



**Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San Jose, Costa Rica**

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION



Photo courtesy of Maracaku National Park staff

Firefighters attempt to extinguish one of the many fires that sparked a national emergency in Paraguay in September 2007.

Helping Paraguay Prepare for Forest Fires

Following a series of devastating forest fires in Paraguay last year, which prompted a national state of emergency, the Government of Paraguay, private businesses and conservation groups joined forces to prevent similar situations in the future.

USAID/OFDA is assisting these efforts on two main fronts: providing technical assistance to authorities in the creation of a National Plan to Combat Forest Fires, and providing training courses to volunteer firefighters.

"Much has been accomplished since the fire emergency. There has definitely been political will to create a plan and improve the training program to combat forest fires," said USAID/OFDA forest fire expert Maria Luisa Alfaro.

Paraguay is the only country in Latin America without a national program to control forest fires. Even though it has a corps trained and equipped for structural fires, it lacks a government agency in charge of forest fire prevention, control and recovery. Instead, the country relies on a nationwide network of volunteer firefighters, many of whom have been

guided and trained in recent years by USAID/OFDA.

Alfaro, who has worked with Paraguay's volunteer firefighter brigades since 2001 through the USAID/OFDA Training and Technical Assistance Program implemented by the International Resources Group (IRG), was dispatched to Paraguay in September of last year to help the country respond to the national fire emergency. She was able to combine her knowledge of forest fires, familiarity with the affected terrain and relationships with officials in Paraguay to provide solid technical advice that was heeded by the country's top decision-makers.

Now, Alfaro is leading USAID/OFDA efforts to help Paraguay reduce the risk of another national emergency.

The Government of Paraguay formed a National Technical Commission on Forest Fires in November 2007 to create a National Plan to Combat Forest Fires. The commission represents government officials, business interests and non-governmental

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DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Urban Search and Rescue Training Targets Caribbean

USAID/OFDA, through its contract with the International Resources Group (IRG), sponsored a follow-up workshop to the pilot Collapsed Structures Rescue Course – Light Level held in Panama in December 2007. The pilot was the first time the course, which has been held throughout Latin America, was offered in the English language. Instructors included experts from the Fairfax and Los Angeles fire departments and certified trainers from Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico.

Urban search and rescue (USAR) teams from Barbados, Jamaica, and St. Kitts participated in the course and returned to Panama for a hands-on workshop and follow-up discussion from April 8 to 11. The event allowed participants to refresh and consolidate their knowledge and skills under the supervision of two of the original instructors.

Earlier in the year, USAID/OFDA donated safety and rescue equipment to the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) during a ceremony February 1 in Barbados with USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan and U.S. Ambassador Mary M. Ourisman.

The equipment, valued at \$8,386, included helmets, flashlights, gloves, elbow and knee pads, safety glasses, and ear plugs to be used during future trainings on collapsed structures rescue.

DISASTER RESPONSE

Disaster Expert Assists Authorities in Ecuador

Following the February 5 eruption of Tungurahua Volcano in Ecuador, emergency management officials requested assistance from USAID/OFDA to improve their disaster risk reduction and response plans in the area.

USAID/OFDA deployed risk management expert Paul Sanchez to provide technical assistance to Ecuador's Ministry of Security in Quito. Sanchez is helping to strengthen the Ministry's capacity to reduce and respond to the potential impacts of future eruptions of the volcano, which erupted after months of intense seismic activity. Sanchez, who was hired through the International Resources Group (IRG), which implements the USAID/OFDA Training and Technical Assistance Program in the region, began working with Ministry officials on March 31 and will provide assistance through May.

COMING UP

Disaster Risk Management Field Trip

The top 15 participants in a six-month virtual e-learning course on disaster risk management will visit Manizales, Colombia, from April 14 to 18 for a first-hand look at this living laboratory for disaster risk management. Within the city, which has a population of roughly 400,000, the community, academic institutions, private businesses, and government officials together create an unusually strong synergy focused on disaster risk management at the local level. The Paul C. Bell, Jr. Risk Management Initiative, a joint effort between the USAID/OFDA Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean and Florida International University, is financing the field trip.

USAID/OFDA Regional Advisors Meeting

Regional Advisors from Latin America and the Caribbean will join their colleagues from other USAID/OFDA regional offices around the globe at a meeting in Dakar, Senegal, on April 14 and 15 to discuss disaster risk reduction in 2008 and beyond. USAID/OFDA Director Ky Luu will also attend the meeting.



U.S. Southern Command and Salvadoran Defense Ministry personnel survey the site of an upcoming exercise in El Salvador. USAID/OFDA is supporting the exercise.

Photo by Dana Chivers, USAID/OFDA

Regional Disaster Relief Exercise

USAID/OFDA is supporting the Fuerzas Aliadas Humanitarias (FA-HUM) 08, a series of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and Salvadoran Defense Ministry-sponsored disaster relief exercises involving military and civilian agencies from countries throughout the hemisphere. The exercises aim to enhance military-to-military, military-to-civilian, and civilian-to-civilian contacts between participating organizations in times of disaster. USAID/OFDA will send two evaluators to the first exercise, scheduled from April 22 to 26 in Panama. Other USAID/OFDA disaster experts will participate in exercises in early and mid-May in El Salvador. The related FA-HUM 2008 Expo is scheduled May 12-14 in San Salvador.

Regional MDRO Workshop

Mission Disaster Relief Officers (MDROs) from Central America and Mexico will meet with USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan and Regional Advisor Julie Leonard in San Salvador on April 25 to discuss the role of MDROs in USAID/OFDA disaster response, preparedness and risk reduction.

Annual Planning Session

International Resources Group (IRG) and USAID/OFDA representatives will meet in Miami from April 30 to May 2 to discuss work performed under the contract in 2007 and plans for 2008, focusing on the USAID/OFDA Training and Technical Assistance Program in Latin America and the Caribbean. Participants will plan the activities for the upcoming year in the 30 countries where the program is implemented.

Technical Assistance to Paraguay

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groups. USAID/OFDA is providing technical assistance to the commission for the design of the new National Plan, including workshops for review and feedback.

"The commission was created as a result of USAID/OFDA recommendations following the fire emergency last year," Alfaro said.

Commission members hope to complete the plan by the end of 2008. Alfaro said that the National Plan will outline goals for the next five years and will include programs and subprograms such as forest fire prevention, education and community outreach, detection and monitoring, containment and control, and rehabilitation of areas destroyed by forest fires.

On another front, efforts are underway to improve training for the nation's volunteer firefighters this year, focusing first on the most critical areas – locations affected by last year's emergency.

"USAID/OFDA is working to train volunteer firefighter brigades and personnel from conservation areas who are using the equipment and tools that USAID/OFDA donated during the emergency last year," Alfaro said. She added that USAID/OFDA is planning to train new course instructors in the coming months so that efforts can be expanded even more.

Alfaro also commended the Corps of Volunteer Firefighters for stepping up to the plate. In January, a new curriculum for firefighters was approved that includes two USAID/OFDA-designed courses.

In late March, the Corps presented its Strategic Plan for 2008-2018. USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan, who traveled to Paraguay to attend the March 27 ceremony, said the document is proof that the firefighters are prepared to face the threats of the coming years.

Callaghan also visited Paraguay in January to personally thank volunteer firefighters for their hard work to control last year's fires.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Works with University To Create Risk Reduction E-Course

USAID/OFDA has teamed up with the University of Wisconsin-Disaster Management Center (UWDMC) to adapt the USAID/OFDA Disaster Risk Reduction course to the e-learning format employed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

UWDMC Director Don Schramm and USAID/OFDA staff from the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean began adapting the course to an e-learning format in February.

"This is USAID/OFDA/LAC's first step on the path to providing distance education, something that will allow us to broaden our coverage, standardize our training, and greatly reduce costs," said International Resources Group (IRG) Technical Director Juan Pablo Sarmiento, who helps implement the USAID/OFDA Training and Technical Assistance Program.

A pilot workshop using the preliminary version of the adapted materials was held from April 1 to 3 at the University of the West Indies in Barbados.

Eleven participants from the Caribbean and two representatives from the USAID/OFDA program for the Pacific region attended the event. Their feedback will be incorporated before the e-course is finalized in May.

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