

U.S. SOUTHCOM Fights Through COVID-19

By Michael T. Plehn

As I boarded my flight in Bogotá, Colombia, to return to the United States on March 14, 2020, after participating in the joint Colombia-U.S. Exercise Vita in the Guajira Peninsula, the reality of how the COVID-19 pandemic was going to affect our lives over the next year began to manifest. Arriving back in Miami, where I was the Military Deputy Commander for U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), I went straight home to begin a 14-day quarantine in accordance with new policies from the Department of Defense (DOD) for travelers returning from overseas. It was the first of many adaptations that we would make in the coming months.

In May of 2019, shortly after assuming command at USSOUTHCOM, Admiral Craig Faller, USN, established three primary lines of effort to guide our activities: strengthen partnerships, counter threats, and build our team.¹ Less than a year later, we were tested in all three areas by the pandemic.

One of the great strengths of USSOUTHCOM is the network of engaged and willing partners in the region. We work closely with them as we guide all U.S. military activity across much of Latin America and the Caribbean. We are neighbors and friends who share common values, ties, and interests. Our neighborhood is not only rich in natural resources but also beset by many longstanding challenges and several emerging issues.

While there is no current armed conflict between countries in the region, it is one of the most violent areas on the globe, much of it fueled by transnational criminal organizations and longstanding structural, societal issues. According to a 2019 global study on homicide by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the rate of intentional homicide in Central and South America is four times the global average.² Particularly virulent, transnational criminal organizations—flush with cash—constantly seek to expand their lethal trade through extortion, corruption, intimidation, and violence. These actions, in turn, erode the power and legitimacy of local, state, and federal governments, reducing their ability to fight this scourge.

An increasingly disruptive factor in regional security and a growing facet of the strategic environment in Latin America and the Caribbean is Great Power competition. Both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia seek to influence conditions in the Western Hemisphere to favor their own national interests, often at the expense of countries there. The Chinese Communist Party wields its economic influence to generate

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political leverage throughout the area.³ The Belt and Road Initiative, begun in 2013 and nonexistent in the region before 2017, has expanded quickly with 19 of 31 nations now signing on to it.⁴ The Chinese distant-water fishing fleet,⁵ the largest in the world, prowls the waters around the region—impinging on exclusive economic zones with a voracious appetite—and strong-arming countries that dare to complain about these predatory economic practices.⁶ Such illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing is beginning to capture the world’s attention; the U.S. Coast Guard recently released its strategic outlook and its vision to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and many countries are beginning to speak up—and stand up—to protect their precious maritime and fisheries resources from this sweeping predation.⁷

At USSOUTHCOM, we referred to all these elements together as a vicious circle of threats at work. It was against this strategic backdrop that I returned to Miami last March, sequestered myself at home for the next several weeks with only my home Internet and the communications gear I had taken to Colombia, and began the first extended teleworking of my life. USSOUTHCOM quickly embarked on a cascading series of challenges to help our partners in the region cope with the medical and humanitarian crises brought about by COVID-19, while simultaneously learning to operate in this new environment and hold the line against these other threats.

Early Challenges

On March 15, the day after I returned from Colombia, Admiral Faller called a senior leader meeting, and I dialed in from home with my work cellphone. We discussed the possible impacts of COVID-19 on our people and mission, with a focus on near- and midterm activities. He encouraged us to focus on three areas: force health protection, essential missions, and maintaining reliable

communications. USSOUTHCOM pushed toward higher levels of telework over the next several weeks, as we instituted a steady, sustainable drumbeat of updates and decision meetings.

USSOUTHCOM has considerable experience dealing with crises, especially natural disasters, so we already had a process built for virtual, distributed meetings that would gather, display, and act on information. We just needed to adapt that framework for the COVID-19 pandemic environment and ensure that it was robust enough for a now largely teleworking workforce. The command’s Operations Directorate (J3) rapidly activated our Crisis Action Team to serve as the central coordination hub for the command, and they proved to be all-star players on our team, working 24/7 for the next half-year to ensure our success. The Communications Directorate (J6) also worked miracles on the hardware and software sides to ensure that we had the right equipment and programs to transition to an effective telework environment. As the senior-most leader teleworking in the command at that time, I was able to provide rapid feedback on what was working well, and not so well, from my sparse home communications equipment.

In addition to ensuring we could maintain communications among ourselves, one of our most immediate challenges was recalling U.S. military forces back to their home units from forward deployed locations. Joint Task Force–Bravo, which was in Colombia conducting the exercise I was observing in March, truncated the exercise and returned their people, helicopters, and equipment to their main operating base in Honduras. With many countries in the region beginning to lock down their borders, it was a challenge to find intermediate locations where they could stop to refuel. Close coordination between U.S. Embassies and host-nation government officials paved the way to recover all our personnel and equipment to assigned locations.



U.S. citizens board a U.S. Air Force C-130J Super Hercules at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras, March 25, 2020. The aircraft was used to transport 78 evacuees from Honduras to Naval Air Station Norfolk, Virginia. The mission was part of an ongoing interagency effort led by the State Department to assist American citizens unable to return home from countries around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Daniel Owen)

However, the growing number of airport and border closures in many countries led to our next big challenge, which was assisting with the repatriation of American citizens back to the United States. U.S. Embassies in the region were swamped with requests for help from thousands of Americans seeking a way back home. We received phone calls directly at the headquarters and elsewhere throughout DOD asking about availability of military aircraft to fly American citizens back to the United States. In late March and early April, using available and opportune military airlift, we quickly evacuated a U.S. women's football team from Honduras as well as American citizens from Perú, Colombia, and many other countries in Latin America.⁸

The USSOUTHCOM Logistics Directorate (J4) quickly produced a spreadsheet to track all U.S. military aircraft and airlift missions traveling into, through, or out of the region. We were in daily contact with U.S. Transportation Command and the Air Force's Air Mobility Command to ensure that we had the most current information. A major challenge and limitation of using opportune military airlift was that the aircraft had to stay on its previously scheduled route, which meant it did not always land at a military base that had a permanent U.S. Customs and Border Protection presence to receive and process U.S. citizens back into the country. Each movement required extensive coordination with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that

people could process through customs, be screened for health factors and COVID-19 symptoms, and then be transported safely to their onward locations. After two intricate movements to a remote airfield in northwest Florida that required intensive coordination among the Department of State, Homeland Security, DOD, and others, I knew we needed more help and a better, more streamlined process for assisting our fellow citizens to return home.

In late March, I called my Pinnacle classmate Ulrich Brechbuhl, who was then Counselor to the State Department, to discuss how we could better integrate our efforts.⁹ He pointed me toward the State Department's Repatriation Task Force, led by Ambassador Ian Brownlee. This task force was established on March 19, 2020, as an element of the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit.¹⁰ It was charged with implementing the most efficient, effective methods for identifying U.S. citizens who wanted to return to the United States, linking them up with the U.S. Embassy in that country and then working to get them home. Military aircraft were quickly replaced with State Department–chartered airlift that ultimately returned tens of thousands of our fellow citizens back to the United States.¹¹

As the repatriation effort took shape and became more normalized, USSOUTHCOM continued with its other essential missions, one of which received a serious boost in attention and resources on April 1, 2020. DOD has a longstanding statutory mission to detect and monitor the aerial and maritime flow of illegal drugs into the United States.¹² A USSOUTHCOM subordinate commands, the Joint Interagency Task Force–South (JIATF-South), has been quietly and effectively fulfilling this role for decades. JIATF-South is comprised of military, intelligence, and law enforcement personnel from across the U.S. Government, with liaison officers from more than 20 different countries to help coordinate and integrate counternarcotics operations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Enhanced Counternarcotics Efforts During COVID-19

On April 1, 2020, President Donald Trump announced an enhanced counternarcotics effort to ensure transnational criminal organizations would not take advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to move more of their lethal product to the United States.

With additional ships, helicopters, airplanes, and personnel, USSOUTHCOM kept a fast pace of counternarcotics operations throughout the spring and into the summer and fall of 2020. Other nations stepped up their pace as well. The Republic of Colombia continued its series of successful counterdrug surge efforts, known as Operation *Orión*, bringing into play additional countries throughout the region and largely focused on the drug transit routes in the eastern Pacific Ocean. From the beginning of April until mid-May, Operation *Orión* V was credited with disrupting or seizing 50 metric tons of cocaine and arresting 150 people involved in illegal narcotics trafficking, according to Colombian President Iván Duque Márquez.¹³ According to the USSOUTHCOM Public Affairs Office, to date since April 1, 2020, this international effort has resulted in the seizure or disruption of more than 1,000,000 pounds of cocaine, over 150,000 pounds of marijuana, and the apprehension of more than 1,200 suspected drug smugglers. USSOUTHCOM and JIATF-South continued to work closely with allies and partners in the Caribbean, with strong contributions from the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. Every intercept at sea also carried the possibility of encountering individuals who might have been COVID-19 positive. We, and our partners, had to ensure that we had personal protective equipment for ourselves, as well as procedures for isolating any infected detainees who were apprehended for trafficking in narcotics.

Early in April, USSOUTHCOM received operational control of the USS *Kidd*, coming out of the



USS *Pinckney* (DDG 91) with embarked U.S. Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachment team (LEDET) conducts enhanced counternarcotics operations July 22, 2020. The *Pinckney* and LEDET recovered an estimated 120 kilograms of suspected cocaine. *Pinckney* is deployed to the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility to support Joint Interagency Task Force–South’s mission, which includes counter–illicit drug trafficking in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Erick A. Parsons/Released)

Indo-Pacific region. Several days later, a COVID-19 outbreak was detected aboard ship and a team with rapid testing capability was quickly sent to the *Kidd* for initial response. We returned the ship and its crew to the Navy, so they could sail to San Diego and manage the outbreak there. With several days sailing time from Central America to San Diego, the Navy provided additional assistance with the USS *Makin Island* to escort *Kidd* to port.¹⁴ This incident highlighted the necessity of ensuring the availability of rapid testing for our forward-deployed forces, which became a top priority for USSOUTHCOM, especially with the limited access to test equipment during the early days and weeks of the pandemic.

We also had a requirement for COVID-19 testing for our military personnel deployed in the region. The Navy Medical Research Unit–Six in Lima, Perú, loaned us six of its BioFire test systems so that we could test any symptomatic personnel and determine their COVID-19 status. We sent test equipment to bases in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where we had the largest groups of U.S. military personnel.

Testing and tracing became two important aspects of our layered COVID-19 force-health protection measures. Largely reliant on our Service “landlords” of whatever base or installation hosted our forces, access to testing in the early weeks and

months of the COVID-19 pandemic became essential to protecting the rest of our team. Along with a diligent process for contact tracing to determine any close contacts of COVID-19-positive personnel, we were able to avoid any substantial outbreaks of COVID-19 among our forces.

Continuing Foreign Military Sales and Security Cooperation Under COVID-19 Conditions

Among USSOUTHCOM's many essential missions was continuing our ability to provide security assistance to our partner nations during the height of COVID-19. Initially, our face-to-face training and exercise events were greatly reduced, as was the delivery of foreign military sales equipment.

One of the early successes in continuing to deliver supplies and equipment was the transfer of the first Near Coastal Patrol Vessel to the Dominican Republic in mid-March. The vessel was designed to give select partner nations the capability to conduct maritime counternarcotics operations farther from their shores. USSOUTHCOM worked closely with the State Department, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and the Navy International Program Office to keep this six-vessel contract on track. Although the contractor was able to transport the boat to the Dominican Republic by March 18, it had to delay delivery to the final port until July due to health conditions in the region. By July 13, the vessel was at its permanent operating location, and the contractor had begun training the Dominican Republic military forces on the use of the ship and its equipment.

Assisting with the COVID-19 Medical and Humanitarian Crisis

While all this was going on, we began hearing the demand signal from our partner nations and U.S. Embassies in the region to provide humanitarian assistance to our partners. Long accustomed to



Near-Coastal Patrol Vessel (NCPV) hull #1 pierside at its operational location in the Dominican Republic, July 2020. The first of six vessels to be delivered to partners in the Caribbean and Latin America, the NCPV extends the range of partner-nation maritime forces to conduct counternarcotics and maritime security operations. (Photo courtesy of USSOUTHCOM and U.S. Embassy Santo Domingo.)

springing into action during crises and disasters, the Humanitarian Assistance Team (J7/9) quickly developed a process for identifying and approving minimum-cost humanitarian assistance projects (HAP) using our combatant command Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster Assistance, and Civic Action (OHDACA) funds.

The Pentagon responded rapidly by giving USSOUTHCOM and all other regional combatant commands more fiscal authority to approve projects on their own recognizance—raising the threshold for minimum-cost projects from \$15,000 to \$30,000 and then to \$50,000 and ultimately up to \$75,000 without having to come back to the Pentagon for approval of each project. We rapidly funded projects providing personal protective equipment in almost

every country in the region, including hand sanitizer, hygiene, and other desperately needed supplies to hospitals, ministries of health, and other civilian medical institutions.

The Pentagon's Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Stability and Humanitarian Affairs (DASD SHA) retained authority to approve projects costing more than \$75,000, and we submitted many of them as well: expeditionary field hospitals, oxygen generators, ventilators, and many other types of lifesaving medical support projects were identified and quickly funded.

USSOUTHCOM typically receives about \$20 million each year in OHDACA funding to help partners deal with the wide variety of humanitarian needs throughout the region ranging from hurricane relief to wildfires, mudslides, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and many other challenging scenarios. Unlike standard operations and maintenance funding that generally must be spent in the same fiscal year that it was appropriated, OHDACA funding is good for 2 years. But by July, we had expended almost all our fiscal year 2019/2020 funds and were well into depleting our 2020/2021 funds—and hurricane season had barely even started.

In July, during one of our weekly COVID-19 Task Force meetings with Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist, I asked if some of DOD funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act could be reprogrammed into OHDACA funds. Once again, the Pentagon quickly acted on this request, and with support from Deputy Secretary Norquist and Acting DASD SHA Ms. Stephanie Hammond, \$120 million was reprogrammed into OHDACA funds for global COVID-19 relief. USSOUTHCOM's request for \$70 million was approved and funded out of the \$120 million.

At the same time, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was providing

large-scale relief in the region. USSOUTHCOM coordinated its efforts with USAID through the country team in each individual U.S. Embassy. The Civilian Deputy to the Commander, Ambassador Jean Manes, and our humanitarian assistance team produced a daily dashboard of COVID-19 relief efforts in the region, enabling us to see where U.S. and international support was being supplied.

We heard from several of our U.S. Ambassadors in the region of the importance and efficacy of our initial humanitarian assistance efforts. In many cases, they stated our HAP donations were the only support they were able to quickly offer their host nations. There was an early push by the People's Republic of China to provide humanitarian support in the region—and it continues to this day. At first it was “mask diplomacy,” which has morphed into “vaccine diplomacy” over time. Given the choice, most of our neighbors prefer to work with the United States, but as one chief of defense remarked to Admiral Faller, a drowning person will accept a lifeline from anyone. OHDACA funds and HAP programs allowed U.S. Ambassadors and chiefs of mission to be present and helpful to partners and neighbors in their time of great need.

As we moved into the fall and winter of 2020, USSOUTHCOM had supported more than 400 humanitarian assistance projects for our neighbors, worth tens of millions of dollars. On September 24, 2020, Admiral Faller personally traveled to Kingston, Jamaica, to participate with U.S. Ambassador to Jamaica Donald Tapia in the donation and acceptance ceremony of a 70-bed expeditionary field hospital.

Natural Disaster Response During COVID-19

In November, Central America was hit with two major hurricanes less than 2 weeks apart. On November 3, 2020, Hurricane Eta roared ashore, bringing widespread flooding and devastation to



Loadmasters, assigned to the 15th Airlift Squadron from Joint Base Charleston, South Carolina, offload a mobile field hospital from a C-17 Globemaster III at Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston, Jamaica, September 19, 2020. Aircrew, assigned to the 15th Airlift Squadron, transported hospital from Charleston to Kingston, where it was donated to healthcare providers and used to support the Caribbean nation's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The donation, made on behalf of the American people, cost \$753,000 and was purchased as a part of USSOUTHCOM's ongoing assistance to nations responding to the global pandemic in the Caribbean and Latin America and funded by the command's Humanitarian Assistance Program. The command has also delivered mobile field hospitals to Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic and, in total, donated 24 field hospitals to 11 countries. (Photo by Staff Sergeant Lance Valencia)

Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Panamá, and El Salvador. JTF-Bravo sprang into action, conducting immediate lifesaving rescues and supporting USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs as they coordinated the U.S. Government's response efforts, led by Regional Director Tim Callaghan, earning their gratitude.¹⁵ With many roads and bridges impassable, the CH-53 Chinook and HH-60 Blackhawk helicopters of JTF-Bravo were invaluable in rescuing stranded persons while also delivering lifesaving supplies, food, and water to isolated towns and communities.

JTF-Bravo established forward operating sites in Panamá and Guatemala while also operating from their main base in Honduras, all in support of the broader U.S. Government relief effort. Then, on November 17, Hurricane Iota stormed ashore 15 miles away from where Eta had made landfall only 2 weeks earlier. In concert with the United Kingdom's Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship *Mounts Bay*, JTF-Bravo pushed its efforts into the remote eastern area of Honduras known as San Pedro Sula. In addition to the already hard-hit countries in Central America, two Colombian islands just off the coast of Central

America—San Andrés and Providencia—were heavily damaged by Iota. JTF-Bravo continued its relief efforts in support of USAID, and USSOUTHCOM also provided additional airlift and sealift support to Colombia to help the people of their two storm-ravaged islands.

By the conclusion of the support during these hectic weeks of lifesaving humanitarian assistance, USSOUTHCOM units had flown 277 missions rescuing over 850 people and delivering more than one million pounds of lifesaving aid—and did so without recording a single case of COVID-19 transmission to any of its U.S. military forces participating in the efforts.¹⁶

What Does It All Mean?

Taken in the aggregate, there is much to be learned from USSOUTHCOM's experience during the first 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic from March to December of 2020. In addition to validating the combatant command's ability to respond rapidly to even the most unexpected crisis, these events highlighted the importance of our U.S. military relations in the region and the vital national security need to sustain and strengthen them. Working closely with U.S. Embassies and their country teams, alongside our partners and allies, USSOUTHCOM was able to continue its essential missions to strengthen partners and counter threats. In fact, even under these difficult operational conditions, USSOUTHCOM *expanded* execution of its essential missions like countering transnational organized crime while also beginning new crisis response missions to assist stranded American citizens, deliver aid and hope to our neighbors and partners in the region, and respond to the twin natural disasters of hurricanes.

On the more troubling side, we verified the existence and growth of Great Power competition in our own hemisphere. While we have long known about the People's Republic of China's increasing trade activities with our neighbors in the region,

we also saw increasing use of PRC influence and rhetoric to bolster its image and discredit the United States. We saw the PRC attempting to leverage its economic relationships for political gain—whether through mask and vaccine diplomacy ostensibly tied to their global Health Silk Road efforts or through disinformation intended to bolster China's image in the region while attempting to tarnish the U.S. standing among our neighbors.

Conclusions

In crisis, a good decision (or set of decisions) acted on early and decisively can be the difference between success and failure. This was certainly the case at U.S. Southern Command throughout 2020. We did not have as much information as we would have wanted about the contagious nature of COVID-19 and how easily and rapidly it spread from one human to another. Neither did we have as much information as desired about the consequences of the rapid spread of COVID-19 and how it would suddenly close borders, limit in-person meetings and activities, and dramatically affect every action we had planned over the coming year. Nevertheless, we acted quickly and decisively in moving our team out of the physical workspace and into telework where possible while also quickly focusing the command on what was most important: safely executing our most critical missions.

Deliberately distilling our activities down to the three essential areas of implementing force health protection measures, accomplishing our essential missions, and maintaining communication with all our team members and partners had an immediate clarifying effect on determining what we would do and what we would postpone or cancel. Admiral Faller maintained this focus relentlessly over the next 10 months and enabled USSOUTHCOM to be present and persistent in fulfilling its mission and its enduring promise to our neighbors in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The same could be said of our colleagues in the Pentagon, the State Department, and elsewhere throughout the interagency and international communities: They were focused on responding at the speed of relevance—and they did. There were, of course, some hiccups and a few false starts. That is to be expected in any sudden and dynamic crisis. But the focus and dedication of our higher headquarters on pulling disparate agencies together, determining the needs and requirements of the situation, and then empowering the combatant commands and subordinate agencies with the appropriate resources and authorities to respond effectively at the speed of the crisis was truly unprecedented. I, and all my teammates, are proud to have been part of such a high-functioning, motivated, and results-focused team.

To this day, I remain amazed and appreciative of the flexibility, resilience, and commitment of Team USSOUTHCOM during this time. From the headquarters to our subordinate commands to our security cooperation offices on the frontlines every day, they conducted themselves with dedication and distinction under difficult and uncertain conditions.

Ultimately, I have concluded COVID-19 is not only a medical and humanitarian emergency that still requires immediate response, but it also remains an operating environment in which we must continue to conduct our missions as effectively and safely as possible. USSOUTHCOM was successful because of early, decisive action and our commitment and ability to work across the broad spectrum of those with whom we partner in DOD, the interagency community, with our country teams in U.S. Embassies throughout the region, and—of course—with our partners and neighbors who are eager to work with us in addressing the many security challenges that confront all the nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Alarming, this crisis uncovered the quiet, steady, and largely unaddressed growth of the

economic and political influence of the PRC in our own neighborhood. It revealed the extent to which China is using its economic leverage to expand its political power in our hemisphere. From predatory lending practices and debt-trap financing enabled by the Belt and Road Initiative to voracious distant-water fishing fleets that could devastate and depopulate the marine fisheries in the Western Hemisphere as they have done in the Western Pacific, China is clearly wielding its growing economic and political power to coerce our neighbors to side with Chinese desired outcomes. We must not turn a blind eye to the competition that is playing out all around us in our own neighborhood. We must not play chess while the PRC is playing the game of go. We must recognize the long game for what it is and compete with an equally long-term strategic mentality and approach. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ *U.S. Southern Command Strategy: Enduring Promise for the Americas* (Doral, FL: USSOUTHCOM, May 2019), 5, available at <https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM_Strategy_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353>.

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (Vienna, Austria: UNODC, 2019), 20. The study notes that the global homicide rate in 2017 was 6.1 homicides per 100,000 population, while the rate in the Americas was 17.2 homicides per 100,000 population. The study also notes the three subregions with the highest homicide rates were Central America (25.9), South America (24.2), and the Caribbean (15.1).

³ Council on Foreign Relations, Independent Task Force Report No. 79, *China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 85.

⁵ U.S. Coast Guard, *Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Strategic Outlook* (Washington, DC: USCG, September 2020), 14.

⁶ Ryan C. Berg, "China's Hunger for Seafood Is Now Latin America's Problem," *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2020, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/30/chinas-hunger-for-seafood-is-now-latin-americas-problem/>>.

⁷ USCG, *Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Strategic Outlook*.

⁸ USSOUTHCOM, "SOUTHCOM Supports Transport of U.S. Citizens from Honduras to U.S.," press release, March 20, 2020, available at <<https://www.southcom.mil/News/PressReleases/Article/2120981/southcom-supports-transport-of-us-citizens-from-honduras-to-us/>>.

⁹ Pinnacle is a 1-week, senior-level course taught at the National Defense University for three-star generals and admirals and senior executives from the State Department and other Federal agencies. Along with Mr. Brechbuhl, my Pinnacle class included Ambassador Phil Goldberg, now the U.S. Ambassador to Colombia.

¹⁰ Michael Durbay, "Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit," *State Magazine*, May 2020.

¹¹ Ambassador Ian Brownlee, *Statement Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, July 21, 2020. Ambassador Brownlee noted more than 110,000 U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents were repatriated.

¹² 10 U.S. Code, Sec. 124, states, "Detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs: Department of Defense to be lead agency. (a) Lead Agency. - (1) The Department of Defense shall serve as the single lead agency of the Federal Government for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the United States."

¹³ "International Naval Operation Nets 50 Tonnes of Cocaine in 45 Days," Reuters, May 29, 2020, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-crime/international-naval-operation-nets-50-tonnes-of-cocainein-45-days-idUSKBN23531Z>>.

¹⁴ "USS Kidd Commanding Officer Sends Thank You Letter to San Diego," U.S. Navy, June 10, 2020, available at <<<https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2284120/uss-kidd-commanding-officer-sends-thank-you-letter-tosan-diego/>>>.

¹⁵ Rachel Salpietra, "JTF-Bravo Concludes Disaster Relief Efforts," *Diálogo*, December 8, 2020, available at <<https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/jtf-bravo-concludes-disaster-relief-efforts/#YR-luo5Kjxh>>.

¹⁶ USSOUTHCOM infographic, "Hurricanes Eta & Iota Humanitarian Assistance," as of December 9, 2020.