

CIA's Pullback From Africa Is Drawing Criticism

Agency Plans to Close 15 Stations, but Advocates of Human Intelligence Think It's a Mistake

By Walter Pincus
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A CIA plan to close 15 stations in Africa because of budget reductions is causing concern and drawing some criticism inside the government, on Capitol Hill and from retired members of the intelligence community.

The proposed cutback would have little effect on the CIA's gathering of information in Africa, because the intelligence agency built up its presence on the continent during the Cold War primarily to recruit people to spy against communist states, a senior CIA official said.

On Capitol Hill, however, the plan has added to apprehension that CIA Director R. James Woolsey favors technical operations, such as satellites, over human intelligence collection.

Over the past month, CIA officials have been briefing other government agencies and the congressional intelligence committees on the decision to withdraw 15 CIA station chiefs and dozens of case officers, who usually act under cover as U.S. Embassy officials.

"We have to rationalize our activities along with everyone else," the senior CIA official said, in defending the proposal.

"We have never been in Africa to report on Africa," the official noted. "We went into Africa as part of the covert activity of the Cold War, to recruit [as spies] Soviet, Chinese, Eastern European and sometimes North Korean officials under circumstances that were easier to operate under than in their home countries."

One result of the proposed CIA action would be

to reduce the U.S. presence in more than a dozen African countries. Another would be to cut off ongoing relationships with local intelligence and police organizations, according to a top retired CIA official with covert experience in the area.

Another retired former CIA official said he was "appalled" at the decision. The move "will be seen

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by the locals" as "part of the withdrawal of this country from the world scene," he warned.

This retired official, a friend and admirer of Woolsey, said that while it is not inexpensive to keep CIA operational people overseas, "relatively speaking it is small potatoes to have kept them there."

After a recent congressional briefing on the proposal, several legislators suggested "keeping a couple of the posts open," according to one participant. The lawmakers pointed out there was no CIA presence in Somalia in 1992, when the decision was made to send U.S. troops to that country. The CIA

"cried because there was nobody there, and they had to send someone back who had left two years earlier," a congressional source said.

"At least keep one person there in some countries was the message given that day," the source said, adding that Congress had fully funded last year's budget for covert human intelligence operations and would do so again this year.

At the State Department reaction is mixed. "It could reduce political coverage in that area," a State Department official said recently. He explained that although the department privately has been critical of the CIA's post-cold war activities in some countries, the departure of the agency from a few of these African countries would put pressure on U.S. diplomats there, who already are short-handed because of budget cuts.

Several sources said the CIA's proposed African cutback reflects some broader battles taking place in the intelligence community and the CIA.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has had a running battle with Woolsey over spending on expensive intelligence satellites. The Africa plan is a sign that "Woolsey is listening to the technical people and not his own operational personnel," a specialist within the committee said.

A former top CIA official said he believed the covert operations people themselves want to withdraw from some African countries rather than remaining and just reporting on local activities. "There's a certain mind-set with them," he said. "If it's not stolen, it's not worth having." This source suggested that covert operations at large CIA stations, such as Bonn, Germany, could be reduced and the money used in Africa.