Expeditionary Fast Transport to Support SOUTHCOM's Continuing Promise Goodwill Deployment



SANTA MARTA, Colombia (Aug. 20, 2023) Expeditionary fast transport ship USNS Burlington (T-EFP 10) arrives in Santa Marta, Colombia, Aug. 20, 2023. Continuing Promise 2023 marks the 13th mission to the region since 2007 and the first involving USNS Burlington. The mission will also foster goodwill, strengthen existing partnerships with partner nations, and encourage the establishment of new partnerships among countries, non-government organizations, and international organizations. (U.S. Navy photo by Lt. j.g. Nicko West)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — A Spearhead-class expeditionary fast

transport, USNS Burlington (T-EPF 10), is scheduled to deploy next week on a voyage to five countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America to provide humanitarian and civic assistance to the population and to promote regional good will under the U.S. Southern Command's annual Continuing Promise mission.

Making its second such deployment, the Burlington will deploy with more than 100 Sailors, Soldiers, State Department personnel, and crew members to provide medical, veterinary, and construction services, subject-matter exchanges, and cultural exchanges. The ship is crewed by 26 Civil Mariners of the U.S. Military Sealift Command.

The Burlington, making the 14th annual deployment of Continuing Promise since 2007, will visit Jamaica, Costa Rica, Honduras, Columbia, and Panama during the two-month deployment. The countries visited differ from year to year.

"We really try to spread the opportunity around the Caribbean and even – based on resources – to some of the other countries in South America," said Rear Admiral Jim Aiken, commander, U.S. 4th Fleet and commander, Naval Forces, U.S. Southern Command, speaking to reporters during a June 28 phone conference. "We have a spreadsheet and spend a significant amount of time evaluating [and] assessing where we should go. So, we're going to a lot of different countries than we did previously. The only one is actually a repeat country from last year is Panama.

"So, going forward, we'll keep looking for different opportunities and different engagements," Aiken said. "This is based on a couple of things. First of all, there has to be a working relationship where there's a need and a desire. The second thing is that we look at it and we really want to try to be strategic where there's 'no kidding' need.

Aiken listed the mission sets of the deployment as medical and

veterinary assistance; humanitarian and disaster relief discussions; civil construction, bio-medical assistance, and the State Department's Women, Peace, and Security Program discussions.

He said the USNS Comfort is available for the Continuing Promise deployment "every two or three years," with the ship planned for next year.

While the Burlington, smaller than the Comfort, brings the assistance teams to port, the teams actually conduct their medical assistance in hospitals ashore side-by-side with local teams.

Aiken mentioned that the "Navy staff has decided to convert a number of EPFs into hospital-like assets that actually could support surgeries and care actually on board."

"Both numerically and qualitatively, Continuing Promise has been one of the most impactful humanitarian missions in the U.S. Navy's history," said Lieutenant Commander. Cmdr. Zachary Smith, the mission commander the operation. "The mission is a symbol of our long-standing commitment to the nations and people of Latin America and the Caribbean.

"We've delivered on our promises," Smith said. "Working hand-in-hand with our partners we delivered over the course of the history of the mission more than 600,000 medical treatments, over 7,000 surgeries, and countless constructions projects, … and community relations events. Previous iterations of the mission have been extremely successful, and we anticipate making just as much of an impact this year."

According to a Navy release, "30 U.S. Navy medical professionals, including general practitioners, nurses, pharmacists, radiologists, dentists, optometrists, and biomedical technicians from Navy Medicine Readiness and Training Command (NMRTC Portsmouth, NMRTC Jacksonville, NMRTC Great Lakes, NMRTC Pensacola, NMRTC Camp Lejeune) and Naval

Medicine Readiness and Logistics Command bring their expertise to this year's iteration of Continuing Promise.

"The Continuing Promise team includes a U.S. Army veterinary team from the 248th Medical Detachment (Veterinary Service Support), which will collaborate with host nation colleagues to provide direct public health education and animal care at local veterinary organizations in-country," the release said. "U.S. Navy Seabees from Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 1 will assist in host nation led community engineering projects. U.S. Navy experts will host seminars and training exercises with host nation civilian officials and military professionals covering disaster preparedness and response. These exchanges aim to support host nation facilities, improve readiness, and empower local and national officials with the knowledge and experience to act with confidence during emergencies."

"This is a very special mission for me because I've seen it many times firsthand in my nearly three years in this assignment, Aiken said. "This is our shared neighborhood. We have friends and we have partners, and we enjoy the side-by-side that we have with each and every one of them. We learn from them, and they learn from us."

The admiral recalled a previous Continuing Promise deployment to Columbia and being approached by a citizen who had been assisted during a Continuing Promise four years prior by the medical team on board the hospital ship USNS Comfort. The person was given surgery on his palate. He approached, saying that the surgery "changed my life so much, and instead of me being ridiculed by my schoolmates I am now able to live a normal life. … I just wanted to come back and say, Thank you.'"

"That's the reason why I still get excited about this and every time we do this," Aiken said.