

Army deploys combat unit in US for possible civil unrest

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For the first time ever, the US military is deploying an active duty regular Army combat unit for full-time use inside the United States to deal with emergencies, including potential civil unrest.

Beginning on October 1, the First Brigade Combat Team of the Third Division will be placed under the command of US Army North, the Army's component of the Pentagon's Northern Command (NorthCom), which was created in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks with the stated mission of defending the US "homeland" and aiding federal, state and local authorities.

The unit — known as the "Raiders" — is among the Army's most "blooded." It has spent nearly three out of the last five years deployed in Iraq, leading the assault on Baghdad in 2003 and carrying out house-to-house combat in the suppression of resistance in the city of Ramadi. It was the first brigade combat team to be sent to Iraq three times.

While active-duty units previously have been used in temporary assignments, such as the combat-equipped troops deployed in New Orleans, which was effectively placed under martial law in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, this marks the first time that an Army combat unit has been given a dedicated assignment in which US soil constitutes its "battle zone."

The Pentagon's official pronouncements have stressed the role of specialized units in a potential response to terrorist attack within the US. Gen. George Casey, the Army chief of staff, attended a training exercise last week for about 250 members of the unit at Fort Stewart, Georgia. The focus of the exercise, according to the Army's public affairs office, was how troops "might fly search and rescue missions, extract casualties and decontaminate people following a catastrophic nuclear attack in the nation's heartland."

"We are at war with a global extremist network that is not going away," Casey told the soldiers. "I hope we don't have to use it, but we need the capability."

However, the mission assigned to the nearly 4,000 troops of the First Brigade Combat Team does not consist merely of rescuing victims of terrorist attacks. An article that appeared earlier this month in the Army Times ("Brigade homeland tours start Oct. 1"), a publication that is widely read within the military, paints a different and far more ominous picture.

"They may be called upon to help with civil unrest and crowd control," the paper reports. It quotes the unit's commander, Col. Robert Cloutier, as saying that the 1st BCT's soldiers are being trained in the use of "the first ever nonlethal package the Army has fielded." The weapons, the paper reported, are "designed to subdue unruly or dangerous individuals without

killing them.” The equipment includes beanbag bullets, shields and batons and equipment for erecting roadblocks.

It appears that as part of the training for deployment within the US, the soldiers have been ordered to test some of this non-lethal equipment on each other.

“I was the first guy in the brigade to get Tasered,” Cloutier told the Army Times. He described the effects of the electroshock weapon as “your worst muscle cramp ever — times 10 throughout your whole body.”

The colonel’s remark suggests that, in preparation for their “homefront” duties, rank-and-file troops are also being routinely Tasered. The brutalizing effect and intent of such a macabre training exercise is to inure troops against sympathy for the pain and suffering they may be called upon to inflict on the civilian population using these same “non-lethal” weapons.

According to military officials quoted by the Army Times, the deployment of regular Army troops in the US begun with the First Brigade Combat Team is to become permanent, with different units rotated into the assignment on an annual basis.

In an online interview with reporters earlier this month, NorthCom officers were asked about the implications of the new deployment for the Posse Comitatus Act, the 230-year-old legal statute that bars the use of US military forces for law enforcement purposes within the US itself.

Col. Lou Volger, NorthCom’s chief of future operations, tried to downplay any enforcement role, but added, “We will integrate with law enforcement to understand the situation and make sure we’re aware of any threats.”

Volger acknowledged the obvious, that the Brigade Combat Team is a military force, while attempting to dismiss the likelihood that it would play any military role. It “has forces for security,” he said, “but that’s really — they call them security forces, but that’s really just to establish our own footprint and make sure that we can operate and run our own bases.”

Lt. Col. James Shores, another NorthCom officer, chimed in, “Let’s say even if there was a scenario that developed into a branch of a civil disturbance — even at that point it would take a presidential directive to even get it close to anything that you’re suggesting.”

Whatever is required to trigger such an intervention, clearly Col. Cloutier and his troops are preparing for it with their hands-on training in the use of “non-lethal” means of repression.

The extreme sensitivity of the military brass on this issue notwithstanding, the reality is that the intervention of the military in domestic affairs has grown sharply over the last period under conditions in which its involvement in two colonial-style wars abroad has given it a far more prominent role in American political life.

The Bush administration has worked to tear down any barriers to the use of the military in domestic repression. Thus, in the 2007 Pentagon spending bill it inserted a measure to amend the Posse Comitatus Act to clear the way for the domestic deployment of the military in the event of natural disaster, terrorist attack or “other conditions in which the president determines that domestic violence has occurred to the extent that state officials cannot maintain public order.”

The provision granted the president sweeping new powers to impose martial

law by declaring a “public emergency” for virtually any reason, allowing him to deploy troops anywhere in the US and to take control of state-based National Guard units without the consent of state governors in order to “suppress public disorder.”

The provision was subsequently repealed by Congress as part of the 2008 military appropriations legislation, but the intent remains. Given the sweeping powers claimed by the White House in the name of the “commander in chief” in a global war on terror — powers to suspend habeas corpus, carry out wholesale domestic spying and conduct torture — there is no reason to believe it would respect legal restrictions against the use of military force at home.

It is noteworthy that the deployment of US combat troops “as an on-call federal response force for natural or manmade emergencies and disasters” — in the words of the Army Times — coincides with the eruption of the greatest economic emergency and financial disaster since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Justified as a response to terrorist threats, the real source of the growing preparations for the use of US military force within America’s borders lies not in the events of September 11, 2001 or the danger that they will be repeated. Rather, the domestic mobilization of the armed forces is a response by the US ruling establishment to the growing threat to political stability.

Under conditions of deepening economic crisis, the unprecedented social chasm separating the country’s working people from the obscenely wealthy financial elite becomes unsustainable within the existing political framework.

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