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DEPARTMENT OF
DEFENSE

Weaknesses in Humanitarian
and Civic Assistance Programs

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to present the results of our work on the Department of Defense's (DOD) Humanitarian and Civic Assistance (HCA) Program. We issued a report on our work in November 1993,¹ and I will highlight two major issues in that report: the extent and costs of the program and the implementation and monitoring of the program by DOD and its Southern and Pacific commands.

The program's activities, which at the time of our review were coordinated by DOD's Office of Global Affairs, include donations of excess DOD property and supplies, civic assistance, disaster assistance, and the provision of space-available transportation for food and supplies from private donor groups to foreign countries. I will be talking about the extent of the program on an overall basis and about specific projects in Panama and Honduras.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Overall, DOD's Humanitarian and Civic Assistance Program is widespread. At least 117 countries have received excess nonlethal equipment and supplies under this program. In addition, in fiscal year 1993, National Guard units from 29 states traveled to Latin American countries to work on civic assistance projects. The full extent and costs of the program are unknown, however, because DOD conducts some projects without State Department's approval and does not report all the costs of the program. For example, DOD does not report (1) personnel and transportation costs associated with unit deployments for civic assistance projects, (2) the value of excess property donated, or (3) the costs of some projects.

At the project level, coordination between the U.S. military and the U.S. embassies and AID missions in Panama and Honduras was minimal. We found that some DOD projects were not designed to contribute to foreign policy objectives, did not appear to enhance U.S. military training, and either lacked the support of the country or were not used. As for oversight, 6 years

¹Department of Defense: Changes Needed to the Humanitarian and Civic Assistance Program (GAO/NSIAD-94-57, Nov. 2, 1993).

after the passage of authorizing legislation, DOD still has not issued regulations, as required, to direct the services how to implement the HCA program. In addition, the Southern and Pacific Commands have not systematically evaluated projects to see whether they had succeeded or failed, and program officials have not routinely visited projects to follow up on their progress.

I would now like to turn to the details of our findings.

FULL EXTENT OF ASSISTANCE IS UNKNOWN

Cost of Excess Property Is Not Reported

Regarding donations of excess supplies to foreign countries, DOD is not required to report the costs of this material. Between 1986 and 1992, over 57 million excess items were donated. Before 1990, DOD reported, through the Secretary of State, the acquisition value of supplies donated rather than their current market value. DOD estimated the value of excess items donated during fiscal years 1986 through 1989 to be \$49 million. Since 1990, when the reporting requirement was eliminated, DOD has not reported the value of items transferred. Most of the supplies have been donated since 1990. The acquisition cost of these materials is significant. Transportation costs for these materials rose from about \$15 million in 1992 to about \$28 million in 1993.

Transportation and Personnel Costs Are Not Reported

On civic assistance projects, DOD reports to Congress only the cost of consumable supplies and materials used. In fiscal year 1992 these costs were \$6.6 million and were expected to increase to \$8.6 million in 1993. However, the unreported costs--for transporting troops and paying them per diem--can be significant because of the large numbers of soldiers involved. In fiscal year 1991, over 8,000 Army National Guard soldiers deployed to Latin America to work on short-term civic assistance projects, and 10,000 were expected to deploy in 1993. The Southern Command estimated that a small deployment of about 14 to 60 troops with an average stay of 14 days would cost about \$315,000 with transportation and per diem accounting for \$250,000 or about 71 percent of the cost.

Costs for Some Projects Are Not Reported

In addition to the unreported costs above, Southern Command officials told us that the Command had used unspent money from previously approved projects to finance about 10 percent of their civic assistance projects for 1992. These projects had not been coordinated with DOD or approved by the State Department. Our sample of 33 construction projects in Panama showed that during 1992 one-third had not been submitted for approval. The cost of consumable materials, alone, for these projects totaled about \$166,000.

Extent of Minimal Assistance Is Unknown

Finally, under the law, military commands are not required to report the cost of providing minimal assistance, coordinate it with DOD, or obtain the State Department's approval. Therefore, the total cost of such assistance is not known. Minimal assistance might be a unit doctor providing immunizations or dispensing medications to the local populace. These activities may be financed with the commands' discretionary funds or other accounts instead of funds appropriated in the operations and maintenance account for HCA activities. The problem is that applicable statutes do not define minimal in terms of cost, and the Southern and Pacific Commands were unsure what the cost threshold should be.

WEAKNESSES IN PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Now I would like to turn to the program's implementation. Under statutory requirements, DOD was to issue regulations on how to implement the HCA Program. However, 6 years later, a final directive outlining legal positions and operating procedures has not been issued. Also, the service secretaries among other things, are to ensure that projects (1) enhance operational readiness skills of U.S. soldiers, (2) do not duplicate other U.S. assistance programs, and (3) serve the basic economic and social needs of the local populace. However, our review indicated that this was not always occurring.

In addition, under a 1987 memorandum of understanding signed by DOD, the State Department, and the Agency for International Development (AID), the regional commands are to obtain the comments and concurrence of

embassies before submitting project proposals to DOD and State for approval. However, in some cases, DOD did not follow the operating procedures in the memorandum.

Some Projects Did Not Meet Foreign Policy Objectives

In Panama, we found that some DOD projects were not coordinated with the embassy and did not meet the U.S. foreign policy objectives outlined in the embassy's country plan. The plan's goals are to strengthen Panama's economy by teaching indigenous workers new skills, improving the overall health of the work force, and improving the country's infrastructure. However, DOD's projects were not designed to improve local work skills. Moreover, medical exercises did not have long-term goals so that progress could be measured in terms of raising the local population's general health. Finally, some of the Southern Command's infrastructure projects did not consider the host nation's ability to maintain them, and some of the buildings and roads were not being used.

After we advised them of our findings, the Southern Command, the embassy in Panama, AID, and the Peace Corps signed an agreement that gives the embassy the lead in coordinating assistance. The agreement recognizes the importance of ensuring cooperation between DOD and the State Department early in the process of establishing projects. U.S. officials in Honduras also established a humanitarian assistance committee to coordinate DOD's program.

Training Benefits of Some Projects Are Questionable

As for the training benefits of HCA projects, after-action reports on HCA projects in Honduras and Panama noted that U.S. commanders were concerned that soldiers were doing jobs they were not trained for, they lacked materials needed for some projects, and they had to repair poor-quality work done by preceding units. The Army Audit Agency has also been critical of soldiers being deployed abroad and used for tasks they have not been trained to do. The point of deploying units is to simulate war-fighting conditions and enhance their operational readiness.

In our visits to project sites, we noted that some soldiers were doing construction work they were not trained for. The lack of quality of the construction was evident on some of the projects. I want to give you just two examples.

- In repairing a hospital clinic in Panama, an Army Reserve unit constructed the roof so that it slanted down toward the center courtyard, and as a result, the clinic flooded during the rainy season. Engineers who accompanied us on our visit also pointed out that the unit's repairs to the supporting columns were rudimentary at best.
- A National Guard unit in Honduras replaced an elementary school roof made of heavy, overlapping ceramic tiles. On inspection, we found that the tiles were loose and if one were removed from the bottom row, all the tiles would likely fall. A civilian engineer with us said that the soldiers probably did not know that the bottom three rows of tiles should be cemented in place as a foundation.

Some Projects Do Not Meet Country Needs

Although HCA projects are supposed to respond to the host nation's needs and be maintainable by the country, we found several cases where roads and schools built by U.S. units were not maintained or used. Since the early 1980s, U.S. Army National Guard and Reserve soldiers have constructed hundreds of miles of road in Honduras and Panama. According to a senior U.S. official, a Honduran government official informally agreed that his government would maintain the roads and build five bridges that would link sections of the highway. However, at the time of our review the roads had not been maintained, and sections had either eroded or washed away, making the roads virtually impassable. The five bridges had not been built.

On a road-building project in Panama, U.S. units did not take into account the adverse impact the rainy season would have on roads that were not surfaced with materials such as gravel. According to an after-action report by a Civil Affairs team, the project caused intense hard feelings among the local populace, and the United States had gained an unfavorable reputation for building only "half roads." In the opinion of local town leaders, the U.S.

government was interested in using the road project only as a North American propaganda tool.

In Honduras, we found a three-building school built by National Guard soldiers that stood empty and unused within eyesight of a Honduran-built school that was bustling with activity. In reviewing the preconstruction site survey forms used by the U.S. military to select projects, we found that the only information about this school was its geographical location. There was no information about how large the school should be or whether teachers would be available.

COMMANDS DO NOT EVALUATE HCA PROJECTS

Our review indicated that the Southern and Pacific Commands were not monitoring projects to determine their effectiveness. The Southern Command's Program Analysis and Evaluation chief said he had not evaluated projects because DOD had not provided guidance. Also, program managers at the Southern Command believed that the projects should be evaluated independently by someone other than those officials responsible for the projects.

The Pacific Command's HCA program office did not systematically review projects because officials there said they did not have enough people to visit project sites. The staff's role was limited to project approval and the funding process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In our report, we recommended that DOD (1) provide Congress a more reasonable estimate of the costs of providing humanitarian assistance, (2) issue an implementing directive for conducting HCA activities, (3) ensure that projects contribute to U.S. foreign policy objectives and are supported by the host country, (4) ensure that the training soldiers receive from working on HCA projects promotes their military readiness skills, and (5) ensure that commands evaluate projects to determine their effectiveness. DOD has not yet responded to our recommendations. That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to answer any questions.

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