

# USAID/OTI Colombia Field Report

October - December 2007

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## Program Description

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives' (OTI) Initial Governance Response Program (IGRP) assists the Government of Colombia (GOC) to stabilize areas recently retaken from insurgent forces by promoting government presence and responsiveness to local needs. OTI's main government partner is the Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI by its Spanish acronym), which is part of the Office of the President and is responsible for coordinating the establishment of government services in 11 prioritized parts of the country recently taken back from insurgents. All OTI project activities are carried out in the name of Accion Social, the partner organization for CCAI. Through the promotion of Accion Social's presence, the program strengthens the credibility and legitimacy of the GOC in post-conflict areas, increases the willingness and capacity of communities to cooperate and interact with the GOC, and improves the GOC's capacity to respond to community-prioritized necessities in a timely and credible manner. To date, total obligations to our implementing partner amount to \$13,515,935.

## Country Situation

**Armed Groups Remain Active** - OTI is currently operational in 5 of the 57 municipalities under CCAI's area of responsibility. These municipalities have historically been marginalized due to geographic inaccessibility; are only partially freed from the influence of illegally armed groups, both the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and newly armed groups connected to narcotics trafficking; and are important coca-producing areas transitioning to the cultivation of legal crops. Military operations are ongoing in these areas due to the continued presence of guerrillas and other illegally armed groups. Security concerns complicate staff travel and program logistics.

**Local Elections** - Elections for governors, mayors, and municipal councils were held on October 28, 2007, and the winners will take office in January 2008. In OTI's area of operation, the elections were conducted without major incidents despite concerns regarding intimidation and violence by armed groups. Notably, there was a significant increase in the number of voters in comparison to previous elections. This rise points to the Colombian citizenry's increasing willingness to participate in a democratic system. Since the election, OTI has been working with newly elected officials from all political parties, providing technical assistance to ensure that municipal development plans support departmental and national efforts to consolidate areas formerly under the control of illegally armed groups.

**GOC Negotiations with the FARC** - President Uribe authorized a *Zona de Encuentro* (zone of encounter) to facilitate a humanitarian accord with the FARC for the release of hostages. The zone would comprise approximately 150 square kilometers in a relatively unpopulated rural area with no military or police presence and would retain its special status for 30 days. The Catholic Church was designated as the only mediator between the FARC and the GOC's Commission for Peace, although international observers would be permitted. The FARC response to date has been to call the offer nothing more than a recycling of rejected GOC offers. As a precondition to any humanitarian accord, the FARC continues to insist that the GOC demilitarize two municipalities near Cali for a period of months, a condition President Uribe strongly and consistently rejects. At the same time, the FARC, working with Venezuelan President Chavez, promised to release three high-profile hostages before the end of the year.

## OTI Highlights

### A. Narrative Summary

Four municipal assemblies were held during the reporting period. Community turn-out was high at all of the events, which were coupled with the public hand-over of previously approved projects. Participants included local government officials and representatives from Accion Social. Seventy-three projects were proposed by various community groups. Thirty-four of the projects were selected by the assemblies as top priorities and subsequently approved by OTI.

The USAID/Colombia Mission provided \$2 million to the program so that OTI can begin implementing small, quick-impact projects that support productive activities. These projects seek to provide Colombians with alternatives to

coca production and demonstrate the presence of the GOC in recently recuperated areas. In addition, a key objective is to develop a methodology and generate lessons learned so that projects can be replicated in other conflict-prone parts of the country. A first round of 11 projects has been approved.

During the quarter, OTI received \$4 million from the Department of Defense through 1207 Authorization. These funds are intended to alleviate tension and resolve conflicts in countries of national strategic interest. This funding is being used to support civilian-military efforts to permanently consolidate government presence in conflictive areas of the country. These funds are also being used to support larger, longer term infrastructure projects (e.g., roads and bridges) that would normally be outside the scope considered by the OTI program.

A local nongovernmental organization has just completed a draft strategy for the support of cultural activities in rural areas. OTI identified the need for a coherent strategy to support these activities because (1) CCAI has prioritized support of leisure activities as part of its national strategy, (2) the program receives strong and repeated requests from community groups for support of cultural activities, and (3) the new communication strategy is exploring ways to draw on cultural activities as a means to engage communities in the consolidation process (see communication strategy bullet item below). The strategy report also highlighted the critical importance of schools as points of community linkage.

OTI provided CCAI with technical assistance to support the following activities:

- *Consolidation planning.* A local firm is working with CCAI to assist with the development of a regional plan of consolidation given the critical role that CCAI will be expected to play in the joint civilian-military effort to consolidate security and establish a long-term civilian government presence in OTI's area of operation. Complementing the technical assistance package for this effort is funding for two long-term positions that will be seconded to CCAI and two short-term positions that will be picked up by the GOC after 3 months.
- *Institutional strengthening.* A local firm that had carried out an assessment of CCAI's organizational strengths and weaknesses during the previous reporting period provided CCAI with a work plan for institutional strengthening. The plan was subsequently approved by Accion Social, CCAI's home agency. Implementation of the proposed institutional strengthening activities will start toward the end of January, once the development of the regional plan of consolidation has been completed (see preceding bullet item).
- *Communication strategy.* A local firm that specializes in "communication for social change" was contracted to develop a communication strategy to support the joint civilian-military consolidation effort. After meeting with focus groups and talking to local leaders, the firm is grappling with the design and implementation of a strategy that can reach a small, widely dispersed population that—depending on the area—continues to be greatly affected by the presence of illegally armed groups. Once it is rolled out and tested in currently targeted municipalities, the strategy will be adapted for use in CCAI's other prioritized zones.

## B. Grants Activity Summary

The security situation remains a serious constraint to rolling out the program much beyond small urban centers. While the GOC continues to extend its presence militarily, much of the project area remains off-limits for reasons of security. (During this reporting period, large contingents of police established themselves in two urban centers; however, one of these centers was the target of a mortar attack in December.) Even in areas that the GOC has declared nominally secure, contractors must be in constant communication with local military authorities before making any trips outside the urban centers to ensure that staff is operating with current security information. The logistics of transporting project supplies through insecure areas are highly complicated: one of the targeted municipalities is accessible to staff only by military helicopter; another, only by five-seat airplanes.

Total activity spending to date is \$1.85 million over 126 grants and breaks down as follows:

- Technical assistance to CCAI: \$450,000.
- Activities: \$1.4 million (e.g., assistance to schools, sports programs, health posts, and water and lighting systems).

## C. Indicators of Success

OTI continues to work with project-affiliated municipal councils, entities through which communities propose and prioritize small projects. The councils are made up of representatives from local government, CCAI, the Colombian military, and Accion Social; leaders of Juntas de Accion Comunal, groups that are legally constituted to represent the citizens of defined geographic areas; and other local leaders such as priests and teachers. The efficacy of this

inclusive approach is illustrated by the following example.

OTI held a municipal assembly in a town that had recently received a new contingent of police. (It is the first time the town has seen a permanent police presence in many years.) The community prioritized six projects and within a month the project supplies were officially handed over—in the name of Accion Social—to the various community groups. Public reaction to the rapid government response was overwhelmingly positive. Subsequently, word of the program spread to surrounding communities and generated numerous requests for assistance with small projects. The outpouring of requests is indicative of changing attitudes: even though there are risks, communities are recognizing that working with the government can be more beneficial than allying with the FARC.

## Program Appraisal

The GOC remains committed to quickly establishing a presence in areas recently recovered by the military and recognizes the value of adding small, quick-impact projects to its portfolio of medium- to long-term initiatives.

Lessons learned include the following:

- Each municipality must be evaluated for implementation as a completely distinct entity. Security is an issue in all target municipalities, as each municipality has varying levels of government forces, the FARC, and/or newly armed narco-trafficking groups, as well as an uneven presence of local government and organized civil society. These factors affect everything from travel by staff and community members within a given area to logistics and work alliances. The situation is fluid, which complicates matters further. Activities by the armed groups are ongoing, affect all operations, and require constant monitoring and analysis in close collaboration with the Colombian military.
- The use of small, high-impact community-prioritized projects to build community confidence in the GOC and strengthen the GOC's credibility is proving highly effective. In many remote communities, these projects are providing the first tangible sign of the GOC's commitment to responding quickly to community needs. The activities are demonstrating that the GOC is moving beyond militaristic interventions and putting the lie to FARC pronouncements that communities can only expect unfulfilled promises from the government. The strategy of presenting this program as a response by the GOC is also proving its effectiveness, tapping into a strong desire on the part of *campesinos*—people living in remote parts of the country—to feel connected to their government and to the rest of their country.
- Community and government input is essential to the success of this program and is something that can be prompted but not rushed. Correspondingly, community participation greatly depends on perceptions regarding security.
- Given the limited technical capacity of partner municipal governments and the inexperience of target communities in working with assistance projects, the absorptive capacity of OTI's target zone is low. On occasion, commitments made by communities or municipal governments will stretch these entities beyond their capacity to deliver. In these cases, adjustments are required to align commitments with reality.
- The program must continue to be an active partner in the process that identifies the geographic areas that are secure enough for program implementation. Areas of operation must be well consolidated by the military before program staff can begin working with communities. Otherwise, unrealistic expectations may arise.
- The program needs, for security reasons, to maintain a credible space between program field staff and the Colombian military—while at the same time publicly including the military in the process as a representative of the State at events ranging from municipal assemblies to public inaugurations. Coming to a joint understanding on this point has required time and tact, but the process has helped build a strong positive relationship between the program and the Colombian military.

## Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Priorities for the next three months include:

- Continue to provide CCAI with capacity-building support, using the joint military-civilian planning process for the permanent consolidation of OTI's operational area to provide the organization with the practical experience that will allow it to replicate the process in other zones.
- Continue efforts to expand the program beyond its narrow, security-conscripted geographic boundaries. (Note: With the roll-out of the consolidation effort, it is expected that the security zone will be significantly

expanded.)

- Continue to identify and implement small-scale productive projects—using the process to refine the methodologies for conducting such activities in conflict-prone zones.
- Assemble a team of consultants to work with the new governor and mayors in the target area to develop municipal development plans that reflect a commitment to the consolidation effort.
- Begin to implement several larger scale infrastructure projects that will significantly alter the environment for communities in the target areas and greatly enhance the image of the GOC. These projects include establishing a small ferry to link two areas within a municipality; rehabilitating an important bridge in a newly liberated area; and, in conjunction with the state government, building a road to link a macadam roadway with an area where people are being resettled from a nearby national park.
- Continue efforts that focus on setting up operations in a second part of the country. (An area has been provisionally selected with CCAI. Before OTI can begin operations, CCAI must develop a regional plan for the target municipalities.)

An important issue for discussion at the spring program meeting will be the development of a hand-over strategy with USAID/Colombia and the GOC.