



# PARTNERSHIP FOR THE AMERICAS: *The Human Rights Initiative*

Admiral Jim Stavridis, U.S. Navy; Alexander T. Roney;  
and Leana Bresnahan

*The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere. These nonnegotiable demands of human dignity are protected most securely in democracies. The United States government will work to advance human dignity in word and deed, speaking out for freedom and against violations of human rights and allocating resources to advance these ideals.*

—National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2006)<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE U.S. SOUTHERN COMMAND (USSOUTHCOM) is responsible for conducting military operations, planning, and security cooperation with the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean. From its headquarters in Miami, USSOUTHCOM professionals focus their efforts on realizing the command's vision of a community of nations that enjoy lasting relationships based on shared values and common interests. These relationships are critical to addressing the security challenges facing the nations today—challenges that are largely transnational in nature and, as such, require cooperative solutions. USSOUTHCOM's motto of "Partnership for the Americas" underscores the importance of working together as partners toward common goals.

Respect for human rights and the rule of law is a critical aspect of these partnerships, and USSOUTHCOM plays a leading role in helping to foster that respect. In response to the widespread human rights abuses that rocked many of the nations of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, USSOUTHCOM leaders created a human rights program that focused on ensuring correct behavior by U.S. military personnel and on encouraging the institutionalization of a culture of respect for human rights in partner-nation military forces. In the 15 years of its existence, this unique program has proven to be invaluable to advancing the Partnership for the Americas.

## History of USSOUTHCOM's Program

In 1990, General Maxwell R. Thurman, USSOUTHCOM commander, issued a policy defining the human rights responsibilities of all U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) personnel who served in the command's area of focus.

In unequivocal terms, the new directive stated that "one of our most important and universal foreign policy objectives is to promote the increased observance of internationally recognized human rights by all countries." This memorandum established the requirement for all U.S. military personnel to immediately record and report through the chain of command any instance of suspected human rights violation. To ensure U.S. military

*Admiral Jim Stavridis, U.S. Navy, is the commander of U.S. Southern Command.*

*Alexander T. Roney served as a policy analyst with Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) in support of the U.S. Southern Command from 1999 to 2006.*

*Leana Bresnahan has served as coordinator for the USSOUTHCOM Human Rights Program since 1996. Currently a student at St. Thomas University, she will complete her master's of law in intercultural human rights in May 2007.*

*(All photos courtesy of  
USSOUTHCOM)*

personnel were aware of what constituted a human rights violation, General Thurman also instituted mandatory human rights training for all personnel deploying within USSOUTHCOM's area of responsibility.

Established in mid-1990, the mandatory training included instruction in four key areas: the laws of war and international humanitarian law; U.S. Government human rights policies, objectives, and directives at the national and international level; the responsibilities of military personnel to support these policies; and procedures for reporting suspected human rights violations. This pre-deployment training was supplemented by a wallet-sized, quick-reference Human Rights Standing Orders Card that personnel were required to carry at all times. The card, with minor revisions, remains in use today. It reminds personnel of "the five R's of human rights" (recognize, refrain, react, record, and report) and lists USSOUTHCOM's standing orders concerning respect for human rights.

The command was acutely aware that failure to improve respect for human rights in the region would ultimately jeopardize the success of its missions and undermine public and congressional support for essential military-to-military programs. Consequently, shortly after initiating the internal training program, USSOUTHCOM also made human rights instruction an element of all training provided to partner-nation military forces.

Over the course of the next decade, subsequent commanders built upon the strong foundation prepared by General Thurman. General George A. Joulwan, USSOUTHCOM commander from 1990 through 1993, supplemented the training materials with a video presentation that codified the responsibility of all USSOUTHCOM personnel to recognize and report human rights violations. The content

of the training video earned praise from the non-governmental human rights community, although many in the community remained skeptical that the command would be able to rapidly implement the policy as it was presented.

In February 1994, General Barry R. McCaffrey, USSOUTHCOM commander from 1994 through 1996, created an organizational framework that integrated human rights directly into USSOUTHCOM daily operations. He transferred responsibility for the human rights program from the command judge advocate to a dedicated human rights office. His goal was to instill a human rights mindset in each member of the command and into all aspects of the command's operations while simultaneously facilitating similar changes in regional military and security forces. McCaffrey challenged the new office to change attitudes, not merely behavior, about human rights. This was the fundamental goal USSOUTHCOM was striving to achieve.

In September 1994, McCaffrey also formed a senior-level human rights steering group to provide him advice on human rights issues and to oversee policy implementation. According to McCaffrey, the steering group would ensure that fostering respect for human rights became a concern of all the command's various components.

## The Human Rights Division Today

USSOUTHCOM's Human Rights Division today is an institutional statement of the command's commitment to maintaining a robust human rights program. It remains unique across DOD, as USSOUTHCOM is the only combatant command with a separate office charged to monitor and coordinate human rights issues. The Human Rights Division has five primary responsibilities:

- Advise and report on human rights issues.
- Establish and support human rights training programs.
- Ensure that human rights are integrated into USSOUTHCOM exercises and operations.
- Advance respect for human rights by supporting regional initiatives.
- Serve as a liaison with other entities working human rights issues, such as the interagency community, international organizations, and nongovernmental human rights organizations.

***The command [USSOUTHCOM] was acutely aware that failure to improve respect for human rights in the region would ultimately jeopardize the success of its missions...***

***...USSOUTHCOM is the only combatant command with a separate office charged to monitor and coordinate human rights issues.***

In advising and reporting on human rights issues, the division monitors and analyzes developments in international human rights law. It ensures that personnel assigned to the USSOUTHCOM staff receive all the information they need to comply with DOD policies and directives and the command's own human rights policy. It prepares country-specific information for the commander's meetings with foreign dignitaries and supports congressional testimony by senior USSOUTHCOM personnel. It keeps the command's leadership abreast of important provisions in domestic laws related to human rights as well those that affect many security cooperation activities.

The division ensures that all personnel assigned to the command or performing temporary duty in the region receive initial human rights training and that permanently assigned personnel receive annual human rights awareness training. To facilitate access to the training materials, the division uses a computer-based training module, available over the Internet via its website. In addition, the division supports other countries' efforts to develop their own human rights and international humanitarian law training. It does this in close cooperation with the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia, and other military schools that have developed rigorous human rights training programs.

To integrate human rights awareness into all of USSOUTHCOM's operations and plans, personnel are exposed, whenever possible, to realistic situations during military exercises that test their knowledge. The Human Rights Division helps prepare and evaluate the human rights scenarios incorporated into exercises.

The last two responsibilities, supporting regional initiatives and serving as a liaison with the human rights community, help build networks and partnerships throughout the region and provide opportunities to foster understanding and respect

for human rights. The initiatives and liaison have helped USSOUTHCOM pave the way for greater cooperation and progress.

## **Engaging Regional Leaders on Human Rights**

USSOUTHCOM sponsored two key regional human rights conferences, one in 1996 and the other in 1997. The first conference, entitled "The Role of the Armed Forces in the Protection of Human Rights," capitalized on the momentum created by the 1995 Defense Ministerial of the Americas, a meeting at which representatives of all 34 democracies in the Americas affirmed their armed forces' commitment to respect human rights and to subordinate themselves to civilian and constitutional authority. The Human Rights Division followed up the ministerial by organizing a conference to address the obligations of military and security-force personnel under international human rights and humanitarian law and to discuss approaches to human rights education and training. This conference was organized in cooperation with the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights, marking the first time any U.S. military command had ever forged such a partnership with an international human rights organization.<sup>2</sup>

The conference provided a unique opportunity for senior defense officials and military officers to begin a dialogue with representatives of human rights organizations. In doing so, it helped break down deeply ingrained mutual suspicions. Initially, these suspicions were so strong that they led to self-imposed segregated seating. As the conference progressed, however, the participants gradually integrated and a growing amount of one-on-one dialogue began to overcome the perceived obstacles between what had seemed to be thoroughly incompatible organizations. In the end, the conference revealed a growing consensus on the importance of human rights and democratic governance and the crucial role of the region's security forces in protecting them.

In February 1997, USSOUTHCOM collaborated with the Inter-American Institute on a second conference, titled "Armed Forces, Democracy, and Human Rights on the Threshold of the 21st Century." At its conclusion, a consensus emerged: more than 190 participants from across the Americas agreed that more concrete steps were now needed

to keep the human rights agenda moving forward. Accordingly, General Wesley K. Clark, USSOUTHCOM commander from 1996 to 1997, invited the participants to work together to establish common criteria for measuring the progress made by military and security forces in respecting human rights.

### **The Human Rights Initiative (HRI)**

The two human rights conferences, and Clark's offer to sponsor a long-term regional initiative, marked a turning point in USSOUTHCOM's human rights program. Thurman and Joulwan had focused on laying the foundation of a strong human rights program, implementing critical improvements to training and doctrine, and pursuing bilateral initiatives with regional militaries. Under McCaffrey, the human rights program matured via organizational changes that brought respect for human rights and international humanitarian law more fully into the operational realm. Through the seminars proposed by Clark, the program promoted a multilateral approach to improving respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. As Clark later recalled, the achievements made by the command's human rights program through 1997 had already changed human rights, in his words, "from an obstacle to a centerpiece" of the command's relationship with regional military and security forces.

In June 1997, the first regional meeting was held in Panama City, Panama. It included a small group of approximately 20 representatives of regional military and security forces, USSOUTHCOM, and the nongovernmental human rights community. Its theme was "Measuring Progress in Respect for Human Rights." The format, which remained the same for subsequent seminars, encouraged dynamic interaction, allowing the participants to reach consensus on difficult issues by engaging each other in dialogue in small groups.

The seminar succeeded in producing a draft "consensus document" identifying human rights standards and objectives for military doctrine, education, and training; effective internal control systems; and cooperation by military forces with external control systems. The process of finalizing and ultimately implementing the document became known as the Human Rights Initiative, or HRI.

From 1998 to 2002, USSOUTHCOM sponsored five additional hemispheric seminars to develop

plans of action, objectives, and performance measures. By the conclusion of the final seminar in March 2002, military and/or security-force officers from all 34 democracies in the Western Hemisphere had participated in drafting and finalizing the consensus document. Prominent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and academic institutions sent representatives to serve as advisors. The final wording can truly be said to represent agreements reached between the hemisphere's military forces and the human rights community, writ large.

***From 1998 to 2002, USSOUTHCOM sponsored five additional hemispheric [human rights] seminars to develop plans of action, objectives, and performance measures.***

The consensus document embodies the principles that USSOUTHCOM, NGOs, and human rights activists have long espoused. These include fostering a culture of respect for human rights in the region's military and security forces; introducing rigorous human rights awareness training; establishing effective means of internal control, such as conducting investigations; sanctioning human rights offenders; prohibiting collaboration with illegal groups that commit human rights violations; and encouraging full cooperation with civilian authorities. The consensus document represents an unprecedented degree of cooperation and dialogue on human rights among the region's military and security forces, and between the security forces and representatives of the human rights community.

With the completion of the consensus document, the HRI entered the implementation phase. Participants in the final seminar expressed the strong desire that the consensus document not become "just another document that sits on the shelf," but that it be implemented and deliver a "real world" impact. In a statement entitled "The Conclusions of Guatemala," participants requested that USSOUTHCOM



continue to support the HRI. They specifically requested that USSOUTHCOM seek high-level support from the participating nations' ministries of defense and security and continue to collaborate with nongovernmental and international human rights organizations during the implementation phase.

## HRI Phase II: Implementation

To implement the tenets of the consensus document, USSOUTHCOM in October

2003 contracted a Costa Rica-based human rights NGO, the Center for Human Rights Training (CECADH), to serve as the HRI secretariat.

Work began in earnest as CECADH and the USSOUTHCOM human rights team designed a strategy for approaching the countries of the region to promote participation in HRI Phase II. The first step of the process is a visit to each nation, to inform the nation's military and government leaders about the history, goals, and objectives of HRI, and to invite them to make a formal commitment to implement HRI within their military and security forces. Following a visit, the partner-nation's minister of defense typically informs USSOUTHCOM, through its military security cooperation office in the U.S. Embassy, when it is ready to move ahead with a formal commitment to implement HRI. That formal commitment is made through the signing of a memorandum of cooperation with the HRI secretariat. This emphasizes the important distinction that participation in HRI is not a commitment to the U.S. Government, but rather a commitment to uphold principles and standards agreed upon within the community of nations of the Western Hemisphere.

Following the signing of the memorandum, USSOUTHCOM stands ready to sponsor a leaders' seminar and an implementation conference. The leaders' seminar familiarizes the small number of military officers and civilians charged to lead the implementation process with the consensus document and the methodology to develop a unique national version. The implementation conference is a larger event in which officers from all the military



**U.S. and Guatemalan dignitaries attend the kickoff of the Human Rights Initiative's implementation, Guatemala City, Guatemala, December 2004.**

services, representatives of other government agencies, and representatives of civil society, including academia and human rights organizations, adapt the regional consensus document model to national realities. Conference participants produce a comprehensive plan showing timelines, institutions, offices responsible for execution, and measures of effectiveness for each specific action plan.

The core objectives of the consensus document cannot be changed unless by consensus in a future hemispheric conference. Participants in the national HRI events therefore work only with the specific action plans that affect actual implementation within their institutions. In this way, the consensus document both supports regional agreements on human rights and encourages innovation and appropriate activities that respond to the real needs of the military forces in each nation.

As of this writing, the HRI team has conducted 20 visits to 15 countries, concentrating primarily on Central America and the Andean Region. Eight nations have signed memoranda of cooperation and one has begun implementation independently. In November 2005, the Conference of Central American Armed Forces became the first regional organization to join HRI. For the year ahead, the focus will be on approaching the remaining Southern Cone nations, followed by the island nations of the Caribbean.

During the implementation phase, the HRI secretariat and USSOUTHCOM stand ready to provide technical assistance to the implementing militaries when requested. Some of the most noteworthy action plans have included printing and distribution of human

rights manuals for soldiers, printing and distribution of new national security doctrine with a human rights component, human rights training courses for officers and soldiers in units throughout a national territory, and a 16-nation regional conference on human rights as the basis for combating terrorism.

In total, USSOUTHCOM has conducted over 60 HRI-related events involving thousands of participants. For those military forces that have implemented the HRI for a minimum of two years, USSOUTHCOM sponsors strategic progress assessment seminars (SPAS), thus completing the plan-execute-assess feedback loop. The SPAS provide a forum for partner-nation action officers to assess progress made on the comprehensive implementation plan, to identify successes and obstacles, and to formulate follow-on action plans. In this way, continuity of the process is ensured, and real world achievements can be measured.

## Partnership for the Americas

The unique process of the HRI has yielded a wealth of experiences and lessons.

The first lesson is the power of dialogue and collaboration between people of diverse backgrounds working toward a common goal based on shared values. Here, the Americas has a strong advantage. All of its member nations, save one, are democracies. This provides a powerful common framework from

which to work. Even mutual suspicion and distrust between military officers and civilians from human rights organizations, palpable during the first hours of every event, eventually wears away. The formula of breaking participants into small, diverse groups and giving them assignments calling for a consensus product in a short amount of time seems almost magic. By the end of every event, camaraderie and a sense of shared purpose prevail. It is not uncommon for conference managers to tell participants to stop working so they don't miss lunch or to break for the night so guards can lock up and go home. Participants often continue discussions on their own time after events have concluded. Such is the sense of mission, dedication to task, and enthusiasm for the projects developed in the HRI conferences held to date.

Second, the basis for forming a true Partnership of the Americas comes from an attitude based on genuine mutual respect. Human rights is an extremely sensitive subject in many, probably most, nations of the world. No nation has a perfect record, and the level of sensitivity toward any hint of criticism relates directly to how recently those abuses occurred and how severe they were. The HRI has continued to move forward, even in the polarized political atmosphere of the past few years, because the work is based on respect for all participants, whether they come from the human rights community, the military forces, or other institutions of the partner nations. The message is that all participants

are stakeholders working toward common goals based on shared values, and that all have valuable insights to share. It is a message HRI team members take care to communicate consistently, both in the words they choose and the actions they take. Partner-nation participants take the lead. USSOUTHCOM and secretariat personnel support and assist as requested.

The third and final lesson is that we must focus on the way ahead while understanding that the past provides the context in which



Colombian colleagues visit a human rights field training course at the Colombian NCO leadership school, Tolemaida, Colombia, November 2005.



USSOUTHCOM's LTC John Perez presents Paraguayan Senator Ana María Juanita Mendoza de Acha with a book detailing Human Rights Initiative achievements, Asuncion, Paraguay, March 2006.

military responses in these types of complex environments.

The Human Rights Initiative's success can be attributed to the strong desire of regional military forces to move forward in history, establishing better training, inculcating human rights into operational missions, and making a positive contribution to their societies. The abuses of the recent past remain fresh in military and civilian minds. The HRI is an essential tool for achieving the Americas' common vision for a better tomorrow: democracy, security, stability, and prosperity.

the HRI takes place. Events must not focus on seeking justice for previous human rights violations. That is the work of other organizations. Instead, HRI's objective should be to facilitate the creation and institutionalization of processes that will prevent future abuses.

The role of the military in a democratic society is clear. A military exists to ensure the security of the nation while obeying legitimate civilian authority and respecting the rights of citizens and non-citizens. Secondary missions include contributing to peaceful regional military cooperation and participating in peacekeeping operations around the world. However, resource constraints drive some governments to assign their military forces nontraditional missions such as disaster relief, environmental protection, riot control, SWAT operations, and support to traditional law enforcement. Indeed, some nontraditional missions are written into national constitutions and law. These nontraditional missions increase the potential for confusion and mistakes. Strong human rights programs are especially vital when conducting

## The Way Ahead

USSOUTHCOM is committed to working together with all interested countries of the Western Hemisphere to support HRI implementation. The command can provide technical support, training, conferences, seminars, and exchanges with human rights organizations, participating national governments, NGOs, and the private sector. In addition, USSOUTHCOM is working to strengthen interagency coordination with other U.S. Government agencies and exploring ways to branch out to achieve broader participation from partner-nation security forces.

Geography, history, trade, extended families, cultural ties, common threats, and even environmental conditions tie the nations of the hemisphere to a common destiny. Ensuring security in a manner consistent with democracy and respect for human rights is the common mission of all military and security forces of the hemisphere.

The U.S. Southern Command's intent is to remain on the forefront of human rights training, which will be fully integrated in everything it does. The Human Rights Initiative will be a key component of that training, as it is key to the Partnership for the Americas and essential to fulfilling that common mission. **MR**

***The Human Rights Initiative's success can be attributed to the strong desire of regional military forces to move forward in history...***

---

### NOTES

1. National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: The White House, 2006), 2.

2. Based in San José, Costa Rica, the Inter-American Institute is an autonomous international academic organization dedicated to the promotion of human rights through education and research.