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Press Release

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The commander of America's newest combatant command briefed members of Congress on March 13 about the progress his unit has made since its inception less than six months ago.

Gen. Ralph E. Eberhart, who took control of U.S. Northern Command when it was established Oct. 1, told members of the House Armed Services Committee how the organization provides "unity of command" for U.S. military actions to counter threats against homeland security.

"We are just like other regional combatant commands, with one important difference," he said. "The United States homeland is our area of responsibility."

Besides conducting operations to deter, prevent and defeat threats and aggression aimed at the United States, its territories and interests, USNORTHCOM also provides military assistance to civil authorities as directed, Eberhart said.

"When we work with civil authorities, we will most likely be in a support role to the lead federal agency, providing one-stop shopping for federal military assistance," Eberhart said.

According to the general, who also commands the North American Aerospace Defense Command, USNORTHCOM has few permanently assigned forces -- less than 250. If mission requirements dictate, he can request additional forces from the secretary of defense.

While those additional forces would come from U.S. Joint Forces Command, day-to-day operations are conducted by three subordinate joint task force commands. These include: JTF Headquarters Homeland Security which handles land and maritime defense planning and military assistance to civil authorities. JTF Civil Support is responsible for command and control consequence management in response to chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or high-yield explosive events. JTF 6 supports federal, state and local counter-drug law enforcement agencies.

USNORTHCOM forces have already participated in a number of real-world events, Eberhart said.

"We have demonstrated our ability to conduct operations in a number of emergency situations," the general said. "During the Washington, D.C., sniper attacks, we coordinated aerial surveillance with the FBI. Most recently, we supported military operations in the aftermath of the Space Shuttle Columbia tragedy."

USNORTHCOM has also supported President George W. Bush's attendance at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference in Los Cabos, Mexico, and the president's State of the Union address in January.

According to the general, the command's biggest challenge is sifting through volumes of intelligence and other operational data that comes from the U.S. intelligence community and nearly 50 other government agencies.

"Our Combined Intelligence and Fusion Center collates and analyzes data," he said. "Our goal is to connect the dots to create a clear threat picture, playing our appropriate

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military role as part of the interagency team."

Many of the House committee members, including Rep. Neil Abercrombie of Hawaii, expressed concern that USNORTHCOM operations may endanger the concept of Posse Comitatus -- the prohibition of using military forces in a civil law enforcement capacity.

"We will remain vigilant in ensuring that USNORTHCOM is used in accordance with the law," Eberhart said. "We understand the Posse Comitatus Act and related laws. We believe the act, as amended, provides the authority we need to do our job."

Doing that job, the general said, has meant taking joint-service operations to a new level.

"Our command is built upon a total force and total national team concept that includes all (military) services, the National Guard, Reserves, Department of Defense civilians and numerous federal, state and local agencies," he said. "We believe we are redefining jointness.

"We are leveraging the unique capabilities and expertise of (all) agencies to protect our homeland. The president's decision to establish USNORTHCOM has enhanced the Department of Defense's ability to provide quick, responsive support, when and where needed," Eberhart said.

General Eberhart's statement before the House Armed Services Committee

<http://www.house.gov/hasc/openingstatementsandpressreleases/108thcongress/03-03-13eberhart.html>