



U.S. Army UH-60 Black Hawk crew members assigned to the 1-228th Aviation Regiment, Joint Task Force-Bravo, and Guatemalans isolated by the high flood waters from Hurricane Iota unload humanitarian aid food items at Chisec, Guatemala, Nov. 25, 2020. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Staff Sgt. Elijah Tiggs).

COVID-19 ASSISTANCE IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: THE ROLE OF SOUTHCOM

BY AMBASSADOR JEAN MANES

The security and stability of the Western Hemisphere is in the national security interest of the United States. What impacts one, impacts all of us. As COVID-19 swept across the globe, Latin America and the Caribbean were about six-to-eight weeks behind the United States in terms of infection rates. In March, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) expanded our Humanitarian Assistance Program (HAP) to support our partners in managing critical needs in the hemisphere. In the last ten months, SOUTHCOM completed over 370 projects in 28 countries. In all, the U.S. government has delivered over \$220 million in assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean – almost double the amount of any other country. These critical, life-saving donations demonstrate ongoing commitment to our friends and allies, and it is simply the right thing to do.

This cooperation required extensive coordination with U.S. embassies. A key team member at each U.S. embassy is the security cooperation officer (SCO). The SCO works alongside the interagency country team at each embassy to field urgent requests from partner nations. Using the full capability of the interagency, SOUTHCOM has tracked U.S. government assistance and monitored attempts by competing governments to leverage the region's urgent needs for their own benefit.

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U.S. assistance is coordinated directly with host governments and designed so as not to disrupt U.S. supply chains. Donations have gone to first responders, hospital personnel, and those treating the most vulnerable in big and small cities across the region. In Guatemala alone, SOUTHCOM provided more than 50 small-scale projects to meet urgent local needs. In Costa Rica, in coordination with UNICEF, the United States delivered hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies to rural schools serving the most vulnerable children.

When the United States makes a commitment, we deliver, and the quality of our products is top notch. U.S. assistance also prioritizes developing resilience and sustainability with our partner nations.

Decades of U.S. assistance in the region have focused on improving health systems. While COVID-19 has strained all of our institutions, the United States remains committed to investing in our partners to increase their long-term capabilities, while also helping them deal with this immediate crisis. We recognize that health security is national security.

The unique capability of the U.S. military centers around agility and logistics. This niche enabled critical emergency assistance to arrive quickly even as the United States planned larger scale assistance, primarily through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The constant interagency coordination ensured that we triaged requests for personal protective equipment such as masks, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies, and other immediate items, while USAID joined not only in addressing immediate needs like ventilators, but in providing increased systemic support for health case management, telehealth capabilities, and other requirements.

While COVID-19 assistance continues, our relationship with countries in the hemisphere runs deep. Education, health, economic, and security assistance remain key priorities, underpinned by a foundation of long-standing friendship and deep-seated common values.

Recently, for example, SOUTHCOM mobilized U.S. support, led by Joint Task Force Bravo in Honduras, to conduct rescue operations in Panama, Guatemala, Honduras, and Colombia due to severe flooding from hurricanes Eta and Iota. As of the end of November 2020, SOUTHCOM has conducted 275 relief missions/flights, rescued 864 people (782 in Honduras alone), and transported 1.3 million pounds of life-saving food, water, and supplies as part of the broader U.S. government support following the devastating hurricanes. Rescuing women, men and children from rising floodwaters and delivering emergency humanitarian assistance to those isolated due to road and bridge destruction is just one more example of our commitment. When our partners call, we answer on the first ring and do everything possible to help them save and preserve lives.



Guatemalans isolated by the high flood waters from Hurricane Iota wait while others unload humanitarian aid food items at Rubelsanto, Guatemala, Nov. 26, 2020. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Staff Sgt. Elijah Tiggs).

U.S. assistance has been consistent and constant – just like our partnership with countries in this hemisphere. Consider how SOUTHCOM deploys the Navy hospital ship USNS COMFORT. Since 2007, COMFORT has visited 21 countries on humanitarian medical missions, many of them multiple times. It spent more than seven months deployed in the region between October 2018 and November 2019. These missions provided life-changing medical care to tens of thousands of people and strengthened our capacity to work with our partners.

These are lasting relationships. Even now, when COVID-19 has limited our ability to meet in person, the number of phone calls, virtual meetings, and WhatsApp messages have skyrocketed. This region matters. Every action helps ensure a secure, free, and prosperous hemisphere that contributes to U.S. national security and security throughout the region.

From the outset of the pandemic, our goal has been responsiveness to key partners. For example, SOUTHCOM procured mobile medical hospital capabilities to meet growing demands for hospital space. We are donating 24 expeditionary field hospitals across 11 countries, consisting of climate-controlled tents with full-scale air handling and electrical generators. In Jamaica, the delivery coincided with a COVID-19 spike, and the hospital tents were immediately utilized by a local hospital. These hospital tent systems, produced by an American company, can pivot to handle other disaster needs in the future. SOUTHCOM also partnered with the U.S. private sector to transport donations to countries even while airports remained closed to commercial traffic.

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Internal coordination has been key. Security cooperation officers at U.S. embassies are in daily contact with SOUTHCOM headquarters to discuss country needs. Weekly regional calls and data sharing ensure we leverage the full power of the interagency and maximize the impact of U.S. assistance. It has been a full court press since March, and we are not slowing down. Plans are

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underway for medical teams to travel to the region to assist with overwhelming demand for non-COVID-19 related procedures put on hold during the pandemic, such as dental and eye procedures. Harnessing the power of the U.S. private sector, donated medical supplies will be critical as health budgets around the hemisphere have been decimated. Meeting our partners where they are is our top priority. We stand with them.

The Commander of U.S. Southern Command and I recently traveled to Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. The appreciation for U.S. assistance by our partners was evident. Whom do you want with you in a crisis? The United States. It is trust and confidence built over decades, our family connections, and our shared values that create a deep bond. It has been a challenging ten months for the region, and equal challenges lie ahead as economies recover. What remains constant is we are in this together as partners, allies, and friends. Security in the Western Hemisphere is a central national security issue for the United States. Reaching the goal of a hemisphere that is secure, free, and prosperous is possible when we all step up and do our part.

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