

# COOPERATIVE TRAINING



Tajik troops in Fakhrrabad participate in the multinational Regional Cooperation 2017 exercise.



By *per Concordiam* Staff

Photos By Staff Sgt. Michael Battles/U.S. Air Force

## PEACEKEEPING, MIGRATION ARE FOCUS OF MULTINATIONAL GATHERINGS IN TAJIKISTAN

On a hot July afternoon at Fakhrrabad military training center near Dushanbe, Tajikistan, a line of hills and fruit orchards in the distance, a squad of Tajik peacekeeping troops was ambushed by violent extremists.

The Tajik patrol maneuvered through brittle fields of brush to kill or capture the attackers. The soldiers cleared a building used as an enemy stronghold and evacuated wounded comrades and prisoners.

The Tajik troops had spent four days conducting a joint field exercise with U.S. soldiers from the Virginia Army National Guard, learning how to detect improvised explosive devices and stanch bullet wounds, among other skills.

It served as a demonstration of what was taking place about 50 kilometers away at the Tajik Ministry of Defense: a multinational command-post exercise called Regional Cooperation 17.

Now in its 14th year, Regional Cooperation is U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM's) premier exercise for Central and South Asian militaries participating in multinational peacekeeping operations.

Tajikistan hosted the latest version of the exercise in July 2017, attracting more than 200 participants from Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Mongolia and the United States. Kazakhstan sent an observer.

“Exercises of this kind are a unique opportunity for soldiers to gain new knowledge and practical skills,” said Saidjafar Imonov, a member of the Tajikistan Parliament. “This is crucial for our soldiers, especially in responding to terror threats. Moreover, it strengthens regional cooperation. Our partnership with the U.S. is becoming stronger, and it brings our countries together.”

During pre-exercise briefings, Dr. Sebastian von Münchow, a professor of international security studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, gave a seminar on how Germany’s security architecture encourages participants to develop innovative ways to overcome institutional obstacles when facing emerging challenges.

The group, consisting mostly of officers, operated for nearly a week as headquarters staff for a multinational infantry brigade, engaged in fictional scenarios testing their ability to cooperate despite differences in language, leadership and doctrine.

The 2017 scenarios had separatists break away from a country called Regislavia to form a small Central Asian nation called Bahora. Multinational task forces under the auspices of the United Nations needed to police a cease-fire while dealing with border incursions by terrorists, weapons and drugs smuggling, displaced people, a devastating earthquake and humanitarian crises.

“The scenario is a realistic possibility for everyone,” said Pakistani Army Col. Aamir Salim, who served as deputy commander of the simulated brigade. “To effectively play your role in such an eventuality, the exercise is very important.”

Regular briefings updated commanders on what was happening. Officers then dispersed to separate cells dedicated to such tasks as logistics, operations and public affairs.

Sometimes the tasks were as basic as transporting drinking water to thousands of troops on the ground. At other times the headquarters staff needed to deal with disasters, such as a powerful earthquake that damaged a hydroelectric dam responsible for generating 90 percent of the country’s electricity. Losing the dam would cripple Bahora’s economy.

Huddled over laptop computers and maps, participants bridged the communications gap by seeking out common languages. The Kyrgyz, Tajik and Mongolian officers used Russian as a common tongue while Americans and Pakistanis spoke English to each other. Translators hovered nearby to bridge any gaps.

“It is important for us to work together so that when we actually have to deploy together for combat or peacekeeping or any other operations we already have bonds built,” said U.S. Col. George Harrington of the Massachusetts Army National Guard.

Inevitably, differences in philosophy among the national delegations needed to be smoothed out. For example, during a mock press conference, Tajik commander Col. Nurridin Sattrov coolly handled questions from sometimes bullying reporters.

But afterward, trainers pointed out that Col. Sattrov’s public affairs officer should have instructed him to rebuff a reporter’s accusation that the brigade was issuing “propaganda.” Winning a war of words can be decisive, particularly in conflicts shaped by ideology such as counterterrorism operations.

“The training will provide us with the chance to learn from one another’s experiences,” said Mongolian Army Maj. Amartaivan, the public affairs officer.

The Mongolian delegation, which cited its experience dealing with the U.N. and Tajik forces, attended the exercise to strengthen officers’ skills in border security and counterterrorism. Mongolia hosts an exercise of its own called Khaan Quest.

As part of Regional Cooperation 17, participants needed to keep the peace in a demilitarized zone between Bahora and Regislavia and intercept shipments of weapons of mass destruction hidden by terrorists among medical supplies.

“We have experience in U.N. peacekeeping missions, but we have to train and get more experience for this coalition force,” Mongolian Col. Tumendemberel said.

Because exercises such as Regional Cooperation stress the need for officers to seize the initiative, Col. Aamir of Pakistan said the experience will be useful in his country’s decade-long fight against terrorism. Local commanders facing down terrorists need greater freedom to act, and Col. Aamir was pleased to see that independent spirit demonstrated by partner nations at the exercise in Tajikistan.

“It gives you comfort,” he said.

Concurrent with Regional Cooperation, the Civil Security Seminar on Managing Mixed Migration was held in Dushanbe and hosted by the Marshall Center and Tajikistan’s Committee of Emergency Situations and Civil Defence. The seminar, led by the Marshall Center’s Dr. Petra Weyland, focused on protecting and integrating migrants of all kinds, including refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs).

Experts from several countries discussed challenges and presented case studies, including securitizing migration and how governments and local communities can organize to manage migrant surges and integration. The seminar provided valuable input to a facet of Regional Cooperation involving refugee management and IDPs.

CENTCOM has held Regional Cooperation since 2001. Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan have hosted the exercise during its 14 iterations. For U.S. Army Maj. Robert McCracken, the lead exercise planner, Regional Cooperation provides a chance for multinational forces to improve the coordination and interoperability needed to address issues critical to Central and South Asia.

“We don’t always get to work side by side with partner nations until a real-world situation occurs,” Maj. McCracken said. “However, RC 17 affords us and those nations a prime opportunity to learn from each other and to develop relationships to prepare for future missions.” □