



Civil Affairs in Colombia

by Robert W. Jones Jr.

THE Civil Affairs mission in Colombia spans much of the country. Although sometimes reinforced, it is normally performed by a single Civil Affairs Team–Alpha (CAT-A), usually four soldiers. For many years, most active Army Civil Affairs support came from Company A, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) [CAB(A)] that had responsibility for Latin America. This changed in 2006 with the formation, in a provisional status, of the 97th CAB(A) (the second active duty Civil Affairs battalion since 1974 when the 96th was activated). The mission remains the same, conducting Civil Affairs to support Counter Narco Terrorism (CNT) operations.¹



96th Civil Affairs Battalion Distinctive Unit Insignia



97th Civil Affairs Battalion Distinctive Unit Insignia

An integral part of Army special operations support of CNT operations is Civil Affairs (which transformed into A Company and C Company, 97th CAB).² Since the 1990s, Civil Affairs teams from Company A, 96th CAB(A) conducted Civil Affairs throughout Colombia in support of national objectives. The Civil Affairs operations encompassed a mixture of Civil Information Management, Nation Assistance, and Foreign Humanitarian Assistance activities, but were usually built around medical, dental, veterinary, and surgical readiness training exercises. The intent of these readiness training exercises (“RETE”) is to provide training for U.S. soldiers.³ These “RETE” activities produce a threefold result: first, they help the Colombia people in remote and underserved areas; second, the activities promote the legitimacy of the Colombian government; and third, they provide training opportunities for U.S. Army personnel.⁴

The role of all Civil Affairs Operations executed is to be transparent to the Colombian public. This is done through the integration of Colombian forces, police, civilian gov-

ernment agencies, NGOs, doctors, and engineers, to plan, coordinate and execute operations facilitated by the civil affairs team. The primary operational impact for this Foreign Internal Defense/Counterinsurgency mission is to legitimize Colombian institutions and create and sustain favorable opinion. CA forces focus on the center of gravity (the populace) by engaging the civil component and there by shaping the operating environment.

The three Civil Affairs missions highlighted in the photographic essay are representative of U.S. Army Civil Affairs in Colombia over the past two decades. Each mission takes hundreds of hours of coordination and liaison with Colombian national, departmental, and local governments, the Colombian military and National Police, as well as civilian volunteer and private health organizations and foundations. While the missions have a basic template, each one is unique because it is tailored to the particular needs of a specific community, balanced with a threat assessment. All missions are accomplished in contested areas, sometimes in full view of members of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or other narco-terrorist organizations that are attempting to overthrow the government.



Map of Colombia highlighting cities in this article.



Colombian volunteers and U.S. Civil Affairs arrive at the National Police base in San José del Guaviare. The safest and most economical way to travel in much of Colombia is by air. In the center of the photograph is a reminder of the danger in the area; the control tower also serves as a guard post for the base.



Locals wait for medical care outside the clinic. For many the free medical care offered during this MEDRETE may be the only medical care they can access. On the wall is the cartoon character used for CNP anti drug messages.



An eye exam being conducted during the MEDRETE in San José. The optometrists and technicians can provide quick basic care.



Children wait for their parents during the MEDRETE. The gifts given during the civic action have several purposes; the plastic bags at the lower left contain toothpaste, mouthwash and a toothbrush. The packages on the children's laps have school notebooks, an eraser, ruler, and pencils. The message on the cover of the notebook, "Todos somos Colombia," (We are all Colombia) is part of the government's information campaign to gain legitimacy. The soccer ball (fútbol) has the message "Más deportes en lugar de drogas," (More sports instead of drugs).

San José del Guaviare MEDRETE

San José del Guaviare is the capital of the Guaviare department and the economic center of the area. Located on the southern bank of the Guaviare River, San José borders the former demilitarized zone (Zona de Despeje) for the FARC (sometimes called "FARClandia"). The MEDRETE personnel flew from Bogotá to the Colombian National Police (CNP) anti-narcotic base airfield in San José. To get to many areas of Colombia, flying is the quickest and safest means of transportation. The MEDRETE took place on 19-20 August 2006 using the CNP facilities as the support base for the operation. In the two days, a mix of Colombian volunteers and U.S. soldiers saw 497 patients and provided more than 800 consultations (most patients had multiple medical problems). The medical support provided covered general medical, optometry, orthopedics, audiology, vaccinations, general dentistry and orthodontics.⁵



The MEDRETE/DENTRETE activities planned by Civil Affairs are "come as you are," in this case dental care for a local man.



View of the front gate at the Colombian National Police base in San José. This is a critical base for the counter-drug campaign in central Colombia. By sponsoring and supporting various civic action projects locally, including the MEDRETE, the National Police could shore up support for the government and counter narco-terrorism operations.



Civil Affairs soldiers find themselves using a variety of transportation to accomplish their mission. In this case the best way to Solano is via the Caquetá River. The Colombian soldier on the right is wearing the new digital camouflage pattern uniform.



View from the bow of the boat as the Colombian medical volunteers and the Civil Affairs soldiers near Solano on the Caquetá River. The barge is a barracks ship and operations center for Colombian riverine forces operating against narco-terrorist organizations.



The MEDRETE makes the maximum use of space with the available facilities. This is a combination waiting room, equipment storage, break area, and behind the curtain, medical screening.



Colombian soldiers pass out "school kits." The school kit is a notebook that children can use for school, some include pencils and other items. The notebook cover is designed by Colombian and U.S. Psychological Operations, usually with an anti-drug message or theme.

Solano MEDRETE/ SURGRETE

Located near the Colombian Air Force's *Tres Equines* base, Solano is located in the Caqueta department. In just three days (8-10 September 2006) Colombian medical volunteers and U.S. Army personnel saw over 826 patients; performed 826 minor surgeries, conducted 560 optometric evaluation consults, and dealt with 670 other specialty consults. The medical activities covered general medical, optometry, pediatrics, and minor surgery (primarily hernias).⁶ The MEDRETE/SURGRETE improved working relationships between the Colombian Military and local government (departmental officials). The MEDRETE also provided medical practice for the Civil Affairs medics.



Detailed planning is critical for a MEDRETE. This photo shows some of the wide variety of medical supplies that were brought into Solano. If the Civil Affairs team does not plan for the supplies there is no corner drug store to buy extras.



The Medical clinic in Solano, the site for the MEDRETE.



Colombian doctors and nurses conduct a hernia operation at the Solano clinic. Minor surgeries are often conducted. The Colombian volunteers are critical to most Civil Affairs activities in the country.



Locals wait in the school courtyard for a variety of medical activities during the Fusagasugá MEDRETE. The waiting provides a good time for various counter-drug and pro-government messages.



Volunteers provide optometry exams in a classroom. The mobile optometry kits allow the volunteers to provide eye exams and prepare classes in a relatively short period of time.



Barbers provide haircuts to the locals in Fusagasugá.



Children listen to a presentation given by the Colombian National Police while their parents wait in line for other activities. The police officers dressed as clowns are used to make the counter-drug message entertaining.



Not all of the children appear to enjoy the clowns.

Fusagasugá MEDRETE

Fusagasugá is located about thirty miles southwest Bogotá in the Cundinamarca department. During a three day (22–24 September 2006) MEDRETE, Colombian volunteers and U.S. Army personnel conducted general medical assessments, as well as optometry, orthopedics, vaccinations, and general dentistry care. The MEDRETE provided healthcare for over 1,030 patients at the cost of \$22,000 for medicines and eyeglasses.⁷

A U.S. Civil Affairs soldier came up with an innovative idea—to bring along barbers. In many remote areas there are no “professional barbers.” As other Civil Affairs programs got started and people gathered, the contracted barbers set up “shop.” Soon men, boys, and their families congregated about the portable “barber shop.” The simple act of getting a haircut, provided another opportunity to judge popular reactions to the MEDRETE and collect information about other Civil Affairs activities needed, especially specific medical and dental problems. The “barbershop” demonstrated to the locals that the Colombian Government had a presence in the area and was regaining control from guerrilla elements. It also showed that the government cared for the people.



Colombian volunteer dentists provide basic dental care to locals in Fusagasugá. In this case they are operating in a local schoolhouse. Schools are often used to support Civil Affairs missions. The portable dental sets are relatively easy to transport to remote locations. For many, this may be their only opportunity for dental care.

**Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.*

Endnotes

- 1 Department of the Army, Center for Military History, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion Lineage and Honors, updated 17 April 2006, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Department of the Army, U.S. Special Operations Command, 97th Civil Affairs Battalion Unit Activation (3 May 2006), permanent order 123-7; Sergeant First Class James Hawkins* III, C Company, 97th Civil Affairs Battalion, e-mail to Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 29 November 2006, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; 95th Civil Affairs Brigade, 95th Civil Affairs Brigade Information Brief, 18 September 2006, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-05.40, *Civil Affairs Operations*, 29 September 2006, 3–36.
- 3 Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-05.401, *Civil Affairs Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, 23 September 2003, 6–21.
- 4 Major Jorgé Cabella*, CATA 113 Team Leader, Company A, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 24 July 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 CATA-733, Civil Affairs Update to SOCSOUTH (23 June 2006 to 23 September 2006) Briefing, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 CATA-733, Civil Affairs Update.
- 7 CATA-733, Civil Affairs Update.