# Guatemala's Refugees: Victims and Shapers of Government Policies

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*During the past year, Guatemala, along with the rest of troubled Central America, has been thrust to the forefront of the world stage. Yet the international community has been selective in where it directs its attention, tending to emphasize the strategic importance of the region while neglecting the human aspects of Central America's turmoil. In the following article, Deirdre Kelly focuses on the human costs of Guatemala's ongoing civil strife. Kelly argues that the Guatemalan peasants who have sought refuge in neighboring Mexico have significantly affected both the domestic and foreign policies of Guatemala and Mexico. The author's findings suggest that it is time to reevaluate the role of refugees as a policy-determining factor in international affairs.*

Yesterday, 25 of us from the same village arrived here and many others are still coming behind us, also fleeing. We fled because we thought they would kill us. It took three days to get here because we walked slowly, by night, carrying the small children. They cried because they were tired; but it is better to be tired and alive.

They have already killed many and taken the men away. They took my husband and they killed my brother on the spot and told us, "We are going to finish off all the Indians." So we fled. It is not possible to live in Guatemala. They have killed many people — the children, the women — it doesn't matter who; they are killing everybody. They say that we are all guerrillas and that is why they are killing us. . . . The ones doing it are Rios Montt's soldiers. . . .

We have just gotten here but we want to return to our village as soon as we know that they won't kill us, our children and our husbands. We are sad because we did not want to leave our land, our corn, our animals, our houses.

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— testimony of a female refugee who fled from her village in San Marcos, Guatemala on May 26, 1982, transcribed from a taped interview with Father Luis Gurriaran in Chiapas, Mexico.[1]

Tens of thousands of Guatemalans — mostly indigenous *campesinos* (peasants) — have been fleeing into southern Mexico in recent months, focusing world attention on the political turmoil within their home country. With few exceptions, they say they are escaping from the tactics of terror and torture employed by the Guatemalan Army against them. They are members of an identifiable ethnic group which the army suspects of either supporting revolutionaries or directly participating in subversive activities. Though many would prefer simply to work their small cornfields in peace, indigenous peasants are being forced to choose sides in a civil war. The hard choice for thousands has been to cross international boundaries in order to save their lives and the lives of their families.

That a country is torn by internal political strife does not in and of itself require foreign governments — even neighbors — to take a stand. But the outpouring of refugees that such conflict creates cannot be ignored. International scrutiny has in fact focused on both the refugee-producing and refugee-receiving countries. Public opinion is being shaped in forums ranging from the United Nations to local churches and is brought to bear through such organizations as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the National Council of Churches.

A study of Guatemala and its recent relations with neighbor Mexico clearly demonstrates how significant a factor refugees can be in international politics. The migration of thousands of peasants from one country to another invites speculation by the international community about the forces in the sender country generating such an exodus. The refugee-receiving country, for its part, must deal with the refugees themselves and, at the same time, preserve a sensitive relationship with the country on its border.

This article first examines the ethnic and class conflicts within Guatemala that have produced the outflow of refugees into Mexico. Present Guatemalan government policies are described in light of their roots in long-standing economic and social disparities and deep-seated ethnic prejudices. Then, after an overview of the present situation of the Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas, Mexico, the relationship between Mexican foreign policy and refugee policy is analyzed, with specific reference to the political dynamics between the governments of Mexico and Guatemala.

1. *Guatemala: Government Against the People. Witnesses of Indian Massacres, March-September 1982*, Document prepared for the Conference on Human Rights in Guatemala, Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies and the Washington Office on Latin America, Washington, D.C., 21 October 1982, pp. 4-5.

## Determinants of Guatemala's Refugee Flows

### *The Socioeconomic Background*

Although the current civil conflict in Guatemala is not easily categorized, Astri Suhrke may offer a useful device for analysis. Her typology lists the following varieties of refugee-producing conflicts in Third World countries: (1) independence struggles; (2) ethnic conflicts with autonomy/separatist dimensions; (3) internal ethnic conflict not related to separatist/autonomy; (4) class conflict "over basic patterns of resource allocation and power sharing in a formally independent state;" (5) inter-elite power struggles; (6) state terrorism; and (7) international wars.[2]

Three of these types of conflict — state terrorism, internal ethnic conflict, and class conflict — seem particularly applicable to Guatemala's present refugee situation. State terrorism has plagued Guatemala for several decades and was brought to recent international attention during the Romeo Lucas Garcia regime. In 1981, Amnesty International published a report entitled *Guatemala: A Government Program of Political Murder* in which it showed "how the selection of targets for detention and murder, and the deployment of official forces for extra-legal operations can be pinpointed to secret offices in an annex of Guatemala's National Palace, under the direct control of the President of the Republic."[3] Major targets of repression included political leaders, trade unionists, peasant organization leaders, the Roman Catholic clergy, educators and other leaders of public opinion. In such a situation, as Suhrke points out, the refugee outflow is gradual. Many of these victims of state terrorism flee to Mexico, but they usually do not become an economic burden to the host country because they are relatively well off and arrive singly or in small groups.

The indigenous *campesinos* presently taking refuge in southern Mexico, however, are generally subsistence farmers who have arrived *en masse* and are creating concern about the threat they pose to the economic well-being of Mexico. These are refugees from both internal ethnic and class conflicts within Guatemala. Before turning to a separate analysis of these two types of conflict, it should be noted that in reality they are highly interrelated. In Guatemala, the term "Indian" is an ethnic and social, not necessarily a racial, identification. The Indian-*ladino* distinction often made in official statistics is misleading in that there are no more "pure-blooded" Indians in Guatemala or Mexico today. As anthropologist Eric

2. Astri Suhrke, "Global Refugee Movements and Strategies: An Overview," paper presented at the Wingspread Workshop on Immigration and Refugees, sponsored by the Rockefeller, Ford and Johnson Foundations, 17-20 August 1981, pp. 17-22.

3. Amnesty International, *Guatemala: A Government Program of Political Murder* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1981), p. 3.

Wolf points out, more than two-thirds of the Indian population was wiped out between 1519 and 1650 by the Spanish, so that after the Conquest the genes introduced by 300,000 Spaniards and 250,000 African Negroes "entered an Indian gene pool much reduced in size and viability." Consequently,

> All Indians are heirs of a process of genetic interchange with Europeans and Africans, just as all Europeans and Africans have been involved in genetic exchanges with Indians. As a result, all are hybrid; all are, to use the Middle American word, "mestizos." At the same time they differ in the degrees to which their genetic equipment contains contributions from each of the other groups.[4]

Social characteristics, not race, set the Indians apart from the *ladinos* today. Indigenous groups in Guatemala have their own languages, customs and dress. These ethnic traits have made the Indians an easily identifiable social group, one that has been shunted aside and exploited throughout Guatemalan history.

Guatemala's Indians also find themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder. Not all members of Guatemala's lower class are Indians, but virtually all Indians are members of Guatemala's lower class. Most Indians lack economic resources and political power, despite the fact that they constitute 60 percent of Guatemala's 7.3 million people, according to mid-1980 UN statistics.

In Guatemala, wealth and class position are primarily determined by land ownership. Today, the indigenous majority owns little or no land, is undernourished and largely illiterate, while a tiny minority of the population — all of them *ladino* or foreign — own the majority of the arable land. The key to understanding this unequal distribution of land and the unequal class structure which it produces is the Spanish Conquest. Between 1530 and 1600, The land grant *encomienda* (trusteeship) system was established in Central America. Through the *encomienda*, Spanish colonists had a legal right to Indian labor at low pay in what amounted to disguised slavery. The King of Spain, fearing that the colonists would become feudal lords and challenge his power, first outlawed slavery and then abolished the *encomienda* in 1549, but his decrees were ignored.[5]

As the Spanish influence began to wane at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the semi-feudal *hacienda* system began to take root. The colonists bought up the land and instituted peonage. As Eric Wolf points out, the

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4. Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 30.
5. Ibid., pp. 189-90.

*hacienda* system was purposely inefficient in its land usage because the colonists feared that an overproduction of export crops would lower agricultural prices and therefore profits as well.

> [The colonists] needed and wanted more land, not to raise more crops, but to take land from the Indians in order to force them to leave their [subsistence] holdings and to become dependent on the *hacienda* for land and work.[6]

Neither independence from Spain in 1821 nor the beginning of industrialization in the twentieth century alleviated the unequal distribution of land and wealth in Guatemala. One significant attempt at agrarian reform through constitutional means, however, deserves mention. In the decade 1944-1954 — a period referred to by Guatemalans as the Revolution — two democratically elected presidents, Juan Jose Arevalo and Jacobo Arbenz, made economic and social reforms within a capitalist, as opposed to a socialist, framework. In 1952 Arbenz initiated the first significant land reform law in Guatemalan history. Its aim was to free unused land for cultivation by peasants while compensating the owners for lost acreage. The American-owned United Fruit Company, the largest landowner in Guatemala, stood to lose a great deal since only 15 percent of its 500,000 acres were under cultivation.[7] Arbenz compensated United Fruit Company based on the banana exporter's own evaluation of its worth for tax purposes. But with the backing of the U.S. State Department, the company demanded fifteen times the amount it had received in compensation for its lost acreage. In a series of events that is well-documented elsewhere, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored and financed a coup to overthrow the popular Arbenz government and installed a pro-U.S. ruler, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas.[8] One of the new government's first acts was to return to the United Fruit Company all of the land it previously owned.

Today, land reform is virtually nonexistent, and government-touted programs offer little hope of change. One such plan implemented in the 1960s — colonization — was presented as a solution to the land squeeze. But as one researcher observes:

> In practice, colonization has meant opening up virgin lands generally owned by the state to avoid touching privately-owned

6. Ibid., p. 205.
7. Suzanne Jonas, "The Democracy Which Gave Way: The Guatemalan Revolution of 1944-1954," in *Guatemala*, eds. Suzanne Jonas and David Tobis (New York: North American Congress on Latin America), pp. 44-50.
8. Jonas, pp. 44-85; Stephen C. Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1982); Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

> but uncultivated fertile lands. Most important, these colonization schemes appear to be a new mechanism for recreating the latifundio-minifundio system in previously uncultivated areas, as more small colonizers are reduced to a subsistence level or below, and are forced to work for the new landowners.[9]

In some cases, peasant colonists have been forced off their land by the army. A recent, well-publicized example occurred on June 17, 1981: Army troops occupied seven agricultural cooperatives in western Peten department, killing approximately fifty people, burning houses and fields, torturing community leaders, and forcing 3,500 to 4,000 Indian peasants to cross the Usumacinta river into Chiapas.[10] Reginaldo Aguilar, a founding member of the El Arbolito Cooperative and now a refugee in Mexico, described his community's accomplishments that were wiped out by the army:

> We grew corn, beans, rice. We built our houses communally. We built a health center, a room for meetings, a little school, two houses to train health promoters and a communal kitchen for gatherings. We had three launches with two motors and an electrical plant that functioned from 6 to 9 p.m. and for two hours during the day for refrigeration in the communal store. The harvest was sold by the cooperative. We weren't rich, but the little bit that we had we had achieved with many years of work and sacrifice. The work in the jungle is very hard. Now we have had to abandon all that was our life, and even our own country, because of the persecution and killings that the soldiers carry out. They attack us as if we were at war.[11]

Anthropologist Beatriz Manz speculates that the area was being cleared for oil exploration. She points out that, "Four areas have been designated for exploration. Two of these, known as areas 'F' and 'K,' are located in the Usumacinta area, home of the 19 cooperatives, which produced the latest refugees . . . ."[12]

Besides oil, nickel and copper were recently discovered in the area which cuts across Peten and other provinces north of the Guatemalan highlands

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9. Andrea Brown, "Land of the Few: Rural Land Ownership in Guatemala," in *Guatemala*, p. 21.
10. Blanche Petrich, "Demandan Asil 4 Mil Campesinos Guatemaltecos; Estan en Chiapas," *UnoMasUno*, 3 July 1981, pp. 5-6.
11. Latin America Task Force (LATF), *Testimonies from Peasants of El Peten* (Detroit: LATF, 1981), p. 10.
12. Beatriz Manz, "Refugees — Guatemalan Troops Clear Peten for Oil Exploration," *Cultural Survival* 5 (Summer 1981): 16.

known as the Franha Transversal del Norte (FTN). This strip of land is also called the "Zone of the Generals" because, since the discovery of valuable minerals, more and more land has fallen into the hands of military leaders. The Lucas Garcia family, for instance, owns 100,000 acres of land along the route of a 200-kilometer oil pipeline that runs from oil wells in Alta Verapaz to the Atlantic coast.[13] International petroleum companies also own substantial amounts of land in northern Guatemala.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the colonization programs implemented in the 1960s resulted in a less equitable distribution of land in the 1970s. In fact, with the rural population increasing at an annual rate of 3.3 percent and the land available to subsistence farmers being further subdivided, the situation has actually worsened. A 1964 agrarian census revealed that only 2.1 percent of Guatemalan landowners possessed 62.2 percent of the arable land, mainly large coffee, cotton, banana, sugar and cattle estates of forty-five hectares or more. In contrast, 87 percent of the landowners — subsistence farmers with less than seven hectares each — owned 19 percent of the arable land.[14]

By 1979, land had become concentrated in even fewer hands: 2.2 percent of the land-owning population owned 65.4 percent of total farmland, while 89.9 percent of the landowners, with plots of less than seven hectares, owned 16.2 percent of the cultivable land.[15] According to 1975 State Department figures, 26 percent of the rural population owns no land, and 90 percent lives on plots too small to provide a minimal living. It is this unequal distribution of land that explains why 83 percent of the agricultural population receives only 35 percent of total rural income.[16]

As the indigenous and *ladino* rural population is increasingly drawn into the cash economy by the necessity of buying such items as food, medicine, clothing and tools, the landless and near landless are forced to become migrant farm laborers. Forced labor is not a recent development in Guatemala. Before 1944, a vagrancy law compelled rural residents with a specified amount of land to work 100 to 150 days on a plantation or for the state. Now, economic necessity alone ensures that a ready pool of cheap labor continues to be available.

In the off-season, *campesinos* borrow money from individuals within their community who have been hired by big plantation owners. Then, during

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13. Rarihokwats, ed., *Guatemala! The Horror and the Hope* (York, Penn.: Four Arrows, 1982), p. 37.
14. Brown, p. 15.
15. Shelton H. Davis and Julie Jodson, *Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala* (Boston: Oxfam America, 1982), p. 27.
16. Ernest B. Johnston, Jr., "Development Bank Lending to Guatemala," *Department of State Bulletin*, March 1982, p. 41.

the harvest, trucks are sent to carry peasant farmers and often entire families from the western and central highlands to work on the Pacific coast coffee, cotton and sugar cane estates for several months in order to pay off their debts. Approximately 600,000 people follow this pattern of internal seasonal migration each year. Poor conditions in the migrant camps and exploitive wages — some get less than the minimum wage of $3.20 a day — have inspired a few strikes among the peasants but have spawned little government action to reform an economic system which finds cheap labor the key to its success. As one government official responsible for Indian affairs explained: "The politicians believe that if the Indians do better they will not work on the plantations. That is the sad truth."[17]

Given that Guatemala's indigenous peoples constitute over half of its population and that they provide the cheap labor so vital to the export-oriented economy, the Indians are perceived by both the government and the guerrilla forces to hold the key to the current civil conflict. However, the tactics used by the army and the guerrillas to "win over" the large Indian population to their cause have differed dramatically, to say the least. In the last two years, the army, in the name of ridding the countryside of communist subversives, has massacred Indians, burned villages, forcibly conscripted vast numbers of Indian youths, used torture and conducted a scorched-earth campaign in the rural highlands. Not surprisingly, large numbers of Indians have either fled the country or joined the guerrillas who — in an effort to incorporate the Indians into their movement — speak the indigenous languages, wear native dress and help the *campesinos* organize to defend themselves against army "pacification" tactics. After their survey of 115 North Americans who had recently participated in rural-based programs sponsored by various development, relief, religious and research organizations, anthropologists Sheldon Davis and Julie Hodson concluded:

> The army and the guerrillas present very different faces to the rural population. It is the actions, rather than the ideologies, of these two groups which determine their acceptance or rejection by the people. Most peasants are not interested in the ideological propaganda of a right-wing army or a left-wing guerrilla movement. It is the peasants' personal experience of the army and guerrillas which determines their political allegiance and not their ideological rhetoric which is of greater concern to urban intellectuals and international policymakers.[18]

17. Clifford Krauss, "Guatemala's Indian Wars," *Nation*, 14 March 1981, p. 306.
18. Davis and Hodson, p. 30.

In its operations, the army unleashed so much violence in the countryside that, for the first time, significant numbers of Indians joined or gave support to the guerrilla forces in their area. A turning point came in March 1980 when troops surrounded Nebaj in the Quiche department and forced three thousand people to stand in line to receive identity cards. Some people "disappeared" and, when their bodies were later found, it was evident that they had been tortured before being killed. When women from outlying villages came looking for their husbands, the army opened fire; six women and five men were killed and thirty-five wounded. Sean McKenna, the chaplain of one of the main guerrilla groups, explains the great cultural significance of this massacre: "In the Indian culture, women are seen as the source of life and therefore the means of survival. Hence the murder of the women in Nebaj was viewed by the elders as a direct threat to the survival of the Ixil [Indians]."[19]

Army atrocities in the highlands escalated throughout 1981 and 1982. Many quotes by members of the army which explicitly state their ethnic bias against the Indians have led officials from outside church, government and human rights organizations to use the word "genocide" to characterize the army's counter-insurgency campaign. U.S. Representative Tom Harkin, who has visited Guatemala several times and monitors human rights abuses there, maintains that the present government policy "borders on genocide." According to Harkin, "every credible source" has claimed that the rural killing has increased under Rios Montt. "The government has a policy of liquidating Indians, and Rios Montt has given his tacit approval."[20]

On July 17, 1982, some five hundred soldiers and six colonels arrived by truck in the rural Indian village of San Francisco; helicopters arrived shortly afterwards with supplies. Women and children were rounded up and put in a house and the village chapel, while the men were gathered into the jail. One survivor, now in Chiapas, described what happened next:

> The war started first with the women in the house. With shooting, with pure lead, they killed the poor women. Afterward they burned the house. They then turned on the chapel. No firing, just machetes and knives. We heard the noise of crying women and children and they said our turn was next.

The soldiers then opened fire on the men. Over three hundred died that

19. Quoted in Tommie Sue Montgomery, "Indians Fighting Back," *News From Guatemala* 4 (October 1982): 6.

20. U.S., Congress, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., 16 September 1982, *Congressional Record* 128: E-4258.

day. The handful of survivors and *campesinos* in neighboring hamlets fled to Mexico.[21]

Dozens of communities have been destroyed in a like manner since the March 1982 coup. In November an inquiry team organized by the National Council of Churches (NCC), invited by Rios Montt to investigate alleged violations of human rights, documented several such massacres and concluded in its report:

> There are deeply rooted racial prejudices of Ladinos (Guatemalans of mixed Spanish-Indian blood or those identifying with them) toward Indian people and a failure fully to understand the Indian cultures and especially their ties to the land. Government intent to make Guatemala one nation "in place of 23" carries the threat of extinction for the rich cultures of the Indian groups.[22]

Though the NCC characterizes these destructive prejudices as "racial," it must be reemphasized that cultural attributes are what distinguish an Indian from a *ladino*. Language, customs and dress are passed down from parent to child; one learns to be an Indian — it is not just a biological given — as the following words of a Quiche peasant woman make clear:

> When we were very small, our parents always taught us to remain faithful to our ancestors, to our culture, to our traditions. . . . It was my father who taught me to be a Christian when I was very small, since the time I learned to speak, and also (taught me) to be an Indian and not become a "ladino;" he told me that we Indians had to preserve our dress, because otherwise we would lose our dignity.[23]

But a *New York Times* journalist reports that Indian women are now begging Catholic nuns working in the highlands for *ladino* clothes. Said one nun: "They're terrified because their embroideries show what village they come from and, what's more, these identify them as Indians."[24]

Not only are the Indians losing part of their culture as a result of the army's counter-insurgency campaign, they are also losing their sons. Forced conscription is one of the main reasons the Indians have become increasingly antagonistic toward the army. The military commissioners round up young

21. Alan Riding, "Guatemalans Tell of Murder of 300," *New York Times*, 12 October 1982, p. 3.
22. National Council of Churches of Christ, "Report of an Inquiry Team to Guatemala," 23 November 1982, p. 11.
23. "Participation of Women in Guatemalan Revolution," *News from Guatemala* 4 (October 1982): 2.
24. Quoted in Marlise Silmons, "For 500,000 Guatemalans, the War Comes Home," *New York Times*, 6 October 1982, p. 2.

men and carry them away in trucks, often without notifying their families. As a former conscript soldier of Kekchi Indian origin told Amnesty International, the peasants have begun to resist this practice:

> What happens now is that the military commissioners are afraid because really the peasants now know what's going on and what they do now is get together in crowds and if the commissioner dares to seize one of their group, what they do is beat them up. . . .

Such community resistance may have been effective for a time, but now soldiers and reservists help conduct the roundups. Basic training methods include brainwashing. According to one former conscript,

> The army officers said to me, if you discover your father is in subversive movements — I didn't understand the word — "subversive," they said, is whatever is against the government and is what causes disorder in Guatemala — if your father is involved in groups like that, kill him, because if you don't he'll try and kill us.

When asked if he could have killed his father, mother or sister, he replied: "Anyone who turned up, if we were ordered to I could have done it then, that's how I used to feel, I'd do anything the army told me."[25]

Not only has the violence perpetrated by the army in the countryside directly contributed to the loss of Indian culture and to the breakup of families, but it has also forced many indigenous peasants off what little land they possess. A Quiche woman explains part of the special ties the Indians feel to the land:

> . . . before sowing, we had to ask the earth for permission to wound her, because for us the land is sacred; we had the right to wound her in order to sustain ourselves. Likewise, when we cut down trees or branches to build our houses, we had to perform a ceremony to ask nature to forgive us.[26]

Scorched-earth tactics which destroy homes and crops and people ensure that refugees will not soon return to the area they once cherished. In the face of such incomprehensible violence, one Chajul Indian refugee in Chiapas concluded: "I guess the government does not want any more Indian race."[27]

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25. Amnesty International, pp. 20-21.
26. "Participation of Women in Guatemalan Revolution," p. 2.
27. Quoted in Ricardo Chavira, "Guatemalan Refugees: They Talk of Death," *San Diego Union*, 5 May 1982, p. 7.

In contrast with these army practices, the four major guerrilla groups active in Guatemala today say that respect for ethnic differences is one reason they have taken up arms against the government. Prior to the March 1982 elections, they proclaimed a five-point program, the third point being that "The revolution will guarantee equality between Indians and ladinos, and will end cultural oppression and discrimination."[28]

Refugees and local church and development officials say that the estimated six thousand armed rebels do not engage in the indiscriminate murder and torture of civilians for which the army is blamed. Academics and a priest interviewing refugees in Chiapas asked about the possibility that guerrilla groups were responsible for the massacres, and the answers were invariably negative.[29]

A technique recently used by army soldiers is to disguise themselves as guerrillas in order to make it appear that the guerrillas are responsible for a particular massacre or to locate which peasants are willing to give food and shelter to guerrillas. (There have also been reports of guerrillas dressing as soldiers in order to discover government informers.) Apparently, however, the peasants are not fooled by this masquerading. Said one refugee: "We know the soldiers very well because they live in posts in our towns. We also know their officials, the lieutenants and their commanders: these are the ones who come to kill our people. We have seen them."[30] Other ways in which the peasants say they are able to identify army personnel include the use of helicopters or trucks, regular army footwear (the guerrillas go barefoot or wear Indian sandals), language, haircut styles and the camouflage uniforms of the *kaibiles* (special counter-insurgency troops).

As Philip Berryman of the American Friends Service Committee points out, the army, aided by Israeli and Argentine advisors, has recently improved its intelligence gathering and therefore has better targeted its violence.

> It would seem that the repression is now based on more information. This does not mean that it is less — in fact the figures indicate higher numbers of people being killed. Nor does it mean they are dying in combat. It means that the army is identifying those sectors of the civilian population suspected of sympathizing or collaborating with the opposition and ruthlessly attacking them. The victims are non-combatants but

28. Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, "Declaration of Revolutionary Unity in Guatemala," *Latin American Perspectives* 9 (Summer 1982): 121.
29. *Guatemala: Government Against the People*, p. 34.
30. Ibid.

may indeed be in the opposition; hence the policy of attacking whole villages.[31]

### *Present Policies of the Rios Montt Government*

The ongoing repression of the Indian peasants by the ruling class *ladinos* and the army provides a backdrop to the formulation of Guatemala's present government policies. The presence of so many refugees in Mexico became a campaign issue in the March 7, 1982, presidential elections in Guatemala. Mario Sandoval Alarcon, the candidate for the extreme right-wing anti-communist National Liberation Movement (MLN), said his party advocated the invasion of Mexico in order to destroy guerrilla camps there. The right-wing National Authentic Central (CAN) candidate Gustavo Anzuelo Vielman maintained that "Mexico's dictatorship is worse and bloodier than Nicaragua's."[32] The winner of the election, former Defense Minister Guevara, had also been an outspoken critic of Mexico.

Approximately two weeks later, on March 23, a group of dissident young officers close to the MLN seized power in a bloodless coup. Denouncing the elections as fraudulent, the officers installed a three-man military junta. On June 9 one of the three leaders, General Rios Montt, effectively dissolved the junta and assumed the sole executive and legislative functions as President of Guatemala and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

Rios Montt had been an anti-insurgency specialist in Colonel Arana Osorio's "pacification campaign" in the late 1960s, during which an estimated ten thousand *campesinos* had been killed over a three-year period.[33] Today the army sees its primary task as defeating the opposition, and since large numbers of people — mainly indigenous peasants — supported this opposition, they must be persuaded to switch their allegiance or be killed along with the armed rebels. As Rios Montt himself told a *New York Times* journalist, "Look, the problem of the war is not just a question of who is shooting. For each one who is shooting there are ten working behind him."[34]

At the same time, it is recognized that Indian peasants, despite the threat they represent to the government as opposition sympathizers, constitute an important element in Guatemala's economy. Three-quarters of Guatemala's exports depend on Indian labor. As early as July 24, 1981, Carlos Alarcon Monsanto, then the Labor and Social Planning Minister, said that Guatemala

31. Philip Berryman, "Questions and Answers about the Current Situation in Guatemala," American Friends Service Committee, October 1982, p. 1.
32. Quoted in Rarihokwats, p. 98.
33. Victor Perera, "Two Cultures, Two Extinctions," *Nation*, 27 November 1982, p. 557.
34. Warren Hoge, "Victimized Indians Hold Key to Guatemalan Conflict," *New York Times*, 9 May 1981, p. 4.

must sign bilateral agreements with neighboring countries, e.g. Mexico, to "avert peasant migrations." He expressed particular concern about the "drain of needed farm labor."[35] In short, the peasant class cannot be summarily eliminated without great cost to the *ladinos*.

Toward these somewhat conflicting ends of eliminating the guerrillas and their popular base of support and of winning the loyalty of the indigenous *campesino* population, Rios Montt declared a "state of siege" effective July 1, 1982, and initiated the "*fusiles y frijoles*" (guns and beans) program. Under the state of siege, all police forces come under control of the army, expanding its size from 17,000 to 25,000 people.[36]

The "guns and beans" program provided for the creation of a civil militia that added another 25,000 people to the fighting forces, according to army estimates in September 1982. In return for joining the civil militia and working in army-implemented public works projects, the army provides villagers and refugees with food and medical assistance. According to *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner: "An army officer in Cunen said that the Government's message to the Indians and peasants was simple: 'If you are with us, we'll feed you, if not, we'll kill you.' "[37]

In addition to its direct dealings with the Indians, the Guatemalan army has managed to frustrate the efforts of international relief agencies seeking to bring relief to displaced peasants. In June 1982, the UN World Food Program started a four-month aid program for the "displaced," and by September 4,500 tons of emergency food supplies had been provided.[38] The terms of the $2 million donation call for "close collaboration" between the government and the Roman Catholic Caritas aid agency, based in Guatemala, in the distribution of the food. But the army, wanting to ensure that no food goes to "guerrilla sympathizers," has refused to work with Caritas.

Instead, missionaries from the California-based Church of the Word, to which President Rios Montt belongs, have been called in to help dole out aid coming from the UN as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).[39] Indeed, fundamentalist Christian churches have played a special role in the Guatemalan conflict ever since Rios Montt came to power declaring, "I have confidence in my God, my master and

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35. Quoted in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (Hereafter cited as *FBIS*) *Latin America Report*, 30 July 1981.
36. Delia Miller and Roland Seeman, *Background Information on Guatemala, the Armed Forces and U.S. Military Training* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981), pp. 8-10.
37. Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Enlists Religion in Battle," *New York Times*, 18 July 1982, p. 3.
38. Marlise Simons, "Guatemalans Adding a Few Twists to 'Pacification,' " *New York Times*, 12 December 1982, p.E3.
39. Simons, "For 500,000 Guatemalans, the War Comes Home," p. 2.

my king, that he will guide me. Only he can grant and take away power."[40] Several American journalists witnessed a religious-military rally, apparently a commonplace event now in Guatemala, on a soccer field in the Quiche village of Cunen at which Francisco Bach, a preacher in the Church of God, told the assembled villagers, "He who resists the authorities is resisting the will of God."[41]

Leaving aside the question of Rios Montt's supposed divine endorsement, it is clear that gaining control over the peasant population is not the only reason behind the "guns and beans" program. Peasants in areas of conflict have been relocated and enlisted to build "model villages" of five hundred people where they will be under the "protection" (control) of the army. For this development plan, the financially ailing Guatemalan government is presently seeking funds from international agencies. The coordination of development is, however, the responsibility of the army.[42]

Through November 1982, the implementation of the "guns and beans" strategy greatly contributed to the flow of refugees out of Guatemala. According to a male refugee from Huehuetenango department:

> We came here because there in San Miguel the army is burning houses and obliging people to burn houses. If we don't burn them, they kill us. We are not in agreement with burning the houses of our brothers, that is why we left. The army comes to our villages and forces us to go with them to burn and kill people. They make us go with no arms, just sticks, and they say: "The people you see, you should beat to death because they are guerrillas and if you don't kill them, we will kill you." But we are not criminals and we don't want to kill people, so we came here.[43]

Those who remain have few options. The leader of one civil patrol, when asked by a visiting reporter if he had been "forced to choose between life and death," replied, "That's the way it is."[44]

The international press likens the Guatemalan government's "model villages" to "strategic hamlets" used by the United States during the Vietnam War to control the rural Vietnamese population. Such comparisons and charges by officials from church and human rights organizations that

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40. Raymond Bonner, "Guatemalan Junta's Chief Says God Guides Him," *New York Times*, 10 June 1982, p. 9.
41. Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Enlists," p. 3.
42. National Council of Churches, pp. 8-9.
43. *Guatemala: Government Against the People*, pp. 20-21.
44. Gordon D. Mott, "Rios Montt's Irregulars Not Exactly Volunteers," *San Jose Mercury*, 26 December 1982, p. 20.

the army is attempting to exterminate an entire people have prompted Rios Montt to launch a sophisticated propaganda campaign. On September 15, he created the "Council of State" to represent traditional parties, the private sector, universities and other institutional bodies. Of the thirty members, ten are supposed to be representatives of the four largest Indian linguistic groups, although no indication was given as to how these people would be chosen. The four political parties which supported the Rios Montt coup boycotted the Council because, being only an advisory body, it has no real power, and they felt, with an allotment of five seats, that they were sorely underrepresented. Critics charge that "the creation of the Council is basically a government propaganda move to give the military regime a facade of democracy."[45]

In a similar face-saving attempt, Rios Montt invited the National Council of Churches to investigate alleged human rights violations, specifically the massacre of some of the refugees from San Martin Jilotepeque while they were in an army-run refugee camp in Choatalun, Chimaltenango department. This invitation was well-publicized by the Guatemalan government, but the results were not. According to the NCC report issued in November, "The army did use informants and extrajudicial killings of people from among the groups of refugees that came down from the mountains into Choatalun in the fall of 1982. . . . There is an atmosphere of fear and an attitude of submission among the people."[46]

## Mexico's Refugee Policy

### *Conditions in Chiapas, Mexico*

The plight of Guatemala's Indian peasants takes place not only in their home country but also in neighboring Mexico, where they have found some relief from the policies of Rios Montt. The refugees have tended to concentrate near the Mexican-Guatemalan border in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Here they remain, in a precarious position subject to the vagaries of both Mexican policy and the occasional intrusions of the Guatemalan army.

Prior to the increase of violence in the Guatemalan countryside in 1980, according to the Bureau of Migration in Chiapas, sixty thousand Guatemalans per year were permitted to enter Mexico to help with the harvest. As the situation in Guatemala deteriorated, however, some migrants chose not

45. Guatemala News & Information Bureau, "New Government Policy: 'Beans and Guns,' " *Guatemala!* 3 (November/December 1982): 8-9.
46. National Council of Churches, p. 10.

to go back to their country after the harvest was over, correctly sensing that returning could result in death. The migration flow could no longer be characterized as economic.

Since the Guatemalan Army began conducting a full-scale offensive against hundreds of Indian villages, there has been a steady inflow of refugees into Chiapas.[47] As of November 1982, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Poul Hartling, announced that there were over thirty thousand Guatemalans in the San Cristobal diocese alone. The UNHCR reports that the regions of Soconusco and the coast of Chiapas — the Tapachula diocese — shelter an additional ten to twenty thousand refugees. Furthermore, Mexican journalists, helicoptering into the nearly impenetrable Lancandon jungle of eastern Chiapas in October 1982, confirmed unofficial reports that up to thirty thousand Guatemalans are eking out an existence in the Marques de Comillas region of Mexico's last tropical forest. The true number of Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas alone probably ranges between fifty and seventy thousand, while as many as seventy thousand may be hiding deeper in the country.[48]

Crossing the relatively porous border has not been difficult for peasants fleeing their villages in Guatemala. The 565 miles of alternating mountainous and jungle terrain is almost impossible to patrol adequately and, until the recent civil conflict, normal migratory passage over the border was allowed. The Suchiate and the Usumacinta Rivers constitute part of the frontier between Mexico and Guatemala. Refugees cross these bodies of water using makeshift bridges, small boats or rafts of large inflated tractor tires which they can hire from local entrepreneurs for the equivalent of a few dollars.

By the end of October 1982, over thirty refugee camps had been set up, housing from one hundred to two thousand occupants each but still only providing for half of the estimated refugee population in Chiapas. The camps are not tightly organized tent cities; the first refugees who came to Mexico were able to build *ranchos*, huts with dirt floors and roofs of woven palm branches, but later arrivals sometimes have had only plastic tarps to guard against the rain. Mexican relief commission doctors report that 90 percent of the refugees are sick with either gastrointestinal infections, malaria or dengue fever. Many are suffering mental trauma after hiding for days in the jungle without food or water.

47. Some of the most well-known massacres are listed in a chronology in Davis and Hodson, pp. 47-52.

48. Press Briefing by Poul Hartling, UNHCR, 11 November 1982; Comite Cristiano de Solidaridad con Centro America, "Refugees en Chiapas," Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, 5 August 1982, p. 4; *FBIS Latin America Report*, 28 October 1982, p. 7; Guatemala News & Information Bureau, "Guatemalan Refugees: Will Mexico Shelter Them?" *Guatemala!* 3 (November/December 1982): 3.

In the month following General Rios Montt's July 1, 1982, declaration of a "state of siege" in Guatemala and dispatch of troop reinforcements to the departments of Quiche, Solola, San Marcos and Huehuetenango, UN officials report that more than nine thousand Guatemalans sought refuge in Mexico. One month later, another ten thousand arrived, straining the capacity of the sixteen existing border camps.[49]

International relief has not been adequate to meet the needs of the daily influx of refugees. With financial support from the UNHCR, Mexico is currently providing food and medicine to some twelve thousand of the asylum-seekers through its Commission for Aid to Refugees.[50] According to a relief official, the Mexican Government has given over $1.5 million in aid so far. Between February and August of 1982, one hundred tons of food and medicine were provided to the refugee camps.[51] By the end of August 1982, 11,250 Guatemalans, mostly women, children and old people, were receiving assistance from the UNHCR at the request of the Mexican Government.

The relief aid distributed by the Commission for Aid to Refugees underscores the expectation of Mexican officials that the refugees' stay in Chiapas will be strictly temporary. The Mexican government does not want land to be made available to Guatemalan *campesinos* so that they can plant their own crops. Officials fear that this policy — what the UNHCR refers to as the "land solution" — would either encourage the presence of guerrillas seeking food and shelter from the Guatemalan army or at least fuel accusations that guerrilla camps exist in Mexican territory. Commented Luis Ortiz Monasterio, the head of the Commission for Aid to Refugees, "The idea is not to create a Shangri-La in the jungle."[52]

According to Poul Hartling, the UNHCR believes that the best solution to the refugee problem is eventual voluntary repatriation but, until civil strife within a refugee-producing country diminishes, "land solution" helps refugees to become self-sufficient. "Instead of having the refugees sit and wait for rations to arrive, we want to give them a chance to live normally until that day when they decide of their own free will whether they wish to go back to their own country."[53]

A sizeable number of Guatemalans have survived without any international relief through the generosity of the Chiapan *campesinos* who are, like the

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49. Gordon D. Mott, "Flood of Sick Hungry Refugees Strains Capacity of Mexico's 16 Border Camps," *San Jose Mercury*, 22 August 1982, p. P2.
50. "How Many Refugees?," *Refugee Magazine*, September 1982, p. 10.
51. Mott, "Flood of Sick Hungry Refugees Strains Capacity of Mexico's 16 Border Camps," p. 5.
52. Quoted in Ricardo Chavira, "Ironically, Mexico Faces Illegal Alien Problem," *San Diego Union*, 6 May 1982, p. 8.
53. "Interview: Poul Hartling, UNHCR," *Refugee Magazine*, September 1982, p. 9.

refugees they are helping, largely descendants of the Mayans. The Mexican villagers offer food and shelter as well as employment. The *campesinos*, even though they cannot afford to pay much, are happy to hire the refugees because they are able to sow more land and reap a larger harvest in this way. The following comment by a Mexican farmer in Vertices who offered seven acres of his land to refugees illustrates how insignificant political borders can be: "This used to be an international community between La Trinidad [Guatemala] and Santiago here. We used to party together, play football and have fun. We were all very happy. Who knows when it will be that way again."[54] Other asylum-seekers have found temporary homes in local churches. The rest, fearing deportation back to Guatemala or harassment and torture at the hands of *kaibiles* who regularly cross the border on the pretext of seeking supplies, hide in the mountains or in the middle of the jungle where they seek shelter beneath the trees.

### *Determinants of Mexico's Refugee Policy*

A detailed description of the living conditions of refugees in Chiapas is more than a mere human interest digression. The great numbers of refugees and the precariousness of their existence due to lack of food, inadequate housing and poor health ensured that this issue would receive the attention of several state governments and international institutions. The enormity and the "internationalization" of the problem has, in turn, forced Mexico to rethink and adjust its refugee policy.

This refugee policy has traditionally been formulated in response to changing political circumstances, both internationally and in the domestic sphere. Tensions between the governments of Mexico and Guatemala have caused the Mexicans to adopt a moderate refugee policy in an attempt to avoid exacerbating relations between the two states. Thus, Mexico initially deported many of the Guatemalans fleeing political and social repression in their country. Increasing pressure from domestic and international groups concerned with the plight of the refugees has spurred internal debate within the Mexican government and has brought about some cautious policy adjustments in providing asylum to an increasing number of Guatemalan refugees.

Until recently, most individuals who have applied for asylum in Mexico have been temporary political exiles. Mexican law does not contain provisions for the "new" type of refugee movements consisting of poor and uneducated persons who have been forced to cross international borders by civil strife

54. Quoted in Gordon D. Mott, "Carving a New Life Out of the Jungle," *San Jose Mercury*, 22 August 1982, p. P4.

within their country of origin. These groups of asylum-seekers are often seen as a potential economic burden and are deported.

The first Guatemalan peasants to seek refuge in Chiapas were seen in this light. The February 10, 1981, announcement by the Bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz, that thirteen hundred asylum-seeking Guatemalans had been deported from Compala, Chiapas (official records say four hundred) brought Mexico's refugee policy, as well as its foreign policy, under public scrutiny. As the year wore on and Guatemalans continued to flood across the border — many only to be deported back to Guatemala again — the debate within the Mexican government intensified.

Two incidents widely reported in the press demonstrate the foreign policy dilemma faced by the Mexican government and the confusion which resulted from the lack of a clear refugee policy. On May 1, 1981, approximately five hundred Guatemalan peasants fled from counter-insurgency troops towards Mexico, arriving there about two weeks later. When the presence of the 475 survivors in Arroyo Negro, Campeche, was announced in Guatemala, a government official there claimed that "heavily armed men" had forced the peasants over the border. "Behind this mass kidnapping of humble Guatemalans for publicity purposes," the official went on to say, "was the hand of the Castroite influence."[55] All 475 peasants (including 150 children) were deported from Mexico on May 20th to a military camp in Camojaita.

Mexico's refugee policy was again put to the test in July 1981, when almost four thousand asylum-seekers from the department of Peten reached Chiapas. Then-President Lucas Garcia of Guatemala immediately denounced the presence of the peasants in Mexico. "It is a new, politically subversive manoeuver designed to discredit Guatemalan authorities by presenting the groups of Guatemalan peasants in Mexico as persecuted."[56] Anxious to avoid further international criticism, the Mexican government announced that it would consider each case individually and that it had invited representatives of the UNHCR to determine which people would receive political asylum. On July 17, a government official stated publicly that "Mexico, faithful to its humanitarian tradition, with strict application of the law, gives asylum to 46 Guatemalans. The rest of the persons that were in Chiapas were returned to their place of origin."[57]

Highly contradictory comments about this decision by different officials quoted in the press indicate that a communications breakdown had occurred between the Mexican government and the UNHCR, between different

55. Quoted in "Government Sees Castro's Hand in Present Exodus," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 28 May 1981, p. 7.
56. Quoted in "President on Peasants in Mexico," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 9 July 1981, p. 6.
57. Rarihokwats, p. 93.

ministries and between federal and local officials. Jorge Santiesteban, a UNHCR representative, said:

> Their return at bayonet point damaged Mexico's international reputation as a defender of human rights. We had arrived at an agreement with the director-general of Immigration, Diana Torres, that the Guatemalans who did not want to go back would have their cases studied in coordination with the High Commission.[58]

The Minister of Defense, General Felix Galvan Lopez, maintained that the Guatemalans had left of their own accord, while the director of a government Indian agency office said they were being forced out by a military unit of the 25th Regiment of the Cavalry. To quell rumors that they had been deported, the head of the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees, Gabino Fraga, sent a delegation to Chiapas to see whether a mass expulsion had occurred.[59] The Mexican press reported that the army, after hearing that only forty-six would receive refugee status, had given the rest the choice of leaving on their own or being forced out. When these facts came to light, Fraga resigned in protest.

Amnesty International states that it has "repeatedly appealed to Mexican officials not to return the Guatemalan refugees fleeing such counter-insurgency operations to Guatemala." In letters to the Mexican government, dated August 25 and September 25, 1981, it noted that at least one person was killed after his forced return to Guatemala in July 1981 and expressed the fear that others had been tortured and killed.[60]

The controversy that these deportations sparked within Mexico centered on the government's definition of a refugee and the distinction between a refugee and an asylee. On May 5, 1981, Mexico signed the decree of the convention on territorial asylum that had been open for signatures in Caracas, Venezuela, since 1954. Embodied in this decree is the notion of an asylee as a person fleeing persecution for political reasons.[61] Legalistic interpreters of this asylum policy require that an asylum-seeker first have her/his status validated by the Mexican embassy in her/his home country. Guatemalans without such documents or proof of persecution for reasons of political affiliation are considered *illegales*.

Many within Mexico criticized this policy. When a reporter asked an immigration border officer in Chiapas "how an illiterate Indian could

58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., p. 94.
60. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 1982: A Survey of Political Imprisonment, Torture & Executions* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1982), p. 143.
61. "Asylum Agreement," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 19 May 1981, p. M1.

possibly apply for refugee status as his village was being bombed, the official replied that he had been doing his job for twenty years and saw no reason to change the rules now."[62] In July 1981, four major opposition parties — National Action (PAN), the Communist Party (PCM), the Popular Socialist Party (PPS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) — held a joint press conference to request that the Mexican government ratify the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees.[63] The definition of a refugee embodied in the 1951 convention — a person who has a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" — broadens the grounds for "persecution" to include race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group and political opinion.

Under the broader UN definition of a refugee, most of the Guatemalans fleeing into Chiapas would no doubt have qualified. But the Mexican government was unwilling to aggravate its already tense relationship with Guatemala. The conferral of refugee status on those leaving Guatemala would imply a negative judgement of that country's government.

A major source of tension between Mexico and Guatemala is Guatemala's concern that Mexico is harboring guerrillas rather than simply providing aid to innocent peasants. In December 1980, Mexican troops — hoping to convince the Guatemalan government that no leftist guerrilla camps had been set up in Mexican territory — conducted an extensive ground search while eight Guatemalan army officers flew over the border area. No guerrillas were found.[64]

The Guatemalan government, especially its more conservative elements, has been critical of Mexico's left-leaning foreign policy; that criticism has also contributed to the atmosphere of tension between the two countries. Two guiding principles of Mexican diplomacy have been self-determination of peoples and nonintervention. In an interview with *Le Monde* in April 1980, Lopez Portillo criticized United States policy in Central America for its tendency to see Cuban and Soviet influence behind every crisis and its failure to understand that socioeconomic conditions alone in Guatemala and El Salvador were sufficient to explain the increasing violence in these two countries.[65] The Guatemalan government, of course, shares U.S. fears of externally supported "communist subversion" in its country and, consequently, has been disturbed by Mexico's friendly relationship with Cuba and Nicaragua. During Lopez Portillo's presidency (1976-1982), he met

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62. Victor Perera, "Guatemala — Climate of Fear," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 October 1981, part II, p. 5.
63. Nidia Marin, "Piden Partidos de Oposicion que Mexico Ratifique el Acuerdo Sobre Refugiados," *Excelsior*, 3 July 1981.
64. *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, 2 October 1981, p. 31114.
65. "Mexico Criticizes Washington's Position on the C.A. Crisis," *Le Monde*, 4 April 1980, p. 7.

with Fidel Castro on three separate occasions. Also, few Mexicans were frightened by the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, which they felt resembled their own in that it replaced a dictatorial regime with a nationalistic one.

Guatemala is also highly suspicious of what it perceives to be Mexico's bid to become the "protectionist leader in Central America." What gives rise to these suspicions is Mexico's recent attempts to play a mediating role in Central American political disputes. In May 1981, it offered to mediate the border dispute between Nicaragua and Honduras. On August 28, 1981, Mexico and France issued a joint communiqué in which they recognized the FDR-FMLN, the umbrella organization of the center-left opposition in El Salvador, as a "representative political force" that must take part in future negotiations to end the conflict in that country. The Franco-Mexican declaration also called for a restructuring of the Salvadoran armed forces before "authentically free" elections could be held there. The Guatemalan government initially abstained from comment, although right-wing opposition parties harshly condemned the declaration and called for the government to break diplomatic relations with Mexico. Then, prompted by the Reagan Administration, Guatemala (along with Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia and the Dominican Republic) issued a statement accusing Mexico and France of "interfering in the internal affairs of El Salvador."[66]

The Mexican Foreign Ministry's sharp criticism of El Salvador's rightist regime seemed inconsistent with its failure to speak out against the equally gross violations of human rights in Guatemala. As in El Salvador, the main root of the conflict is the unequal distribution of land and money. As in El Salvador, the army has become an institution responsible for continual human rights abuses which do not change significantly from one government to the next. In fact, the armed forces and top military leaders in Guatemala increasingly *are* the government. And as the owners of a bank, an investment fund and vast tracts of land, the military leaders have achieved a certain amount of economic independence from the last politically influential civilian group in Guatemala, the tiny landowning elite, with whom they share an interest in defeating the guerrilla forces.[67] As in El Salvador, popular opposition groups that are well organized, enjoy broad-based support among the people and are linked to militarily capable guerrilla organizations have emerged in recent years. And, as in El Salvador, the large-scale killing of many unarmed civilians by official forces has produced large refugee flows into Mexico and elsewhere.

66. D. Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), p. 198.
67. Marlise Simons, "Guatemala: The Coming Danger," *Foreign Policy*, no. 43 (Summer 1981), p. 98.

This apparent inconsistency in foreign policy is partly explained by Mexico's fear that Guatemala might invade their common neighbor, Belize (formerly British Honduras), which Guatemala has long claimed as part of its national territory. When Britain scheduled to give Belize its independence on September 21, 1981, cries such as those of right-wing National Liberation Movement leader Mario Sandoval Alarcon's that the only solution was "a military one" had become alarmingly common within Guatemala.[68] According to Mexican Foreign Minister Castaneda, Guatemala called for a meeting with the Mexicans to discuss the Belize issue. As a result, Lopez Portillo was scheduled to meet with Lucas Garcia at a Guatemalan farm five kilometers from the border on September 5. On September 1, the Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre* received a note from three secret organizations — the Guatemalan Command for the Recuperation of Belize, the Guatemalan Anti-Communist League and the League for the Protection of Guatemalans — declaring that Lopez Portillo would be "executed" if he crossed into Guatemalan territory. The next day, September 2, the meeting between the two presidents was cancelled "by mutual consent."

In addition to being angered by Mexico's support for Belizean independence and its joint communiqué with France on El Salvador, many in Guatemala City were upset about the alleged mistreatment of Guatemalan tourists and migrant workers by Mexican immigration officials. There is some evidence to suggest that minor Mexican officials extort bribes out of Central American tourists and undocumented workers or asylum-seekers. As a Mexican busdriver who makes daily trips from the southeast border to Mexico City told a reporter:

> At each . . . checkpoint of the Federal Judicial Police, some money is taken from [the poor Central Americans]. Some claim to have given from $20 to $25, while others say that as much as $100 of the green has been grabbed from them.[69]

These charges, brought to public attention by Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM) leader Adolfo Mejia Gonzales, have embarrassed the Foreign Ministry. Mejia Gonzales declared:

> It appears that Mexico has a highly contradictory foreign policy. It is like that proverb which says: Light in the street, and

68. Donald E. Westlake, "Belize: Will It Be Another Falkland Islands?" *New York Times Magazine*, 19 September 1982, p. 104.

69. Quoted in Hector A. Gonzales, "Officials Exploit C.A. Tourists, Illegals," *UnoMasUno*, 24, 25, 26 August 1982; Reprinted in *FBIS Latin America Report*, no. 2577, 23 September 1982, p. 77.

> darkness in the house. The manner in which the different police entities, particularly the DIDP (Crime Prevention Investigation Division), is committing violations against the visitors from Central American countries arriving at TAPO (Eastern Passenger Bus Terminal) is a national problem.[70]

The treatment of Guatemalan migrant farm laborers in Mexico has also been a source of friction between the two countries. As a result, U.S. journalists began reporting that, in an ironic reversal of roles, Mexico was now "faced with an illegal alien problem."[71] When Mexico deported several thousand asylum-seekers in May and July 1981, Guatemalan Defense Minister General Angel Anibal Guevara Rodriquez complained that Mexico was not only exploiting Guatemalan migrant farm laborers but arbitrarily arresting them as well.[72]

A final factor straining Mexican-Guatemalan relations has been the issue of border incursions. Guatemalan Army troops have repeatedly crossed the border to search for and, in some cases, take back people they suspect of being guerrillas. In an apparent attempt to cope with these border incursions, Defense Secretary Galvan Lopez announced on February 10, 1982, that the Mexican Army was in a "state of alert" along its southern border to "guarantee the integrity of national sovereignty." The training of a 4,000-person quick-reaction military force was also mentioned.[73] At first, the Guatemalan government reacted negatively, calling the deployment of Mexican troops at the Guatemalan border a "smokescreen." But General Benedicto Lucas Garcia, the head of the Guatemalan Army offensive being carried out in the highlands in late 1981 and early 1982, welcomed the move as being an impediment to guerrillas crossing the border to escape the army.[74]

In sum, with tensions heightened between Mexico and Guatemala over the initiative on El Salvador, the Guatemalan claim to Belize, the alleged mistreatment of Guatemalans within Mexico and repeated border incursions, foreign policy considerations were important determinants in the formation of Mexico's cautious response to the Guatemalan refugees.

Fears about the potential domestic repercussions from conferring refugee status were also factors in the determination of Mexico's refugee policy.

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70. Ibid., p. 79.
71. *See*, for example, Marlise Simons, "Mexico, in Role Switch, Struggles with Immigrant Tide from South," *Washington Post*, 23 May 1981, p. A22.
72. "Minister Complains About Mexican Migrant Policy," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 16 July 1981, p. P8.
73. *FBIS Latin America Report*, 11 February 1982, p. M1; Marlise Simons, "Guatemalan Indians Crowd into Mexico to Escape Widening War," *Washington Post*, 17 February 1982.
74. *FBIS Latin America Report*, 17 February 1982, p. P9, and 23 February 1982, p. P5.

The Interior Ministry (which has jurisdiction over the Commission for Aid to Refugees and the Immigration Department) and the Defense Ministry privately voiced concerns that refugee camps would be used as a base for armed rebels and that the conflict in Guatemala would spill over into Chiapas. Some conservative landowners and businesspeople, especially those with oil interests, shared these fears. Jose Luis Coindreau, president of the Mexican Employers Confederation, claimed that there were already "Guatemalan guerrilla groups which frighten the investors in Chiapas State."[75]

Concerns that the refugee flows could "export" the conflict in Guatemala to Mexico are not without foundation. As one observer points out: "Chiapas . . . has many of Guatemala's problems, minus repression: population pressure, declining soil fertility, underemployment."[76] According to a high-ranking immigration official in Tapachula, Chiapas:

> We could accept a million people. And if that would solve the problem in Guatemala, then fine, we would do it. But if we accept a million, the problem will remain and if the people in Oaxaca and Tabasco (states north of here) decide to come south? We could easily have a revolution of our own.[77]

Within the past two years, according to ABC News, there have been over twenty violent conflicts in Chiapas, mostly over land. One of the latest disputes occurred in the rural village of Monte Libano, where a wealthy landowner had his ranch hands, in complicity with the state police, burn seventy peasant homes. The governor of Chiapas, Juan Sabines, admitted to an ABC reporter that the police were acting on government orders — while attempting to downplay the government's role:

> In fact they were sent because the peasants had invaded the land, and the landowner wanted the law to be respected. He wanted those people taken away, but in fact, we have in no way mistreated those people . . . the police did not burn down their houses.[78]

Despite the land shortage, Sabine told the press that the refugees are welcome in Chiapas where they can help the Mexican peasants with the harvest of coffee and other crops. He explained that they are granted a

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75. "Businessmen Criticize Central America Policy," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 17 March 1982, p. M1.
76. Frank C. Miller, "Dominoes — But," *New York Times*, 25 March 1982, p. 31.
77. Ricardo Chavira, "Ironically, Mexico Faces Illegal Alien Problem," *San Diego Union*, 6 May 1982, p. A8.
78. ABC, "Mexico: Times of Crisis," Steve Singer and Christopher Isham, 25 July 1982.

"30-day work permit and are paid minimum wages, the same as the Mexicans, 150 pesos per day."[79] Others, including some of the bishops from southern Mexico, maintain that the Guatemalans "have had to accept unjust salaries." *El Dia* reports that laborers often receive less than twenty-five pesos for a work day of sixteen hours.[80]

After the harvests are over, however, some fear that food supplies and social services will be strained by the demands of the refugees, especially as Mexico faces the challenge of an $80 billion debt, inflation approaching 100 percent, numerous peso devaluations, growing unemployment and underemployment, and declining oil prices.

Catholic bishops, on the other hand, argue that the refugees actually amplify the agricultural capacity of the region. They state, furthermore, that with proper planning the foreign exchange coming from international institutions to aid the refugees can be used to stimulate the local economy and benefit the poorest sectors of the Mexican population by employing their services and buying their surplus crops.[81]

In late 1981 and early 1982, the problem of how to deal with the Central American asylum-seekers became an issue in the Mexican presidential campaign. Several political party leaders, including Lopez Portillo's designated heir, Miguel de la Madrid, traveled to the border with Guatemala to present their views. In an oblique reference to the charge that Guatemalan guerrilla camps had been or would be set up in Mexico, de la Madrid said, "We are not going to allow any trouble against Guatemala to be organized in Mexico." He indicated that Mexico would rather "organize solutions for our brothers" there. Jesus Zamora Flores of the right-wing Mexican Democratic Party commented: "We have said many times that the government should be very careful in who they accept because many of these refugees are leftist extremists." At the other end of the political spectrum, the candidates for the PRT, the PPS, the Mexican Democratic Party (PDM) and the PSUM all demanded that the Guatemalans be accorded refugee status (the "open door policy"). And in the political center, the presidential candidate for PAN, Pablo Emiliano Madero, stated that Mexico had an obligation to "welcome the refugees with open arms, but care should be taken not to deprive Mexicans of work opportunities as a result."[82]

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79. Quoted in *FBIS Latin America Report*, 14 May 1982, p. 82.
80. "Guatemalan Refugees in Chiapas," Communiqué from the bishops from the Southern Pastoral Region of Mexico, San Cristobal de las Casas, 27 February 1982, p. 2; quoted in *FBIS Latin America Report*, 14 July 1982, p. 83.
81. Comite Cristiano de Solidaridad, p. 4.
82. Gordon D. Mott, "Mexico, Guatemala Walk Thin Line of Diplomacy," *San Jose Mercury*, 22 August 1982, p. P2; D. B. Donne, "Indians Seek Refuge From Guatemalan Troops," *Cultural Survival* 6 (Spring 1982): 30.

The government was also under pressure from church officials and international organizations to change its policy. A communiqué entitled "Guatemalan Refugees in Chiapas" from five bishops from the south of Mexico included specific petitions to the Mexican government. The Christian Committee for Assistance to Guatemalan Refugees was formed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz to demand, among other things, the promotion of a law recognizing the status of the refugees. Amnesty International and other human rights organizations kept up pressure on the Mexican authorities not to deport the refugees.

Furthermore, Mexico's international reputation as a defender of human rights had been called into question by, among others, the UNHCR. The Foreign Ministry, especially, was embarrassed by its seemingly contradictory policies toward El Salvador and Guatemala. It also found itself in the awkward position of desiring that undocumented Mexican workers in the United States be treated with dignity and not be deported while simultaneously expelling thousands of Central Americans back into their war-torn countries.

In mid-March 1982, the Mexican government responded to these pressures, both domestic and international, and adjusted its refugee policy. The Interior Ministry began issuing ninety-day visas, renewable for up to three years, to the Guatemalans in Chiapas. The policy change was a cautious one, and Central Americans fleeing the violence in their home countries were and continue to be referred to as "frontier visitors" or "displaced persons," not refugees. "Everything we give them is to emphasize that their stay in Mexico is temporary," an official explained, "and obviously we prefer to see them farther away from the border."[83]

Since the Rios Montt coup on March 23, 1982, Mexico has continued to walk the diplomatic tightrope with Guatemala, still uncertain about how to respond to the increasing violence being perpetrated within its neighbor's borders. Despite the fact that the ebb and flow of the refugee movement into Mexico corresponds to the trips of the Guatemalan army into the border zones, the Mexican government has carefully avoided pinning the responsibility for the violence on Guatemala's military government, preferring to call the influx of refugees a "phenomenon" rather than a "problem."[84] Commissioner for Aid to Refugeees Ortiz Monasterio said with restraint, "We have established a causal relationship between reports of burnings of and attacks on villages and the arrival of refugees in Mexican territory."[85]

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83. Quoted in Alan Riding, "Guatemalan Refugees Flood Mexico," *New York Times*, 18 August 1982, p. 3.
84. Mott, "Mexico, Guatemala Walk Thin Line of Diplomacy," p. 2.
85. Quoted in Riding, "Guatemalan Refugees Flood Mexico," p. 3.

Since the March coup, refugees have found it more difficult to cross the border into Mexico as the number of soldiers sent to patrol the area from Huehuetenango to San Marcos departments has increased. Previously, some refugees would return to their fields at night to harvest their crops at dawn or milk their cows, staying in Mexico during the daytime. But several were killed going back over the border, and a local representative of the UNHCR in Chiapas noted that ". . . since June, the fear is greater and people are not returning."[86]

Border violations by the Guatemalan army and paramilitary forces have increased since July 1981, when three Mexicans complained to authorities in Chiapas that they and others had been threatened with machine guns and rifles by the Guatemalan army soldiers.[87] The Guatemalan government denied responsibility, claiming that "members of clandestine organizations" were to blame.

In a letter dated September 20, 1982, Mexican Foreign Minister Castaneda made a formal protest to his Guatemalan counterpart, Eduardo Castillo Arriola, over the repeated border violations and requested that "clear and absolute instructions be given to Guatemalan troops and paramilitary elements that operate in the frontier zone to respect scrupulously Mexican territory and to abstain from entering it or firing at persons on the Mexican side of the frontier."[88]

Castaneda made specific reference to several incidents. The first involved the "disappearance" on September 11, 1981, of Mexican Consul Jesus Silva Mendo and Mexican citizen Carlos Guadalupe Mendez when they went to search for Mendez' brother Jose Luiz, who had been detained by the Guatemalan Treasury Police in Chihuate, San Marcos in August. The three men were never found and are presumed dead. Also mentioned was the August 31, 1982, killing of three peasants — two Mexicans and one Guatemalan — by Guatemalan soldiers who had crossed into Mexico and opened fire on people laboring in the fields near La Hamaca refugee camp.[89]

Guatemala did not issue an official response to Mexico's protest. One month later, Governor of Chiapas Sabines told the press that "the incidents have increased since the formal protest note was sent." He cited the events of September 29, 1982, when approximately 140 *kaibiles*, entering Mexico on foot and by helicopter, spent the night in a Mexican border village. Some Mexicans were beaten up to discourage them from supporting the

86. Ibid.

87. "Border Violations By Guatemalan Army Reported," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 31 July 1981, p. M1.

88. Quoted in Guatemala News & Information Bureau, "Guatemalan Refugees: Will Mexico Shelter Them?" *Guatemala!* 3 (November/December 1982): 3.

89. Carlos Fazio, "Tensions Grow over Guatemalan Incursion into Mexican Territory," *Latin American Press*, 21 October 1982, p. 1.

refugees. Eyewitnesses say the soldiers tortured some refugees on the spot, demanding information about the guerrillas, and ten people were forced back into Guatemala by the troops the next morning. According to the *Central America Report:*

> The incident was duly reported to the commander of the military zone, General Alberto Quintanar, who, in the ordinary course of events, advises the Minister of Defense General Felix Galvan Lopez. The minister, however, says all is tranquil in Chiapas and that reports of Guatemalan military incursions have not been filed. He is satisfied there is no need for more Mexican troops in the area.[90]

The Interior Ministry, however, did send forty Federal Security Police agents to patrol the southern border in helicopters late in September.

Some observers believe that Guatemala was deliberately trying to provoke militarization of the Mexican side of the border to prevent guerrillas from entering Mexico. In any case, in mid-October officials indicated that Lopez Portillo had decided to move the refugees away from the border area in order to minimize the risk of military clashes with Guatemala and to avoid worsening the political tensions in Chiapas.[91]

The continued failure of the Mexican Ministries of Defense, Interior and Foreign Affairs to achieve consensus on the appropriate response to the refugee situation partly explains several recent incidents where local migration officials have evicted refugees, apparently in contravention of official policy. In early October, three leaders of a refugee camp had been deported by Cesar Marcos Morales, the head of migration in the Chiapas border area, when they approached him to renew their visas and those of the rest of the refugees in their camp.[92] Morales was allegedly acting in collaboration with the Guatemalan military authorities and local conservative landowners. On October 27, almost two thousand refugees were forced to leave the camp at Rancho Tejas by local officials under orders from Morales. On October 29, UNHCR's Poul Hartling delivered a formal protest letter to Foreign Minister Castaneda over the most recent deportation, expressing his "great concern" about threats to the security of the some thirty thousand Guatemalan refugees in southern Mexico.[93]

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90. "Pushing Friendship," *Central America Report*, 29 October 1982, p. 334.
91. Alan Riding, "Mexicans to Shift Guatemalan Exiles," *New York Times*, 17 October 1982, p. 9.
92. Alan Riding, "Guatemalans Evicted in Mexico," *New York Times*, 29 October 1982, p. 8.
93. "Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico Worry U.N.," *New York Times*, 2 November 1982, p. 3.

## EPILOGUE

Guatemalan peasants continue to flee across the border into Mexico. Although the Mexican authorities have restricted the entry of reporters into refugee areas, a New York lawyer, Stephen Kass, was recently allowed to interview refugees in southern Mexico on behalf of the Americas Watch Committee. He reports that several thousand Guatemalans have come into organized refugee camps during the early months of 1983.[94] The indigenous peasants' descriptions of the widespread and indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the Guatemalan army toward unarmed civilians indicate that government policies in Guatemala have not changed significantly.

Nevertheless, President Ronald Reagan told reporters last December, after meeting with Rios Montt in Honduras for an hour, that Guatemala had received a "bum rap" because of allegations of human rights violations.[95] On January 7, 1983, the Reagan Administration ended a five-year embargo on military sales to Guatemala. So far, Guatemala has been allowed to buy $6.3 million worth of military equipment from the U.S. Defense Department.[96]

With renewed U.S. military support for the Rios Montt government, the prospects for a more equitable sharing of wealth and power in Guatemala seem dim. As a consequence, violent conflict, not only in Guatemala but in El Salvador and other Central American countries as well, will no doubt continue to generate so-called "cross-fire refugees" (usually poor and illiterate *campesinos* helplessly caught between opposing factions), many of whom will seek asylum in the relatively more stable and developed country of Mexico.[97] This "new" type of refugee movement poses a fundamental challenge to Mexico's present refugee policy.

Until now, policy decisions affecting asylum-seekers in Mexico have been made in an ad hoc fashion, reflecting the complex interaction between foreign policy and domestic considerations. The foreign policy determinants of Mexico's refugee policy, however, have never been explicitly recognized, explored and debated. Instead, the public debate focuses more and more on whether the Mexican economy can absorb the refugees. Toward the end of 1982, Chiapas State Governor Juan Sabines Gutierrez warned that

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94. Anthony Lewis, "In America's Name," *New York Times*, 13 March 1983, p. E21.
95. "Guatemalan Is Said to Pledge Elimination of 'Death Squads,' " *New York Times*, 7 December 1982, p. 14.
96. Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Lifts Embargo on Military Sales to Guatemala," *New York Times*, 8 January 1983, p. 1.
97. Nicholas Van Praag, "Haven and Hope in Nicaragua," *Refugee Magazine*, September 1982, p. 20.

if the Guatemalans are granted complete asylum and are allowed to stay indefinitely,

> We are going to have a very serious social problem since it is quite certain that, after spending 3 to 6 months in Mexican territory, they are going to want land to work and that is impossible.[98]

Concern that refugees will become an economic burden may be legitimate but it also tends to gloss over other factors which should be considered when formulating refugee policy. As Astri Suhrke points out:

> If asylum and resettlement have to be restricted in the face of possibly growing demand, the crucial question boils down to which groups should be given priority. Foreign policy considerations that affect the setting of priorities need to be fully examined, rather than shoved under a general cover of "humanitarian concern."[99]

Mexican policymakers must ask themselves some fundamental questions. Should Mexico become a country of first asylum and allow a significant number of Guatemalans to remain? If so, how many people should it accept, and according to what criteria? Refugee policy goals — and the foreign policy determinants of these goals — need to be made explicit and therefore open to public debate. Failure to do so increases the likelihood that the Guatemalans presently taking refuge in Mexico may once again be victims of government policies.

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98. "Chiapas Governor Urges Action on Refugees' Status," *FBIS Latin America Report*, 2 December 1982, p. 125.
99. Suhrke, p. 28.