

The Colombian Air Force as an Instrument of Power to Confront the Pandemic

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Introduction

For the past two decades, Colombian society has been improving its economic growth and development indicators, largely due to advances in security from investment in capabilities to project the reach of military forces and National Police throughout its territory.¹ This has allowed private investors to regain confidence in its institutions and create new development hubs in different cities throughout the country, which all have benefited from the presence of institutions that provide national security and defense.

Such achievements, which led to the recovery of the economy, faith in institutions, and the security of the roads that connect the development hubs throughout the region, have been forged by the strength of the Colombian Air Force (FAC), which used its capabilities and personnel to extend the rule of law throughout the land. In fact, airpower marked a turning point in the construction of a vibrant contemporary democracy and serves as an example for the continent. This success story was only possible in the hands of the men and women who proudly wear the blue uniform and who, in turn, work shoulder to shoulder with our staunch ally: The United States of America.

Currently, COVID-19 has pushed the world into a humanitarian, health, and economic crisis in a way not seen since the Great Depression.² According to the International Monetary Fund, the pandemic has evolved into a disaster with tremendous costs, forcing governments to impose wide-spread lockdowns. The magnitude and speed of the breakdown in daily activities is unlike anything experienced in our lives.³ In this context, society has faced a reality that political elites and academics envisioned at the time, calling them “future threats” at the end of the Cold War.⁴ Such a description of events, only seen in textbooks, films, and fictional narratives, is our reality today.

The viral outbreak flattened societies. It does not recognize sovereignties, nor cultural, economic, or religious differences. COVID-19 advances indifferent to historical, political, and social structures created by humans. To confront the abyss created by the dangers of depleting capabilities at hospitals and intensive care

units, citizens have once again taken refuge in the State as their protector.⁵ The greatest burden of the emergency response effort is coordinated by the government and executed by health care professionals, essential service workers and, of course, the military forces.

In Colombia, this epidemic has impacted institutions with greater stress, while terrorism and illegal economies continue to affect daily life.⁶ Thus, the FAC must protect itself from the pandemic, face continued threats, fulfill its constitutional mandate to protect the rights, freedoms and lives of citizens, and carry out a great humanitarian effort.

Positive results on different fronts are testimony of the enormous commitment that officers, NCOs, soldiers, and civil servants have with their homeland. By working tirelessly and observing all safety measures, they have made it possible to reach every corner of the challenging Colombian geography, supporting families in confinement and hospitals, with the major necessities for medical equipment. From this perspective, it is worth asking ourselves: How has it been possible to obtain such results that require the employment and complex coordination of scarce financial, human, and airpower capabilities?

This article aims to answer this question and proposes that the strategy adopted by the FAC has allowed it to fulfill its mission in the midst of the emergency, faithfully following four lines of action: (1) safeguarding the military, (2) sustaining capabilities, (3) continuing operations against factors that generate instability, and (4) supporting civilian authorities.

Safeguarding the Military

At the heart of the military is its human capital, and safeguarding it is the only way to ensure the institution's survival, project airpower, and accomplish the mission. The main purpose of the FAC's strategy to face this pandemic is to safeguard the military, so that they, in turn, can protect the lives of citizens. In any social environment free of conflict or war, a productive life is fundamental in the recovery of the state's economy, maintaining security, and fostering production, growth, and development. On the other hand, if conflict and armed confrontations are part of the situation, as is the case in Colombia, the priority is to be adequately prepared and employ military capabilities to respond to all challenges in a timely and legitimate manner. In other words, the Air Force must ensure the normal development of its daily activities (operational or administrative); establish protocols for prevention, isolation, and care of its personnel; and simultaneously provide humanitarian assistance/cooperation with other military and police forces as well as the civilian population.

Safeguarding the force means to maintain the vitality of its personnel by avoiding the spread of the virus and implementing strict measures of control in military units and operations, such as prolonged quartering and screening of personnel upon admission. Furthermore, during times of fiscal crisis and budget cuts, we need to use the scarce resources available efficiently to satisfy both internal requirements and of those affected by an economic, social, and sanitary emergency that interrupts the economic cycle and destroys investors' confidence and confidence in society.

The new allocation of government funds, which impacted the FAC's budget, forced the establishment of new priorities to ensure the resources to sustain its strategy in the face of this national emergency and continue planning operations to neutralize illegal armed actors, drug trafficking, terrorism, and national and transnational organized crime. Sufficient personnel, technologies, and military capabilities are needed to contain, mitigate, and neutralize the different threats that our nation faces.



Figure 1. KC-767 aircraft that carried out the “Homecoming” mission

Source: Author

When information about a new unidentified strain of pneumonia was made public in January 2020,⁷ the FAC was in the midst of deploying its fourth mission in the white [Antarctic] continent. There, it had assumed a leadership role that brought together talented professionals from the military and scientific commu-

nity to conduct investigations to benefit the nation and humanity.⁸ However, with the new horizon, the versatility of the force would be put to the test.

Under this emerging backdrop, the rapid spread of the coronavirus that affected Wuhan, a city that was under a strict quarantine, forced various countries to send humanitarian flights to repatriate their citizens. Thus, the FAC flew a KC-767, to evacuate 13 citizens who were at the center of the pandemic (see figure 1).

The planned mission took off on 22 February, literally circling the world with a crew of 11 military and professional personnel from the Red Cross and the National Institute of Health.⁹ The aircraft was specially configured to be self-sufficient, with vital basic standards such as food and water, health, and biosafety requirements. After completing its journey, the tanker, called *Jupiter*, returned with Colombian citizens, their families, and foreign personnel who were also evacuated thanks to diplomatic efforts.

Without a doubt, our long years of experience were an advantage that allowed us to carry out this mission with great confidence, after analyzing hundreds of variables obtained from previous operations such as the mission performed in March 2011, when *Jupiter* flew to Japan to evacuate 163 Colombians after the country was affected by a series of natural disasters.¹⁰ Additionally, in August 2006, the FAC carried out a similar mission in a C-130, repatriating a group of Colombian citizens from Syria who were affected by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹¹ In Latin America, other countries hit by disasters have received the support of the FAC, such as cargo transport, medical aid, health personnel, and humanitarian support, as demonstrated after the earthquake that occurred in Ecuador in April 2016, where different air forces extended their ties of cooperation through the SICOFAA (System of Cooperation among the American Air Forces).

The aforementioned events, especially the experience in dealing with internal disasters—among them the disaster that occurred in Armero in 1985, where more than 23,000 people perished when the city was covered by stones and mud as a result of the eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano—awakened in the FAC a great concern to build capabilities to respond to the needs of the nation in a timely and effective manner.

This current scenario did not greatly surprise the institution, since the capabilities the FAC had already built allowed it to respond immediately, with the same standards it has now been performing for over 100 days of continuous operations during the pandemic. Accordingly, the effort inside and outside the country is aligned with international values that have become a new standard in terms of practices and behaviors appropriate for states and military forces. Contemporary political debates call the standard “human security.”¹² The standard has become a complementary approach that allows for the explanation and justifica-

tion in the expansion of air doctrine to include the protection of the political, economic, civil, environmental, social, and cultural rights of the population.¹³ It has especially been adopted, from the highest level, as a guiding criterion in public plans and policies—obligating institutions, such as the Air Force, to plan ahead by designing long-term strategies in order to maintain, strengthen, and build capabilities to preserve itself and help others survive.

Sustain Capabilities

Sustaining military air capabilities becomes the golden rule to expand national power at any time and place, since they give the state the power needed in a dynamic, agile, and effective way to provide security and defense of constitutional order. Offensive and defensive operations, troop transport, and humanitarian aid operations (see figure 2), as well as deterrence of external threats, depend on the combination of human capital, enlistment, and capabilities.



Figure 2. Transportation aboard the C-295 FAC 1280, from Leticia to Bogotá, of a patient in delicate condition due to COVID-19

Source: FAC Press Office

However, operational capability depends on the commitment, willingness, and health of personnel. Personnel are not immune to the threat posed by the pandemic, even more so when many are in the first line of response, in direct contact with troops that travel through different parts of the territory and with the population.

To avoid exposing our men and women to an unnecessary risk of infection, the FAC has been using modern methods that allow a large part of its members to work from home. Thus, support processes, meetings, education, communication with experts, operational coordination, and command and control have been carried out using technological means backed by military experts in cybersecurity.

This way, up to 50 percent of available human resources, including civil servants (with the exception of the soldiers who guard facilities) have worked from their homes thanks to information and communication technologies, in addition to all the integrated systems developed to remotely connect military air units and thus carry out different operations. Another 4.9 percent have special schedules to reduce gatherings in offices and to protect them from crowds in public transportation (see figure 3).¹⁴ This transition did not occur as a result of the pandemic; on the contrary, it is the result of years of transformation dedicated to adjusting processes, improving and transferring communications technology, analysis, surveillance and operations, guaranteeing the flexibility that should characterize the Air Force.



Figure 3. A Boeing 737 airplane transports humanitarian aid to La Guajira

Source: FAC Press Office

To continue advancing the use of modern tools and information management, we have joined efforts with innovators from the private sector capable of promoting security and defense in an effective way and at a lower cost. Towards the end of 2019, for example, the FAC and the Bogotá District University launched the “Delfos” tool, which uses artificial intelligence and integrates aerial and satellite intelligence images, as well as cyber defense capabilities, to predict, prevent, and combat environmental threats of human origin that cause ecological damage due to illegal mining.¹⁵ Through Delfos the Air Force is coordinating efforts to broaden governmental and multilateral endeavors focused on the protection of critical resources for the nation and humanity, such as oceans and wildlife that are essential for survival.

Consequently, progress in technological developments has been fundamental to continue consolidating national security and defense. With absolute certainty,

the evolution of traditional and nontraditional threats makes cyberpower a vital dimension that adds significant complexities to the tasks entrusted to the armed forces. Thus, after several decades of confronting illegal armed groups, the FAC is seeking groundbreaking solutions to solve new needs in education, training, research, and equipment, which will allow it to maintain, strengthen, and create new capabilities. This entrepreneurial spirit makes it an example for Latin American air forces that are beginning to adjust to these new contemporary requirements.

Continue Operations Against Drivers that Generate Instability

Indeed, violence in different rural regions caused by illegal armed actors does not stop, even under quarantine conditions. These groups continue to support illicit economic chains, reflected in the production of cocaine and marijuana, illegal exploitation of mining deposits, or the indiscriminate clearing of trees—constricting, intimidating, and subjugating local populations. The armed conflict has recently deepened, in part due to systematic violence against citizens, mostly peasants, who have opposed the claims of dominance that these criminal actors assert.



Figure 4. Sikorsky AH 60 Arpa IV helicopter on a close air support and escort mission to the southwest of Colombia

Source: FAC Press Office

However, the Air Force has sought, through joint, coordinated, and interagency operations with other military, police, and judicial institutions, to integrate different capabilities to develop preventive and offensive actions, in order to neutralize these threats, the rule of law, and defend the constitutional rights of citizens.

The emergence of remnant groups after the agreement between the government and the demobilized guerrilla group of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colom-

bia (FARC) in 2016 maintains an atmosphere of insecurity in certain areas previously affected by the conflict. In these areas, confrontations between these criminals and other armed organizations, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Gulf Clan, have created more violence as a result of struggles for dominance of strategic corridors and areas where they intend to control illicit economies.

In response, the FAC has maintained its operational deployment throughout the region—conducting surveillance, reconnaissance, air intelligence, interdiction, strategic attack, close air support, air escort, troop infiltration missions, and those operations that allow it to apply force effectively, timely, with precision and forcefulness, but, above all, with total adherence to the norms of international humanitarian law, human rights, the constitution, and the law (see figure 4). The proven results of this effort demonstrate the institutional commitment to the consolidation of security as a fundamental public good for sustaining social development.



Figure 5. A Sikorsky UH 60 helicopter performs a joint operation with army troops in western Colombia

Source: FAC Press Office

This requires the sustained development of a wide spectrum of operations against violent groups that threaten the poorest communities and endanger natural resources. On 13 May 2020, in a joint operation in the Department of Bolívar (see figure 5), the FAC neutralized 20 ELN terrorists, including two high-value targets, through a precise attack. These actions are in line with the government policy of pressuring members of such groups to voluntarily demobilize, through active show

of force, as well as the dissuasive effect of the will and determination in defense of the nation, in such a way for illegal individuals or factions to disarm.¹⁶

Positive results against multiple challenges have been possible given the great commitment of the human component in intelligence as well as pilots, crew members, air professionals from different specialties, soldiers, and civilians. They have all dedicated countless hours to defending constitutional order and democratic freedoms, even at the cost of family separation and risk to their lives—the highest price to pay when protecting countrymen and offering a better future.

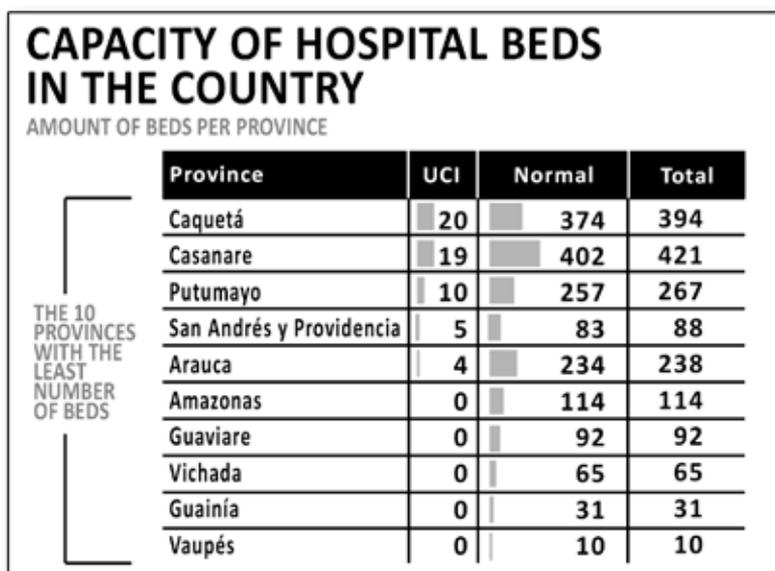


Figure 6. Intensive care units to care for severe COVID-19 patients in the 10 most vulnerable provinces

Source: *La República*¹⁷: newspaper, 2020

To directly affect the financial activities of these threats, airspace control has remained as efficient and strict as ever, under standards established in military cooperation agreements with the US. Systems, personnel, and capabilities remain at the highest levels to simultaneously comply with national air defense and humanitarian support operations. The success in the reduction of 99.9 percent of illegal flights over Colombia is the achievement of the objectives of the joint “Air Bridge Denial” program, even when it has been affected by the pandemic when missions outside the border have been restricted to mitigate the risk of infection. Despite this, the program continues to yield important results in air interdiction. Likewise, observation and monitoring capabilities have become a determining

factor in supporting the suppression of illegal maritime traffic, leading to the seizure of large quantities of drugs—a combined operational effort in which more than 20 countries of the continent and Europe participate.

Support for Civilian Authorities

The administration at its national, regional, and local levels has been pressured by demands from the population who cannot afford their daily expenses during this quarantine. This complicated social situation, caused by the quarantine’s impact on economic activities, supply chains, and a deficient health system—as a result of government measures to contain the spread of COVID-19—severely impacts the poorest communities, the most vulnerable, and the most remote provinces (see figure 6), presenting greater requirements for the transfer of critically ill patients, as they do not have the medical capabilities to deal with the situation.

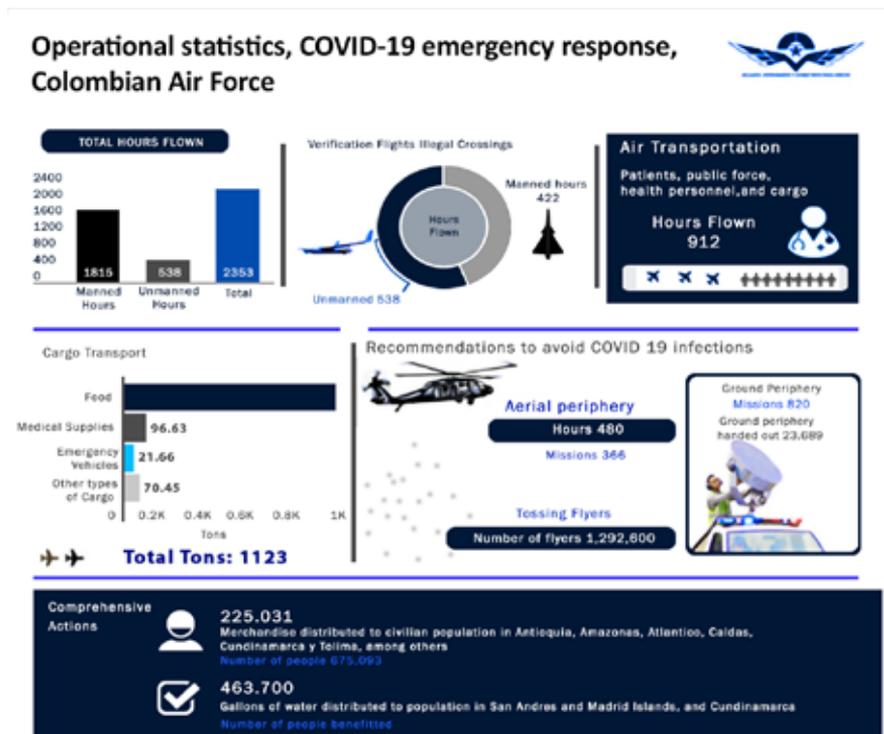


Figure 7. FAC operational statistics from 23 February to 13 July 2020

Source: FAC Air Operations Command

For this reason, the Air Force used all its human, technical, and technological resources to cover the needs of the regions where the communications infrastruc-

ture/state presence is precarious. Distant territories with difficult access and with reduced public health system capabilities are the priority. From the Archipelago of San Andrés in the Caribbean to Leticia in the Amazon, and from the Pacific coast to the imposing Orinoco River, humanitarian aid—represented in markets, biosecurity elements, intensive care units, medical equipment, hospital supplies, water, ventilators, health personnel, military, police, government equipment, among others—have been transported day and night in sustained operations, in some cases using night vision goggles to reach remote parts of the territory. This effort is translated into the operational statistics illustrated in figure 7.

One of the most complex places in the management of the pandemic is the Amazonas province where Leticia, the most distant city from the center of the country and accessible only by air, is located, on the border with Brazil, the country most affected by the virus in South America. There, the pandemic has particularly impacted its humble inhabitants, including indigenous communities, with great consequences on the limited response capabilities of the public health system. Thus, the FAC has transported mechanical ventilators, medicines, food, epidemiologists, and essential workers to Leticia to face the critical situation (see figure 8).



Figure 8. A soldier from the Amazonas Air Group unloads vital supplies donated to the inhabitants of Leticia, capital of the Amazon

Source: FAC Press Office

Likewise, the Air Force configured its CN-295 planes to transport critical patients infected with COVID-19 from different corners of the country to Bogotá, where there is better medical care. Medical isolation systems adapted to the cabin environment were developed, the necessary equipment was installed, and crews of doctors, urgent care specialists, and nurses were organized for this purpose (see

figure 9). This innovation, part of a broad institutional effort, helped overcome pressure placed upon the limited local network of hospitals upon the outbreak, as in the case of Leticia, by May of 2020.¹⁸

Everything previously described demonstrates the willingness and ability of personnel to innovate and overcome adversity, which allowed the Air Force to operate in unstable insecure environments. This response is the product of years of experience in conflict, in a complex operational scenario, which also includes challenging geographical obstacles only overcome by the evolution of national air power. Thanks to this, Colombia has an Air Force capable of satisfying the expectations of the government, its armed forces, and its citizens.



Figure 9. Transformation and adaptation of aeromedical capabilities for the transportation of COVID-19 patients

Source: FAC Press Office

Conclusion **Being Prepared for the Future** **Implies Preparedness for Uncertainty**

Over a century, the FAC has grown as an institution capable of pushing itself into the future. The uncertainty caused by the conflict, the dispute over control on porous borders, transnational threats, natural disasters, and threats to national sovereignty have created the need to constantly plan, build capabilities, and stimulate innovation as part of its strategy to foresee future scenarios.

Without doubt the heart of the Air Force is the infinite energy of its human resources, its men and women who chose to serve their country wearing a blue uniform. Pioneers and those who fight in their ranks today, under truly visionary

leadership, have projected the operational scope of the institution in a wide spectrum of capabilities that go from the forceful application of the force to humanitarian missions.

In a country with the geographic complexities of Colombia, one of the critical factors for growth and development is territorial integration. Under this premise, airpower has been a pillar in the consolidation of security for the economic, political, social, and cultural advance of many communities, where, literally, the inhabitants go from “the mule to the plane.”¹⁹ Taking into account that the advance of many regions has occurred thanks to air operations, more and more requirements arise that must be met. This great demand has inspired the development of initiatives to meet these needs, under efficient models that are supported by operational engineering and organizational reengineering, bearing in mind the premise that guides the design of the strategy: “being bigger does not necessarily make us stronger.”*

Technology, professionalization in different disciplines, humanitarian support, and strategies aimed at reinforcing security as a foundation for the protection of democracy led to the transformation of the FAC. The institution that emerged from this process has been able to fulfill the mission in environments with VUCA characteristics (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous).

At present, the FAC’s military airpower has been a critical component of the entire government’s strategy to deal with the coronavirus. Simultaneously, the FAC continues to protect the lives of Colombians threatened by terrorism and transnational crime, contributing at the same time to the construction of hemispheric security. This multifaceted response is made a reality by the hands of talented military and civil servants motivated by their patriotism. They are the maximum example of the Colombian military experience and its good practices.

The mission to Wuhan to repatriate Colombian citizens, as well as permanent aid to urban and rural communities transporting food, medical supplies, essential elements, health professionals, and patients affected by COVID-19 are actions that express the commitment and contribution of the FAC for the mitigation of the pandemic. Colombian citizens trust their Air Force because it has proven to be an institution loyal to its principles and values, made up of exemplary citizens, an instrument of power to protect Colombians and safeguard their democracy, rights, and freedoms and enforce the rule of law.

Facing a new century of institutional life, the Air Force of the Colombians continues to fulfill its mission** —flying, training, and fighting to win. □

*Guiding criterion, on which General Ramsés Rueda has supported the design of the 2020–2042 Air and Space Strategy.

** New Mission of the FAC, restructured in September 2019..

Notes

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