When disasters occur, they often provide lessons on how to avoid or minimize similar tragedies in the future. To explore these lessons in the areas of urban search-and-rescue (USAR) and disaster risk reduction (DRR), USAID/OFDA recently supported a study tour in Medellín, Colombia, to review the humanitarian response to the collapse of a high-rise apartment building.

Experiences such as this and at least five similar large-scale building collapses in various LAC countries during the past three years have inspired USAID/OFDA to take a closer look at common urban vulnerabilities in which natural hazards, such as earthquakes or hurricanes, are not a factor. Participants in the USAID/OFDA disaster risk management specialists and USAR personnel from 11 Latin American countries visit the site of the fatal October 2013 collapse of Tower Six, part of the recently constructed Space Building in Medellín, Colombia, to explore the role of USAR experts in urban planning and DRR activities.
Forest Community in Paraguay Welcomes First Firefighter Brigade
Paraguay’s Alto Verá Municipality, which borders the expansive forests of the San Rafael Reserve, recently inaugurated its first firefighter brigade; a welcome asset for protecting the biologically rich area that is plagued annually by forest fires.
Men, women, and youth volunteers from the Alto Verá community, including Guarani indigenous inhabitants, make up the new brigade. They have already demonstrated their skills battling recent blazes.
With support from the Tropical Forest Conservation Fund and an RDAP small grant, local non-governmental organization Promotores Ambientales de San Rafael supplied firefighting equipment and infrastructure to the brigade and conducted community fire prevention awareness campaigns. USAID/OFDA also supported development of a municipal forest fire management policy.
RDAP has provided fire management training to residents of Alto Verá and other communities in Paraguay since 2001.

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which is headquartered at UB. The team also visited UB’s Center for Geohazards Studies, which studies early warning systems for hydrometeorological events and volcanic eruptions, as well as geohazard monitoring and research. UB professors also explained their role in the PEOPLES Resilience Framework – a holistic framework for defining and measuring disaster resilience in different areas, such as environmental, economic, and social/cultural, among others.
The group also saw first-hand the cutting-edge technical capabilities of the YNHS-CEPDR, primarily in the public health and medical emergencies field. The center is an integral part of the state-level emergency response system and serves as an example for the LAC region of effective institution-state disaster management collaboration, according to Velado.
Finally, the team toured the Center for Rebuilding Sustainable Communities after Disasters at UMass Boston, which studies human rights-based approaches to the protection of vulnerable populations during post-disaster reconstruction.
Prior USAID/OFDA collaboration with U.S. universities includes work with the University of Wisconsin to develop online disaster management courses and a five-year cooperative agreement with Florida International University to strengthen DRR programs in the LAC region. More recently, USAID/OFDA developed a relationship with Louisiana State University’s Stephenson Disaster Management Institute, including a study tour that gave Central American professors an opportunity to learn about the role of the university in disaster management.

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