

OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE (USAID/OFDA)

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

Pasto and San José Strengthen Earthquake Preparedness

If an earthquake strikes a large city such as San Juan de Pasto, Colombia, in the middle of the night, where would local authorities need to deploy urban-search-and-rescue (USAR) teams to save more lives? What type of equipment would be needed to remove debris and clear the roads? Which alternative routes could be used to assist populations?

Earthquakes can strike at any time, without warning. However identifying hazards and planning in advance can help reduce loss of life, as well as minimize the social and economic impacts of a major earthquake.

USAID/OFDA, in partnership with global structural earthquake engineering group Miyamoto International, is helping local governments and first response organizations in San José, Costa Rica, and San Juan de Pasto, Colombia, better prepare to respond to a major earthquake before it occurs. As part of the USAID/OFDA-funded program entitled “Preparing Rescue and Emergency Personnel to Ameliorate the Response to Earthquakes” (PREPARE), Miyamoto International conducted a seismic risk assessment in each city to identify the possible hazards and consequences of a major urban earthquake.

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PREPARE program engineers team up with first responders to collect building data in San Juan de Pasto. Courtesy of Miyamoto International

USAID/OFDA Supports an Innovative Approach to Emergency Information Management and Analysis

In mid-June, USAID/OFDA supported a three-day information management and analysis workshop for 15 representatives from national disaster management agencies in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Mexico. During the first day of the training, which was held from June 12 to 14 in Antigua, Guatemala, participants shared their organizations’ best practices and technologies used for collecting and managing information during an emergency. The following two days, the Assessment Capacity Project (ACAPS), a non-profit, non-governmental project that supports the humanitarian community with all aspects of needs assessments and analysis, conducted a workshop on using innovative tools and techniques for organizing data, creating in-depth needs analysis frameworks, and implementing structured analytical processes that enable better decision making during a response.

The objective of the workshop was to increase knowledge of the tools and frameworks available for emergency response authorities to manage

and analyze information to make data-driven response decisions. With these new tools, staff can more quickly and effectively set priorities, objectives, and strategies to meet the needs of populations affected by emergencies.

“Professional information management and analysis tools are crucial to enable effective, data-driven decision-making during a response, which can help prioritize activities to save lives and optimize limited resources. It can also help us implement more timely interventions, target those most in need, and increase the accountability and transparency of our humanitarian efforts,” said USAID/OFDA Program Officer Peter Schecter, who helped to organize the event.

According to Patrice Chaitagner, ACAPS Head of Methodology and Innovation, “Nowadays, when an incident occurs, humanitarian actors are barraged with a lot of information from everywhere in many forms: video streams, photos, phone calls, emails, texts, alerts, and documents. But having more information does not necessarily mean that we are better informed. The need for more concise and useful content is growing as crises become more frequent, widespread, and complex. Through this training, we want to teach response actors how to organize and summarize these large amounts of information and enhance the analytical thinking in humanitarian emergencies.”

Mexico City’s Command, Control, Computing, Communications and Citizen Contact Center (CDMX C5) Deputy Operations Director Roberto Jaramillo commented, “The exchange of experiences and knowledge among different countries is an imperative for the improvement of disaster risk reduction, mitigation, and response actions throughout the region. USAID/OFDA’s workshop provided vital knowledge and concepts to improve data organization and build a solid information management structure. We are implementing the expertise acquired during the workshop in our current organization’s improvement process.”



Participants of the information management and analysis workshop held in Antigua pose with the view of the active Fuego Volcano on the background. Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA



Retired USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Ricardo Bermúdez (on the left) and former Senior Regional Advisor Paul Bell (on the right) built the foundations of USAID/OFDA's regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean. *Courtesy of Father Sasha Bermúdez*

USAID/OFDA Colleagues Remember and Honor the Memory of Ricardo Bermúdez

Colleagues from the USAID/OFDA regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean recently honored the memory of Ricardo Bermúdez, a retired USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor, who passed away on June 4.

USAID/OFDA extends the deepest and most sincere condolences to his family.

Mr. Bermúdez worked as a USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor for Latin America and the Caribbean from 1983 to 2002. He provided vital support to some of USAID/OFDA's largest responses in the region, including the Mexico earthquake in 1985 and El Salvador earthquake in 1986. Previously, he worked as a volunteer with the Nicaraguan Red Cross, as a leader of the Nicaraguan Youth Red Cross, and as the Latin American representative for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFCR).

"Don Ricardo, a volunteer at heart, a visionary, a gentleman, and a diplomat, represents the beginnings of USAID/OFDA's disaster risk reduction program. He promoted the inclusion of the School Safety program in USAID/OFDA's work in the region. He always inspired us with his example and discipline," said Manuel Ramírez, USAID/OFDA School Safety Disaster Risk Management Specialist (DRMS).

"The words that my regional colleagues and I use to describe our dear friend Ricardo Bermúdez are: diplomacy, ethics, responsibility, warmth, humor, faith, and coherence. Each one of those words is also a gift from him that we carry in our backpacks. We received his instructions, guidance, and constructive inputs, and will always remember him as a special human being, whose example still guides us when it comes to doing things right the first time," commented Guatemala-based USAID/OFDA DRMS Ricardo Berganza.

"Thirty years ago, during the 1986 El Salvador earthquake, Ricardo was among the first to arrive as a USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor. We will always admire and respect him, recognizing his particular human qualities as a teacher, mentor, and leader. He always trusted us to accompany him and be part of the mission of saving lives and alleviating human suffering during crises. He was a perfect gentleman and a humble humanitarian worker; his impeccable behavior keeps inspiring us daily. He is the true expression of solidarity, and also a great father, husband, and friend. We will miss him, but his example will continue to inspire and serve as a reference for our actions," said El Salvador-based USAID/OFDA DRMS Sergio David Gutiérrez.



Miyamoto International staff trained civil engineer students and firefighters on how to collect building data in San José to create seismic hazard maps. *Courtesy of Miyamoto International*

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Miyamoto International analyzed factors such as where the population would be located if an earthquake happens during the day or at night, which buildings are most likely to collapse, based on their age and construction type, which roads might be blocked, and what is the volume of debris that would need to be removed in each zone of the city.

In recent months, PREPARE program representatives presented the results of the earthquake assessments to local governments from San José and San Juan de Pasto. The studies' findings were formally accepted and adopted by city authorities, who are now using this data to test and identify possible gaps in both cities' current emergency response protocols and plans.

San Juan de Pasto's Municipal Council for Risk Disaster Management has used the assessment's data to update seven response protocols and policies related to infrastructure, health services, and USAR, which are crucial for implementing effective and efficient response actions.

San Juan de Pasto Major Pedro Vicente Obando, who in late April signed a formal adoption of the Miyamoto assessment results, said "We will consider the findings of this study seriously and will continue working together to prepare in the best way possible to face a major disaster in the city. This assessment gives us many responsibilities."

According to USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Phil Gelman, "This is the first time that the governments of Colombia and Costa Rica have access to an earthquake hazard assessment conducted by an internationally recognized earthquake structural engineering group. The information provided to city authorities and emergency responders includes specific data on seismic risks per zone, such as probable number of victims and injured people, collapsed buildings, and debris volume, that can help guide preparedness efforts and make a huge, positive impact on response planning."

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