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USAID/OFDA Thanks Volunteer Firefighters in Peru for Their Assistance after Devastating Earthquake

A senior representative of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) traveled to Peru in early December 2007 to thank volunteer firefighters for their work following a devastating earthquake there several months earlier.

"The firefighters did a fantastic job," said Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan, who heads the USAID/OFDA Latin America and Caribbean office in San José, Costa Rica.

The office has worked with the Peruvian Volunteer Firefighters Corps since the late 1980s with specialized training and technical assistance that has since been expanded to firefighters in other Latin American countries. However, the work of the Peruvian Volunteer Firefighters Corps in building temporary shelters for affected families following the August 2007 earthquake marked the first time firefighters have worked directly with USAID/OFDA to provide humanitarian assistance following a disaster.

When the magnitude 8.0 earthquake struck the country on August 15, 2007, tens of thousands of buildings crumbled throughout southern Peru. The epicenter was located near Pisco, a seaside city about 150 miles south of Lima.

According to the Peruvian National Institute of Civil Defense (INDECI), the earthquake resulted in 519 deaths and severely damaged or destroyed 93,708 homes.

Volunteer firefighters were the first to respond to the tragedy, conducting search-and-rescue activities, damage assessments and needs analysis, and providing medical assistance, potable water and shelter to thousands of affected families.



USAID/Peru representative Larry Sacks, center left, Carlos Córdova, Chief Commander of the Peruvian Volunteer Firefighters Corps, center, and USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan, center right, with representatives of USAID/OFDA and regional firefighter brigades.

"On behalf of the people of the United States, through USAID/Peru and USAID/OFDA, I would like to express our most sincere recognition for the noble and arduous task undertaken by each and every one of the volunteer firefighters who participated in the rescue activities and humanitarian assistance, for your excellent work," Callaghan said during the December 11, 2007, ceremony in Lima.

The Chief Commander of the Peruvian Volunteer Firefighters Corps, members of the Group for Search and Rescue in Collapsed Structures and delegations of firefighter brigades from the towns of Ica, Pisco, Chincha and Cañete attended the ceremony, during which Callaghan and USAID/Peru Mission Disaster Relief Officer (MDRO) Larry Sacks presented the Peruvian Volunteer Firefighters Corps with a commemorative plaque in appreciation of their hard work.



A volunteer firefighter helps community members in southern Peru build temporary shelters with reinforced plastic from USAID/OFDA.

The joint USAID/OFDA and Peruvian Volunteer Firefighters Corps training program was launched in 1989. By 2000, the program included eight USAID/OFDA courses as part of the official training for volunteer firefighters in Peru. Additionally, course instructors from Peru have helped USAID/OFDA in the creation of training programs for firefighters in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Venezuela and Central America.

“Even though they are not a paid cadre, Peru’s volunteer firefighters are the most consistent partner of USAID/OFDA’s Training and Technical Assistance Program. They call themselves “*hijos de OFDA*” (“sons of OFDA”). They’ve institutionalized USAID/OFDA training; it’s a fundamental part of being a *bombero* in Peru,” said USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Phil Gelman, who helped coordinate U.S. humanitarian assistance in Peru following the earthquake.

Carlos Córdova, a Peru-based disaster expert with the International Resources Group (IRG), which implements the USAID/OFDA Training and Technical Assistance Program in Latin America and the Caribbean, agreed.

“The ceremony recognizes the overall accomplishments of the firefighters. It’s important to recognize this process of transforming training into action. It’s rare that we measure this type of process. Too often results are measured in how many courses are provided,

how many firefighters received training, etc. It’s amazing to see how the firefighters applied the training to save lives, calm victims, coordinate with national and international humanitarian organizations, assess damages, and help communities organize themselves after the earthquake,” Córdova said.

Because of the longstanding relationship between USAID/OFDA and the Volunteer Firefighters, it seemed logical to consider the firefighters when selecting implementing partners for the U.S. Government’s relief efforts after the earthquake, which focused on two main areas: shelter and water.

Because the Volunteer Firefighters had never been funded by USAID/OFDA for response work, the office decided to fund them through grant agreements with humanitarian organizations with which USAID/OFDA has funding experience: CARE, Caritas and World Vision. The agreements, signed about a week after the earthquake, provided cash and reinforced plastic sheeting to assist more than 4,000 families in building temporary shelters in Cañete, Chinchá, Ica and Yauyos provinces.

Each implementing partner agreed to channel funds to the Volunteer Firefighters, through a foundation called F&H Hope, to support the construction of temporary shelters. In all, 40 firefighters received a stipend for a two-month period, as well as money to cover logistical expenses.

“These are firefighters from the region, who have themselves been affected. They are local people working in their own communities to resolve the problem. It’s a win-win situation,” Gelman said.

Córdova agreed. “The firefighters are disciplined, prepared, and know the community. They have a very good public image – greater than other organizations that serve the public. Families respect their authority. That helped the firefighters resolve conflicts and foment cooperative work within the community. For example, they didn’t help one family make one shelter. Instead, they would help groups of 10 families make 10 shelters together. That was important in helping build community,” he said.