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Sentek prepares product, AFRICOM activated

By ERIN BRIDGES, The Daily Transcript
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After a year of building the organization to develop long-term partnerships, U.S. Africa Command was activated on Oct. 1.

As the command now works to unify the activities of the three regional commands that previously coordinated U.S. military relations in Africa, one local company will be anticipating its opportunity to bring information-sharing technology that will serve the needs and desires of the African people to the continent.

Hamlin Tallent, vice president of C4ISR Systems at San Diego-based **Sentek Consulting**, said he hopes the command now will focus more time on an outward reach to Africa and encompass industry ideas.

"Sentek has never, never spent any thought or time on inside the headquarters things," he said. "Our sole approach has been outside the headquarters onto the continent. I'm hoping now that it is fully operational, they can spend more intensity on that piece of it."

Gen. William E. Ward, commander of AFRICOM, outlines his goals on the command's Web site, which include the goal to employ active security to prevent or mitigate the effects of conflict and the goal to assist African partners in developing national and regional security institution capabilities that promote security and stability, and facilitate development.

Other goals include supporting U.S. government departments and agencies, building positive foreign relations and defeating al Qaida and its associated movements.

"It is, at its heart, a different kind of command with a different orientation, one that we hope and expect will institutionalize a lasting security relationship with Africa, a vast region of growing importance in the globe," said Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in a press release.

Sentek hopes to be part of the solution that will bring capacity to the continent and improve information sharing within and among African nations.

Drawing on the experiences and expertise of Sentek employees such as Tallent, a retired Navy flag officer, Sentek, an SBA0-certified 8(a) Small Disadvantaged Business and California-certified Disabled Veteran

Business Enterprise, has been working on a package of capabilities that will improve communication within African states as well as provide the capability to share information with other governments and organizations.

The package incorporates computers and Internet systems that would allow for the dissemination of information on a secured network. Other options include a messaging system to facilitate quick response within a group of people and a type of camera phone to transmit photos and information about potential threats spotted on the streets or in the fields.

It would be useful in tracking and sharing health information, coordinating relief efforts, communicating within an organization and sharing information with other organizations or other nations.

But the key, Tallent said, is in understanding the customer — in this case, Africans. He said that, in general, Africans value personal relationships and prefer personal business approaches. As a result, both the military and contractors like Sentek find that taking the extra time to build personal relationships will lead to success.

When it comes to selling a product, Sentek has deliberately chosen not to give the package a name or a definitive composition because they believe it is better to approach Africans with a set of national capabilities from which to choose and integrate based on their comfort level and the needs of their specific organization.

"We're not going to walk up and say, 'Hey, what do you think?'" he said. "We're going to walk up with an open mind about what they think is important and how they want to have certain functions integrated."

Specifically with communication, Tallent said he could understand why some African leaders might be hesitant to use it and concerned about how it will affect their ability to control their surroundings.

While the United States and other Western nations have progressed from telegraphs to high speed Internet, African nations have not. The big technology jump could be frightening.

"We can't assume (an African leader) would want it just because it's something Americans happen to like," Tallent said.

Sentek is working on securing contracts to provide its product to Africa and Tallent said he expects to know more sometime this month