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Guns, Drugs, and Disaster: Cauca/Huila, Colombia , 1994

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Guns, Drugs, and Disaster: Cauca/Huila, Colombia, 1994*

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A Richter magnitude 6.4 earthquake occurred near the Nevado del Huila volcano in southwestern Colombia on June 6, 1994, affecting an area both deforested and coincidentally saturated by heavy rains over preceding weeks. The earthquake and resultant landslides and mud flows killed an estimated 656 people and left thousands homeless, most of them non-Spanish speaking Paez and Guambiano. Context is all important, and the disaster response and especially reconstruction planning became rapidly political because the event affected primarily indigenous populations and occurred in a heroin poppy growing area long contested between Colombian national security forces and several guerrilla organizations.

Overview

When the Nevado del Ruiz volcano erupted on November 13, 1985, it melted part of its icecap and sent a *lahar* (a heated mud flow) down toward and then through the city of Armero, Colombia, killing at least the official number: 22,000. Armero became one of the three great 1985 disasters in Latin America, the other two being earthquakes in Chile (March) and Mexico City (September). For the international media, Armero was a major and continuing story. Indeed, Armero was the cover of *Time* magazine the first issue after the event.

Shortly before 4 pm local time on June 6, 1994, a Richter magnitude 6.4 earthquake occurred near the Nevado del Huila volcano in southwestern Colombia.[1] The epicenter was near the border intersection between the

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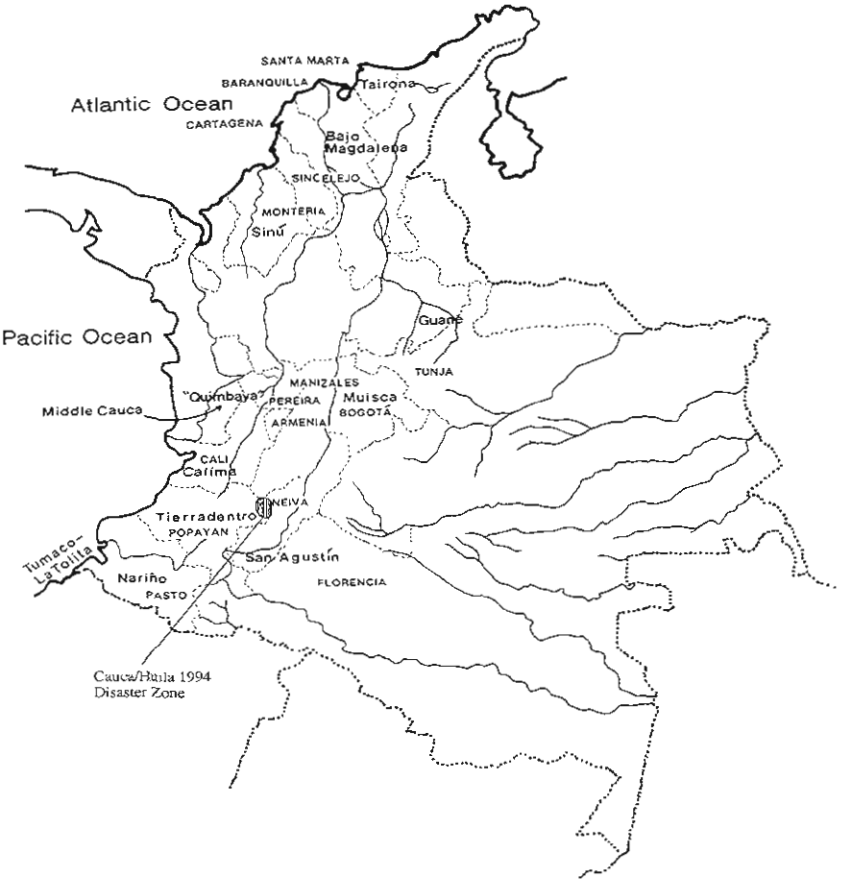
Map 1. Map of Colombia



administrative departments of Cauca, Huila, and Tolima and in an area saturated by weeks of heavy rains.

Destructive in itself, the earthquake triggered literally dozens of landslides, some of which blocked rivers in the high valleys on the flanks of the mountain. These temporary dams soon broke, however, and within hours sent huge mud flows down to lower elevation valleys, causing major additional death and destruction.

Based on incomplete and rather garbled initial reports, early media coverage made this disaster seem another Armero, tying together a volcano, landslides, and mud flows. The linkage was misleading. This disaster was definitely *not* another Armero. Cauca/Huila 1994 is, was, and will remain a very different disaster. Few outside Colombia, however, will ever appreciate the differences.

With only hundreds, not thousands, killed in Cauca/Huila, and preoccupied with the breakdown and resulting civil war disaster in Rwanda and the anticipated U.S. invasion of Haiti, the international media barely noted the event. From a social science perspective, however, this is a serious blindspot, because Cauca/Huila 1994 has to be one of the most complex and fascinating disasters in recent memory.

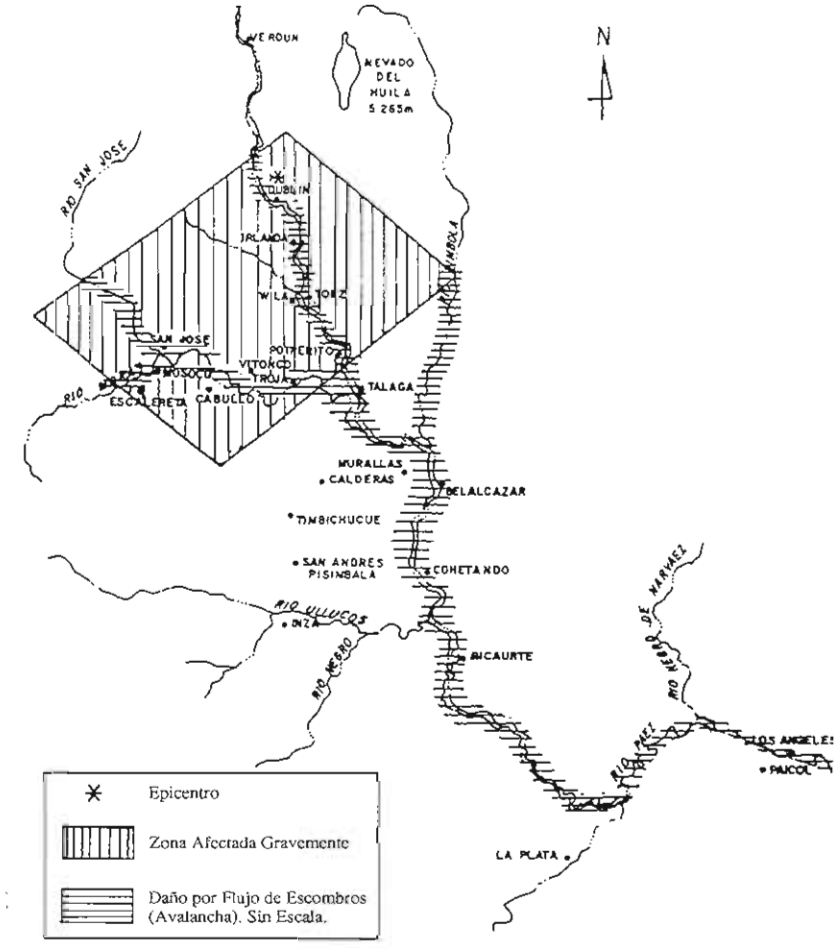
Cauca/Huila 1994 was a compound disaster in the sense that destruction came from the earthquake, the landslides, and then from the mud flows. The event also confirms the blurring of the line between natural and man-made disasters, because deforestation contributed to the landslides and the mud flows. That is, while the earthquake was locally destructive, the severity of the "disaster" was really determined by the subsequent downstream losses (quite literally downstream).

Perhaps the most important distinguishing characteristic of this event, however, revolves around the affected population — or more accurately, the affected populations, plural. Unlike Armero 1985, which affected a much more developed and urbanized area, Cauca/Huila 1994 had its major impacts on two different and non-Spanish speaking indigenous tribes: the Paez and the Guambiano. Much of the damage took place in "*resguardos,*" of which the best American English translation would be (Native American) "reserves" or "reservations." Complicating the situation, smaller mestizo and black populations were affected as well, especially in the disaster zone's towns.

The term indigenous, however, also obscures rather than enlightens. Paeces and the Guambianos are not fond of each other. Speaking different languages and living separately in small communal groups dispersed throughout the area, they have a history of conflict. Prior to the disaster, the Paez were especially noted for being reclusive.

All disasters occur in societal context, however, and three additional ingredients must be factored into the mix: (1) The event occurred in a "conflict zone" between several different but effectively cooperating armed guerrilla groups on one hand and the Colombian government on the other, which meant a significant police and military presence in the area prior to the disaster; (2) Cropping patterns indicate production involvement in the illicit drug trade by parts of the affected population — taller corn plants shielding from aerial view heroin poppy plants, "*amapola,*" growing between the corn rows, the entire area linked to the larger cocaine trade (see Map 3); and (3) Much of the previously occupied area is too geologically hazardous for return, and therefore the long term solution touches on one of the most sensitive nerve endings in all of Latin America: land tenure.

Map 2. Impact Zones

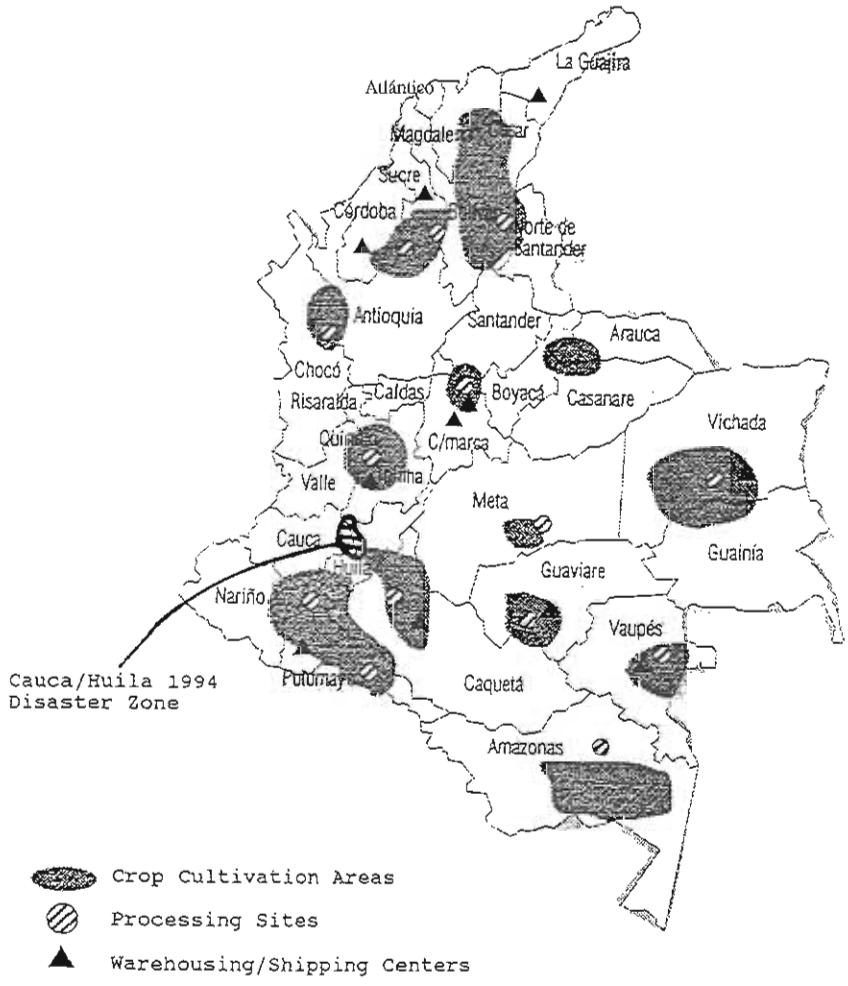


Reviewing the entire situation in all of its complexity, one Colombian involved in local level event response noted, "This disaster is my country in miniature. It's all there" — meaning the guerrilla war, the drug trade, indigenous populations, and tectonic instability.

Profiling the Event

Reflecting on the difficulties involved in helping the survivors of the disaster, the President of the Colombian Red Cross, Dr. Guillermo Rueda Montaña, has asked rhetorically why it is that recent disasters in Colombia, including Cauca/Huila, have had to occur in the most inaccessible spots.

Map 3. Cocaine Trafficking Zones



Inaccessible is a moderate word for much of this disaster area. Impossible comes closer.

The epicenter of the earthquake was slightly to the west of the Nevado del Huila volcano, which caused the early confusion about "an eruption." *No* volcanic eruption took place.

The earthquake impact area included the west side of the mountain toward the Cauca valley, inhabited by the Guambiano. The worst damage occurred on the east side, in Huila department, especially along the Paez, Negro de Narváez, and La Simbola rivers and their respective tributaries, where the landslides and mud flows added to the earthquake damage.

Echoing the name for the east side of the mountain given by the Spanish, Colombians themselves traditionally called that part of the disaster zone "*Tierradentro,*" literally "inland." A more meaningful American English translation would be "no man's land" or badlands. Guerrilla war has a long history there.

Roads in Tierradentro are few and primitive, and they proved vulnerable to both the landslides and the mud flows. Bridges were lost to landslides, mud flows, and the earthquake. Assistance, evacuation, and supply had to be by helicopter, and flight crews were hampered by seriously deficient maps.

Reflecting an astute defensive strategy developed over the centuries, some of the hardest hit villages were virtually unknown to the outside and had to be indicated to flight crews by Paeces themselves.

Human Impact

Prior to the disaster, the Paez were little involved with Colombian national life and inhabited the high mountain valleys and gorges to which their forebears had progressively retreated over hundreds of years of pressure — first from the Spanish and then, after independence, from the Colombians. Paez towns and villages suffered from both the earthquake as well as the landslides and mud flows.

Inhabiting a more moderate, hospitable, and accessible terrain on the west slope of the mountain, the Guambiano were slightly more involved in the national life but no less careful than the Paez of their cultural identity. Damage on their side of Nevado del Huila resulted primarily from the earthquake.

Indeed, a recurring theme in this disaster was the indigenous demand to keep their communal groups together and their culture, their "*costumbre,*" alive — even in the temporary relocation shelters and camps. In the early days of the evacuation, some Paez and Guambiano groups found themselves in the same camps. Tensions arose, and Paez and Guambiano had to be separated. Colombian authorities subsequently attempted to maintain communal integrity within Paez and Guambiano groups and yet at the same time maintain a degree of separation between them.

Indeed, as late as August 6, and to rectify an early evacuation mistake, Colombian authorities moved more than 1,000 Paeces from near the town of La Plata to two shelters in Cauca Department, one near Popayán, the other near Caloto, to reconnect these populations to their communal groups. Interestingly, both of these shelters are on lands which the Paez identify as

once theirs — hundreds of years ago. Indeed, several Paeces have spoken, very quietly, of these shelters as one step in a "*reconquista*" (reconquest).

That particular word choice by the Paeces was clearly intentional. "Reconquista" connotes more and carries a much heavier symbolic load in Spanish than the translation does in English: For more than 700 years, Spain fought a religious/military war, the Reconquista, to expel a Muslim occupation of that part of Europe, which only ended with the fall of Granada in 1492 — a pivotal date for both European and indigenous (Native) American civilizations. Therefore, the importance of the word reconquista should not be underestimated given the historical and cultural context in which it is being used.

By late June 1994 the statistical situation had clarified in the disaster area. According to the Colombian Red Cross, visible damage occurred in 34 separate towns and villages. Four were literally wiped out, and five more were in such precarious conditions that the surviving populations cannot return. Approximately 1,600 homes were destroyed, and more than 3,000 were seriously damaged. Five road bridges and 15 smaller trail bridges were destroyed, along with approximately 100 kilometers of roads, effectively isolating much of the area from land access. Air access was not all that easy either, as fog and low clouds frequently hamper helicopter flights.

Because the Government of Colombia insisted that the death count be based on recovered bodies, many of which are buried deep under the mud flows, the casualty summary (as of late June 1994) showed an unusually high figure for the missing:

Confirmed Deaths:	148
Missing:	508
Injured and Treated:	207

Both the Paez and Guambiano have very strong internal political structures ("*Cabildos*") recognized by the Colombian Constitution as having independent standing. That is, they are essentially self-governing at the local level.[2] Both Paez and Guambiano leaders ("Governors") were able to identify with great accuracy exactly — by name — who was missing from each of their dispersed groups. Therefore, we can say with confidence that the missing are certainly dead — giving a fatality figure of 656.

We visited several of the shelters and camps containing indigenous populations. They were remarkably clean, orderly, and carefully but cordially receptive to outsiders. The strong group ties, internal organization, and even the tradition of communal cooking facilitated a quiet and patient acceptance of temporary arrangements. The limit to the patience is an empirical question, however.

Interestingly, because of their strong communal structures, both the Paez and the Guambiano absorbed disaster caused orphans in their own ways. The concepts of family and community are intimately linked, and the loss of a member or even a head of a family is immediately replaced by the larger communal grouping and ratified by the internal, Cabildo, government. The respective Paez and Guambiano leaders were quite explicit about not allowing outside authorities to handle any aspect of the orphan problem. Actually, they used the phrase "none of your business" in answering questions about orphans.

The crux of any disaster, however, is not the number of people killed but rather the plight of the survivors. According to Colombian Red Cross figures, approximately 28,000 people were directly affected by the various components of this compound disaster (earthquake, landslides, mud flows and resultant isolation).[3] The homeless numbers are somewhat fluid, but as of late June 1994, approximately 6,000 were in 24 relatively large and organized shelters ("*albergues*"). Another 11,600 were in 119 smaller camps dispersed in the area.

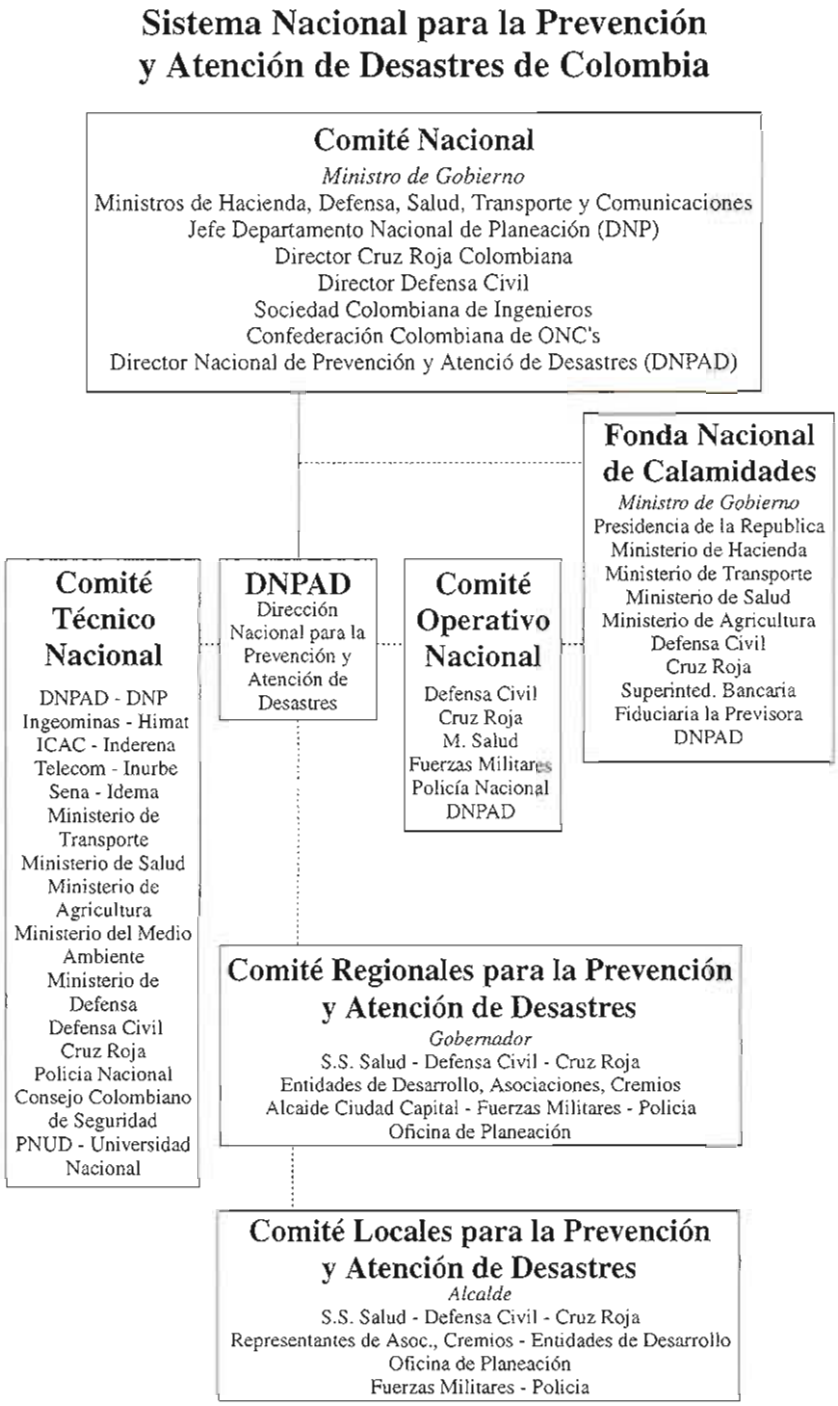
The Response Structure

Stimulated by complaints about, and alleged deficiencies in, the response to the 1983 Popayán earthquake and to the 1985 Armero disaster, in 1987 then-President of Colombia Virgilio Barco created a National Office for Disaster Response (in Spanish, ONADE). President Barco located it directly in the Presidency. ONADE functioned rather informally at first (it lacked the all important in Latin America legislative codification), but it enjoyed strong political backing.

In 1988, by Law 46, the Government of Colombia established the formal legal basis for a "National System for Disaster Prevention and Response." In May 1989, by Decree 919, President Barco issued the necessary codifying regulations to implement the law.

In 1990, the new President of Colombia, César Gaviria, attempted to streamline the Presidency, in part to strengthen the formal structure of the ministries. As part of this reorganization, President Gaviria consolidated various disaster related functions in different ministries together with ONADE, renaming the resulting entity DNPAD (*Dirección Nacional para la Prevención y Atención de Desastres*), which translates out as the National Office for Disaster Prevention and Response. He moved DNPAD down and placed it within the Ministry of the Interior (called "*Ministerio de Gobierno*" in Colombia), where it remains.

Figure 1. Organization Chart



Within this system, general policy is the province of a National Committee housed in the Ministry of the Interior and comprised of: the Ministers of Finance, Defense, Health, and Transport and Communication; the Director of the Department of National Planning; the Director of the Red Cross; the Director of Civil Defense; and representatives from the Society of Engineers and the Confederation of Non-Governmental Organizations. The final member is the Director of DNPAD.

To the DNPAD falls the actual coordination of Colombian response to a disaster. It has both a National Technical Committee and a National Committee for Operations. It reaches downward through departmental and local disaster committees as well.

Of course, the system never really anticipated a major disaster affecting indigenous populations in a nearly inaccessible guerrilla conflict zone with heroin production ties to the drug trade.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Colombian structure is the "National Calamity Fund," which was created in 1984 as a result of the 1983 Popayán earthquake. It existed only on paper, however, with no appropriation. Then in 1987 — after Armero in 1985 and a flood disaster in 1986 — the Ministry of Finance allocated it resources, and the Fund has oscillated between the Colombian peso equivalent of (U.S.) 2 million dollars and 4 million dollars since. The Fund is used for immediate post-event response, but the *interest* from it can also be used for certain pre-event mitigation, preparedness, and education activities. For this latter purpose, the Fund requires matching departmental or community financing — thereby stretching the pesos and guaranteeing local involvement.

Event Response and Recovery

The disaster occurred late on a Monday afternoon on a national holiday in one of the most isolated areas of Colombia, all of which contributed to early confusion in the response. Moreover, the earthquake knocked out electric power in the disaster zone, which prevented many of the hardest hit towns and villages from reporting their plight.

The disaster occurred in the midst of a sensitive anti-narcotrafficking operation by police and military forces, and the police/military control of access to the zone both delayed and effectively constrained civil response to the disaster. In fact, President Gaviria did not arrive in the disaster zone until Wednesday June 8, when he met in Neiva, capital of Huila Department, with departmental disaster committees and other authorities involved in the area. A relatively complete damage assessment was not completed until Thursday June 9.

On June 9, 1994 President Gaviria issued (Decree 1178) a State of Emergency for the disaster zone and called for a national campaign to help the victims. National donations were immediate and significant. Reflecting this fact, the Government of Colombia issued a request for international assistance but limited it to cash contributions and specific items (e.g., metal bridges, generators, water purification equipment) in part to avoid the spasm deluge which has characterized other disaster responses, including Armero in 1985.

In the end, Colombia covered 95 per cent of its disaster needs. External assistance was needed for only the remaining 5 per cent — again a contrast to Armero.

The primary responding organization to the disaster for the first two days was the National Police, who as noted above had a significant personnel presence in the area as well as helicopters for surveillance and interdiction of drug trafficking. The National Police received some help from local Red Cross and Civil Defense groups as well.

By the third day, the Colombian Army and the Colombian Air Force were operating officially in the zone as well, with additional help from the Colombian Red Cross, Civil Defense, and the Ministry of Health. The major activities were medical attention to the affected population, transfer of the more seriously injured to care centers, and evacuation of vulnerable populations to safer areas. This phase ended around June 20.

Again reflecting strong local level structures, the responding agencies had to work through or at least with the indigenous Cabildos and their Governors. This factor also carries over into the reconstruction phase, discussed below.

International Assistance

On Thursday June 9, 1994, United States Ambassador to Colombia Morris Busby sent a cable (*Bogotá 8741*, unclassified) to Washington noting that "a major disaster has occurred in the departments of Huila and Cauca" and that "it is the Mission's judgement that Colombia's resources are not adequate to respond to the needs."

Ambassador Busby then issued the key words, without which the U.S. Government cannot respond: "I therefore declare that a state of disaster exists in Colombia." This declaration activated both the U. S. Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) and the Department of Defense Southern Command in Panama (DOD/SOUTHCOM).

Senior Regional Adviser Paul Bell of OFDA, based in Costa Rica, visited the disaster zone over the weekend of June 11 and 12. Informed by earlier field reports and anticipating the need, however, Bell had already arranged for shipment of two specific items from the OFDA stockpile in Panama: (1) a special type of plastic sheeting for temporary shelter for the homeless, and (2) individual water containers. OFDA had these items airlifted on June 11 to Neiva for distribution to the field. That is, to compensate for the early confusion and a relatively late call for help, Bell had OFDA organize an initial response before even arriving in the area.

We can confirm the use of USAID items in the shelters we visited.

For its part, and ultimately on its own budget, the DOD supplied two Chinook helicopters and support equipment and personnel, initially for evacuation of at-risk populations but subsequently for transport of supplies to shelters and camps. The Chinooks arrived at the Neiva airport from Panama on Sunday June 12 and commenced operations the following morning. Flight operations (75 total) continued until June 28.

Among others, international donors included Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, the European Community (especially France and Spain), Japan, Taiwan, and Korea.

The Colombians (principally the National Police and the Colombian Red Cross) coordinated the receipt of disaster assistance and tracked it with the computerized SUMA system developed by the Colombian Red Cross after their experiences in the Armero disaster. The SUMA system has been adopted and modified by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) for use elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. The system reportedly worked very well in the Cauca/Huila disaster and will facilitate accurate accountability.

Conclusion: Toward Reconstruction — and "*Nasa Kiwe*"

Coincidentally, the Cauca/Huila 1994 disaster occurred in the final stages of the Colombian presidential campaign. For retiring President Gaviria, the Cauca/Huila event constituted one of his last major action items. For the new president, Ernesto Samper, who took office on August 7, 1994, the disaster — or more precisely the reconstruction phase — forms part of his inherited political agenda.

The reconstruction phase is where all the social, economic, and political complexities and tensions will come out. Reflecting this fact was a statement on Colombian national television by a spokesperson for the indigenous populations in the disaster zone: "It is an opportune moment to remember 500 years of oppression." That is, given that they cannot return

to many parts of their original area (too hazardous), the Guambiano — but especially the Paez — intend to use this disaster and the consequent need for the relocation of many of their population groups to negotiate for that most precious of values in Latin America: land.

On June 10, 1994, President Gaviria established a public corporation to direct the reconstruction phase. In Bogotá and formally it is known as the "*Corporación para la Reconstrucción de la Cuenca del Rio Paez.*" The American English translation would be the Paez River Watershed Reconstruction Corporation.

Reflecting the strong indigenous context of this disaster, however, the corporation is known locally in the zone by another name — "*Nasa Kiwe,*" which is Paez for "Territory of the People." Again, this word choice is evocative and interesting, to say the least.

The corporation's Board of Directors is comprised of six representatives from the Government of Colombia and eight from the disaster zone. The six are the Minister of Interior; the Minister for the Environment; the Governor of Huila Department; the Governor of Cauca Department; a business leader from Cauca; and an adviser to the President of the Republic of Colombia.

The eight from the disaster zone are the Catholic Prefect for the area; the Director of the Colombian Anthropological Foundation; two Governors of the indigenous groups; one indigenous community leader; one representative of the non-indigenous population; one representative of the border or overlap area between Paez and Guambiano; and a representative of the "*Cómite Regional Indígena del Cauca,*" known as the "CRIC." A literal translation of CRIC would be misleading (Regional Indigenous Committee of the Cauca). It is better to think of CRIC as a kind of (politically radical) Inter-Tribal Council.

Nasa Kiwe, financed from the national budget (but with funds from donations and from the privatization sales of banks and of operating rights of the cellular telephone company), was given a 1994 budget by the Government of Colombia of the peso equivalent of US$ 10.5 million. The budget for 1995 was set at the equivalent of US$ 12.5 million.[4]

The budget has as its main purposes the following: (1) financing the social, economic, and material rehabilitation and reconstruction of the disaster zone; (2) directly or indirectly carrying out public works and establishing productive enterprises; and, most importantly, (3) *acquiring land* by either negotiation or expropriation for those groups which cannot return to their areas because of excessive geologic or hydrologic risk. All three functions will be interesting to track, but the third simply rivets

attention, for the vast majority of the funds are expected to go toward acquiring land. The questions will be "Whose lands, and on what terms?"

Technically the corporation is based in Bogotá, but the center of gravity is clearly in the field. Indeed, Gustavo Wilches Chaux, a long time resident of Popayán (capital of Cauca Department) and known for his work in its reconstruction after the 1983 earthquake, as well as for his sensitivity to indigenous concerns, was chosen to head the corporation.

Whatever the final outcome, it will not be an "imposed from Bogotá" reconstruction. At the very least it will be a negotiated reconstruction, and political conflict should be expected both within the zone, especially between Nasa Kiwe and the CRIC, and between the zone and Bogotá. Given that this disaster reconstruction will have to take place within the larger context of the continuing guerrilla war and the zone's involvement in the drug trade, the process alone will be fascinating.

Notes

1. We are taking the Richter magnitude 6.4 from INGEOMINAS, which operates the Colombian seismological network.

2. This is roughly similar to the "tribal government" system for Native American reservations in the United States. In Colombia, however, the guarantees are written into the Constitution.

3. These figures are surprisingly close to those for Armero in 1985. Of course, the distinguishing characteristic of Armero was the very high number of fatalities.

4. The *Nasa Kiwe* budget represents probably no more than 30 percent to 40 percent of the planned expenditures for the disaster zone. Such ministries as Transport and Communication, Development, and Health, as well as the Fund for Calamities, will be carrying out works in their own functional domains. They are, however, supposed to coordinate with *Nasa Kiwe*.