

American

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Exercise Cobra Gold 2014 Kicks Off in Thailand

By Terri Moon Cronk | American Forces Press Service | 12 February 2014

This article was originally published on the Defense Department website on February 11.

Washington — In a ceremony at Camp Akatosarot in Thailand on February 11, Navy Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, kicked off the 33rd annual military exercise Cobra Gold.

Cobra Gold 2014 is designed to advance regional security and provide effective response to regional crises through a multinational force from nations that share common goals and security commitments in the Asia-Pacific region, officials said.

Participants include Thailand, the United States, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and Malaysia.

Noting that Thailand is the oldest U.S. ally in the region — the U.S.-Thai alliance is entering its 181st year — Locklear called Cobra Gold the Pacific's signature exercise and one of the largest and most important multilateral exercises in which the United States participates.

In 2012, U.S. and Thai defense leaders signed a joint vision statement to update the defense relationship between the two nations, which expanded the nations' regional partnership to focus on challenges that include disaster relief and other global security contributions, Locklear said.

"Events like Cobra Gold allow us to work together multilaterally to exercise those commitments," he said. "Since 1980, Cobra Gold has served to develop, better respect and understand all the participants. This 33rd annual event, with over 13,000 participants, is no different."

But Cobra Gold 2014 is more than just the United States and Thai forces, as myriad nations are represented in the exercise, he noted. "Whether you are a participant or an observer, whether you have been here from the beginning or this is your nation's first Cobra Gold, your presence here demonstrates your country's resolve to support peace and stability in the region," Locklear told the kick-off ceremony's audience. The observers come from Burma, China, Laos and Vietnam.

This year's exercise "will prepare us for a whole spectrum of challenges," from field exercises and live firing events, the admiral said. Humanitarian civic assistance projects also are important to the event, he added.

"Cobra Gold truly replicates the dynamic security environment we find ourselves in today, and what we will face in the future," Locklear said. "We must continue to build on the rich history of cooperation that events like Cobra Gold provide for us."

Aspiring to work closely with all nations in the region to confront common challenges and continue peace and prosperity is critical, he added.

"Together, we can build a common view on security interests," he said, adding that through such bilateral and multilateral engagements, participating nations will improve and share understanding, and enhance trust.

"I look forward to the opportunity when we can continue to work together to solve problems that each of our nations face," the Pacom commander said, "and toward a brighter future for the entire region for ourselves, our children, and their children."

World Acceptance of Biotech Crops Continues to Grow

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 13 February 2014

Washington — Acceptance of crops developed through biotechnology continued to expand in 2013 with more than 18 million farmers in 27 countries planting more than 175 million hectares with scientifically improved seeds that produced high yields of food, feed and fiber, according to an international agricultural research group.

In its report *Global Status of Commercialized Biotech/GM Crops: 2013*, released February 13, the nonprofit International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) said 2013 was the 18th year of growing acceptance of biotech plantings. It said 90 percent of the farmers who planted biotech were small holders and that nearly all had planted biotech seeds in previous years. It also said that for the second year, developing countries planted more biotech hectares than industrial countries. Biotech crops were first commercialized in 1996.

"Biotech crops are demonstrating their global value as a tool for resource-poor farmers who face decreased water supplies and increased weed and pest pressures," said ISAAA founder Clive James. "The effects of climate change will only continue to expand the need for this technology." He said the growth in acceptance represents the confidence and trust of millions of risk-averse farmers "who have gained from the significant benefits that biotech crops offer."

The United States supports the safe use of science and technology, including biotechnology, to help meet agricultural challenges and consumer needs of the 21st

century. It has supported ISAAA's work through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

James touted public-private partnerships for helping to spread awareness of the benefits of biotech crops such as drought-tolerant maize. "Partnership between the public and private sectors allows you to do something that no party can do on its own." He said research and development partnerships "combined with political will are necessary for biotech crop adoption and sustainability."

James cited one such partnership: the Water Efficient Maize for Africa project to develop drought-tolerant maize that involves the U.S. seed developer Monsanto Company, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico, and the African Agricultural Technology Foundation in Nairobi, Kenya, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He called drought "the biggest constraint to maize productivity in Africa."

Through another public-private partnership with Cornell University in New York and USAID, ISAAA is helping to make more members of the public aware of the benefits of biotech, also called genetic engineering or genetic modification, James said.

The report noted that developing countries are continuing to push forward with biotech research and commercialization and "have demonstrated the political willpower to approve new biotech traits."

The countries that grew biotech crops in 2013, in order of the number of hectares planted, are the United States, Brazil, Argentina, India, Canada, China, Paraguay, South Africa, Pakistan, Uruguay, Bolivia, the Philippines, Australia, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Sudan, Chile, Honduras, Portugal and Cuba. The top five producing countries each planted at least 1 million biotech hectares, the report states; the next five planted more than 50,000 hectares.

Notable advancements for biotech crops in 2013 include Bangladesh's approval of an improved eggplant, the country's first biotech approval; Indonesia's approval of drought-tolerant sugarcane; and Panama's approval of biotech maize for planting in 2014, James said. Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda are conducting field trials of biotech cotton while the Philippines is completing field trials of vitamin A-fortified golden rice.

Looking ahead, James said the Water Efficient Maize for Africa project in 2017 is expected to introduce the first "stacked" soybean containing both herbicide-tolerance

and insect-resistance traits.

He said biotech crops also benefit food security and the environment. He said that between 1996 and 2012, the latest year for which data is available, biotech crops contributed \$117 billion in environmental benefits by eliminating the need for nearly 500 kilograms of pesticides; reduced the need for tilling, which reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 27 billion kilograms; and saved 123 million hectares of land from being placed into agricultural production.

Biotech also helped raise the incomes of more than 16.5 million small-farm families, the report says.

U.S. Intelligence Leaders Outline Security Threats

By Sonya Weakley | Staff Writer | 12 February 2014

Washington – Cyber attacks, isolated ground attacks, ongoing regional conflicts and organized crime are among the major threats to the long- and short-term security of the United States and the rest of the world.

In testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on February 11, James Clapper, U.S. national intelligence director, and Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said increasingly diverse formal and informal terrorist networks constitute major sources of foreign and domestic destabilization.

Such groups – numbering in the thousands – have taken advantage of the unprecedented violence in Syria, constituting a threat to both the United States and Europe. Both men indicated the spread of violence into neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, threatens to prolong the conflict.

Calling the humanitarian situation in Syria an "apocalyptic disaster," Clapper added that the estimated 7,500 foreign fighters in Syria, from as many as 50 countries, pose a significant security challenge.

He said the capability of established terrorist organizations, including al-Qaida, to conduct large-scale U.S. attacks has been significantly degraded, but the group remains a threat, particularly as it reorganizes in other areas, including North Africa.

While Iran's foreign policies contribute to regional destabilization, Clapper and Flynn agreed that long-standing sanctions, resulting in major economic consequences, have motivated the country's leaders to make concessions. Clapper said U.S. intelligence organizations have the capability to monitor compliance.

He said new sanctions against Iran would be

“counterproductive” to ongoing multilateral talks aimed at convincing Tehran to give up its nuclear weapons program.

Flynn said uncertainty over Afghanistan’s post-2014 security environment will likely drive decisions at all levels next year, while the country’s security forces work to improve their already noted progress in conducting and sustaining security operations.

The United States has been urging Afghan President Hamid Karzai to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement overwhelmingly approved by an Afghan Loya Jira in November 2013 to allow a small number of U.S. troops to remain in support roles after 2014. Clapper said he now expects the agreement will not be signed prior to the April presidential election. “The effect already of the delay has been negative in terms of the impact on the economy, not to mention, I think, the psychological impact,” he said.

Under intensive questioning regarding internal and external threats to U.S. domestic and foreign intelligence operations, Flynn said major revisions to internal data-access processes are being instituted across all U.S. intelligence agencies. At the same time, efforts are being made to increase the transparency of intelligence-gathering objectives to allay privacy concerns.

Both men outlined major security concerns from all parts of the world. Combining the efforts of civilian and defense intelligence are key to maintaining national and international security.

“Our assessments are based upon ... worldwide human intelligence, technical intelligence, counterintelligence, and document and media exploitation capabilities, along with information from partners in the [intelligence community] and the entire ... intelligence enterprise, international allies and open sources,” Flynn said.

Farmers Who Adopt Technologies Can Grow More, Researchers Say

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 12 February 2014

Washington — Farmers who grown maize, wheat and rice can significantly boost their production and feed more people if they adopt one or more improved agricultural practices identified by a leading U.S. agricultural research center.

“No single agricultural technology or farming practice will provide sufficient food for the world in 2050,” said Mark Rosegrant, lead author of a new report from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington. Rosegrant measured the impacts that agricultural innovations have on farm productivity, prices and hunger. He said that instead “we must advocate for

and utilize a range of these technologies in order to maximize yields.”

In *Food Security in a World of Growing Natural Resource Scarcity: The Role of Agricultural Technologies*, released February 12 in Washington, Rosegrant states that no-till farming alone could increase maize yields by 20 percent and that irrigating the same fields could increase yields by 67 percent.

Unless improved practices are adopted, he writes, maize production could decrease by 18 percent by 2050, making it more difficult to feed a growing population. Rosegrant added that technologies can keep the costs of food down, especially for those at risk of hunger and malnutrition in developing countries. The world’s population is expected to grow from 7 billion in 2011 to more than 9 billion by 2050, while farmers face climate change and dwindling supplies of arable land and water, he says.

“The future technology mix will have major impacts on agricultural production, food consumption, food security, trade and environmental quality in developing countries,” he says.

The report urges more support for agricultural research and for helping farmers learn how to use improved technologies like no-till, as well as drip and sprinkler irrigation. Drip irrigation is water applied in small amounts directly around each plant. Sprinkler irrigation is water delivered to crops by means of pressurized pipes.

The report also focuses on the improved technologies of drought- and heat-tolerant seeds, and seeds that better respond to fertilizer; harvesting water for agriculture; and improved management of pests, diseases and weeds. It also states that technologies that reduce water use and nitrogen runoff are important to minimize agriculture’s impact on the environment.

The research by Rosegrant and his colleagues was funded by the U.S. Department of State, the global federation CropLife International and CGIAR, formerly known as the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

Global Wildlife Protection Effort Nets Traffickers in Africa, Asia

12 February 2014

Washington — Law enforcement officers from 28 countries February 11 announced completion of a groundbreaking, global operation to combat wildlife poaching and trafficking.

Code named Operation Cobra II, the monthlong operation and capacity-building activity promoted cross-

border law enforcement cooperation and drew praise from the conservation community for its impressive results, including more than 400 arrests of wildlife criminals and 350 major wildlife seizures across Africa and Asia. Operation Cobra II also resulted in the seizure of 36 rhino horns, more than 3 metric tons of elephant ivory, more than 10,000 turtles, more than 1,000 skins of protected species, more than 10,000 European eels and more than 200 metric tons of endangered rosewood.

Among the many arrests were several wildlife kingpins, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) said in a release on its website February 11.

Police, customs and wildlife officials from China, Africa, Southeast and South Asia, as well as the United States joined with international enforcement agencies to stage the operation out of two coordination centers in Nairobi, Kenya, and Bangkok, with links to field operatives across Africa and Asia. The International Coordination Team for Cobra II exchanged intelligence on a daily basis, targeting poachers and traffickers of endangered elephants, rhinos, tigers, pangolins, turtles and other species sought by wildlife criminals to feed the black market in wildlife and wildlife products, USFWS said.

The illegal wildlife trade has become highly profitable – some estimates put the value as high as \$19 billion annually. Trade is increasingly controlled by organized crime syndicates with sophisticated international networks that have access to large amounts of cash, the latest technology and corrupt transportation channels, USFWS said. Chinese and African law enforcement officials conducted the first successful joint sting operation that resulted in the arrest of an ivory trafficking kingpin who was funneling large amounts of poached elephant tusks between Africa and China, USFWS added.

Investigators joined together with the World Customs Organization, U.N. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, Interpol, Association of Southeast Asia Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network and the Lusaka Agreement Task Force to run the operation. New intelligence on poaching and trafficking syndicates was gathered, allowing governments to continue investigations with increasingly clearer targets.

Operation Cobra II was financed principally by the U.S. State Department, the USFWS Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund and African Elephant Conservation Fund and the China Wildlife Conservation Association. Joint training exercises that led to Operation Cobra II were conducted by the Special Investigation Group on wildlife trafficking, which has received technical and financial support from the U.S. Agency for International Development's Asia's Regional Response to Endangered

Species Trafficking Program, implemented by the countertrafficking organization Freeland. The International Fund for Animal Welfare another program partner, provided additional financial support, as did the Canadian Embassy in Kenya and participating countries. Freeland mobilized and provided financial, logistical and training support as well as information on wildlife trafficking syndicates.

"Wildlife crooks are networking efficiently with horrific results on the poaching battlefield, so conservationists and law enforcement officers must do the same to stop them," said Steve Galster, director of Freeland. "This operation was a great example of governments, international organizations and nongovernment organizations collaborating to break up wildlife trafficking networks. We need to do this more."

"Operation Cobra II is a great example of countries working together to address the most serious and pressing wildlife issue of our time. Wildlife trafficking is quickly threatening to wipe out some of the most charismatic and treasured animals on the planet, and it is only through international collaboration such as this that we can hope to save them in time," said USFWS Director Dan Ashe. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service looks forward to working further with the partners of Operation Cobra II to help stop the illegal trade in wildlife."

France, U.S. Agree to Move Forward on Key Issues

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 11 February 2014

Washington – The United States and France have agreed to move forward on key issues having to do with security, trade, the environment and global development, President Obama said at a February 11 joint press briefing at the White House with French President François Hollande.

"We're standing shoulder to shoulder on the key challenges to global security," Obama said on the second day of the French president's three-day state visit.

Obama noted U.S.-France agreement on the need to end Iran's nuclear weapons program and destroy Syria's chemical weapons. As for the ongoing violence in Syria, Obama said France and the United States will continue to strengthen the moderate opposition and call on the international community to stem the flow of foreign fighters into Syria.

France and the United States also agree that they, along with the European Union, have an important role in supporting a final agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, Obama said. "And we also agreed," Obama said, "to continue our cooperation on Mali and the

Central African Republic, where leaders and communities need to show the courage to resist further violence and to pursue reconciliation.”

Obama announced the launch of a new economic dialogue to expand trade, increase the competitiveness of U.S. and French businesses, spur innovation and encourage new entrepreneurs. He noted that Hollande’s next stop will be to the U.S. technological center in California known as Silicon Valley. That visit, Obama said, “underscores our commitment to new collaborations in science and technology.”

Obama said the two countries have agreed to continue pursuing the ambitious Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. “We need to get this done,” Obama said, “because an agreement could increase exports by tens of billions of dollars, support hundreds of thousands of additional jobs both in the United States and the European Union, and promote growth on both sides of the Atlantic.”

Both nations have agreed to keep expanding their clean-energy partnerships to fight climate change, Obama said. “And even as we take steps at home to reduce carbon emissions, we’ll work to help developing countries move to low-carbon growth.” The 2015 United Nations climate conference in France, Obama said, “will be an opportunity to forge a strong global agreement that reduces greenhouse-gas emissions through concrete actions.”

Obama said the United States and France are also making progress in their cooperative efforts on food security and nutrition and in the fight against AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other infectious diseases.

“Standing together and using our freedom to improve the lives of not only our citizens but people around the world is what makes France not only America’s oldest ally, but also one of our closest allies,” Obama said.

Obama said he was honored to accept Hollande’s invitation to visit France in June to mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day. “I was there for the 65th anniversary, and it was an extraordinary experience,” Obama said. “I’m looking forward to returning to honor our remarkable veterans and to reaffirm this extraordinary alliance.”

Federal Marriage Recognition Extended to Same-Sex Couples

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 10 February 2014

Washington — Married same-sex couples will enjoy the legal recognition and privileges granted to heterosexual married couples, according to an announcement from

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder on February 8.

Speaking to a gay rights advocacy group in New York City, Holder said he will issue a formal memo to Justice Department employees February 10 to outline the federal position in all legal matters going forward.

“In every courthouse, in every proceeding, and in every place where a member of the Department of Justice stands on behalf of the United States,” Holder said, Justice Department employees “will strive to ensure that same-sex marriages receive the same privileges, protections and rights as opposite-sex marriages under federal law.”

The announcement caps a period of what Holder called “remarkable, once-unimaginable” progress for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals. While many state governments have taken steps in recent years to recognize marriage of LGBT couples, the touchstone for federal action stems from a Supreme Court decision in mid-2013 striking down a 1996 federal law that had banned recognition of same-sex marriage.

“Thanks to the opinions handed down on that day — and the efforts of this organization and many others — there’s no question that this country stands at a new frontier in the fight for civil rights,” Holder said at a New York City dinner held by the Human Rights Campaign.

The Justice Department is the central agency for enforcement of federal laws. With that authority, this announcement changes the legal position of same-sex partners in a variety of circumstances under federal jurisdiction:

- Same-sex spouses of individuals charged with a crime cannot be compelled to testify against their partners, a longstanding marital privilege granted to heterosexual couples.
- Same-sex couples will be able to file for bankruptcy jointly, allowing some assets and debts to be excepted from bankruptcy proceedings.
- Federal prison inmates in same-sex marriages will be granted the same rights to spousal visits and contacts extended to traditional couples.
- Certain federal benefit programs will now give equal treatment to same-sex couples and heterosexual couples, notably benefits granted to the survivors of public safety officers who are killed in the line of duty.

The Obama administration has worked for the expansion of civil rights to LGBT citizens from its first year in office. The Hate Crimes Prevention Act was adopted in 2009 in

response to vicious attacks on homosexuals who were assaulted because of their gender orientation. In 2010, the Obama administration repealed a Department of Defense policy that forced homosexual service members to keep their orientation secret or face the risk of being discharged.

Most recently, the Justice Department announced that federal tax and immigration laws must treat same-sex married couples with the same consideration granted to heterosexual couples. Employees of the U.S. government have also been assured that their same-sex partners will be eligible for the protections and benefits offered to heterosexual spouses.

The steady expansion of these LGBT rights puts the United States in a historic position like that of an earlier civil rights era, Holder said.

“Just as was true during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the stakes involved in this generation’s struggle for LGBT equality could not be higher,” Holder said. “Then, as now, nothing less than our country’s founding commitment to the notion of equal protection under the law was at stake.”

As the government takes this series of actions on the federal level, LGBT rights are rapidly advancing at the state level. The advocacy organization Freedom to Marry reports that 17 states plus Washington have offered same-sex couples the benefits of legally recognized marriage. Several more states have broadened legal recognition of domestic partnerships.

New U.S. Farm Bill Ends Direct Crop Subsidies

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 07 February 2014

Washington – President Obama signed a comprehensive five-year farm bill on February 7 that ends controversial direct subsidies to farmers in favor of cheaper crop insurance for growers who face risks from severe drought, flooding and unpredictable market conditions.

The direct payments had been supported by some U.S. farm groups but opposed by U.S. trade partners.

The president travelled to Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, to sign the bill. He was surrounded by several members of Congress who represent farm states and by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. He chose middle America to celebrate the bill as an example of political compromise.

The \$956.4 billion, bipartisan bill known as the Agriculture Act of 2014 also authorizes an array of programs including trade, agricultural research, renewable energy and food aid.

The legislation requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that pork, chicken and beef sold in the United States includes details about where the animal was born, slaughtered and processed. Some members of the meat industry have argued that this "country-of-origin" measure would be too costly for them while consumer groups favored the labeling.

The House of Representatives in January and the Senate on February 4 passed differing versions of the bill. The final version was then negotiated by a conference committee of House and Senate members and passed by both chambers before being sent to the president for signature or veto. Before signing the bill, Obama praised it for supporting land conservation, spurring the development of renewable energy, and giving incentives to processors to make meals more nutritious. Congress had spent three years debating the bill, which also reauthorizes emergency and development food-aid programs.

The farm bill was created during the Great Depression to give financial assistance to American farmers because excess crop production led to low prices. Congress passed the first farm bill in 1933. It enabled the government to buy excess grain from farmers, which could be sold later if bad weather or other circumstances negatively affected output.

In 1938, Congress created a long-range farm bill when it decided that farm incomes should be managed by the free market. It required farmers to enroll in a crop-insurance program. Direct payments began in the 1990s as a way to support struggling farmers regardless of how much they produced. Traditionally, Congress has reauthorized farm bills every five years.

The 2014 farm bill “includes the most significant reduction to farm policy spending in history,” the House-Senate conference committee said in a statement.

The bill sets aside \$80 million a year for local food purchases to deal with international emergencies, a food-aid adjustment that supporters say is more effective than shipping food from the United States. It also limits the use of monetization, or selling U.S. commodities in countries receiving aid, by increasing the allowance to use cash-based assistance from 13 percent to 20 percent. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) praised the bill, saying it will allow aid to reach up to 4 million more people each year and save about \$215 million a year.

The bill also authorizes \$15 million for USAID to preposition U.S. food shipments at distribution sites to enable rapid respond to emergencies.

Vilsack, speaking at the White House days before the

president signed the measure into law, said the bill will allow his department to put an additional \$400 million into agricultural research, including studying how climate change affects agriculture and forestry. As a sign the administration backs agricultural research, while in East Lansing Obama toured the Michigan Biotechnology Institute.

The White House said in a statement that the administration has consistently focused on expanding markets for American goods abroad, "working aggressively to break down trade barriers with our global partners while meeting our trade commitments."

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