



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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DEVLIN: Today is October 14th, 2009. We are in Cartagena, Colombia with Colonel Plata of the Colombian National Police Force. Colonel, thank you for joining us. If I could maybe begin by asking you to perhaps describe your position here at the Regional Coordination Center and your experience before how you came to be here.

PLATA: *I am Colonel Plata. I have been doing this for 22 years. I have worked in this in terms of vigilance as well as a professor. On the operating front, as well as pilot of the police. I also worked on special teams against kidnapping in this region. For that reason I know the region a bit. How did I end up in this role? By being appointed by institutional head.*

In December I was asked to be the coordinator for this government plan. What is the police role in this program? This comes out of a government policy which is democratic consolidation policy. Within that strategy there are a few institutions that are asked to get together to define their specific strategy in order to have that situation.

Within that strategy there are certain consolidation zones which, you know which ones they are. The police is a part of these zones, first of all with its mission which is established. Second was the desire to have a strategy with everything that has to do with the criminal bands, the fight against narco trafficking, and subversive groups, without forgetting everything that has to do with common crime in these zones.

So let's talk about the zone that I work in which is Montes de Maria? This zone as you already know, used to have a problem with subversive activities as well as paramilitary activity in which the police were also affected by this violence in this region. We had a lot of deaths and injuries, there were people and families within the police who also suffered from this violence. Thanks to the military forces with the support of the police, we successfully eliminated what was harming the region.

At that time the police started a program to consolidate the municipalities and strengthen the institution as well as accompanying their community. So how was this strategy established? First of all we have some programs at an internal level, by that I mean an institutional level. So we are training policemen in some specific programs in terms of human rights and programs on how to treat or better reach the community and at the same time we're training policemen in some specific skills that are related to our mission such as traditional police, community police even police of infancy and adolescence, intelligence police and something regarding technological and agricultural police.

We want to do this to amplify the vision of our work. That's been an internal level. So on an external level, and here I'm not just talking about the four municipalities that make up Montes de Maria that were the hardest hit by violence but beyond that. So what other strategy are we implementing? We are increasing the number of personnel that we have in these municipalities with all these specialties.

We are also strengthening them in terms of mobility. They came to account to a great extent that mobility was affected by violence and also took into account that this situation posed a risk which limited our mobilization. We're doing studies and projects thinking about the establishment of new police stations. In those

municipalities or townships where there was no presence of the institution we're in those townships where people are newly returning.

You have to be conscious of one thing. In the places where we had violence and the time of violence, people were displaced or fled to the urban centers of their municipalities, amplifying the problems of violence and crime in those municipalities. Why violence? These people left everything they had, they abandoned everything. In order to eat, in order to live they often saw vandalism or robbery as the only way for them to survive. That's why our first program is to strengthen the urban centers within the municipalities.

Another point where the police is developing a strategy is in terms of road police on the principal and secondary roads. This was a part that was hit hard by violence. There were many illegal blockades or stops where they would check people, where often vehicles were burned and there were robberies. For that reason we implemented this program with police who are trained in activities of reacting and with an agile mobility to respond to any type of situation that might present itself.

For those places such as townships where the presence of police was scarce or non-existent, there is a group of basically rural police that we call "encar." This purpose is to patrol the rural area for this region. These are groups of about sixty people. They go accompanied by intelligence personnel, judicial police and all of these programs that I told you about.

So the purpose is to go to these townships to generate campaigns but also to create the sensation of security and to work closely with the community. These groups they rotate, they are mobile, the purpose is for them to be able to deploy to anywhere in the territory.

DEVLIN: There is a lot there so I hope you won't mind if we go back and I have some follow up questions on that.

PLATA: Okay.

DEVLIN: One thing I was wondering about is can we distinguish, or maybe we can't between what is happening here specifically in Montes de Maria and what is part of a broader department or maybe even nation-wide development in the police.

PLATA: *These are being strengthened in the region of Montes de Maria but the program is at a national scale. Because we don't want that at any moment these problems move to other places. We strengthen them in these regions that were affected with the program we would like to implement and is being implemented and has been implemented at the national level. They came to account that Colombia is a country with very different regions. Taking into account that situation we strengthened one or another activity.*

DEVLIN: Just to make sure I have it right, for the Colonel himself, he was appointed by the central police in Bogotá?

PLATA: Correct.

DEVLIN: And was there any police representation here before the colonel's arrival at the center for regional coordination?

PLATA: No.

DEVLIN: Or with SECAI? as they existed before the center?

PLATA: *No. SECAI, at the central level, in the center there was a police coordinator. Any activity that was going to be developed within this region. He would coordinate, or he would communicate with the local police authority for this region. The communication wasn't very good, it wasn't very constant. The desire to strengthen the center in terms of police was designated to this decision. In the past this activity was led by the mayor. From Bogotá we were doing this as part of our mission of the police but without this extra effort as has been done in the past year.*

DEVLIN: So the colonel mentioned that there was this arrangement before hand with the central coordinator talking to the regional police commanders. So I can imagine that the area of operations being split between Bolivia and Sucre complicated things.

PLATA: *Correct.*

DEVLIN: So can we talk about that structure then, how police in the area are split between maybe departments and also...?

PLATA: *Correct. We have Sucre and we have Bolivar. In Sucre there was a commander for the department. In Bolivar there was a commander for the department. Montes de Maria was in both departments. This is one of my missions, one of my responsibilities of work, to coordinate between the two commanders so they do work together to understand this is a region. At times, I coordinated with one commander or the other for different activities.*

DEVLIN: Then on the operational level what is communication like between police units on the ground there?

PLATA: *Are you referring to the fact that at one point there might be an incident on one side of the border and they might have to communicate to the other? They communicate by radio, [so the Sucre people would communicate to the center person and Bolivar would then communicate it to their own people. Beyond that we also met with the commanders of all of the police of all of the townships. We have all the phone numbers and we explained this program to them. So they have a fluid conversation in case there's an incident or there is data they would like to share.*

DEVLIN: So do they sometimes go cell phone to cell phone rather than go through this whole radio—?

PLATA: *Yes. Sometimes it is faster cell phone to cell phone.*

DEVLIN: So within this area, Montes de Maria, what type of units do we have? We have two department commands but what units within the commands? For example the road police who are different, we understand, from the police in the urban areas. So could the colonel perhaps explain that?

PLATA: *A police commander for the department is responsible for police security in this region. For the crimes related to citizenship, security and democratic security. Under his responsibility, there is a second commander whose responsibility is the administrative part, the human part, and the part that has to do with training of the personnel. There is a third man who is operational commander. He is the*

operational person in terms of planning, strategy. Under him are the district commanders. A district commander under him would then have three or four stations. So that is the line of command.

Each district has intelligence personnel and judicial police personnel who accompany everything that has to do with investigations or interactions with the judicial system. Then in each district there is someone in charge of community police, human rights, infants, and all the other programs. Beyond this the operational commander has a few specialized units. For example, anti-kidnapping units, an entire department would share information with all the districts, judicial police, and road police.

Taking into account the different situations that you might find in every municipality or township, there were different strategies of this unit.

DEVLIN: In terms of when the Center was first set up, did they set out a plan with the police? Did they sit down and develop a plan of action for the police element of the work?

PLATA: *No, the plan for the police was already established.*

DEVLIN: So would it be fair to say the Center's responsibilities in regard to policing is to strengthen a process already in place and to strengthen coordination?

PLATA: *Yes. At this moment, it's being strengthened. Accompanied by the plan of action of the fusion center. So it is to accompany the standard action of the fusion center. So we provide the support so that the goals can be met.*

DEVLIN: So when we talk about its being strengthened, how so? Does the Center—is the center finding more resources for this police process that is already ongoing?

PLATA: *At a police level, I have to tell you something. There were certain commitments at a national level, by the police, a consolidation plan, which is eliminating criminal bands, to attack narco trafficking and all of its structures, to strengthen our police intelligence and judicial police and to generate certain mechanisms in terms of community police. At this moment, all these strategies are at the national level and they could or could not have something to do with Montes de Maria. In terms of your question, where are the resources from, there is a government policy to create extra strength*

So programs for strengthening capacity in these areas where the fusion centers were. In this case that there are, the police have created certain orders to ensure that mobility and security are strengthened in this region without forgetting other responsibilities. In terms of resources for the social activities of the fusion center, some of them come from internal institutions as well as external institutions.

DEVLIN: So one thing the colonel had mentioned is that they increased the number of police officers in the area. Can we talk about how that was done? Were they transferred from other areas? Was there a recruiting effort?

PLATA: *The police in prior years increased the number of policemen by including more people in the schools of training for police. Taking into account this mechanism implemented by the police. Once they were out of these training schools, they received specialized training in all the areas I explained to you. Taking then into account into a very detailed analysis at the Bogotá level, at the central level, and with the purpose of fulfilling all the requirements of the needs that are known at*

the central level, the goal has been to be able to give other policemen to the unit that has requested that number.

DEVLIN: Is there any, in the navy for example has this effort, Infantes de mi Pueblo to keep officers, Marines in this case, in their community. Is there a similar effort amongst the police?

PLATA: *I have to clarify something. I can't tell you that at this point all the units already have all the personnel that we wish they would. We are strengthening step by step, taking into account that the national needs are high. Beyond that, at a national level we've tried to increase the number of police posts throughout the whole country. We don't have a program that you've mentioned, but we do have a goal that police members, police staff, policemen, work in regions close to where they are from. This has advantages and disadvantages.*

One, that being a policeman from the region, for that person it is easier to be close to the community. But this can also become a problem. There are times when we have to do things like arrest people from the same region and the policeman could be threatened or his family could be threatened. So there are advantages and disadvantages to this programming.

DEVLIN: So the numbers have increased over time. Does the colonel have a sense of actual figures, how many there have been over the years in this area, roughly speaking?

PLATA: *I don't have exact data with me right now. The idea is year by year we can increase the number of policemen in each one of the urban areas of each municipality. And also to get to the townships where at this moment we don't have police personnel. I can tell you that it is a lot, but we are institutionally committed to strengthen these units.*

DEVLIN: And as the colonel said it is a national buildup but have areas like Montes de Maria, have they been able to prioritize themselves?

PLATA: Yes, Sir.

DEVLIN: Where, I'm wondering who does that? Maybe the central police coordinate it in Bogotá and can lobby for that effort? Or is the national force already oriented toward that already?

PLATA: *Yes, everything is worked out together. First of all there are the requirements that we make in coordination with the department commanders. There are working groups at a central level, based on that we have established the priorities.*

DEVLIN: Another thing the colonel had mentioned was training people in a variety of specialties such as community policing, judicial police. Is that training new recruits or are they also retraining officers who are already there?

PLATA: *In some situations it is new people, in others people already worked here, we send them to Bogota.*

DEVLIN: And in addition to increasing numbers [end of file two]

So you increased numbers but you also increased mobility you mentioned. Given the geographic nature of the area, it is obviously very important, can we talk a little bit about what was done there?

PLATA: *At this moment we've strengthened with 4x4 vehicles, with four-wheel drive vehicles, with motorcycles with high cylinder for the principal roads, four-wheel drive vehicles for urban as well as rural areas. They use trucks, pick-up trucks and cars for guarding neighborhoods that are called panes in terms of uniformed police with other prototypes of vehicles and technical teams for the units generate investigations and intelligence. We cannot say we have everything already, but the idea is to do this step-by-step.*

DEVLIN: So that's actually an important distinction between the uniform police and the investigative police? Because often times it is easier to increase the uniform presence quickly and the investigative presence lags behind. Has that been the experience here or they haven't had that problem?

PLATA: *Yes, at this time we had some problems we were seeing in the region. There is a judicial police that accompanies the judicial process of any type of crime. They are also the ones who give proof to the judges who are investigating this. All the municipalities did not have these policemen nor did all the policemen have all the technical equipment. Taking into account the new accusatorial criminal system, it is important for the policemen as well as for the prosecutor to have some minimum equipment or elements to begin the judicial process. Circumstances in prior years...I don't want to say that before they felt useless, but they felt like they had to wait or find other tools in order to continue the investigation, in order to find the real authors of a crime. [end of file 3]*

DEVLIN: You mentioned that part of the strengthening process is also some studies are being carried out on where new stations should be built.

PLATA: Yes.

DEVLIN: Can you talk about that process and how you prioritized where to put them?

PLATA: *At this moment, and taking into account the return of displaced people that are taking place to the townships and even more rural areas, and due to a request not just by the communities but also by the departmental entities, they are analyzing the possibility of establishing a police service in the township of Solado and in the corrimiento (neighborhood) of Macapejo. Now we have to analyze two situations. One is the terrain at this point in time has to be donated or bought, by an institution so the police can get the resources in order to start construction. But it can't be anyplace. We're asking that these terrains have specific dimensions and certain conditions that we can work in these places. So for example we need them to have electricity, water, an aqueduct.*

At the same time, security. At the point of construction we need minimum security requirements for construction. In terms of Macapejo, this is in the high region of Montes de Maria so here they asked for a fort of commanders. At this moment we are studying this possibility taking into account that Macajepo, in this area we still lack electricity and that for this to be a fort we need horses and dogs. First we need this to be a more rural area, especially for the animals.

Translator: *I'm just asking why is it allowed in Macajepo, is it because the community has asked for it?*

PLATA: *Yes. These two communities have asked for this and it is not just the communities but the governments have asked for this and also because we have done analysis. The authorities, we believe it is indispensable at this time for this*

community to have police service. For the moment we are in these communities, the right word is not sporadic but we are accompanying with the encar groups that might be there for fifteen or twenty minutes and then they go somewhere else. Also because we've seen them in these places, might be protected by the navy but due to its mission, at times cannot resolve certain situations because their institutional mission does not really permit them.

DEVLIN: So this fort in Macajepo is a carabinero fort?

PLATA: Yes.

DEVLIN: So can you talk a little bit about the carabineros and how their responsibilities interact with other units. I am referring to groups like [encar?] or the road police or even the police in the urban areas.

TRANSLATOR: *How the carabineros relate to them?*

DEVLIN: Yes, what functions do they perform that are different from other groups?

PLATA: *Because the carabinero groups are a rural police, we want to use mounted police in that region. At this moment we have carabinero police which are the Encara. because these are really sort of shock groups for the rural communities.*

DEVLIN: So encar is just a type of carabinero unit?

PLATA: Yes.

DEVLIN: Okay.

PLATA: *And accompanying them with the mounted police and by that I mean on horses, dogs, so that they can patrol by horse.*

DEVLIN: Okay. So what does the word [encar] actually mean? Is it an acronym?

PLATA: *Mobile squadrons of carabineros.*

DEVLIN: Okay.

PLATA: *And carabineros, that's sort of where they belong within the structure.*

DEVLIN: And the carabineros report to the departmental command?

PLATA: Yes.

DEVLIN: So increasing them is part of the drive to increase mobility, the mounted police?

PLATA: *Yes, it is an analysis that we are doing, how possible would it be to locate the mounted police in that territory or to create a unit of rural police in that place. We are first of all, that is just ensuring we have better mobility in that region. That is something we are doing right now.*

We are also looking at the possibility of seeing how possible and favorable it would be to have mounted police in that place or, if not, perhaps having that be one of the bases for the encar which would not be mounted. We also have to take into account that we are waiting for people to return, which is always starting

[inaudible]. Because if people don't actually return, this place will be empty. So then we'll have stations that are not really fulfilling our mission.

DEVLIN: So how do you change, or does one change operations when dealing with returning displaced people. Because the colonel mentioned, I think, that one of the results of this is that they're focusing on urban centers because these are where these people are going.

PLATA: *Yes. It is not that they were returning there, they had been displaced to urban centers, I can't say all of them, but some of them. Now they are returning and the idea is that if the urban places were not given them conditions, don't have conditions that are livable, then the rural areas will not have them either.*

DEVLIN: And in terms of returning to areas where there was no presence beforehand, is that simply a matter of redeploying or the community policing principals, they have to be very delicate in the way they reenter these areas?

PLATA: *First of all these communities have been very affected by violence. We first want to get there with the community police to do outreach to the community, to create links of trust, to believe in them, all the institutions. For that reason, that's one of the roles of the fusion center. It is to have people once again trust these institutions including the police. To answer your question, yes. The police wants to get there first with community police to generate confidence of trust. Many of these communities don't know what our role, what our function is, what are we based on, how do we work? They don't understand that there is a carta magna, a constitution, so we have talks, instructions, documents, so they can learn about this.*

DEVLIN: Do some people in the area still go to the military forces when they should be going to the police?

PLATA: *Yes, of course. The community has certain particular relationships with institutions of the state. For example people may still be afraid if they talk with us this may lead to some sort of act against them. But that's our role, that's our work. That's the idea, change that concept.*

DEVLIN: So because of the security situation the police in these areas is rather heavily equipped. Some people who advance the community policing idea see this as a problem, heavily equipped police. Have they thought about ways to balance that or is that just not a concern at this moment right now?

PLATA: *No, at this moment up now we haven't had the situation. We haven't really had these concerns come up in the community. If they ask anything of us it is when we come in we also come in with community police.*

DEVLIN: Got you. Because this is an evolving process, a very fluid one, have they—are there things that they do differently now that they've adapted over time from looking at their own experience that they've changed? Maybe one way to think about it is are there things you would have liked to have known earlier?

PLATA: *No, I believe we had many situations where we made mistakes, but these mistakes were being analyzed and solved, not only for the wellbeing of the community but for our own well being.*

DEVLIN: So what are some of the successes where they've achieved improvements? What would some of those examples be?

PLATA: *For example the way to deal with the community in terms of training, human rights. At this moment not just us but because the police has been strengthened. Another thing is the links or the way we work with other institutions have improved for example with the navy we now work very well in this institution, this regional coordination center allows us to have this relationship. The idea is if the community is strengthened, we are strengthened.*

DEVLIN: Before the center was there any similar, formal coordination between the navy and the police?

PLATA: *Yes, the communication we have among department commanders, the links each commander of the marines or the navy, but here we are doing strengthening of this activity. Here we have officials of high level, which allows us to work in a much more professional way.*

DEVLIN: And lastly I just wonder, the center here, it probably won't exist forever. For example, formally it is under the President's office which of course changes with every President. What does the colonel think about sustainability? Is this a process that can now go on without the center? If not yet, is that something they're working towards?

PLATA: *My way of seeing it is that here in the center we are creating certain basis, not just so the community and this region can grow, but also so that institutions are strengthened in every one of these places. That is our idea, if the time comes when this ends, I think our role will go on, I think the idea here it to create a certain basis, to strengthen them so that the work can go on.*

DEVLIN: Well thank you so much colonel.