Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Thumbnail Image:

Nov 15, 2017 by Michael Edward Walsh

Djibouti: Renewed Interest in Maritime Security Facility Next to Chinese Base [1]

Thanks to millions of dollars in funding from the government of Japan, the Djibouti Regional Training Center (DRTC) opened its doors two years ago. However, the facility has gone largely unused since then. That may be about to change.

In recent weeks, the government of Djibouti has expressed a renewed interest in making use of the facility as a meeting space for events related to the Djibouti Code of Conduct. If this happens, the facility's potential will finally start to be realized.

History of the Djibouti Regional Training Center (DRTC)

On October 29, 2011, the foundation stone for the DRTC was laid by the president of the Republic of Djibouti and the director of the Maritime Safety Division at the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Funded through the IMO Djibouti Code of Conduct Trust Fund,

the new facility was intended to promote successful implementation of the Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. Specifically, it was intended to provide a meeting space for events related to the Djibouti Code of Conduct and office space for coordinating similar events across the region.

On November 12, 2015, the $2.5 million facility was officially opened by Djibouti's minister of equipment and transport. Although not in attendance, the IMO secretary-general addressed the attendees by way of video. According to him, the facility "should be an asset to Djibouti and to the region for many years to come." However, the IMO secretary-general recognized that the government of Djibouti would need "to be imaginative in its use of the new building and to be proactive in maximizing its potential, for the benefit of the whole region" in order to realize the facility's full potential.

Since the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the facility has gone largely unused.

Although the facility boasts one of the best conference auditoriums in the country, it has only hosted a handful of events. According to some experts, this is because of a lack of funding for events and basic infrastructure problems at the facility. According to others, it is because of serious limitations placed on access to the facility during the construction of the Chinese military base next door. Whatever the reasons, the facility has not played the "key role in regional capacity-building initiatives under the Code of Conduct" originally envisioned by the IMO.

Conference on the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC Conference)

On October 29, 2017, the DCoC Conference was held at the DRTC. It included delegations from Djibouti, the European Union, France, Japan, the United States and Africa's Intergovernmental Authority on Development. It also included speakers from the IMO and the Interregional Maritime Safety Institute, among others.

If the DRTC becomes useless, it would not just harm the reputation of the government of the Djibouti as an aid recipient: it would also harm the reputation of the IMO as an aid organization.

Although most of the presentations focused on specific regional maritime security issues, the conference included a presentation on the facility's potential. After these presentations, the DRTC director took attendees on a guided tour of the facility. During the tour, she noted that the government of Djibouti was interested in putting the facility to greater use, but it lacked the funds to do so. So, she appealed to attendees to find ways to fund future programming at the facility.

The DCoC Conference is a sign that the government of Djibouti is interested in more fully realizing the potential of the DRTC. It also shows that the government is willing to make use of the facility as a meeting space for events related to the Djibouti Code of Conduct. This is an important development because the facility has hosted only one other major event over the

past two years and none since completion of the Chinese military base, and some experts have started to question whether the government of Djibouti is at all interested in making use of the facility now that the Chinese base is next door.

Future of the DRTC

There is an old Afar proverb that goes, “A son can be difficult in three ways. Either he isn't born, or being born dies, or grows up and becomes useless.”

If the DRTC becomes useless, it would not just harm the reputation of the government of the Djibouti as an aid recipient: it would also harm the reputation of the IMO as an aid organization. For this reason, many will welcome the news that the government of Djibouti is interested in more fully utilizing the facility as a meeting space for events related to the Djibouti Code of Conduct.

However, it will take more than just an expression of interest to more fully utilize the facility as a meeting space. As the DCoC Conference shows, the government of Djibouti will require additional funding from foreign donors to support programming at the facility, and these foreign donors will need reassurances that the government will make proper use of those funds to deliver that programming.

It therefore remains difficult to predict what the future holds for the DRTC. For now, the IMO can only hope that the DRTC will become an important asset for Djibouti and the region in the years to come.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *On October 29, 2017, the author attended the abovementioned Conference on the Djibouti Code of Conduct at the Djibouti Regional Training Center in Doraleh, Djibouti.*

Photo by the International Maritime Organization I *CC BY 2.0*