

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ADMIRAL JOSEPH KERNAN, COMMANDER,
U.S. NAVAL FORCES SOUTHERN COMMAND AND THE 4TH FLEET, VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME:
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ADM. KERNAN: Good morning, Admiral Kernan here down at the 4th Fleet,
so I'm online when you're all ready to start, firing it all, open up with a few
comments if that's okay. Over.

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Yes, sir, that'll be fine. Thanks for
joining us today for the Bloggers' Roundtable. Admiral Joseph Kernan is with
us, Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command and U.S. 4th Fleet.

And Admiral, we appreciate you joining us today.

ADM. KERNAN: Thanks. I kind of appreciate the opportunity, albeit
I've spent my career trying to stay away from the press and talking to people
that write stuff, but I am in the 4th Fleet and so it's a little bit of a
different animal here. I guess the one thing I'll open up with, you know,
certainly the advantage for me getting this opportunity is you just talk a
little bit about 4th Fleet. The 4th Fleet, obviously, it's met to be nice about
it with mixed feelings down in the southern region, you know, I'm kind of
responsible for naval forces and maritime assets that are operating down in the
Caribbean, Central America and South America.

So I think some of the leftist perspectives down there have put kind of
a twist on what 4th Fleet was really intended to do and maybe the timing of the
standup, you know, was coincidental with other things that were going on in the
region and so they associated the standup with 4th Fleet with discoveries of
natural resources and things of that nature in the 4th Fleet standup maybe was
viewed as the U.S. coming after some assets, and again, I wasn't a part of the
buildup of the 4th Fleet piece, I was out at naval special warfare running 35
percent of my forces involved in combat, so I wasn't focused on the region at
all, and so I really wasn't involved.

So when I came into it, though, I understood the whole perspective of
what 4th Fleet was intended to do, you know, part of the chief of naval
operations kind of maritime strategy, you know, again, you know, it's all about
us in this region. It's all about us, you know, kind of building partners,
security cooperation with the countries down there, kind of promoting and
strengthening our coalitions and our partnerships with the countries down there,
and really using our -- we're pretty high speed in a lot of areas, so we
certainly can develop their capabilities down there.

And the other, I would say more warlike piece is just, deterring aggression, deterrent things that are common threats in the region, certainly counter-drugs, any type of illicit trafficking, you know, of course, migration is something that we also worry about.

So those are kind of the common threats to the region that we collectively ought to go after and I think as 4th Fleet, you know, we're better postured either from a command and control perspective or just from a little bit of a hierarchy perspective and the other piece, I think, the 4th Fleet, you know, the region is really important to us. We share so many things with the region, whether we're sharing cultures, whether we're sharing people, common interests, values, you know, all of those things are important, certainly, economies and just a number of things. On my mind it's showing our commitment to the region. It ought to be a fleet just like other regions around the world and there's two kind of perspectives to a fleet, you know, it's an organizational thing as well as it's kind of a physical thing in some regions. But as some people misspoke, I don't own any ships. I don't own any assets. All I do is I go to 2nd and 3rd Fleet and ask them for assets, the types of things in the region that we want to do, whether it's a cooperation exercise, whether it's supporting humanitarian assistance or whether it's participating in an exercise with the countries down there to kind of collectively build our capabilities together. So those are the kind of, you know, kind of the key elements I think of 4th Fleet, and again, I think there's been a lot of misperception of it, but you know, maybe part of the misperception was who the guy was that they brought in here to do it, you know, me coming from a community -- SEALs, I guess, naval special warfare and special operations, but special operations, I mean, our whole life is about engaging people and trying to foster and build their capabilities and understanding the cultures and appreciating those cultures, and so I think that was probably more than anything the reason that I was selected to come down here, and again in the Navy, I'm an unrestricted line officer just like a surface warfare officer or submarine officer or aviators.

So those are maybe just some opening comments and I'm game for anything, I'll push this through on somewhat of a colloquial way because that's how I am, I'm not a public speaker, so I'm happy to answer any questions that you all have for me and go in any direction that you want to take me and I feel like I'm getting close to a danger zone, you know me, I'll -- (inaudible).

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

ADM. KERNAN: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Well, Jim, you were online first and as we get started here, if you would please just state your name and your publication prior to asking your question and we'll get started.

Jim?

Q Hey, good morning, Admiral. Jim Dolbow with the Naval Institute blog. I've got a Continuing Promise question. Is there going to be a Continuing Promise '09? And what are some of the lessons you've learned from Continuing Promise '08?

ADM. KERNAN: Yeah, there's going to be Continuing Promise indefinitely, I mean, part of the thing I'm going to try to do is

institutionalize our presence in the region, you know, it doesn't do much good to go and do some great humanitarian stuff in my mind. It doesn't in a tactical sense, i.e., right there that day, but enduring peace is real important to me and I think the Navy is going to support us on that, whether it be Comfort or whether it be a Kearsarge. We're going to continue every year, we're going to continue to do an exercise like a Continuing Promise, and also every asset that goes into the region or the theater is going to do Continuing Promise-like activities, you know, whether it's humanitarian, whether it's a construction project or things of that nature.

I guess in Continuing Promise, I mean, you know, again, it was all new to me my first time in exposure to it, but it was just an extraordinary, you know, mission that they did, I mean, when you go down there and you see what they did with people and the impact you had, you know, both the tactical level and the operational level, it was amazing. I use those words not from the perspective of a humanitarian, but the context of the impact that it had on entire countries, I mean, we went down there in Continuing Promise with no intent -- we didn't invite presidents of countries to visit, but I'll tell you after they're there for about a week, presidents of countries showed up in three different places.

One of the examples I like to use, you know, we went to Nicaragua, obviously, you know, Ortega is a left-leaning guy, but after about a week there, you know, he finally realized that it wasn't -- his initial comments were about they're there for some insidious reason, but after about a week or so, he couldn't take how good it was and, eventually, you know, invited -- wanted to visit the Kearsarge and wanted to invite the people to come. And so in that mind, you know, we turned a leader in there who looked exactly at what we were doing and determined that, hey, this is in the best interest of my country and it really is helping my people.

So I guess one of the things you learn is, you know, that type of activity, that humanitarian activity, I mean, it is a turn of perspective in an entire country where we might not be doing so well, first, it epitomizes the true sense of what we want to do down there, so that's one thing.

The other thing I learned really was kind of reinforced. Probably the most effective piece of any humanitarian operation is the youth of our country participating in it, so young sailors who actually participate, you know, it's one thing for me or an older guy to come in there and talk and they figure we're talking the tune and part of the political infrastructure were not necessarily as unbiased as they think we should be, but when the youth go in there, you know, 17- to 24-year-olds, hundreds of them ashore doing things with people that does two things, number one, they can connect to the people, the young generation of that country, and number two, it tells them that, hey, these are the types of people that are going to lead America and this is where their values and their interests are and it was unbelievable. If you went to Haiti, you know, I spent time in Haiti; it would bring a tear to your eye. The hundreds of sailors that volunteered every day to go ashore in the hot sun and carry 110-pound bags.

So the other lesson again is, what impact, you know, a humanitarian effort can have a country? The other piece I learned is it's critically important and we did in Continuing Promise. We had a number of foreign countries on board, you know, and a number of nongovernmental organizations, so I learned you have to have them onboard, too, it's just important. NGOs, nongovernmental organizations have incredible access in the country, and then

I think some that, you know, had different views of what the military really is, they figure, hey, these people are humanitarians and they're citizens as well as being in the military and maybe they're most in the citizen arena because they volunteer to serve their country and preserve everything they value.

So Brazil, Canada, France, Netherlands and Spain, they were all on this mission with us, as well as Operation Smile, Operation Hope and a number of other nongovernmental organizations and even in Haiti, nongovernmental organizations that typically don't like us very much and I won't put the names on there ended up kind of, you know, attracting to us because they saw what we were doing and we could, in fact, enable what they were doing.

So that was another lesson learned. You've got to be really inclusive of all of the countries and we invite them on every single mission to come with us and be a part of what we're doing, so the country that we're working in can see that their country is also contributing to the humanitarian efforts.

The other piece is you really have to include the government, you know, the government, whether it's their health services, whether it's their human rights organizations, I mean, they have to be a part of this thing and we really, you know, in a democratic area, we really want to bolster that government and in Haiti, particularly, where they are a very fragile government, but it was democratically elected, so everything we did was under the auspices of we discussed it and coordinated all of our efforts with the government, so the people could see that the government were the ones that invited us in here through the ambassador to do these types of missions.

And probably the last thing I would say is, you know, when the military goes in and we don't have to be the lead. We don't have to be in charge. In Haiti, we were not in charge. We were happy to work at the behest of the ambassador, the government of Haiti, USAID, I mean, they were the people who were running the organizations and other organizations and the U.N. particularly in the case of Haiti, were happy to work, you know, pull the line in the same direction and contribute to the cause.

So those are probably the key and planning, you've got to plan. You've got to start planning way in advance. You have to go to the country in advance, each country for the Comfort, we've already gone to all of the countries we're going to visit and try to coordinate with them, hey, where do you want us to go? What are the medical concerns? What are some of the infrastructure things we can do with what we bring to the area, whether it's a Kearsarge-like deployment or Comfort-like deployment?

Does that hit some of that stuff? Over.

Q Thank you, Admiral. That was outstanding. MR. HOLT: All right. Maggie?

Q Thanks. Good morning, Admiral.

I am more familiar with the humanitarian mission of the 4th Fleet, that's where most of what I know about it is has been focused, but in your opening remarks, you mentioned illegal immigration. What sort of impact will the 4th Fleet have on illegal immigration?

ADM. KERNAN: Yeah, I mean, we're not involved in the necessary, if there was a mass migration movement, for instance, from Cuba or from another

area in the region, so mass migration is the concern, we're certainly not involved at all in the law enforcement piece of illegal immigration. But if we're called upon, you know, if there's a mass migration of people across the water, whether it be from Haiti or any other country and Cuba, for instance in the region, then my responsibility would be, you know, obviously, we would support someone else, the Coast Guard or whatever the national policy is because we're a maritime, we are the maritime force in the region. We have the maritime assets in the region.

I would be asked to either facilitate something in the way of safety or those types of things.

So we're a part of a plan that would call us, you know, bring us to bear, whether we're helping people and we routinely do that, you know, if it's a sinking vessel with a boat that's supposed to carry 100 that's got 500 that sinks, you know, we rescue people in that regard.

So we're really just part of that what we're asked to do in accordance with U.S. policy to facilitate whatever would be required of us in a mass migration-like scenario, does that kind of make sense?

Q Very good. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Andrew?

Q Admiral, good morning, Andrew Lubin from the Naval Institute magazine, Proceedings. How are you, sir?

ADM. KERNAN: Good. How are you today?

Q Good. Thank you. Admiral, we've read, at least I read a couple of articles about the Marines working with the Brazilian marines and along those lines. I hadn't heard anything about some of the leftist problems you had. Can you talk to us a bit about that and a bit more how you overcame them?

ADM. KERNAN: It's a good question. There's a number of countries in the region that the political environment, you know, again, the political environment serves the constituents and so if there is concern about, again, the 4th Fleet piece where we were stood up because we were going to try to infringe upon new discoveries of oil and natural gas off the coast of Brazil, I mean, those things kind of happened at the same time. And so the political piece down there seems to be, I mean, they're very careful about how they -- what their perspective is of 4th Fleet and how they talk about it because the people view, certainly from the leftist side that there was something insidious that we were up to.

Interestingly, though, from the military perspective, you know, the militaries of the region excepting very few are really -- they welcome us with open arms. And so there's a political piece to it on what they can allow us to do on the military-to-military perspective and then there's what we do with the military.

So in the case of Brazil, I mean, next year, we're sending the USS Oak Hill down there. We're going to embark Marines. It's an exercise with Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, probably the first time we've been all the way down there in a while, but we're embarking even up here in Mayport, some are going to come up and embark here in Mayport and ride the ship all the way down there.

So we're going, you know, there's an interest in the naval forces throughout the region, to participate and exercise with us for all the right reasons, for whether it's security cooperative regions, whether we can exchange ideas and perspectives on how we do things, how we do exercises and operate at sea. But they view it and my sense is they'll convince the government, hey, working with the United States is in our best interest because it gives us the skills and proves our own naval forces so that we can, in fact, execute our requirements and protecting our sovereignty and protecting our maritime environment and understanding, all those common interests of what's going on and what may be going on in that region that may be a threat to a particular country.

So, you know, we're working with all those countries, but there's a political realm to it that allows it to occur because they know it's in the best interests of the security of the country, but in the more overt sense, they have to be careful politically on how they sell it with the people.

Q Can I follow up on this?

MR. HOLT: Yes.

Q Admiral, do you get any assistance from the State Department, from the local ambassador, from the local PRTs?

ADM. KERNAN: You know, you obviously, from where I come from who, I guess, I like to say from the special operations, we caught on pretty quick to the importance of joining, we caught on pretty quick to the importance of inter-agency and how critical it is to success.

We don't go anywhere without coordinating through the embassy with the ambassador and all of the departments under the ambassador's -- under that particular mission, I mean, they're the ones that are on the ground so to speak and have an understanding of what the equities are. So all of our visits are coordinated through the ambassador and he or she works with the country to facilitate what we're doing. We don't ever compromise the sovereignty of a country down there. We only go at the behest of an invitation of the country and that's always coordinated through the ambassador and they, obviously, would help us, any sensitivities, they facilitate what we should be doing with what they want us to do with the country and we always coordinate, you know, they have a lot of things that we do in the humanitarian realm and so we coordinate through them, you know, to facilitate where should we be doing it and what's in our best interest?

And so there's a whole lot of coordination in that regard to make sure what we're doing is really consistent with U.S. policy and the ambassador's perspective and understanding of the region.

Is that what you were looking for?

Q Yes, absolutely. Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Chuck?

Q Good morning, Admiral. Chuck Simmons from America's North Shore Journal.

One quick thing and then my question. I couldn't type fast enough and I didn't get all the countries involved in the Oak Hill mission, what countries we'll be working with that?

LIEUTENANT VASQUEZ: This is Lieutenant Vasquez. I'll coordinate with Jack and get you all the countries that will be involved with the southern partnership station Oak Hill next year.

Q Oh, okay. Great.

ADM. KERNAN: Certainly the major ones, and we probably don't even have it nailed down, we talked about Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, but you know, in every one of those missions, we try to invite any country from the region who wants to have a ship rider with us because, I mean, they really, really value. They value coming up here. We're doing -- (inaudible) -- up here in Mayport, first time in 50 years. It will be a huge, huge, probably the largest presence of foreign navies in this country, shoot, in history that I can even remember.

So we're having a multitude of countries coming here from the southern region and actually Europe is coming over, the Germans are going to play, the Canadians are going to play and we'll operate out of Mayport here, but all of those countries, I guess, my point was that every time we do an exercise, unless there's a critical sensitivity between a couple of countries, you know, we probably can't have a whole lot of success in getting Ecuador and Colombia together right now because there's still concerns about the counter-drug thing that happened several months back, but we open our arms to anybody, even if it's not a country that we're doing an exercise in, we invite them to participate to go with us.

Q Okay. And then my question following on was, the 4th Fleet has responsibilities in both the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean, that's kind of unusual for a fleet. How does that affect your planning and your ability to conduct operations that you're a two ocean fleet?

ADM. KERNAN: Yeah, it doesn't, you know, it hasn't impacted me, I mean, I haven't felt any impact, I mean, I coordinate, obviously, I coordinate all of my activities and work closely with Admiral Williams, he's the 2nd Fleet commander up in Norfolk and Admiral Locklear who is out in San Diego, you know, they provide, you're right, we have Caribbean, Southern Atlantic and then the Pacific Side, but this far, that's probably the advantage of where I sit at 4th Fleet. Whatever it is I kind of need to do, they just provide an asset to me and, in theory, when the assets are provided to me and it goes below the tip of Florida or goes below the tip of Mexico, then it chops over to my responsibility.

So where it comes from, to me, is kind of less important and when they recognize that, hey, that's the region I'm responsible for. I haven't really run into any issues whatsoever; I just realize that I have to management a space that just happens to include, you know, both Pacific and Atlantic assets from 2nd and 3rd Fleet.

So it really hasn't been an issue. It's almost seamless so far, I mean, I haven't had -- when it comes down to, sometimes I'm not even sure because I don't even know all the names of ships because I've been out of it for so long, who owns it, whether it's a Pacific asset or an Atlantic asset, but generally if they're on the Pacific side, they're out on 3rd Fleet and on the Atlantic Caribbean side, they're out of 2nd Fleet. But it's seamless to me.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Paul McCleary joins us. Paul?

Q Yeah. Hey, Admiral, it's Paul McCleary from DTI, thanks for talking to us.

Given the Kearsarge mission, in particular, and future missions, do you -- have you partnered or do you plan on partnering with local NGOs or aid groups? Are you trying to stay away from some of the local NGOs for fear of political concerns or things like that?

ADM. KERNAN: Good question. I was asked about a couple of weeks ago that the Navy, I think, the Navy in general recognizes it and the CNO recognizes. So he held an NGO conference up in Washington that I attended and the whole purpose of that NGO conference and it really brought in a number of people, whether it was Catholic Charities of America, whether it was Operation Smile, I mean, it was a whole multitude of NGOs and it was really about sitting down, talking about exactly what you're alluding to, hey, what are some of the -- Red Cross was there and the Red Cross is a little bit different.

You never want to inhibit their ability to be able to go visit people and take care of people in a country that might be completely counter-politically to our own country.

So they have a particular political equity, but one of the issues was that came up was exactly that and, hey, our association with the military, you know, sometimes that inhibits us getting access or doing the things that are key to the mission of our nongovernmental organizations. So part of it was, I guess, you know, everything about 4th Fleet and everything about what we do is going to have to be proven by what we do and not what we say, and certainly, the Kearsarge -- NGOs are following over themselves trying to get a piece of the next one because they recognize that all we're trying to do, truly trying to do is humanitarian efforts.

So the NGO participation is going to grow massively in the future in my mind because they're going to see that our antennas, there's nothing insidious about it at all, you know, you go in there and you just have to visit it and if any of you ever get a chance and I'm not sure if any of you had a chance, you ought to try and visit one of those things. We have bloggers on the Kearsarge, but you ought to try over the next year if you can get a visit down there and I'd be happy to facilitate it just to kind of see for yourselves, you know, we're kind of see me people.

You'll see the impact and how alongside NGOs and the military people work together when they recognize that, you know, we're not from Venus and they're from Mars; we're all kind of from the same place and have the same values.

So there will be sensitivities to it, but already we have a ton of NGOs wanting to participate with us because they realize that we can facilitate what they're trying to do there in an incredibly beneficial way and that we're not there for some insidious reason and diminishing underlying conditions of poverty and things like that is, in and of itself, a deterrent to bad things happening in the region.

Q Okay. Did you partner with any Colombian or Nicaraguan NGOs or anything? Or were they mostly --

ADM. KERNAN: Mostly they were from the military, but there was interaction. When we went ashore, it's real important in my mind, we would rather partner for the medical perspective, we'd rather partner with a local host nation organization because, first, we teach them, we establish connectivity with them. We're doing this kind of cyber- medicine thing now. We're going to start in, the first one is El Salvador where we work with the doctors in El Salvador and then we leave equipment there to include audio-video equipment where in the course of an operation, people up here in Mayport can watch what they're doing and advise them on how to conduct the particular procedures, so it's kind of our way to do persistence without actually being there.

So it is important to do that from the medical perspective to do that, and in Haiti, obviously, any NGO organization there, it didn't matter who it was, whether it was UN associated or even religious- based, it didn't matter to us if we had a common interest, we would do it and we'll partner with anyone in the country in my mind that facilitates the common reasons for the mission.

Q Okay. Actually, I was on the Kearsarge in Nicaragua and Colombia and next time, I'll remember translators.

ADM. KERNAN: Yeah, Nicaragua and Colombia, yeah, I mean, that was a -- (inaudible) -- somebody mentioned about lessons learned. The language is key and critical, but that's not a problem, that's not really a problem in that region. Across the Navy, Hispanics carry heavy load in the military from this country and there's tons of speakers that we can bring with us, but I think we didn't have all that we had, but in my mind, that's not a difficult one to take care of because they're available, we just need to plan ahead and that kind of refers to the planning ahead piece that we got to do.

Q Thank you.

ADM. KERNAN: Thanks for reminding me of that one.

Q Sure.

MR. HOLT: All right. Got just a couple of minutes left here. Do we have any follow up questions? All right.

Q I have one.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right.

Q As you had mentioned, the blogs on the Kearsarge, did they tell you they had a favorite one?

ADM. KERNAN: The blogs on the Kearsarge? So this is an E&E question, okay, that's like asking me what kind of shoes I like from a -- (inaudible). It was good, interestingly though, the bloggers and I'll tell you what, they were candid. It wasn't always positive, which is fine, you know, all we want to know is, hey, how can we get better? I thought it was a great idea to bring them with us and we're going to continue to do that. If we're afraid of candid comments about it then we're wrong, I encourage that and there were a few negative articles about it and we probably have changed some things based on

those comments and a lot of it is strategic communications, you know, we just got to get better at getting the message out on what we're doing, but again, we've got to do it and not talk about it and I think, over time, we'll be understood better.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Well, sir, do you have any closing thoughts for us?

ADM. KERNAN: No. I kind of appreciate the opportunity, you know, it's an interesting world now where you can get the information out there and, actually, Admiral Stavridis has a blog now, so he's become a blogger. He's the regional commander down here, but it's a great way to get information out and if we're doing the right thing, the work that you all do should be beneficial to us. If it's not, then we better start looking at what we're doing because we might be doing some things wrong, assuming that everybody is straight up and honest and reports what they hear and see.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Well, thank you very much for joining us today and we look forward to another opportunity to engage with you as the year progresses.

ADM. KERNAN: Thanks. And again, I encourage you, you know, if there's something we're doing down here that you might have an opportunity to participate in and do first hand and it's always great if you can sit down and talk to sailors, the young sailors, you know, their perspective is not tainted at all. They're all as candid as they can be, but you're certainly welcome to do that.

MR. HOLT: All right. Well, thank you very much. Thanks for joining us today for Bloggers' Roundtable.

ADM. KERNAN: Thanks very much.

END.