



FRONTLINES

YOUR VOICE

Promoting Civilian-Military Cooperation Beyond Borders

March/April 2012

Lynn Vega and Chris Martin | [LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN](#)

Like

Lynn Vega is deputy director of planning and the civilian liaison to the U.S. Southern Command in USAID's Office of Civilian-Military Cooperation. From 2005 to 2010, she was director of USAID/Colombia's program to assist those displaced by conflict and affected by long-running violence.

Navy Cmdr. Chris Martin is assigned to USAID as the U.S. Southern Command liaison.



Navy Cmdr. Chris Martin

Now that development is on equal footing with defense and diplomacy in U.S. national security affairs, it is becoming more common to see military uniforms in USAID's halls. However, USAID staff passing through the headquarters lobby in Washington one day late last fall probably did a double-take when they saw 65 military officers lined up at the reception desk. These men and women in uniform didn't fit the mold. They were not wearing U.S. stars and stripes on their sleeves. Instead, they displayed the yellow, blue, and red banner of Colombia.

Just a decade ago, Colombia was on the cusp of becoming a failed state. Within its borders, a drug-fueled war raged complete with car bombs, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks. The Colombian Government had no presence in approximately half of its 1,100 municipalities.

Today, Colombia is a thriving and much more peaceful country thanks to the

Related Articles

[FrontLines Interview with Gen. John Allen](#)

Sign up
email

Email:

First Name

Last Name

RSS

Still V
Resub



FRON

INSIG

PARTI

LATIN
AND T

LATIN A
THE CA

A New A
Hemispt

U.S.-EI S
Partners

Beyond

Fighting
Preventi

Alternati
Empowe

Latin An
Chapter

In Devel
Better th

Five Wa
EXTRA

Growing
LAC EXTRA

Promoti



CREDIT: PATRICIA ADAMS, USAID
Lynn Vega

hard work and strong convictions of the Colombian people and unwavering support from the U.S. Government’s Plan Colombia and the follow-on program, the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI).

In many ways, the Colombian experience illustrates the key contribution of development to security in a country of strategic significance to the United States. Plan Colombia and the CSDI were designed to stem the production and impede the transit of illicit drugs, help Colombia turn the tide in the drug-fueled conflict, and secure and consolidate territory that was under the control of violent armed groups.

No one group or program can take full credit for the transformation, but we can learn many lessons from Colombia’s transition away from conflict toward enhanced security and governance, expanded social services, and new economic opportunities.

A Plan for Colombia

The uniformed visitors to USAID, students from Colombia’s National War College, were there to share their thinking on the CSDI: its successes, its failures, and the challenges that lie ahead. At the same time, they came to learn about development’s role in national security and how USAID and the Department of Defense are committed to enhanced civil-military communication and coordination in Washington as well as in the field.

The success of Plan Colombia and the CSDI were borne of an interagency effort involving USAID and various divisions of the Departments of State, Defense, Justice, and others. As Plan Colombia evolved over time, it became clear that the CSDI’s success depended on the close cooperation of civilian and military partners and leveraging of each entity’s respective areas of expertise.

USAID’s Office of Civilian-Military Cooperation (CMC), located in the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA), played a key role in facilitating civil-military coordination strategies among the U.S. Government interagency team, Colombian institutions, and other stakeholders as the CSDI was designed and implemented.

One of the CSDI’s first programs was the La Macarena Initiative. Located at the heart of the Colombian conflict and just a few hours drive from the capital city Bogota, La Macarena is a zone with the highest level of coca production in all of Colombia and the historical home of the FARC guerrilla army. The initiative began with military operations to establish security, and was followed by efforts to eradicate coca production and quickly establish civilian government agencies to provide social and economic services – health care, housing, education, basic infrastructure, etc.— to the affected population.

“The War College students were well-versed on the La Macarena Initiative and Colombia’s National Consolidation Plan.”

The underlying idea was that the best way to make the consolidation efforts stick was to have civilian



and military entities working in a quick, coordinated way that was highly visible and would rapidly gain the support of the local population. Once a zone was “consolidated” and the civilian entities were up-and-running, most of the military forces would be able to withdraw and move on to the next region leaving behind a smaller group able to maintain order in the zone.

Even though the quick-impact projects were essential to signaling positive change in La Macarena, the civilian and military planners had to keep their minds focused on the long-term projects as well, which were essential to sustaining the gains that were made in the region.

The War College students were well-versed on the La Macarena Initiative and Colombia’s National Consolidation Plan, having visited the coordination centers as part of their studies. They recognized the value of having organized systems in place for collaborating with their civilian counterparts. Their sentiments often mirrored those expressed by USAID officers who work with the military on how our work cultures and planning systems are significantly different; and that patience, trust, and person-to-person contacts are critical to making the systems work together.

The Colombian students realize they represent a new generation of military leaders in Colombia and that their *modus operandi* will be significantly different from their predecessors.’ For them, civilian-military coordination will be a standard operating procedure.

The same can be said between USAID and the Department of Defense. Increasingly, our men and women work side-by-side toward shared defense, development, national security, and foreign-policy goals making our country and our world more secure, prosperous, and democratic.

[Back to Top ^](#)