

Transporting medical supplies to readiness exercise in Comayagua, Honduras



U.S. Army South (Miguel A. Negron)

# JTF-Bravo and Disaster Relief

Soldier discusses medical issues with Guatemalans after Hurricane Stan



Fleet Combat Camera, Atlantic (Robert McRill)

By EDMUND WOOLFOLK and JAMES MARSHALL

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Natural disasters can be difficult to forecast and vary greatly in magnitude. Central American hurricanes and tropical storms, however, can be all too predictable and devastating. The 2005 Atlantic hurricane season will forever be infamous for the ruin and fatalities it brought to the U.S. Gulf Coast, but it also wrought destruction and loss of life in several Central American countries, which sparked a coordinated U.S. Government relief effort. One of the most responsive elements came from the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) Joint Task Force (JTF)-Bravo, located at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras. This joint task force's unique combination of mission, location, and means gives it a quick disaster relief response capability in this storm-stricken region.

### Unique Capabilities

JTF-Bravo was established in August 1984 to exercise command and control of U.S. forces and exercises within the Republic of Honduras. As the political-military situation in Honduras and the region changed over the years, its mission transformed to include conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, personnel recovery, counternarcotics and counterterrorism operations, and noncombatant evacuation. Located on an 8,000-foot, C-5-capable airfield, the JTF has Army and Air Force contingents, an Army General Support (composite) Aviation Battalion (1-228<sup>th</sup> AV), a medical element, and a joint security force for an assigned strength of over 550. It is also the most forward U.S. military presence within the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility.

The Atlantic hurricane season runs from June through November, producing a range of tropical weather events from depressions, which deliver heavy rains, to increasingly dangerous tropical disturbances and hurricanes. Each season, Central America bears the fury of storms that kill and displace people and damage and destroy housing, buildings, and infrastructure. Hurricane Mitch left thousands dead and caused billions of dollars in damage in 1998. While Central American nations have done much to prepare, to include establishing emergency operations centers and stockpiling supplies, the immediate aftermath of a hurricane can paralyze even a robust relief network. In fall 2005, JTF-Bravo rapidly deployed skilled teams with helicopter support to provide emergency

relief in response to Hurricane Stan in Guatemala and Tropical Storms Beta and Gamma in Honduras. How the joint task force responded to Hurricane Stan became a model for dealing with the two tropical storms.

Hurricane Stan devastated an already saturated landscape in Guatemala. A mudslide buried Santiago Atitlan, a town in the west central region, which triggered the Guatemalan government's request for American assistance. The U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City and U.S. security assistance officer (SAO) in the country requested and coordinated JTF-Bravo's integration into the relief effort. They also worked with USSOUTHCOM leadership to ensure clear strategic guidance. An ambiguous situation on the ground made defining the problem the salient task. This undertaking was complicated by uncooperative weather and the challenges presented by combined

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*how the joint task force responded to Hurricane Stan became a model for dealing with the two tropical storms*

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and interagency operations. From the start, the aircrews of the 1-228<sup>th</sup> AV were able to overcome the daunting obstacles of weather and rugged terrain to save life and limb, then deliver first responders while assessing the damage from the rain, wind, and mudslides. This quickly transitioned to relieving suffering and allowed the JTF to take a more "second row" approach, applying its unique capabilities directly in areas where the host nation lacked assets.

Determining the most affected areas was the mission of the Guatemalan civilian lead agency, the National Coordinator for the Reduction of Disasters. JTF-Bravo embedded its civil affairs planners into the agency as advisers. Simply put, the joint task force looked at the requirements and the assets it had available and determined where its capabilities could be best applied.

The JTF-Bravo aircrews operated over great distances and at high altitudes to deliver emergency supplies to isolated highland communities that were cut off by mudslides and washed-out bridges. After delivering the *bomberos* (firefighters) and other first responders—the local heroes of the operation who began opening roads and repairing bridges—they then



set up a forward staging base in Quetzaltenango to shorten the resupply legs and maximize the utility of its aviation assets. The airstrip there, a reliable road network, and a volunteer workforce enabled the rapid movement of relief supplies. As isolated communities were reconnected by roads, JTF-Bravo gradually scaled back its relief operations and focused on assessment and sustainment. This same model was applied in the joint task force's relief effort in Honduras following Tropical Storms Beta and Gamma. Taken together, these operations demonstrate the value of forward-deployed forces.

#### **What Makes It Work**

JTF-Bravo enjoys several attributes that make it a responsive disaster relief effort.

*Regional Situational Awareness.* Due to forward presence, aircrews routinely fly throughout the region, resulting in familiarity with areas that could be affected by severe weather and awareness of local air traffic control procedures.

*Established Relationships.* Another advantage of forward deployment is that leadership has solid working relationships with the U.S. Embassies in Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, in addition to regional SAOs and partner nation military leaders and governmental organizations. This contributes to greatly improved communications during the early critical stages of a disaster relief operation. These relationships are sustained during the year through JTF-Bravo's support of numerous humanitarian assistance exercises, training events, and operations involving this same network of people.

*Unit Cohesion.* JTF-Bravo is a ready-formed team that can capitalize on shared

procedures and rehearsed plans in a way that an ad hoc joint task force could not, thus reducing response time to a minimum.

*Language Proficiency.* The JTF is able to leverage the Spanish bilingualism of many of its members. Having the inherent ability to speak in the native language of Central American partner nations makes communication more rapid and clear.

*Supporting Infrastructure.* Soto Cano Air Base maximizes all of the above strengths with its long runway, ramp space for pallet storage, limited warehouse space, and associated garrison support activities. This provides a useful forward staging base for disaster relief.

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Joint Task Force-Bravo's support of disaster relief operations demonstrates good will to partner nations and advances theater strategy and national security interests. The commander's ability to commit such a force for 72 hours without a deployment order has saved lives, relieved pain and suffering, and improved relations with our Latin American partners. While the reasons the JTF is successful are not new, they reinforce the benefits of forward-deployed forces and advanced preparation coupled with built-in knowledge of local languages and customs. **JFQ**