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U.S. military delivers aid, evacuates flood victims in Costa Rica, Panama

CHANGUINOLA, Panama — Two U.S. military disaster relief teams from Joint Task Force-Bravo, based at Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, have delivered more than 278,000 pounds of relief supplies to victims in flood-affected communities in Panama and Costa Rica.

The teams, comprised of 68 U.S. military personnel from the task force, have been supporting U.S. relief efforts in both countries since Nov 26. During the past seven days, the teams have flown 95 missions, using eight “Chinook” and “Blackhawk” helicopters to distribute aid and evacuate 17 flood victims in need of immediate medical attention.

U.S. Southern Command directed the teams to support ongoing U.S. relief efforts in Costa Rica and Panama, after authorities in both countries declared a state of emergency and requested U.S. assistance.

"We are here to help and our teams are prepared to do whatever we can -- be it through continued airlift support, search and rescue missions or medical assistance," said Army Col. Richard Juergens, JTF-Bravo commander. "We are working hand in hand with our Panamanian and Costa Rican partners to provide help to those who need it most."

Near Bocas del Toro, Panama, a region where the task force's helicopters have delivered supplies, the flooding has killed three people, injured seven, destroyed or damaged more than 1,000 houses, and affected more than 14,500 residents, according to Panama's National System for Civil Protection.

The U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Government's lead agency for international disaster assistance, is directing U.S. relief efforts in both countries.

"We are glad that we were able to contribute the talents and the resources of our task force to help the communities affected by these terrible floods," said Adm. James Stavridis, Commander of U.S. Southern Command. "We will continue to support USAID and local authorities until our assistance is no longer needed."

"USAID provided initial funding for the local procurement and transport of emergency relief commodities and deployed disaster experts to the affected areas," said Ky Luu, Director of USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance.

Luu explained that USAID airlifted emergency relief supplies from the agency's Miami warehouse to Panama and Costa Rica using commercial assets. The airlifted relief commodities included blankets, hygiene kits, and water containers.

he added that USAID disaster experts are also working alongside local authorities to further assess flood damage and determine if additional U.S. assistance is needed.

The task force previously assisted disaster relief efforts in Panama in November 2006, providing humanitarian assistance to flooded communities near the city of Colon and in parts of northern Panama. During that four-day relief mission, the task force evacuated victims and airlifted more than 130,000 pounds of food, water, mattresses and hygiene supplies.

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Additional information and imagery is available at
<http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/factFiles.php?id=90>