VETERANS STRENGTHENING AMERICA
NATIONAL SECURITY DIVISION'S WEEKLY REPORT

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June 22 – June 28, 2024

Meetings

- NS Staff conducted a follow-up meeting with experts from the Niskanen Center to discuss border policy and the role of foreign policy in securing the southern land border.

- NS Staff attended a Department of Defense (DOD) IGA Webinar on Sexual Assault Prevention. The meeting discussed results from the most recent report on sexual assault in the military, which can be read here.

- NS Staff attended a reception honoring the anniversary of the GI Bill.

- NS Staff attended the Department of Veterans Affairs Commemoration of the 80th Anniversary of the GI Bill.

- NS Director met with HR to begin interviewing and hiring for a vacant National Security Policy Analyst position.

- NS Staff met to continue detailed planning for hosting over 30 distinguished and Commission guests for the national convention. Detailed logistical and administrative planning critical to executing a successful convention is ongoing.

- The NS Director attended a meet-and-greet hosted by the Executive Director to welcome Ms. Tahina Montoya, the new Senior Advisor/Director of Veterans Engagement, Office of Public Engagement, from the White House.

- NS Director joined the Executive Director for a Veteran breakfast with Governor Youngkin in Richmond, VA.

- NS Staff attended a meeting with Colonel Masaka, the Defense Attache at the Embassy of Japan, to discuss a range of veterans and military affairs.

- NS Staff attended a coordination call with various VSOs to discuss the Richard Star Act.

- NS Director conducted an introductory call with Sergeant Major Barrett, 17th SgtMaj of the Marine Corps.

- NS Director attended a coordination call with the Atlantic Council regarding an upcoming 75th Anniversary of NATO Summit event.

- NS Staff attended a "With Honor" Afghan Adjustment Act update/coordination call.

Policy

- NS Staff provided statements of support for three house appropriations bills: the Defense Appropriations Act, the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, and the Homeland Security Appropriations Act.

- NS Staff is assessing the best way to consolidate various resolutions on border security to streamline and modernize the Legion's policy regarding transnational criminal organizations and their impact on America.

- NS Staff began researching the cost of malnutrition in the military for DOD and the Defense Health Agency (DHA).

- NS Staff continued working with wounded warriors to research and report on the Feres Doctrine. The lack of clarity surrounding "incident to service" was the investigation's root.

- NS Staff reviewed ongoing regional instability in Western Africa. NS Staff will provide an outlook on the potential ramifications of this instability on the United States and allies in the region.

Programs

- NS Staff compiled biographies for the 2024 American Legion Spirit of Service Award, which will be incorporated during the 2024 National Convention ceremony.

The American Legion Military Surplus Equipment

- Items requested: Ammo – 4960; Rifles – 24; Clips – 0; Static Displays – 1
- Requests submitted by: Posts –8; Departments – 7

POW/MIA

DPAA has identified/repatriated 99 service members this year.

June 26, 2024

- Airman Accounted for from WWII (Banta, D.)
- Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Zarifian, J.)

- Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Mahoney, J.)
- Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Cocco, J.)

June 25, 2024

- Soldier Accounted for from Korean War (Hall, R.)
- Airman Accounted from Vietnam War (Price, D.)
- Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Brown, C.)

June 24, 2024

- Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Murphy, J.)

Be The One (BTO)

- NS Staff attended a DOD update on Sexual Assault. These updates are critical for informing the NS Staff on efforts which can better a veteran or service member's life and address potential issues surrounding sexual assault related trauma.

Focus Topic: The Significance of Protests in Kenya

Background:

Since decolonization in 1963, Kenya has maintained diplomatic ties with the United States. Although relations were strained by the ruling party's repressive behavior, attempts to democratize in the late 1990s and 2000s allowed U.S.-Kenya engagement to expand. The 2019 Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD) solidified the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Kenya, emphasizing mutual interests in economic prosperity, defense, democracy, regional stability, and public health. Already, this partnership is proving to be fruitful. The following are key developments:

- Kenya is one of the U.S.'s top trading partners in Africa and is negotiating a new trade deal.
- The U.S. and Kenya signed a 5-year defense cooperation deal, targeting al-Shabaab and other Al-Qaeda affiliates.
- Kenya received about $680 million in foreign assistance in 2023, largely to help curb food insecurity and solidify the medical supply chain.

Current Challenges:

President William Ruto was elected in 2022 on a "man of the people" platform, often referring to his pastoral upbringing. But his government's ever-increasing taxes are threatening his popularity. Despite deadly protests last year that came after new taxes were introduced as the cost of living was on the rise, this year President Ruto recently supported a plan to increase taxes through 2027. This includes taxes for car owners, a 16% sales tax on bread, 25% duties on cooking oil, and increased prices for baby diapers and other sanitary products.

Members of Parliament (MPs) approved these taxes as law this week, igniting a new round of protests that quickly devolved into violence. According to the Human Rights Commission, 23 people were killed and 300 were injured in the uproar where Kenyan police forces fired live ammunition into the crowds. The United Nations (UN) has called on Kenyan police to act with increased restraint, and the African Union has expressed deep concern about the events.

On June 25, 2024, President Joe Biden also condemned the violence in Kenya. This castigation comes only a month after President Ruto visited President Biden in Washington, D.C. and agreed on a joint mission to strengthen democracy and stabilize Sub-Saharan Africa. President Biden also designated Keyna as its first major non-NATO ally in the region.

On June 26th, 2024, President Ruto declined to sign the tax bill into law and sent it back to parliament for reform in an act of self-preservation. Ruto said, "It is necessary for us to have a conversation as a nation" and that he was ready to concede to "ongoing dissatisfaction." There is still skepticism about the bills future and President Ruto's policies among Kenyans.

Looking Ahead:

If he wishes to maintain his domestic legitimacy, Ruto will likely have to reject the bill outright, rather than returning the bill for amendment. But even this move may be seen as too little, too late to many Kenyans who continued to protest his government on Thursday, June 27th. It appears that the tax bill was merely a catalyst for protests, while a more deeply seeded mistrust in Ruto and his government has given them stamina. Kenyan youth are now calling for President Ruto to step down.

If Ruto loses legitimacy and is ousted from the presidency, the geopolitical implications could be disastrous. While democratic backsliding has plagued Western and Sub-Saharan Africa for a decade, Kenya has been one of the few African nations to progress towards a more fair and open society. If Ruto is ousted without proper elections, or remains in power without popular consent, yet another democracy in Africa will fall and regional instability will escalate.

Moreover, the U.S. and other Western powers will lose a crucial ally in a region where China and Russia are increasingly popular. As stated previously, Kenya is a key trade partner for the U.S. and a stronghold against terrorist forces, who are increasingly backed by Russian mercenaries. Backsliding in Kenya would not just pose a risk an ideational risk to U.S. influence, but could generate tangible, negative ramifications for American security and financial prosperity.