



DISASTER  
RELIEF

CASE REPORT  
Colombia-Avalanche  
June 1974

Agency for International Development  
Washington, DC 20523

## **COLOMBIA**

### **Avalanche—June 1974**

In the late afternoon of June 28, 1974, a massive landslide occurred on the main highway midway between Bogota and Villavicencio, a provincial center some 50 miles southeast of Bogota. Thousands of tons of cascading earth and rock swept over the twisting highway below, burying cars, buses, and trucks. Over 300 people were killed and thousands injured. The blockage of the highway halted all road transportation, disrupting the food supply from the Meta agricultural region and blocking the transport of harvesting machinery to areas where crops were ready for harvest.

Value of U.S. Government Assistance ..... \$30,115

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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On the day of the disaster, there had been several small landslides along the 50-year old highway which was the principal land linkage connecting the eastern part of the country with Bogota and the central region of Colombia. Police and army corps personnel were forcing all traffic to alternate travel on a single lane of the highway. A half-hour before the disaster, officials of the Ministry of Public Works warned the transit authorities of the possibility of a large slide. Vehicles were forbidden to travel through this danger zone, and a total evacuation was ordered by the authorities. Tragically, most drivers did not heed the warning, and a large number of vehicles were caught in the path of the landslide.

#### **ACTION TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF COLUMBIA**

Relief operations began the next day under the direction of General Jose Jaime Rodriguez, head of the Colombian Civil Defense. Hundreds of survivors were taken to hospitals, but recovery operations were limited because of the danger of further slides.

The landslide occurred when rice and food grain crops in the heart of the Meta agricultural region were to be harvested. The obstructed highway made it impossible to get harvesting equipment into the area. With the possible loss of these crops, the country was confronted with a food shortage and the farmers with economic ruin. Attempts by the Government of Colombia to immediately charter commercial aircraft to airlift construction equipment and agricultural machinery to Villavicencio were unsuccessful. President Misael Pastrana Borrero personally contacted U.S. Ambassador Viron P. Vaky on July 3, requesting one or two C-130 Hercules to help with the airlift.

#### **ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT**

Ambassador Vaky, responding to President Pastrana's request for airlift assistance, exercised his disaster relief authority on July 4 which initially provided \$25,000 to fund this effort. A.I.D.'s Foreign Disaster Relief Coor-

dinator arranged through the Department of Defense and U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) in the Canal Zone, Panama, to have one C-130 Hercules put on standby immediately, subject to call as soon as the Embassy in Bogota completed arrangements with local authorities for its utilization. Radio contact was established between the disaster area and USSOUTHCOM on July 5 to facilitate coordination of the airlift.

The Colombian Minister in charge of the disaster relief coordination informed Ambassador Vaky that the essential equipment to be airlifted included eight crated harvesters, 30 used harvesters, and 40 grain dryers.

Two U.S. Air Force survey specialists were dispatched from Panama to plan for the airlift support. They determined that one C-130 could haul the cargo in 43 sorties over a period of 22 days. Each sortie would be a 70-mile flight from Bogota's Eldorado Airport to Villavicencio's Apiay Airport and return.

The aircraft assigned for the mission was a C-130 of the 32nd Tactical Airlift Squadron, 314th Tactical Airlift Wing, on rotational duty in the Canal Zone from Little Rock Air Force Base, Arkansas. It arrived at Eldorado Airport on July 10 where loading operations began in preparation for the first mission. The airlift began on July 11.

Thirty-eight sorties were completed before Colombian officials made the decision for the remaining farm equipment to be transported by truck on the newly reopened highway.

Upon termination of the airlift at noon on July 27, 73 tons of cargo had been flown to Villavicencio and 25 tons of harvested rice was backhauled to Bogota. Total U.S. Government expenditure for the airlift was \$30,115.

#### **ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

The United Nations Disaster Relief Office donated \$20,000 to the Government of Colombia's relief effort.

