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Colombian military members and U.S. Army Civil Affairs Soldiers assigned to Company B, 98th Battalion, 95th CA Brigade (Airborne) unload two tons of medical supplies and equipment off a Colombian military cargo plane in preparation for a two-day Surgical Civic Action Program (SURGCAP) April 27-28 in the small town of La Macarena, Colombia, located 170 miles south of Bogota. (Department of Defense photo by Sgt. 1st Class Alex Licea, Special Operations Command South Public Affairs)

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Colombian military, U.S Army Civil Affairs team up to help Colombian residents along remote countryside

By Sgt. 1st Class Alex Licea

LA MACARENA, Colombia (USASOC News Service, May 2, 2012) - In the small, remote town of La Macarena, located 170 miles south of Bogota, residents lack medical services due to the town's poverty stricken, rural location.

Located in the department of Meta, similar to a state in the U.S., the town can only be accessed by air travel due to the lack of established roadways. La Macarena is surrounded by farms and isolated from several of the country's main cities, causing the residents to experience a poor quality of life with little or no basic services.



Because of these growing concerns for the people living in this town, the Colombian military, with support from a group of U.S. Army Civil Affairs Soldiers and a Bogota-based nongovernment medical organization called "Patrulla Aerea Civil Colombiana" or PAC, conducted a Surgical Civic Action Program April 27-28.

Commonly referred to as a SURGCAP, this type of event is carried out in order to improve the quality of life for these citizens and provide them with much needed medical services.

Colombian soldiers provided security around the area, while doctors and medical staff from PAC, with the assistance of U.S. CA Soldiers assigned to Company B, 98th Battalion, 95th CA Brigade (Airborne), currently under the operational control of Special Operations Command South, based at Homestead, Fla., provided free medical care and general surgery services to more than 1,000 Colombian citizens during the two-day event. SOCSOUTH is the special operations component for U.S. Southern Command.

Throughout the two-day SURGCAP, hundreds of people waited in La Macarena's only hospital and at a nearby school. Medical services included pediatrics, dermatology, general medicine, optometry, ophthalmology,

dentistry, and general surgery to remove or correct ailments such as hernias, cataracts, and lipoma, which is a non-cancerous benign tumor that develops from fat cells in the body.

"When we plan events like this, we meet with our task force and members of the U.S. Embassy to determine which regions need these types of services," said Colombian soldier, 1st Lt. Diego Mauricio Quintero Franco, who served as an operations officer during the event. "We are here to bring solutions to some of the health problems in this community and show the people we care about them."

In order to put this event together, the Colombian military reached out to U.S. Civil Affairs Soldiers and officials at PAC to provide the medical experts and supplies to conduct this event for the people of La Macarena.

PAC was founded more than 40 years ago by a group of search and rescue pilots. It is an organization of volunteer doctors and pilots who provide medical services to several secluded communities across Colombia. They have been working with the U.S. military for the past 10 years.

Dr. Adriana Piquero Echeverri, who serves as the general director for PAC, said the organization's mission is to provide medical care to those who need it in the most isolated locations in the country.

"Our organization is based around helping people who don't have access to this type of medical care across remote locations in the country," she said. "We have a great relationship with the U.S. Civil Affairs members and without their support this medical event would have not been possible."

For Carlos Lopez, this event couldn't have come at a better time. The middle-aged man has not been able to work because of pain and discomfort. Suffering from an inguinal hernia, which forms in a person's lower abdomen, Lopez has been unable to work for three years. This SURGCAP was the answer he had been waiting for.

"I am very happy for the services I am receiving," he said. "We are very poor people, so we can use all the help we can get. I am grateful for this day and all those who are helping us."

U.S. troops assigned to the CA team, based out of Fort Bragg, N.C., have been working with their Colombian partners for the past eight months. The working relationship between the two has established two substantial benefits. The first is to help plan events like this and assist with the purchase of medicine and basic medical supplies. The second is to continue to enhance the capacity of the Colombian military and show them the positive effects of working with different government and civilian agencies.

"We have been working with our Colombian partners and planning this event for the past two months," said the senior U.S. CA planner. "We as Civil Affairs have a huge role in coordinating all these efforts because we act as the link between all these different organizations. By working with the Colombian military, and several municipal government leaders, we can all come together and make events like this happen."

By the end of the two-day event, more than 1,000 citizens received medical screenings and more than 150 general surgeries were conducted by the medical volunteers working for PAC.

Music and activities such as a bounce house and clowns were brought in to entertain many of the area children. The two-day event concluded by the daylong celebration of children, which is held at the town's main square every year. Festivities included a parade of characters and several animated shows.

Despite the success of the SURGCAP in La Macarena, Colombian soldier 1st Lt. Quintero Franco said more work needs to be done in order to extend the provision of services on a more consistent basis. He hopes to continue to work with the U.S. government and its armed forces on future events.

"The U.S. Embassy assists us with medicine for these events, and the support we receive from the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Army's Civil Affairs is fundamental," said Franco. "The relationship we have with the U.S. military and Soldiers with U.S. Civil Affairs is tremendous, and we hope to continue this work."

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