



Flooding Prompts Humanitarian Response from Colombian Army

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Richard McColl | 21 May 2012



Colombian Army engineers work to erect barriers along the flooded banks of the Río Chicú near Bogotá. [Richard McColl]

BOGOTÁ — The gray skies over Bogotá herald rain. For Col. Henry Dussan of the Colombian Army's Engineering division, this means work.

Following three years of unseasonal climatic conditions in Colombia that in 2012 disrupted the lives of at least 61,000 people nationwide, the army engineers have been busy evacuating civilians and livestock from disaster zones, fixing roads, fighting landslides, building emergency bridges and — most recently here in Bogotá — blocking off a burst river bank.

The flood plains around the Chicú River in Siberia (aptly named for its chillier climes) are rife with engineering problems. During a recent trip to this region, Dussan showed Diálogo huge potholes in the city's streets, all the while lamenting that infrastructure was placed on preciously delicate and unstable wetland.



A Colombian Army soldier loads sandbags along the flooded banks of the Río Chicú near Bogotá. [Richard McColl]

And herein lies the principal problem with Bogotá, a city that at 2,600 meters above sea level can never be completely free from flooding and other natural disasters.



Colombian Army soldiers cross the flood plain as part of humanitarian efforts to alleviate suffering along the banks of the Chicú River near Bogotá. [Richard McColl]

That becomes obvious the closer one comes to the disaster zone, as the nearby grazing cattle on the city's edge search for high ground and dry pastures along the highway's shoulder. Overcast Bogotá is reflected over a vast flooded area, making it difficult to distinguish the waterlogged ground from the skies.

The bustle here along the banks of the Chicú River is one of controlled urgency. The waters continue to rise and as the skies darken, it's understood that it is going to rain again — therefore impeding progress on this essential piece of disaster control.

Dussan offered his visitor a motorized dinghy so they could better understand the scale of the flooding. Printed on the boat's hull were the words: *Fe en la Causa* — faith in the cause. Here in the mire, at the edge of the flood plain, the shallowest point of the floodwaters is three to five feet deep.



Flooded houses near Cota — in the Colombian department of Cundinamarca — are the result of unseasonably heavy rains in the Bogotá metropolitan area. [Richard McColl]

Somewhere below, under water, there's a highway referred to as the Ruta al Infierno or Road to Hell. Nearly 15 minutes later downriver, farmhouses submerged up to their rooftops appear on the horizon. As recently as a few weeks ago, this was grazing land for livestock on Bogotá's western limits.

At the “*boquete*” or hole in the Chicú River's bank which opened to cause this mayhem, Dussan deferred immediately to Lt. Col. Luís Fernando Ramírez, the officer in charge of the Engineering Battalion's Disaster Response division.

Around 1 a.m. on Sunday morning due to heavy rains which created a backflow of water along the Bogotá River causing levels to rise uncontrollably, the Chicú River opened up here and flooded the surrounding area,” he said.

The hole which opened measured roughly 100 feet in length. But in just three days, the capable engineers had succeeded in closing up half the opening by placing 300 wooden posts as ballasts in order to support



Colombian soldiers hammer in poles to stop flooding along the banks of the Chicú River near Bogotá. [Richard McColl]

Weather permitting, Ramírez believes that with the full team of 160 men working 24 hours a day for the coming days they'll have the riverbank once again blocked within the week.

It's an impressive sight to see the coordination of the Colombian Armed Forces, and as Ramírez said, "We are committed to supporting and assisting the Colombian people in times of disaster and need."

He then suggested that his country's army is undergoing profound change.

"Someday the conflict in Colombia has to end, yes or no?" Dussan insisted during the ride back to his battalion's headquarters in Puente Aranda, Bogotá.

"We have seen the need to commit ourselves to works that are of a more important impact, our depth of knowledge stemming from the conflict is immense and soon we can export and share our skills in international disaster zones," he continued. Indeed, the colonel's words rang true since the Colombian Army's experiences and skills in the aftermath of Haiti's earthquake two years ago drew international praise.

"We have to look at the post conflict situation," he goes on. "Our engineers are showing their worth in peace."



A Colombian Army officer stands in a rubber dinghy named "Fe en La Causa" (Faith in the Cause) used to transport engineers along the flooded Chicú River. [Richard McColl]

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