

USAID/OTI Colombia Field Report

April - June 2008

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 12 prioritized parts of the country. All OTI project activities are carried out in the name of Acción Social, the partner organization for CCAI. Through the promotion of Acción 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, including efforts to increase economic opportunities, in a timely and credible manner.

Country Situation

Armed Groups Remain Active - OTI is currently operational in 6 of the 64 municipalities under CCAI's area of responsibility. These municipalities have historically been marginalized due to geographic inaccessibility; are increasingly 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 part of the operational area due to the continued presence of the FARC. Although the security situation is improving, it continues to complicate staff travel and program logistics.

While security concerns will undoubtedly be a consideration for the life of the program, it is encouraging to see the rapid pace of transition in recently recovered areas. The ongoing presence of security forces—including the police—is reducing FARC control and coca production activities, spurring voluntary eradication efforts, and allowing civilian governmental entities to establish themselves. These changes are due, in large part, to the sustained work of the Colombian military over the past several years. Colombian military victories have been on the increase, and desertions by FARC guerrillas and mid-level commanders are reported almost daily. And certainly the increasing, if still limited, presence of the civilian government in the operational area is convincing communities that the situation is truly changing. However, the emergence of criminal groups seeking to capitalize on the FARC's loss of control over coca production and marketing remains a significant threat.

FARC Setbacks - The FARC was dealt a serious blow when Colombian armed forces rescued 15 hostages being held in the jungle. The flawlessly executed rescue freed some of the FARC's most high-profile hostages, including three Americans that had been held for more than 5 years and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. Also freed were police officers and soldiers who had been in captivity for as many as 10 years. The death of FARC supreme commander Manuel Marulanda (alias Tirofijo) was another setback for the guerrillas. Marulanda is the third FARC secretariat member to die or be killed since February. Another major setback for the FARC was the high-profile desertion of "Karina," an infamous guerrilla leader who terrorized the Antioquia region for years. Karina's desertion has helped Colombian military intelligence mount additional offensives against the guerrillas. It is widely felt that Colombia has entered a new phase in its conflict with the FARC. Rates of desertions are on track to surpass 2007 desertion levels by 100 percent, as conditions for the guerrillas continue to deteriorate and FARC combatants turn in their comrades for high ransoms.

Regional Tensions - After the Colombian military's action against a FARC encampment in Ecuador last quarter, border tensions nearly undermined relations between Colombia and its neighbors Venezuela and Ecuador. Official diplomatic relations have been restored; however, tensions remain high. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has softened his tone considerably—after being identified as a major source of FARC support on laptops seized during the raid—and is calling for the guerrillas to put down their arms. The GOC continues to assert that information found on the computers reveals closer relations between the FARC and the Governments of both Venezuela and Ecuador than has previously been documented. Both Ecuador and Venezuela have repeatedly and strongly denied the allegations.

Paramilitary Extraditions - Fourteen paramilitary leaders were extradited to the United States, marking the largest

such extradition to date. Six of the paramilitaries were top leaders of the Colombian Self-Defense Forces (AUC by its Spanish acronym) and were being held as part of the collective demobilization process framed by the Peace and Justice Law, which also provides for reparations to families of victims of massacres. It is believed that the extraditions will have a long-term effect on judicial processes in Colombia, especially as related to continued human rights investigations into massacres perpetrated by paramilitaries and into paramilitary financing of Colombian congressional representatives in the so-called para-political scandal.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

A major program accomplishment during the quarter was the finalization of the GOC's unified consolidation plan, which serves as the guide for the permanent consolidation of GOC presence in the program area. Since late 2007, OTI has been working closely with CCAI to develop the plan, targeting areas with critical strategic value in terms of FARC's operational capacity and the income the guerilla group receives from coca production. The planning process began with the identification of the key components of the consolidation process: good governance and institutional development, land titling, infrastructure (roads, electricity, and water), economic development, and social services (health and education). A local consulting firm was hired to work with CCAI on the development of a 3-year operational plan that specifies budgetary requirements on a per-year, per-component basis. It is the first consolidation plan of its kind in Colombia.

While the detailed operational plan was being developed, program staff were hired and, with OTI support, have already leveraged significant funding from national and departmental governments and the international community. The effort has also mobilized increased GOC presence in the program area. Now that the consolidation plan has been finalized, CCAI is in a strong position to expand its efforts to mobilize government presence and to use this experience as a model for developing consolidation plans in other parts of the country.

Because of improvements in the security situation, which have come about much faster than anticipated, the consolidation effort is seeing opportunities in transition zones that are proving relatively secure but where a State presence is practically absent. Communities that were controlled by the FARC and dedicated to coca production 6 months ago now find that the Colombian military is providing security, and that coca production is no longer an option. CCAI, the consolidation plan staff, government entities, and OTI are working to develop short-, medium-, and long-term methodologies for establishing government presence and providing services as these opportunities present themselves. The intensified effort to put the consolidation plan into practice is providing a learning process that has important implications for similar efforts in other parts of the country. What is clear to all is that quick-impact, community-identified projects implemented in the name of the GOC (OTI's program focus) are key to building confidence in the government and buying time for establishing a State presence.

Four municipal assemblies were held during the reporting period. The gatherings were coupled with the public delivery of supplies for projects approved during previous assemblies. Community turn-out and participation remains high. Confidence in the GOC's ability to respond to community needs and to provide security continues to rise, as demonstrated by the increasing numbers of isolated and distant communities participating in the assembly process. A total of \$647,843 in community grants was approved during the quarter.

The program's economic development component, which was initiated in late November 2007, is showing great promise. The program is developing a methodology for implementing small-scale, high-impact economic support activities in conflict zones. Citizens of rural communities whose main source of income was coca production need assistance to make the transition to the legal economy. The activity seeks to use these small projects to attract support from municipal, departmental, and national levels of government—an effort that is showing success as different economic support programs begin to invest in the zones. The staff of the economic development component has played a leading role in pulling together various key actors and catalyzing the union of programs and resources to focus on the consolidation process. To date, 34 economic development projects totaling \$1,020,636 have been approved.

During the reporting period, OTI received notice that \$10 million in funding had been authorized through the 1207 transfer authority. The funds are being allocated for staffing of the consolidation plan effort, improving infrastructure (primarily tertiary roads), preventing the recruitment of youth into illegal armed groups, replicating the consolidation model in another part of the country, and responding to new opportunities as they present themselves.

OTI held a team building and strategy session with its implementing partners to review lessons learned during the first year of the program and to discuss program strategy for the coming months.

B. Grants Activity Summary

During the reporting period, the program approved 46 new projects worth \$1.7 million. Total activity spending to date is \$5.9 million on more than 240 grants.

Spending, with examples of recent activities, breaks down as follows:

- Technical Assistance (including assistance to CCAI): \$1.2 million. Initiatives receiving technical assistance included a project to support the preparation of documentation needed to put to bid several important infrastructure projects that will be funded by the GOC's Fondo de Paz. In addition, a database that is used by the six target municipalities for monitoring implementation of their municipal plans was finalized during the period.
- Municipal Assembly Activities: \$3.7 million (e.g., assistance to schools, sports programs, and health posts and water, electricity, roads, and transportation projects). These activities included repairing several key roads and bridges that link communities to markets and training 82 local teachers in an area where conflict is ongoing. The training has strengthened the teachers' ability to provide basic educational services in their communities.
- Income-generating projects: \$1 million. Technical assistance continues to be an important part of these projects. The Center for International Tropical Agriculture is providing assistance to partner associations and groups to help farmers increase productivity and establish regional linkages that will facilitate long-term sustainability.

C. Indicators of Success

One of OTI's early projects in Colombia provided support for the purchase of office equipment for an organization that represents the Juntas de Acción Comunal (the local unit of the country's political structure) in one of the target municipalities. The project provided computers, filing cabinets, and desks as well as chairs for municipal assemblies. During a recent visit to the organization's one-room, street-front office, community representatives attested to the impact of the OTI program. They said that the equipment not only provided the organization with the basics to establish a physical presence but also boosted the members' confidence as they assumed their roles as community organizers. The representatives also pointed to more than 40 government-approved, OTI-supported projects (in addition to their project) as evidence that the GOC is serious about its commitment to the municipality.

Watermelons can generate significant income, at least that's the experience of a group of farmers benefiting from the program's economic support component. Led by a farmer with years of experience growing watermelons (a man who lost everything when the FARC took control of the region), 14 farmers have pooled their resources to set up an agricultural enterprise. OTI provided the cooperative with \$25,000 in capital for the purchase of agricultural inputs and technical assistance, and the group has set up a rotating fund and repaid its initial debts. And while the project has facilitated economic activity in the area, more importantly it has demonstrated the GOC's commitment to the welfare of its citizens and to projects that will help farmers move beyond their dependence on coca for their livelihoods.

As Colombian military successes have consolidated regions and improved security in formerly inaccessible areas, the strategic value of the program has been clearly demonstrated. OTI was able to quickly provide technical assistance and farming equipment to one transitioning community as well as playgrounds and library kits to schools in another. At the same time, the program was working with the GOC to develop a structured response methodology for use in other communities as the security situation permits. Although donations of farm or school equipment may not fundamentally change people's lives, they do serve as concrete demonstrations of the intent of the GOC to work in partnership with its people as they throw off the vestiges of FARC control and become fully engaged citizens of Colombia.

Program Appraisal

The GOC remains committed to quickly establishing a presence in areas recently recovered by the military and recognizes the value of using small, quick-impact projects as part of a larger framework of medium- to long-term initiatives. However, the civilian component of the State response can be slow and inefficient.

Lessons learned during the reporting period include the following:

- Carrying out program activities in the name of the GOC works to rapidly create confidence in the government at all levels. Mechanisms should be flexible and "light" enough to respond rapidly to improving security conditions and opportunities as they present themselves.

- Communities will ally with the group that they believe will provide long-term security. As the GOC continues to make gains, communities are coming to trust that the military's commitment to security is permanent.
- Given the importance of reliable security information with which to make informed programming decisions, it is absolutely critical to mine as many sources of information as possible. Information about security conditions should be drawn from government sources (the military, police, functionaries, and elected officials), community members, program staff, and other organizations working in the program area. In addition, rumor control is an essential element of managing a program in a conflict zone.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Priorities for the next 3 months include the following:

- Continue working with partners to implement the consolidation plan, focusing on the continued mobilization of the GOC into the program area.
- Expand the program area as the security situation permits and continue to implement projects in transition zones.
- Provide technical assistance to strategically important groups providing services to communities within the program area.
- Work with mayors to plan and begin implementation of additional technical assistance activities by mobilizing existing GOC technical assistance programs and focusing on areas such as transparent budget management, community outreach, and municipal management - with the aim of assuring complementarity with, and support for, the consolidation plan.
- Develop a database to be used by CCAI and the consolidation plan staff for data management.
- Develop and finalize a strategy, which will be implemented with incoming 1207 funding, for the prevention of youth recruitment by illegally armed groups.
- Finalize a strategic plan for Colombia's national parks that will focus on resettling illegal inhabitants of the three parks in the program's area of operation - with the objectives of protecting the national parks from the ravages of coca production and reducing an important source of logistical support for armed groups.
- Finalize an operational plan for the consolidation process in the Montes de Maria, an area of the country that has suffered significant displacement because of massacres perpetrated by both FARC and paramilitary forces. The plan will focus on mobilizing the GOC to comply with constitutional requirements mandating that appropriate safeguards be in place to support the return of the displaced population.
- Complete a project that establishes a ferry linking a strategically important town to the rest of the country. President Uribe has committed to attending a ceremony that will recognize the completion of the ferry, acknowledge a U.S. MilGroup-supported project, and celebrate the town's recent connection to the national electric grid.