

CIVIC ACTION AND REGIONAL SECURITY

By

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The Challenge

A contest of ideologies continues to unfold in Central America and it is one which will most likely have profound consequences for the entire hemisphere. As the sirens of Marxism-Leninism continue to threaten the security of our regional allies and probe U.S. resolve. We and they alike are being constantly challenged to thoughtfully aggregate the necessary resources to deter and counteract this tenacious intrusion. A multi-faceted approach with economic, social, political and military assistance initiatives appears to be the best response to restoration of stability and peace, and the U.S. is providing selective support in these areas. (In our efforts to counter regional instability, we must be sensitive to the possibility of a "knee Jerk" arms race which could prove further destabilizing by undermining fragile economies and fledgling democratic institutions.) In this context, military sponsored civic action projects prove a cost effective and important component of any corrective or deterrent effort, as has been demonstrated in Guatemala in its recent successes against an active insurgency. But civic action doesn't have to be purely a military undertaking. Additionally, most Central American public security forces are uniquely qualified for this mission due to the nature of their organizations, responsibilities, and resources.

An Investment in Stability

One of the integral parts of the U.S. Southern Command security development program implemented last year is civic action -- which includes both participation in combined projects and encouragement to regional militaries to pursue projects of their own. Civic action is not a cheap substitute for a well trained and maintained armed force, nor will it stop a conventional air, ground or naval attack. However, it does complement other security development initiatives and is designed to help preclude, as well as counter, those conditions that promote instability. Therefore, it is an investment in stability. Civic action supports regional security enhancement by accomplishing the following:

Nation Building. Civic action gains and strengthens popular support for the host government and contributes to its internal defense and development.

Pluralistic Approach. In addition to focusing on the opportunistic Marxist-Leninist intrusion, civic action addresses many of the long-term underlying causes of instability in Central America (e.g., illiteracy, poverty, absence of basic health care, etc.).

Psychological Operations. Properly applied, civic action helps reduce popular susceptibility to leftist propaganda and, therefore, undermines guerrilla efforts to build a manpower and resource base among the indigenous population.

Confidence. Civic action builds an important people-to-people reservoir of trust and confidence in their government and the U.S.

Positive Military Role. Civic action casts the military in the role of a positive societal change agent and helps extend military resources to the non-combatative aspects of national security, e.g., nation building. This role also has a positive correlative impact on military morale.

Making It Happen - A Case Study

The key to any civic action program is to maximize the use of available resources. The recent U.S.-Honduran combined exercise "AHUAS TARA," conducted during Jan-Feb 83, is a case in point. During the exercise planning phase, representatives from the United States Southern Command (US-SOUTHCOM), the Honduran General Staff, the United States Military Group (USMILGP), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) met in Tegucigalpa, Honduras to identify high impact civic action projects. The planning emphasized the possible use of exercise assets and sought the involvement of host-country military and civilian officials in key positions of interface with the local population. After extensive and detailed discussions, the following civic action initiatives were orchestrated by the exercise combined staff:

Water Systems and Security. Exercise helicopter assets from the 210th Combat Aviation Battalion, 193d Infantry Brigade, transported more than 30 tons of USAID funded water and sanitation systems to remote Honduran villages along the El Salvadoran and Guatemalan borders. Honduran soldiers loaded the helicopters, and villagers unloaded them. Honduran paramedics treated villagers, dispensed medicines, and conducted an emergency medical evacuation which saved a peasant woman's life. This humanitarian set of events not only reinforced Honduran nationalism, but also seeded a bulwark against external guerrilla forces operating in proximity to the Honduran-Salvadoran border.

Military Medical Action Teams. Eighteen Honduran medical personnel (doctors, dentists, nurses, and medics) and twelve U.S. medical specialists (specialties included dermatology, infectious diseases, OB-gyn, pediatrics, and tropical diseases) combined to form five medical action teams. These teams were transported by Honduran helicopters to isolated villages in the Northeastern Honduran Department of Gracias A Dios, which borders Nicaragua. More than 4,000 Nicaraguan refugees and Honduran campesinos received medical attention during the exercise. This initiative responded not only to the population's dire need for medical attention, but also reflected the synergistic impact of numerous host-country and U.S. agencies working together.

Support for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). An unprogrammed civic action initiative came from the UNHCR representative in Honduras, who requested help in transporting 80 indigent Nicaraguan refugees from the Honduran border to programmed relocation sites. This initiative involved close coordination with international relief agencies and mushroomed beyond any expectation. The relief effort began with helicopters from the 210th Combat Aviation Battalion which prepositioned more than 20,000 pounds of food stuffs to support the relocation effort.

Helicopters from B Troop, 1st Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry Regiment, assisted the relief operation by transporting in excess of 900 debilitated refugees and possessions to their new homes. Additionally, perishable food stuffs, excess to exercise requirements, were airlifted to the Mocomon Refugee Center located near Honduras' northeastern border with Nicaragua. This effort supported the Honduran government's desire to move Nicaraguan refugees from a politically sensitive border camp to a more secure and permanent relocation site.

Improving the Transportation System. Exercise engineering assets not only expanded and improved the eastern region's major landing strip at Puerto Lempira, but also accomplished significant maintenance on and improvement of the road network between Puerto Lempira (the Eastern region's principal air and sea terminal) and Mocomon. This road is the only ground resupply route for the Honduran 5th Battalion and the Mocomon Refugee Center.

Conclusion

Civic Action is and will remain a major element of our security development program. It is an economy of force investment that gets to the heart of some of the main causes of low-intensity conflict and paves the way for a durable partnership between civilian and military counterparts in those nations wise enough to exploit the opportunity. If properly and sincerely applied either separately or in conjunction with other security enhancement measures, a dedicated, continual program of civic action can prove a potent catalyst in fostering internal stability and cooperation in Central American and other countries now facing the deleterious effects of Marxist-Leninist intrusion. It constitutes a positive, pro-active strategy over which the enemy cannot prevail in the long run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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