REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS
IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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REFUGEE POLICY GROUP
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REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The tragedy of more than one million displaced persons in Central America—driven from their home by violence and fear of violence—is well known. Those who have found refuge in Mexico, Honduras and Costa Rica are being adequately cared for under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. However, hundreds of thousands remain in El Salvador and Guatemala living under the most miserable conditions. These nations, whose economies have been seriously disrupted, cannot by themselves provide adequate care of relief for these people. The refugee camps and overcrowded cities to which they have fled become breeding grounds for discontent and frustration.

This characterization from the Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (Kissinger Commission) is helpful in calling much needed attention to the plight of refugees and displaced persons and in recommending more effective relief efforts on their behalf from the United States. However, by giving little space to these issues, the Commission has understated or ignored numerous aspects of the plight of refugees and displaced persons.

Refugee and Displaced Person Flights: An Overview

El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, three small countries with a total population of under fifteen million people, have experienced the flight of approximately half a million people to other countries of Central America, Mexico and the United States. Additionally, within their national territories, between half a million and a million people have been displaced due to violence, repression, civil strife, and military assaults.

Because of the flight from these countries, Costa Rica, with a population of approximately three and a half million people is
providing a haven for more than 15,000 refugees, and its government estimates that 200,000 foreigners (principally Nicaraguans) have entered the country. Honduras, with approximately the same population, has received about 35,000 Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans (excluding these associated with the fighting units). Tiny Belize, with only 156,000 people is the temporary home for some 7,000 Salvadorans. Another 1,500 Salvadorans are in Panama. In Mexico's poorest and least developed province, Chiapas, there are over 40,000 Guatemalans, in a string of camps along the border, and another 80,000 Guatemalans, at least, who are not considered refugees and are not in the camps. The Mexican government has estimated close to 150,000 Salvadorans to be in the country. One hundred thousand to two hundred thousand Salvadorans are believed to have come to the United States since the acceleration of civil strife in El Salvador in 1980. Relatively few of the Salvadorans in Mexico or the United States are considered to be refugees by the host governments in these two countries.

It is difficult to ascertain the numbers of displaced persons. In El Salvador, the government has registered approximately 265,000 people, or slightly more than half what most observers have estimated to be 400,000 displaced persons; of those registered less than 15 percent are in displaced persons camps. In Guatemala, church sources estimate that there are about half a million displaced persons. For the Guatemalan highland Indians who have fled their villages, the government has created re-education camps, where people with no other source of food and shelter eventually come to live under military control. In Nicaragua, the government has planned and implemented the obligatory resettlement of whole communities all along the peri-
phery of the country. Estimates of the number of displaced persons in Nicaragua approach 100,000. Government initiated moves on the Atlantic coast were, and to an extent still are, carried out against the will of many who obliged to participate in them.

**Legal Status**

All the host governments concede refugee status on a temporary basis which usually must be renewed annually. Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama are signatories to the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and these countries have domestic legislation which incorporates the United Nations refugee definition and the non-refoulement principle. Guatemala and El Salvador, as well, recently signed the Convention and Protocol. There are no refugee programs in Guatemala, and the UNHCR has not been invited either to investigate the conditions of the 70,000 Salvadorans the Guatemalan government claims are in the country, or to establish refugee programs to assist them. Honduras and Mexico have domestic laws confirming the non-refoulement principle but have not legislated formal procedures to determine refugee status. In both countries, the UNHCR operates large scale refugee programs, but there have been disagreements over how the UNHCR exercises its protection mandate. There have been tensions in the relationships between the Mexican government as well as the Costa Rican government and the UNHCR over the management of refugee assistance programs.

Nicaragua permits refugees freedom of movement and permission to work. Belize allows refugees to work so long as they remain outside of the capital city. Honduras allows Miskito Indians to take jobs
so long as they remain in the Honduran Mosquitia region, but otherwise permits refugees to work only on internationally funded refugee projects. While ladino Nicaraguans, like the Miskitos, may freely leave the refugee settlements, El Salvadorans live in closed camps and lose their refugee status if they leave these camps. Costa Rica and Mexico likewise deny work authorizations to most refugees, although the governments have on occasion made exceptions for individuals with special skills or for short-term agricultural work.

Protection Issues: Refugees

Refugee protection has improved in Mexico and Honduras, where many serious incidents were previously reported. There have been few Guatemalan attacks across the Mexican border since mid 1983, but fear of resumed attacks remains. The Mexican government has pledged not to forcibly repatriate any of the Guatemalans under its protection, and the overwhelmingly Indian population living in the string of camps near the border appear to be safe from refoulement for the time being. Nevertheless, the Mexican government remains under some pressure—mainly from conservative domestic groups—to repatriate Guatemalans. The U.S. government for its part has urged the Mexican government to pursue negotiations with the Guatemalan government on the issue of repatriation, and has encouraged the UNHCR to establish a pilot program in Guatemala for repatriated persons. There is no refugee protection for the largely, but not exclusively ladino Guatemalans who are entering in increasing numbers in the western part of the country, in areas where there are no camps. Reportedly a large number of these Guatemalans have been deported across the border. The Mexican government will not send Salvadorans back to El Salvador, but does send them across the border to Guatemala. Many,
probably most, are able to return, but there is no information on what happens either to returned Guatemalans or to Salvadorean in Guatemala.

From 1980 to 1982 military attacks against Salvadorean refugee camps resulted in the deaths of about thirty refugees and refugee workers. Protection of Salvadorean refugees has much improved since then. In July, 1983, however, Honduran and, it is alleged, Guatemalan troops entered El Tesoro refugee camp, taking seventeen refugees. Seven were returned to the camp, but the remaining ten were not, and the UNHCR had to resettle them in Bolivia, where they later were joined by their families.

Working relations between the Honduran government and the UNHCR, on the whole, have become more cooperative, as have relations between the UNHCR in Honduras and the U.S. Embassy. These three are now in basic agreement on plans to move the Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees presently in camps in Western Honduras near the Salvadorean and Guatemalan borders to a location in the province of Yoro. Refugees and the international agency voluntary workers in the camps oppose these moves—as they opposed the 1981-1982 move of Salvadorean from the La Virtud camp to Mesa Grande. They insist there is a dangerous level of hostility, especially to Salvadorean, in the interior of the country, and that the Honduran military will not, and the UNHCR cannot, assure the refugees’ safety in that area.

Another protection problem in Honduras concerns the Miskito Indians in settlements dispersed along three rivers in the Gracias a Dios province. In this case, the Miskito leadership itself has been forcibly recruiting young men into the anti-Sandinista contra armies
fighting nearby. Both the UNHCR and its program implementing agency, World Relief, have taken a number of steps to prevent this practice from continuing. Largely because of this problem, the UNHCR has stationed a full time program officer to Mocoron to assure that assistance and food distribution are not subordinated to the political agendas of the refugee leadership.

In Costa Rica, about 350 Salvadoran refugees are living on a farm, Los Angeles, near the Nicaraguan border purchased by the UNHCR in 1980. Over the past two years, productivity on this well-equipped farm has declined markedly, and a number of refugees have left. The refugees contend that they are in constant danger from the Nicaraguan contra forces in the area, but the UNHCR which has two UN officers stationed there, insists they are adequately protected. The UNHCR attributes the fall in productivity to poor management and low morale.

Protection issues: Displaced Persons

The displaced persons are far more vulnerable than any of the refugee groups to repression and assaults. Insofar as the displaced persons populations in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua are considered to be enemies of the regimes, they are likely to be subject to neglect and in some cases to serious abuses.

Guatemala: Since 1982, the Guatemalan government has had a program in which displaced persons are brought, and sometimes coerced, to settle in re-education camps. Often, they have fled from their original villages in the wake of military sweeps and have tried to survive in the surrounding areas until, driven by hunger, they come to the military for help, or until the military carry out new sweeps that destroy recently planted crops. The new settlements
are considerably larger than most of the communities in which Guatemalan Indians typically live, which the military justifies on grounds that larger villages are more efficiently defended from the guerrillas and easier to feed.

Many observers in Guatemala now report that once abandoned villages have been re-inhabited, and that for the first time in years, crops are being planted. They also report, however, that villages remain under military vigilance, which is reinforced by civil patrols. All men between 18 and 50 are obliged to serve in these patrols. Although food and medicine are still desperately needed, the military, by and large, prohibits international agencies from establishing relief programs in the villages. In most departments, it is the military itself which delivers donated international food supplies, apparently hoping to win the allegiance of the native population in this way.

El Salvador: The vigilence and repression that have led approximately half a million Salvadorans to leave the country since 1980 also have caused over 400,000 of them to flee from their homes to other parts of the country. The massive displacement of the Salvadoran people, belatedly, is attracting public attention. The Salvadoran government recognizes it to be a major humanitarian emergency and has created an inter-ministerial agency, CONADES, to attend to their needs; the U.S. government has devoted over $10 million direct funding to address the needs of displaced persons, and numerous international religious and humanitarian agencies have begun to examine ways in which they might channel assistance to displaced persons in Salvador. Although the need is evident, the
means by which outside aid can be effectively used to alleviate the situation are far from obvious: The country is at war, and large portions of it are all but inaccessible, or accessible only at great risk.

It is difficult for most international agencies in El Salvador to avoid being identified with one or the other side in the war, and assistance provided to the victims of one side is often viewed as support for the other. The government military forces, more often than the guerrillas, are reported to have interfered with food delivery and medical services, to have bombed places where food has been distributed, or to have arrested persons working with displaced persons. The government, whose first priority is to feed and supply the military forces, is widely accused of absorbing or redirecting large portions of the relief intended for humanitarian purposes. It is further accused of channeling the aid according to political criteria and allowing it to be sold for profit on the open market.

As noted the government has registered about 265,000 as displaced persons, out of the generally estimated 400,000. Government figures show at least 70 percent of the displaced persons to be in the northern and eastern departments of the country, where fighting has been constant. Large numbers of displaced persons are also in the San Vicente and Usulatan regions. When the government wrested these areas from guerrilla control, it established a pacification program, a major goal of which was to relocate or resettle displaced persons on military controlled agricultural projects. A new agency, CONARA, was established in July, 1983 for this purpose. According to reports, CONARA sometimes uses coercive methods to induce people
to enter its programs, the most common of which is re-channeling food from displaced persons settlements to CONARA projects.

Only the registered displaced persons are entitled to the overwhelmingly U.S. funded assistance programs. Less than 15 percent of the registered displaced persons are in camps created to care for their needs. Other displaced Salvadorans have sought shelter with family and friends, or in squatter type settlements in or near regional capitals, and especially around San Salvador. The camps, at best, are crowded and dirty, food supplies are irregular almost everywhere, and medical attention is inadequate. Displaced persons, overwhelmingly, are unemployed. A U.S. funded jobs and health program provides some medical attention and pays half the minimum wage for short term employment, mostly for public works projects. This program provides vital income to the Salvadorans who participate in it; however, as participation is only temporary, the program can not help much to promote self-sufficiency. As for the displaced persons who are not in camps, and especially those in contested regions, they are likely to receive little government assistance, even if they have registered and are entitled to it.

A few thousand of the unregistered displaced persons are receiving assistance from the Salvadoran Catholic Archdiocese and other religious or humanitarian groups, including most prominently, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Salvadoran Red Cross, ICRC/RC. The various religious and humanitarian groups are fully caring for or providing some services for about 180,000 displaced persons, largely unregistered. The ICRC/RC provides food and medical assistance for about 80,000 Salvadorans, largely
unregistered, in the contested regions which are not reached by the other humanitarian agencies. By their own estimates, they reach only a fraction of the people in these areas in need of their services.

The Catholic Archdiocese operates closed camps to provide refuge and care for some 5,000 to 6,000 persons whom it considers to be "refugees" rather than displaced persons. The distinction is based on the grounds that these people have fled military aggression specifically directed against them and their families, hence they are escaping persecution not merely escaping general violence.* The Lutherans also run a camp for 800 people in this category, and are assisted in their work there by the Mennonites.

These churches house the "refugees" in closed camps which they cannot leave without grave risk. Even in the camps, they are subject to continuing military harassment and sometimes to direct attack. More than a dozen voluntary workers serving these camps have been arrested and tortured on grounds that they are aiding subversives. These allegations have been documented in the reports of several medical and humanitarian missions to El Salvador.

USAID has been a source of financial assistance for many of the organizations which assist the unregistered displaced persons, most significantly the ICRC/RC. The major agency involved in this assistance, the Catholic Archdiocese, has indicated that it is unwilling to take U.S funds, and asserts that the U.S. is so closely associated with the Salvadoran military that Archdiocese lists of people being assisted would fall into military hands. The U.S. has not

*Technically, only people who have left their countries of origin due to fear of persecution are considered refugees.
offered to fund the displaced persons programs of the Archdiocese.

The major portion of AID funding is directed to registered displaced persons. The $10 million jobs and health program reaches the 15 percent of registered displaced persons who are in camps, but is inadequate to the existing level of need, as already noted. US PL 480 food assistance is channeled through CONADES and also through some of the voluntary agencies.

Nicaragua: Considerable violence accompanied the early 1982 displacement of some 8,500 Miskito Indians from their traditional Rio Coco homes on the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast to the government-constructed Tasba pri settlement. As communities along the Atlantic Coast continue to be evacuated or relocated, some towns have grown tremendously. Puerto Cabezas, for example, has increased its population from 7,000 to 17,000 in the past two years. By all accounts, government policies on the Atlantic coast are now better planned and more humanely administered than they were in 1982. However, it appears there is still considerable disaffection. As the recent march of some 2,500 Miskitos to Honduras with U.S. Bishop Salvador Schlaefer demonstrated, reports of what is occurring on the Atlantic coast are often contradictory.

Since November, 1982, two government-initiated moves have taken place: In November, about 6,000 people from towns near the Honduran border were taken to nearby Sangni Laya, and in October, 1983 a few hundred people from four small communities were moved to the town of Sandybay. Although these moves were undoubtedly widely opposed, there were no reports of violence similar to what occurred with the earlier resettlements.

Communities along both the northern and southern borders in
Nicaragua continue to be moved, often to locations only a few kilometers from their homes, in order to remove residents from direct attacks across the border. These moves usually occur after considerable planning between community groups and government ministries, and people move willingly because of the persistent danger. Nonetheless, the moves entail substantial hardship. Those involved tend to be among the poorest peasants in the country. They leave villages with few resources and go to places with virtually none: houses, sanitation facilities, schools, etc. all must be built by the residents as they plant the first crops. The Nicaraguan government provides assistance, credit and some material, but lacks the resources to meet the needs of the newly settled. In the long run those being moved may improve their quality of life, insofar as they are given better land to farm than the land they left behind; yet for the time being, the lives of the displaced will continue to be difficult.

A few, largely European, humanitarian organizations have been assisting the Nicaraguan government with relief efforts and construction projects for displaced persons. The ICRC is assisting people in areas where there is armed conflict on the Atlantic Coast, the northern border and, most recently, in the south.

**Some Conclusions and Recommendations**

Displaced Persons: Assistance and protection issues are clearly related, especially in programs affecting displaced persons. To the degree that international agencies administer aid and directly implement assistance projects, their presence will also tend to discourage serious abuses of human rights. In Central America,
assistance channeled through local churches or other independent agencies in the country is frequently more even-handed and less politicized than government assistance. Since the personnel in such organizations are vulnerable to reprisals, however, their protection role is almost always limited to gathering information about abuses, and making this information available to international sources.

The Guatemalan practice of distributing international assistance through military channels undermines the protective roles that international agencies can play and enhances the power of the agency most responsible for the flight of displaced persons. The U.S. should insist that its public assistance programs be administered by credible social service agencies, a category which does not include the Guatemalan military. The U.S. government, further, should insist that international and domestic personnel working on behalf of the displaced be adequately protected from the Guatemalan security forces and the death squads associated with the security forces.

The Nicaraguan government has pledged to rectify past brutality toward Miskito Indians and other sectors of poor peasants who oppose the Sandinista government. Nevertheless, many observers contend that lower-level military officers still frequently resort to brutality when they encounter opposition from people in remote areas. Here, too, an increased international presence could exert considerable humanitarian influence. For this reason, as well as on humanitarian grounds, it is important that the U.S. continue to support the newly established ICRC programs in Nicaragua.

Many private voluntary agencies, anxious to help Salvadoran displaced persons, have declined to become involved in existing operations because of the way the Salvadoran government manages the
displaced persons programs, as well as because of the persistent danger to which people working in these programs are exposed. As noted, the danger derives both from the general violence in the country and from security force reprisals against displaced persons programs believed to benefit people opposed to the government. Many humanitarian agencies also consider that the programs, as now constituted, are too politicized. Although projects supported by AID serve essential needs for large numbers of displaced persons, AID's food assistance and medical programs have been criticized in the press, in Congressional hearings, and in the reports of private missions for being politicized and subject to corruption and mismanagement.

Finally, it is important to emphasize, that in all three countries, the hardships endured by displaced persons are widely shared in the general population: The Nicaraguan government's social programs have been slowed by generally scarce resources, a problem exacerbated by the military attacks across its borders. Food and other necessities are in short supply throughout the country. The Guatemalan military has created a virtual scorched earth in major areas of the highlands where the Indian population used to be able to survive by its own efforts. Most lived in poverty prior to the military pacification program that began in 1979, but since that time conditions have dramatically deteriorated, and large sectors of the population now live at near starvation levels. In El Salvador, health standards have dropped dramatically, as have productivity and employment. The displaced persons camps, unacceptably poor as they
may be, are less miserable than many of the areas in which the so-called "marginal" population lives.

Refugees: The refugees in Central America are considerably better assisted and protected than are the displaced persons. Nevertheless, major problems remain unresolved: The condition of the Guatemalans arriving in Mexico is still alarmingly poor, and efforts to improve the quality of their assistance have encountered serious logistical as well as political obstacles; the Nicaraguans who continue to cross the border into Costa Rica still face months in overcrowded transit camps, and the Salvadorans in Honduras face a choice between accepting a move they vigorously oppose or returning to a country where they fear for their lives. Most difficult to address is the problem of thousands of would-be refugees in Mexico, Guatemala and to a smaller extent Costa Rica, Honduras and Belize who are not recognized as such, and hence do not benefit from any international assistance programs.

U.S. contributions to the UNHCR have been an essential component in the international response to refugee flows in the region. The U.S. government pays about a quarter of the UNHCR budget. The U.S. has influenced refugee policy in many ways. For example, U.S. pressure was a positive factor in leading to improved conditions for Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica and Honduras. U.S. influence has also been a factor in decisions about the location of Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras. In this latter case, U.S. concern has been largely motivated, by its own security considerations.
While the U.S. will perceive refugees in the framework of its larger political and military strategies, it is also important that it avoid allowing refugee protection to be sacrificed as a result. As it appears that the Salvadorans will be moved during the summer to the interior of Honduras, despite the opposition from voluntary agencies, the U.S should use the considerable influence it also has with the Honduran government to assure that the latter cooperates with the UNHCR by providing the promised conditions for the Salvadorans, and that it guarantees the refugees' safety. With regard to the Guatemalans in Mexico, it is to be hoped that the U.S. will not attempt to convince either the Mexican government or the UNHCR to move forward with plans to repatriate the Guatemalans until such time as both agree that the refugees can safely return.

Obviously, the U.S. has an additional interest in maintaining adequate facilities for refugees in Central America. Absent these, the refugees are far more likely to find a way to reach the United States itself. In this regard, however, it is important that policymakers not mislead the American public with attempts to gain domestic support for U.S. policies in El Salvador that elicit fears of thousands of "feet people" trekking north because Central America has "gone Communist." There is no basis at this time to suppose that larger numbers of people will flee leftist governments than are presently fleeing the rightist regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala, or that people fleeing leftist as opposed to rightist oppression have more meritorious claims to refugee and asylum status. There is, however, reason to expect that the restoration of peace in the
area would stem the flow and allow many—including Central Americans presently in the U.S—to return to their homes.