

NEWS FROM THE FRONT

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The 404th Civil Affairs Battalion Enabling Capacity Building through English Discussion Groups (EDGs): The Pros and Cons (Civil Information Management Cell in the Horn of Africa)



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Introduction

The English Discussion Groups (EDGs) have been an enduring mission of the Civil Affairs Battalion (CA BN) in Djibouti since 2007. EDGs are not new to the Army and in the Army CA FM 41-10 dated in 1967, are discussed as a component of capacity building, although this type of mission has not been addressed in CA doctrine since the late sixties. However, it has reemerged as one for the CA BN deployed to CJTF-HOA in Djibouti.

Although the more tangible intent of the EDGs is to assist in the promotion of the English language, the ultimate goal of these events is to provide CA Soldiers access to the local population, opportunities to gather civil information and to gain a better understanding of the civil component of the operational environment for the commander. The level of public access necessary to fulfill the CA role in U.S. operations can often be very difficult to obtain, so the EDGs provide an ideal opportunity. The mission supports the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa's (CJTF-HOA) Campaign Support Plan (CSP), the United States Embassy's Integrated Country Strategy, serves the interests of the Djiboutian government and creates a positive image for the U.S.

This document describes the various EDGs currently in operation in Djibouti and is meant to summarize the strengths and weaknesses of an enabling activity used by CA soldiers around Djibouti. The information is presented from the perspective of the Civil Information Management (CIM) Cell Officer-in-Charge (OIC).

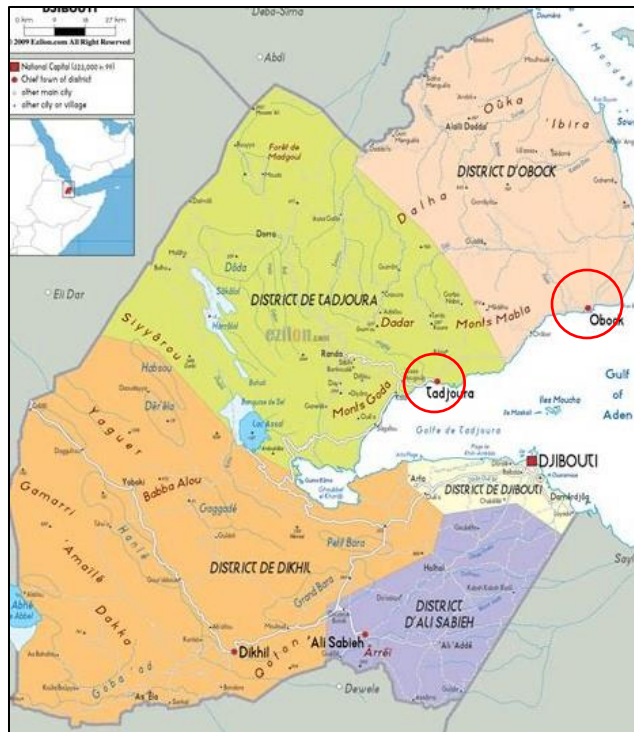
BACKGROUND. The CJTF-HOA's 404th CA BN fell-in on the operations of the previous CA BN, which included EDGs as a primary line of effort. EDGs are semi-formal courses provided to the local populace by the U.S. military, the CA BN in this case. This program has been ongoing since 2007, when the president of Djibouti requested assistance from the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti to promote English education in order to transition the language of national commerce from French to English. The U.S. Embassy agreed to support this public agenda and authorized the U.S. Army CA BN to be their arm in conducting support for the English education program.

The U.S. Embassy has the authority to approve non-training discussion groups, therefore key to the fulfillment of these duties is that the encounters are structured as a discussion group and not a formal training. Likewise, due to the nature of studying languages, discussion groups are an effective means of providing high-quality learning opportunities without formal planning and sourcing. Ideally EDGs are an efficient and effective way to create a win-win scenario for multiple parties at a low cost to the U.S. government while providing high potential impact. Also essential to this effort is that the EDGs are executed in a manner that does not bring distraction from the civil reconnaissance and civil engagement incentives, and the U.S.' desired end-states.

The 404th CA BN has continued a range of different venues of EDGs, each distinct depending on the sector of society the U.S. wants to access. The following are the primary active EDGs inherited by the 404th CA BN:

- The U.S. Embassy established their first program in Djibouti City, which includes a youth outreach component along a central corridor within the city; this was the first EDG the CJTF-HOA CA BN joined. Local national university students manage a weekly debate club at the city library (called the American Library since it was a U.S. construction project). This debate club is composed of both university and high school students. This allows CA and U.S. access to the middle class youth of the urban center.
- There is a course provided for upper-middle class professionals in Djibouti City and the Djiboutian Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees this program at their city campus. These are formal courses led by professional American educators and the CA BN supports it by providing rotating native English speakers to participate in discussions with these professionals, who include those working in the government, banking, trade, healthcare and corporate administration. This access provides invaluable opportunities for CA Soldiers to gain insights from and to leverage relationships with members of these various key sectors of the population. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs campus for this professional course was a Chinese development project. The campus is still administratively run by Chinese, many of the education endeavors are in the Chinese language and Chinese nationals make up the primary education staff. This CA BN connection with the professional course allows the U.S. to offset this piece of Chinese influence.

- There is an EDG primarily for healthcare professionals at the Le Institut Superieur des Sciences de la Sante (ISSS). Medical members of the CA Functional Specialty Cell (FSXP) conduct this medical discussion group. This provides the CA medical professional's access to the leading medical students in the country. It enables CA to monitor and influence development of local healthcare and to remain aware of the current medical threats to society.
- CA BN members contribute to an English discussion program administrated by members of the Djiboutian Air Force (FAD – *Force Aeriennne du Djibouti*). The FAD runs a program supported by the Defense Language Institute (DLI) out of Monterrey, CA. DLI traditionally brings foreign soldiers to California to study in order to build key relationships with foreign militaries. However, to increase cost effectiveness, the FAD began their own program locally in Djibouti City led by their DLI graduates utilizing curriculum and materials provided by DLI. CA members provide support to the discussion segments of the curriculum. This opportunity provides regular U.S. access to the Djiboutian military, which as a key segment of Djiboutian society, has potential to promote stability or regime change. Valuable information has been gained through FAD members volunteering consistently in-depth information about other foreign influencers, their joint operations, and training and equipment provided to them from the foreign influencers.
- The last inherited groups are two weekly EDGs for minors in the northern Afar region towns of Obock and Tadjoura; these are the only two EDGs not held in Djibouti City. This region has traditionally been seen as a threat to central stability due to ethnic rivalry and a self-perception of an 'oppressed' people. These EDGs provide U.S. access to the general population of this region which had never before existed. Currently there is no indication of threat from this region and the EDG accesses have been the primary means by which CA has been able to determine the situation in that region.
- Due to the popular public support from the Djiboutian people, local governments and the satisfaction and positive feedback from the U.S. Embassy, the number of EDGs may continue to grow in other regions of the country outside of Djibouti City and will help increase a positive image for the U.S. in Djibouti.



GOALS. Aside from the tangible mission of promoting the English language in Djibouti, the greater intent of the CA BN in participating in the EDG mission is the concurrent opportunities to conduct operations that engage with the local populace: civil reconnaissance and civil engagement; this type of military-civilian operation is governed by Title 10. Public access and personal interactions allow the U.S. military to better understand the civil component of the operational environment, build relationships and influence the local society to generally support the U.S. and its agenda, therefore conceivably assisting the U.S. in achieving desired strategic end-states. The level of public access necessary to fulfill the CA role in U.S. operations can often be very difficult to obtain, so the EDGs provide an ideal opportunity. This is especially important now in the face of rising Chinese influence in the area.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT. The EDGs have successfully provided occasions for Civil Engagement, access to the Djiboutian public, and building a positive image for the U.S., however actual return on investment fell short of original expectations, according to the CA BN CIM Cell OIC. This is primarily due to the encounters generally failing to adequately leverage the access into garnering civil information.

The U.S. Embassy's principal goal of the EDGs is to help build a positive public image for the U.S. If measured by this singular goal, then the EDGs are overall a successful effort. EDGs regularly receive praise from the Djiboutian public, government officials and media. These media highlights were initiated solely by the Djiboutian's without any prompting from U.S. information operations (IO).

Another goal, more for the CA BN and CJTF-HOA, is to provide CA Soldiers access to the local population in order to gain a better understanding of the civil component of the operational environment. In regards to gaining this access to wide arrays of civil society, the EDGs are very valuable. There are very few types of interactions in which the local populace will seek out U.S. military for regular interactions. The EDGs not only provided the U.S. military opportunities for access to the people, but they are interactions specifically requested by the local government and people.

Despite the success in gaining access, the CA BN personnel conducting the missions generally failed to adequately leverage the access into deriving civil information. From 01 FEB to 01 SEP 2018, out of a total of 112 EDGs held, there were only 54 single reports of civil information. This means that a total of 83 hours were spent interacting with multiple local nationals without reaping any informational benefit.

ISSUES AND DISCUSSION. The CIM Cell OIC considered causes for lack of success in civil information reporting. The following were identified as possible issues and potential approaches to remedying the shortfalls.

- **LACK OF AWARENESS OF THE VALUE OF INSIGNIFICANT DATA.** All information should be considered significant until proven otherwise. The CIM Cell OIC believed team members were not aware of the value of what may seem to be insignificant data. He and his team stressed to team members that all information is significant until proven otherwise. The team members were probably encountering usable civil information, however they evaluated it to be not of any value and thus did not report it. The CIM Cell OIC began to conduct pre and post mission briefs in order to continually emphasize that the CIM Cell needed reports after every encounter, including all topics of information and the analysts would determine the significance. The CIM Cell offered the challenge to each team member to provide a minimum of one piece of information after each discussion event, whether they thought it was significant or not.

An example the OIC used in briefing the personnel is as follows: The fact is that a child in Tadjourah, which is a six hour road trip from Djibouti City, reports her favorite food is ice cream. Although this may seem insignificant, it is important and requires follow up discussion to confirm how often she eats it and from where she gets it. The follow-on dialogue could reveal several bits of civil information. If she eats it once a week from the only convenience store in Tadjourah, this reveals:

- Tadjourah has a facility capable of production of ice cream *or*
 - There is a logistical supply line in the region capable of transporting frozen food items for the six hour trip from Djibouti City *or*
 - Tadjourah has a power grid capable of keeping frozen food items while in stock *or*
 - Tadjourah has the ability to supply enough fuel to support a local generator *and*
 - Any of the above could indicate a profit margin large enough to support such expenses.
- **CA TEAM MEMBERS TAKING A ROLE OF ‘TEACHER-STUDENT’ AND DIRECTING TARGETED TOPICS OF CONVERSATION.** EDGs should be conducted as free discussions to gain the most reward. Team members thought it may be simpler if the CIM Cell directs them as to what type of information should be sought after and reported, so they could ask targeted questions. Additionally, many team members felt more comfortable in the standard teacher role rather than observing and coaching open discussions. The CIM Cell team emphasized that providing focused questions and not promoting open discussions limits the benefits of a discussion group. In order for a discussion group to obtain the most information, the participants should be allowed to freely move from one subject to another, to those topics the local national participants are

most eager to talk about, with the team members encouraging conversation with general questions and comments.

- **MISUNDERSTANDING OF ‘INTELLIGENCE’ VERSUS ‘CIVIL INFORMATION.’** Some of the less experienced team leaders and members felt uncomfortable reporting information back to the CIM Cell, citing that CA members do not per CA doctrine, provide intelligence. This brought about another education opportunity for the CA leadership team. They conducted reviews of doctrinal definitions of ‘intelligence’ versus ‘civil information,’ and their responsibilities to obtain civil information in order to assist in updating understanding of the civil environment. Clarification and reassurance on information provided from the event was covered during each discussion group debrief.
- **RESTRICTION TO BASE.** This policy has made it extremely difficult to build lasting relationships between CA and Djiboutian personnel. During the 404th CA BN’s deployment, the CIM Cell OIC reports there has been practically no development of useful relationships between CA and Djiboutian individuals. This is in part due to the inexperience of some of the personnel as discussed below, however, another aspect of this is the restricted movement off base in Djibouti City. Djiboutian culture is kind and friendly on the exterior, but personally they are hesitant to develop relationships with outsiders. This cultural limitation is significant when paired with the fact that interactions are limited only to missions and not to any social interactions. Prior to restricted movement from Camp Lemonnier, previous CA BN soldiers were able to develop meaningful relationships. Since the policy was enacted, all interactions have become business interactions. These limited and formal interactions have not been able to breach the Djiboutian’s social walls.
- **PERSONNEL SHORTAGES AND INEXPERIENCE.** Not everyone in a CA BN is CA Qualified (CA QC). All team leaders by CA doctrine, are officers and only officers are guaranteed to be CA QC. The CJTF-HOA’s vast area of operations and CA mission sets often made it difficult for the CA BN to assign qualified team leaders and team members in accordance with doctrine. Within the Combined Joint Area of Operations (CJOA), aside from the CA BN Command Group/Staff, CA was conducting missions in nine countries using only one company and one functional specialty cell. The more distant (from Djibouti) and complex missions typically had the more well-trained CA QC team leaders. For other missions, such as the EDGs, more often than not, the CA team leaders were chosen based on availability rather than talent, background or experience. Frequently, non-commissioned officers (NCO’s) who are not CA QC, became the EDG team leaders.

The CIM Cell OIC thought the inexperience played a large role in several of the shortfalls of the EDG program. Many of the younger soldiers are not familiar with the entirety of the CA mission, so they have their own interpretation of what CA does or should do. The longevity of an EDG team leader is about three months based on missions and availability of personnel. This is not enough time to build experience and confidence in using education to gain information, therefore the team leaders tend to concentrate on the teaching portion rather than the information-gathering portion. Furthermore, with the inexperience and absence of stability within an EDG team leader position, the CA Soldiers tend not to venture from their comfort zones in order to develop relationships with the local people.

The CA units can conduct specific cultural training prior to deployment, in fact it can be included as a regularly scheduled event on the reserve units' training calendar throughout the year. However, what is truly needed is in-depth cultural immersion to learn the skill of cultural flexibility.

If personnel shortages and lack of experienced team leaders remains an issue, why can't the number of EDGs be reduced or the program even be eliminated so assets can be re-dispersed to higher priority missions? Conducting less missions is counter intuitive to CA's goal of legitimizing its worth, however it would be reasonable to reduce or eliminate the EDGs for children, so other groups can be structured for focus on other, more pertinent groups. For example, establishing an EDG for the Djiboutian Gendarmerie would be very worthwhile. This access would provide an otherwise unavailable opportunity for interaction with this group, as CJTF-HOA is not permitted to conduct training and operations with the local police. Secondly, the police are an integral part of society, they have access to various social statistics and would be an invaluable source of civil information.

Despite the failure to gain adequate civil information from the EDGs, the missions themselves have not been for naught. It is unfortunate that 'fake news' and foreign information operations can have a significant impact on intelligence reporting and CA presence proved to be instrumental in offsetting some of these informational discrepancies. There are three examples to follow where U.S. CA military members present in areas during EDG missions were able to gather a more precise understanding of inaccurately reported civil information.

- In one Facebook and Twitter post, users were reporting a "riot" at the Port of Tadjourah involving burning vehicles to protest Chinese not hiring local workers. However, CA soldiers in Tadjourah for EDGs, were at the reported location at that time and did not witness any such behavior.

- A second event involved a reported terrorist attack in an area between Tadjourah and Obock. This was based off of a report of a failed armed robbery attempt at an illegal checkpoint which resulted in a local national woman being shot and the vehicle disabled by gunfire. By the time it was disseminated through reporting channels, it had become a terrorist attack. CA members had been witness to this event and were able confirm there was no evidence of any terrorist involvement or motive.
- The third event was based on an Ethiopian online journal reporting that Djiboutians in Djibouti City were rioting, killing Ethiopian citizens and plundering Ethiopian businesses in response to the killings of two Djiboutians in Ethiopia the week prior. The news reported six Ethiopians had been killed. Yet, CA Soldiers, who had been present in the vicinity at the time to conduct an EDG, witnessed no evidence of any social disturbances. Follow on discussion with the Djiboutian Gendarmerie confirmed that no one was killed, there had been a simple fist fight between two individuals and local Ethiopians were also surprised by the story.

When compared to some of the other CA missions in the CJOA, such as mil-to-mil trainings and subject matter expert exchanges, EDGs may seem to be of a lower priority for CJTF-HOA. Despite some of the shortfalls, the EDGs directly impact LOE 1 of the CSP, Maintain influence, and they are currently the only aspect of CA and CJTF-HOA operations that counter Chinese influence through economic infrastructure development. The EDGs are valuable to the U.S. Embassy's agenda and integrated country strategy and the program is highly supported by the Djiboutian government. EDGs are of a lower immediate value but over a long duration, they potentially have a significant enduring end result.