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# REFUGEES RÉFUGIÉS FLÜCHTLINGE REFUGIADOS

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## The Situation of Refugees in Central America

Readers of these Refugee Reports will recall issues Nos. 43 and 44 which contained accounts by Geneviève Camus Jacques of her visits to Honduras and Puerto Rico in December 1981. Once again, from April 22 - May 17, 1982, Mrs. Camus Jacques visited the area in order to prepare a supplementary report on the rapidly-growing refugee situations in four other Central American countries where refugees from El Salvador and, in certain cases, also Guatemala are found: Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama and Nicaragua.

The trip on which Mrs. Camus Jacques' report is based was undertaken at the request of the Refugee Service of the World Council of Churches. Mrs. Camus Jacques also presented her report to a Central America consultation under WCC auspices that took place in Geneva shortly after her return.

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Before discussing in detail the situation of refugees in the four countries visited by the WCC Mission between April 22-May 17, 1982, we shall first try to indicate a few basic features of the present state of affairs which have certain implications for all the institutions which are striving to give practical proof of their solidarity with the thousands of men, women and children driven from their homes by persecution, fear and hunger.

### I. FROM INDIVIDUAL EXILE TO MASS EXODUS

As a large-scale social and political problem, the question of refugees and displaced persons resulting from man-made disasters is a new phenomenon in Central America.

The presence of dictatorial regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua for decades past, had of course caused hundreds of people to leave their country and seek refuge in more tolerant places such as Mexico and Costa Rica. On the whole, they belonged to political, trade union or intellectual élites particularly threatened by the police or paramilitary forces, and were able to fit into the countries of immigration without much difficulty because of their contacts and education.

Since the late seventies this kind of refugee, produced by selective repression, has been joined in all countries of the Central American isthmus by hundreds of thousands of persons fleeing from indiscriminate, mass repression.

The victory of the Nicaraguan people in 1979 contributed to exacerbate the already explosive social tensions in El Salvador and Guatemala, where a civil and military oligarchy passionately determined to cling to its privileges, confronted a hungry and despised people in revolt, who found in the victorious struggle of the Nicaraguans an additional reason to believe and hope.

The strengthening of popular organizations, their militancy in defence of civil rights, and the growing power of military Liberation Fronts was countered by the armed forces with large-scale anti-insurgency operations combining massacre of civil populations with a scorched earth policy - techniques already applied elsewhere by the US "military advisers" of these armed forces.

In Guatemala, the forcible expulsion of the Indian peasants from their lands coveted by the landowners and the military, amounts to a veritable genocide to which the surviving population has responded by two forms of self-defence: mass exodus and increasing participation in armed resistance.

In El Salvador, the army's "mopping-up" operations in the countryside evoke the same dialectical response from the people - exodus and armed resistance.

Living in the combat zones and consequently suspected of being the natural element in which the guerillas move and find food, the peasants are the most persecuted and therefore form the main constituents of the wave of exiles and also of the dead. Poor, burdened with large families usually looked after by women, most of these peasants do not have the resources to undertake long journeys in search of shelter. Those who live in frontier areas try to go on foot to the neighbouring country, the rest are forced to remain in their own country, internal exiles seeking support and protection from other communities, from churches, or the Red Cross. This is the first fact which should be borne in mind.

## II. A MAJORITY OF INTERNAL EXILES

If the term "refugees" strictly applies only to people who have left their own country, it is impossible for those concerned about the fate of victims of violence in El Salvador and Guatemala not to take into account the "internal refugees" whose flight results from the same causes as that of the refugees proper, but who simply have not had a chance to cross a frontier. All the more so as they are the most numerous and most lacking in real protection and material assistance.

The present head of the Guatemalan Junta, General Rios Montt, speaks of two to three hundred thousand displaced families (!) inside the country who, in his own words, have lost everything "because the army has had to raze their villages and burn their crops in order to fight the guerillas". That same army now proposes to gather these populations into assembly camps - the Association of Democratic Journalists of Guatemala does not hesitate to call them

"concentration camps" (El Nuevo Diario, Nicaragua, 8 May 1982) - while appealing at the same time for international bodies to come to the aid of the victims of its own misdeeds.

In El Salvador, the number of internal exiles amounts to between two hundred and fifty and three hundred thousand persons, spread over about thirty places of refuge (ten under the protection of the Catholic Church, the others under that of the Red Cross and Green Cross).

Even if these are only vague estimates, the number of internal refugees in El Salvador and Guatemala must at present amount to between one and one and a half million persons!

### III. OVERALL ESTIMATE OF THE NUMBER OF REFUGEES

The following figures are estimates supplied by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) dated April 1982. As we shall see, these overall figures do not correspond to the number of persons recognized and assisted by UNHCR as refugees, but represent an estimate of the migratory flows caused by violent situations and consequent decline of economic and social life in El Salvador and Guatemala.

This table includes only countries of the Central American isthmus, excluding the USA where many Salvadorans and Guatemalans are also trying to find refuge.

Country of asylum	Total number of refugees	of whom Salvadorans number	and Guatemalans number
Mexico	200,000 - 250,000	100,000 - 150,000	100,000
Guatemala	50,000 - 100,000	50,000 - 100,000	-
Honduras	45,000	34,000	+ 1,000
Nicaragua	22,000	21,000	+ 500
Costa Rica	15,000	10,000	
Belize	7,000	7,000	?
Panama	1,500	1,000	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>340,000 - 440,000</b>	<b>225,000 - 325,000</b>	

### IV. VERY VARIED CONDITIONS OF EXILE IN A CHANGING CONTEXT

Examination of the exile conditions of Central American refugees in present circumstances points to three general features:

(1) A majority of exiles do not declare themselves refugees to the relevant agencies established by governments and UNHCR. Reference to the figures for refugees receiving aid from UNHCR through local agencies administering aid programmes in April 1982 shows the magnitude of this phenomenon when this second table is compared with the first. (See table on next page)

Reasons of various kinds may be suggested to explain this marked discrepancy between the total number of exiles and the numbers recognized and receiving assistance as refugees; some are institutional in character and depend on the authorities of the immigration countries, while others are historical and political and depend on the behaviour of the exiles.

Country of asylum	Number of refugees aided	of whom Salvadorans number	and Guatemalans number
Mexico	10,500	3,500	6,000
Guatemala	-	-	-
Honduras	28,500	21,250	800
Nicaragua	5,000	5,000	?
Costa Rica	9,500	8,000	?
Belize	2,000	2,000	?
Panama	1,000	1,000	?
TOTAL	56,700	40,750	?

(a) The material assistance provided by UNHCR can obviously only be given to persons whose residence is authorized by the receiving country.

In countries which are not signatories of the Geneva Convention and therefore do not accept the international definitions of refugees, people who migrate for political reasons are by no means certain of having any right to stay, even if their claim to be refugees in the sense of the international agreements is recognized by UNHCR.

In Honduras, the presence of Salvadoran refugees is tolerated by the authorities with numerous provisos; in particular, they are allowed no freedom of movement outside the camps assigned by the government.

In Mexico, no clear decision has yet been taken about the status to be granted by the government to the tens of thousands of Guatemalans hidden along the frontier, and to the tens of thousands of Salvadorans without papers all over the country. For the moment the immigration authorities refuse to recognize them as "political refugees" and have not yet defined precisely the migrant status which they intend to grant or, it may be, refuse them.

It is therefore understandable that in this context, thousands of exiles opt for the tactics of melting into the local population without registering anywhere (or by obtaining false papers if need be) and prefer to endure the extreme exploitation inevitably linked with the status of illegal worker rather than run the risk of expulsion by actually applying for political asylum.

(b) For many Central American peasants, the fact of crossing the frontier into a neighbouring country is no new thing; there have always been very large migrating streams of seasonal agricultural labour, of Guatemalans to Mexico and of Salvadorans to Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

There are therefore channels and networks of contacts which facilitate a sort of spontaneous integration of the exiles into an environment with which they are already familiar and where they can survive, though very often precariously, without having to have recourse to UNHCR for aid and without having to register. For peasants brutally driven from their homes, departure is felt as an extreme and provisional evil, and the least organized and percipient among them hope that they will be able to return at the first opportunity, so unable are they to endure the thought that their lands will not be sown. So they are afraid of being

detected as dissidents by putting their names on lists of applicants for asylum and prefer to remain anonymous, which, they assume, provides better protection.

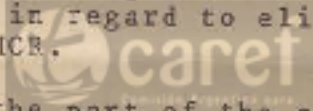
(c) Finally, for a minority of exiles, the determination not to notify official refugee relief organizations is prompted by motives of prudence connected with their political activities. For various types of reason, some of them wish to preserve a more discreet status as tourists vis-à-vis the immigration authorities which will leave them greater freedom of movement in the region.

This does not prevent a number of them from having to face the economic difficulties of day to day survival.

(2) The role of state organizations in the reception of refugees is being developed and strengthened

The last two years have seen a very clear evolution in the official policies of the Central American states in regard to the refugee problem. Three states of the region have signed the Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees since 1980, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, and three others officially accept action by UNHCR on their territory: Honduras, Mexico and Belize.

In almost all these countries, national commissions for refugees have recently been created by the governments and tend to play an increasingly important role in regard to eligibility and assistance by acting as partners of UNHCR.



This change of attitude on the part of the state, and the entry of official organizations into the domain of humanitarian relief previously entrusted to non-governmental agencies, may be explained in various ways: it is not only a case of coping with social problems on a far wider scale than any previously encountered, but also of establishing special mechanisms of control in regard to refugees who, it is easy to see, do not present merely humanitarian problems but have strategic importance in present circumstances in Central America.

(3) Very different conditions of exile

While all governments in the region intend to take in hand the refugee question, they are far from all applying the same policy.

From Nicaragua where they meet with a sympathetic reception, to Honduras where they are placed under the control of a hostile army, the refugees have to face very different conditions of exile in the various countries which open their doors to them or at least tolerate their presence.

In the section which follows, we describe the general features of four countries visited by the Mission in April-May 1982. Two countries are missing from this picture, Belize and Honduras.

As regards Honduras, a Mission report has already been published in January 1982 after a visit to the frontier zone (WCC: "Honduras, Salvadoran Refugees in the Firing Line").

The developments that have taken place since the beginning of 1982 have only served to confirm the fears and aggravate the conclusions expressed in that report; the frontier has in fact now been "cleared" of refugees, in the interest of the Honduras armed forces and their US advisers more than in that of the refugees.

The vast Assembly camp of Mesa Grande into which 7,000 people are crowded at the present time, less than ever provides conditions favourable to humane and decent collective and individual life. There is talk of seeking other settlement sites.

#### MEXICO

By geographical position, resources and political regime, Mexico undoubtedly represents the chief magnet for Central American exiles, although, paradoxically it is the country in which their situation is most confused at the present time. While a certain number of them look on Mexico mainly as a transit stage on the way to the United States and Canada, the majority of those fleeing from terror and hunger in Guatemala and El Salvador hope to find refuge there, and that is just where the complications of the problem lie. Historically, Mexico has never been an immigration country, and at the present time has to face the problem of an influx of Central Americans into its territory in circumstances of internal social tensions and without any suitable legislative and statutory means of dealing with it.

Mexico has not signed the Geneva Convention or the Protocol on the protection of refugees, but grants the status of "political refugee" to certain categories of persons fleeing from repressive regimes. In this way, thousands of exiles from the southern cone of Latin America, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia and the intellectual and political elites of Guatemala and El Salvador, have found asylum and protection in Mexico and have been incorporated into Mexican economic and social life. The problem raised by Salvadoran and Guatemalan emigration today is of an entirely different order for two reasons. On the one hand it involves numerically very large groups belonging to the peasantry and working classes and living in total destitution, and on the other, these exiles come from Mexico's neighbour countries, which has far-reaching political and diplomatic implications.

This refugee question reveals the contradictions of Mexican policy in regard to Central America. On the one hand Mexico means to play an increasingly active role in the defence of the rights of the Central American peoples in the face of USA intervention; this is plain from the Franco-Mexican declaration on El Salvador and the diplomatic role in regard to Nicaragua. On the other hand, Mexico is sensitive to any risk of internal destabilization, especially in its southern regions where social unrest is rife in the countryside.

#### (a) The Guatemalan refugees

The Mexican attitude to Guatemala has always been marked by extreme caution to avoid any friction that might disturb the balance of economic and political relations between the two governments which

In other respects are very distant. And now the presence of a hundred thousand Guatemalan peasants, most of them of native Indian descent, along the frontier, seriously threatens that balance long preserved by Mexican diplomacy. The Guatemalan military take an extremely unfavourable view of these groups of exiles massed on the other side of the frontier, which they denounce as "terrorists' lairs", while the Mexican authorities for their part are not unaware that the cultural and social ties between peoples of identical Maya descent on either side of the frontier are likely to promote a common growth of political consciousness, and that any radical intensification of the struggles of the Guatemalan peasants could have repercussions in Mexico itself.

In view of this increasingly serious situation, since late 1981 in particular, when massive waves of Guatemalan refugees have been arriving, the Mexican government has not yet adopted any clear and final position on how it proposes to cope with this state of affairs.

So far, it has refused to recognize the status of political refugee to these people, whom it still regards as "illegal immigrants" even though the proofs that they are fleeing from conditions "seriously imperilling their life and safety" are undeniable.

In the course of 1981, probably with the intention of discouraging exodus to Mexico, the immigration authorities, all-powerful in this domain, carried out mass expulsions to Guatemala, which meant death for many of those who on their return were "welcomed" by the Guatemalan army. The scandal caused by these deportations and the action of the UNHCR office have since February 1982 apparently checked such practices, but without thereby solving the question of the legal status which the authorities envisage granting the Guatemalans.

Travelling along the southern frontier of Mexico in the state of Chiapas, what is immediately apparent is these families' fear of what the future holds. Remembering the terror of the massacres from which they have fled a dozen or two miles away, the refugees ask above all for themselves and their children the right to stay in Mexico, away from persecution by the armed forces of their country. For the moment, however, they have no certainty that this right will be conceded. Tolerated provisionally with no legal papers, they live in fear lest the pressure exerted by immigration officers should pass from the verbal to the physical stage and expulsions begin again.

Of the hundred thousand or so persons estimated on the Mexican side to be concealed there, about 6,000 of those who arrived in December 1981 or the first months of 1982 have been recognized by UNHCR prima facie as refugees. They are gathered in small groups under trees, along rivers, in improvised encampments, often sleeping on the bare ground without shelter in appalling material and mental distress.

This condition of being "without rights", in which the Guatemalan exiles are placed at present, makes any relief scheme very difficult. Not admitting them officially as refugees, the Mexican

government has not organized or allowed the establishment of official emergency relief programmes such as are found in all other countries with an influx of refugees. The Mexican Commission of Aid to Refugees which was set up in 1981 under government direction has no express mandate to organize relief measures for people exiled from Guatemala, and its action is consequently extremely limited in the southern region.

The refugees survival is therefore due chiefly to the practical sympathy expressed by the local Mexican population, the spontaneous solidarity of the thousands of families who have taken a Guatemalan family into their homes, as well as the more organized form of solidarity of the dioceses which have set up local refugee relief committees to collect food, clothing and money.

The "Chiapas Christian Committee", encouraged by the frank and generous attitude of the bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, Don Samuel Ruiz, is in fact playing an essential part at the present time in bringing emergency relief to these Guatemalan families who have taken refuge practically empty-handed on the territory of their diocese. This relief action, which has been really organized only in the last two or three months, comes under the heading of pastoral work of local parishes, and has no official character in relation to the civil authorities. Separation of Church and State is in fact "sacred" in Mexico since the revolution, and it is out of the question for the government to permit refugee relief aid schemes financed by UNHCR to be run by denominational bodies (as has been the case in very many Latin American countries).

Until a clearer position is adopted by the Mexican authorities in regard to Guatemalan exiles, the paradoxical situation is that while tens of thousands of people are in urgent need of relief and help, international assistance cannot reach those for whom it is intended, for lack of mechanisms officially authorized to carry out the task.

At the present time the practical solidarity of non-governmental private agencies has therefore to use the only existing channels, which are connected with the Catholic Church, while respecting the cautious tactics which the latter is obliged to adopt in order not to compromise all its work.

#### (b) The Salvadoran refugees

While Mexico's attitude to El Salvador is less ambiguous than towards Guatemala, the conduct of the authorities in regard to the masses of Salvadoran exiles is nonetheless not clearly defined. Although it acknowledges the highly repressive character of the Salvadoran regime, the Mexican government refuses systematically to grant political exile status to all fugitives from that regime who arrive on its territory.

Unlike the Guatemalans, practically all of whom are peasants, who come on foot and remain in zones close to the frontier, the Salvadorans seeking refuge in Mexico belong to the urban middle and lower classes and mostly make for the capital, though some go north to get to the USA.



The Mexican authorities will only regard as political refugees those who have been individual victims of repression because of their responsibilities or commitments. These have been officially granted a right to stay, and financial assistance, but they represent only a minority of the Salvadoran exiles in Mexico (about three to four thousand persons out of a total of more than 100,000).

All the rest, fugitives from the situation of violence, war and its economic and social consequences, but not able to prove they were under any particular individual threat, are assimilated by Mexico as "economic migrants" and do not enjoy any specific rights. All that remains to them, therefore, is the possibility of mingling with the local population on a more or less legal basis as a worker or to seek the help of some private organizations which will recognize them as "de facto exiles" and provide them with some assistance.

If crossing the frontier from Guatemala to Mexico is a nightmare for many because of the corruption of the immigration officials and "coyotes" (illegal guides), arrival at the northern frontier with the USA presents yet another drama for those who want to go further. The mere fact of being Salvadoran is suspect, because synonymous with a potential smuggler. Once again it is paradoxical to observe that the Mexican authorities who complain so openly and with reason of the behaviour of the US immigration services use against the Salvadoran refugees the same brutality and methods as those they criticize the USA for using against their compatriots.

Cases of ill-treatment and assaults on Salvadorans have frequently been denounced by the press, and the prison warden of the frontier town of Tijuana even had to be transferred in consequence of overwhelming evidence.

### (c) The relief organizations

The confused and ill-defined situation of Central American exiles in Mexico is watched by an equally scattered and for the moment badly coordinated organization of relief.

On the official side, two organizations are responsible for dealing with refugees, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the Mexican Refugees Relief Commission.

Only since 1 January 1982 has the Mexican office of UNHCR had the status of an international representative officially recognized by the Mexican government, although the latter has not yet ratified the international legal instruments for the protection of refugees. This evolution of the Mexican position will make possible wider action by UNHCR in regard to protection, particularly to prevent extraditions. However, the policies applied to refugees still depend solely on the directorate of the Immigration services, who do not accept the certificate of refugee status issued by UNHCR as having any legal validity. Furthermore, as regards humanitarian relief, the international organization does not possess the necessary powers to choose the best channels for serving the refugees, but is obliged to employ such institutions as are designated by the Mexican government.

The Mexican Refugees Relief Commission (CMAR), a government organization created by presidential decree in March 1981, is at present the only institution authorized to receive and administer UNHCR funds intended for refugee relief. This Commission has no authority over the immigration authorities in regard to recognition of refugee status. In fact it was as a result of the measures of mass expulsion of Guatemalans in the summer of 1981 ordered by the immigration authorities that the members of the first CMAR team resigned. With a very small staff, the Mexican Commission at present plays an essentially attendant role in regard to refugees recognized by UNHCR: distribution of emergency relief and financing of a few productive projects.

In the state of Chiapas, an office has recently been opened in Comitan, but its work does not yet appear to be extensive.

As regards non-governmental organizations, a number of committees, groups and agencies are attempting out of their own resources or with the help of private international agencies, to meet the needs of refugees, whether officially recognized as such or not. Their number and diversity make any attempt at classification very difficult and we shall list only a few of the Mexican ones:

- \* CECOPE (Coordinating Committee for Ecumenical Projects) working with South American refugees and the Salvadoran exiles under threat at the frontier with the USA.
- \* Friends Service Committee (Quakers), carrying out relief work and collective productive projects for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees residing in the capital.
- \* Chiapas Christian Committee of Solidarity with Central America, coordinating the main private aid reaching the Guatemalans who have sought refuge along the frontier of the state of Chiapas.
- \* The Baptist Seminary in Mexico City, which supports collective productive projects for refugees.

To these few Mexican organizations should be added the special refugee organizations which have been formed in the Salvadoran and Guatemalan communities and all the initiatives which are being undertaken at the present time by international agencies with branches in Mexico. In the face of a situation characterized both by urgent need and governmental indecision and touchiness, these undertakings appear to be multiplying but are not always very well coordinated, and it is probably one of the priority tasks which non-governmental agencies will have to tackle in Mexico in the next few months.

#### COSTA RICA

On a smaller scale than Mexico, Costa Rica has historically been an asylum for numerous Latin Americans belonging to political and intellectual elites. This small, peaceful and democratic country was likewise able to mobilize during the Nicaraguan war of liberation, and welcome on its soil nearly 60,000 Nicaraguan refugees in the years 1978 and 1979.

Today the position is unfortunately very different, and the reception conditions for refugees have deteriorated considerably since 1980.

The internal economic crisis, aggravated by the almost total paralysis of the Central American Common Market, brought the country to the verge of total bankruptcy by the end of the presidential term of the Christian Democrat Carrazo. The new Social Democrat president recently elected inherits a country practically mortgaged to its international creditors and obliged to submit to the demands of the International Monetary Fund and international banking. Since these institutions are dominated by the USA, their demands in the context of Central America are not expressed solely by rules of economic management, but also by considerable political pressure on Costa Rica to fall into line with US policies in regard to the other countries of the region.

The entry of Costa Rica into the "Central American Democratic Community", an entity also including El Salvador and Honduras and purely and simply devised by the USA in order to isolate Nicaragua, is an example of the recent results of that kind of pressure. Of course there has just been a change of president in Costa Rica, but it does not seem at all certain that the new president, Luis Monge, will have any freer hand than his predecessor to pursue an autonomous foreign policy in the region, as his first declarations in regard to Nicaragua unfortunately give reason to fear.

These political declarations have had, and still have, a very direct effect on the Salvadoran refugees who make up two-thirds of the exiles in Costa Rica.

Far from presenting them as brothers in distress, victims of a regime of terror, the mass media use every pretext (strikes, common law crimes, acts of violence) to insinuate that their presence is an element of destabilization in the country and that revolutionary movements are "instruments of Soviet-Cuban expansion" and "terrorists' lairs".

In a country which is facing an economic crisis unparalleled for almost half a century, and sees its legendary social stability cracking as a result, this type of manipulated "news" unfortunately finds a certain echo in a section of the population, and 1982 is far from witnessing the vast movements of popular solidarity which developed around the Nicaraguan refugees three years ago.

In these circumstances, the Costa Rican government, despite its signature to the Geneva Convention and Protocol in October 1980, has imposed a series of barriers to the immigration of foreigners and these have had the effect of considerably slowing the entry of applicants for political asylum since the end of 1981.

The number of exiles at present resident in Costa Rica is estimated at 15,000, of whom 10,000 are Salvadoran arrivals in 1980 for the most part.

The incorporation of these refugees is made difficult by bureaucratic and legal complications. It is estimated that half the

refugees have no regulation papers (refugee and residence permits) because of inability to provide the documents demanded by Costa Rica.

It is chiefly in regard to work, however, that the obstacles are most formidable. The refugees in fact do not have a right to work in the public or private sectors, and work permit is granted only to those who join specific productive projects accepted by UNHCR.

As regards agricultural projects, the authorities practically insist on their being carried out in the framework of the "model farm" of Los Angeles, situated in the north of the country, which is supposed to have the capacity to receive a thousand refugees on lands bought by UNHCR. For the moment there are only 320 persons, and numerous refugees already resident in the capital for more than a year prove very loath to accept a transfer to this rural resettlement centre which encountered many organizational problems in 1981.

The urban productive projects at the moment are very far from ensuring the refugees' autonomy, for one thing because only a minority have found a place in these projects (about 400 heads of families), and for another, because the economic climate is not very propitious for the development of artisanal activities of this type.

The majority of refugees who have settled in the capital and its surroundings, accordingly survive with difficulty thanks to the small financial assistance distributed by the Costa Rican Red Cross, the organization officially entrusted by UNHCR with carrying out urgent relief schemes.

#### The relief organizations

UNHCR, which in Costa Rica has a regional office responsible for the protection of refugees in eight countries of the region, has contracted with two organizations to carry out relief programmes financed by the United Nations:

- the Costa Rica Red Cross which allots emergency relief and administers the Los Angeles agricultural project;
- Caritas, which takes charge of projects for a lasting solution on the urban level.

These two organizations, which have social and technical staff paid by UNHCR, care for about half the refugee population of Costa Rica.

As well as this official relief structure, there are a certain number of institutions and churches which in various degrees work for the welfare of refugees in Costa Rica. The Episcopal Church, which until 1981 was one of the partners of UNHCR, continues at the present time to do considerable work in the domain of productive projects, thanks to funds provided by international agencies.

In order to achieve better coordination of their work for refugees, these various non-governmental Costa Rican organizations set up, in 1981, an "Inter-institutional Coordinating Agency for Refugees" (ICIR), one important task of which will be to arrange a regional meeting of all non-governmental organizations working for refugees in all Central American countries, to be held in San José in July 1982.

#### PANAMA

Lying further from the zones of violence from which the exiles come, Panama is not at present faced with an acute refugee problem, since their total number is estimated at 1,500, about 80 per cent of whom receive aid.

As a signatory of the Geneva Convention since 1981, the Panamanian government has established an official inter-ministerial structure for the care of refugees (National Commission for the Care of Refugees).

Since March 1982, this Commission has assumed responsibility for all aid programmes financed by UNHCR which previously had been administered by the Panama Ecumenical Committee for Refugees. This assumption of control by governmental authorities undoubtedly indicates political concern on the part of the Panamanian government, which intends to supervise more closely the presence of political refugees on its territory without the intervention of independent religious organizations such as the Ecumenical Committee.

The process of democratization of Panamanian political life which characterized the twelve years when General Torrijos was in power, seems today to be marking time with the return to the scene of more conservative military circles closer to the Americans.

This political swing to the right, together with the economic crisis which is hitting the country hard, is not favourable either to the development of Panamanian national policy nor to the reception and integration of a large number of refugees.

Most of these are Salvadorans belonging to the urban middle and lower classes and are living in Panama City. They subsist on relief grants provided by the National Commission, and should in principle be organized into productive projects financed to start with mainly by UNHCR. As in Costa Rica, however, this desirable evolution of aid towards self-sufficiency encounters numerous economic and organizational obstacles, and in fact the very great majority of refugees depend on monthly grants which in the long run engenders a dependency outlook.

Only one particular group of 70 Salvadoran families, transferred from Honduras to Panama by UNHCR, has been fitted into a rural development project on the Atlantic coast by a governmental organization (Proyecto especial del Atlántico).

The Panama Ecumenical Committee for Refugees, which until March 1982 was the only body dealing with refugees in Panama and

UNHCR's only partner, is now endeavouring to redefine its specific role both in regard to the categories of exiles to be supported and in regard to the types of project to be developed.

#### NICARAGUA

Unlike all other Central American states, Nicaragua does not regard the reception of refugees as a burden or a danger but as a real and concrete way of showing its solidarity with brothers of neighbouring countries.

It is true, of course, that the conditions of reception and integration offered by the Nicaraguan people and government to Salvadoran refugees are rather exceptional, especially when we recall that this country has passed in less than three years from a position where it was expelling refugees to that of a receiver country. The number of exiles who have found refuge in Nicaragua is estimated at present as 22,000, mostly from the rural areas of El Salvador.

Nicaragua signed the Geneva Convention and the Protocol in March 1980 with no reservations, and from the start the government has shown its intention to ease as far as possible the living conditions and status of the refugees within the framework of the new Nicaraguan society under construction. Facilities are granted for them to legalize their migrant situation (about 12,000 have already obtained refugee papers) and they enjoy complete freedom of movement, employment and residence, and can join the trade union and people's organizations of their choice. The only real restrictions placed on refugees are those which apply to the whole Nicaraguan people and are inherent in the present stage of reconstruction of the country: lack of work especially for the unskilled labourer, housing shortage, etc.

The freedom of movement accorded to the refugees and the very strong current of popular solidarity shown in favour of the Salvadorans, explains that more than half the registered refugees have not had to apply for the food or financial aid distributed by the UNHCR.

At present, 5,500 persons receive some aid through this channel, 3,000 in the form of emergency relief in food, clothes or money.

The official policy is not to set up "refuges" assembling large numbers of refugees supported by public or international relief, but on the contrary to integrate refugees as far as possible in productive projects with the Nicaraguans.

A thousand Salvadorans are lodged for the moment in collective "refuges", the largest of which, near León, contains 450 persons. These are mainly reception centres for families until the bread-winners can find work either individually or in collective projects.

In spite of their deliberately provisional character, these refuges were equipped from the start with a remarkable educational and welfare infrastructure; all children attend school regularly

in buildings specially built for the purpose, there are evening classes for adults, and small local dispensaries are set up.

Care for Salvadoran refugees is based on two types of organizations working in cooperation, one dependent on the Nicaraguan government, the other on the Salvadoran community in exile.

As soon as the first refugees arrived towards the middle of 1980, a National Emergency Committee was set up on the initiative of the Ministry of Social Welfare and gradually assumed institutional form as a "Refugees Aid Bureau".

V. A NEW CHALLENGE FOR ECUMENICAL AGENCIES

The present period in history represents a new stage for ecumenical refugee relief agencies.

(1) In the very disturbed political context of Central America and in face of a growing economic crisis, most states tend to strengthen their measures of internal protection, and the increased control which they exert on refugees is not accompanied by measures designed to promote their integration into local society.

(2) The present magnitude of migrations for political reasons and their lasting character in the years ahead, make it necessary to seek solutions which are not merely emergency responses but will give refugees a chance of acceptance which respects their dignity while preparing them for return to their country.

(3) Although the UNHCR is the chief guarantor of protection for refugees and overseer of most relief programmes, the search for solutions of that kind cannot be entirely its responsibility, in view of the limits imposed on it by states as well as the number of de facto exiles who do not come within its scope.

(4) Working within very diverse institutional frameworks, the ecumenical agencies must therefore define their specific place and role in relation to UNHCR and to official bodies established for the reception of refugees. Certain agencies have to carry out such redefinition after a period in which they have directly undertaken tasks which are now entrusted to state organizations (as is the case in Panama, Costa Rica and to a certain extent in Honduras).

(5) Among the tasks specifically incumbent on local agencies, two appear to merit priority in present circumstances:

- that of strengthening a current of solidarity and support within receiving countries themselves. For this purpose a work of information and promoting awareness of the causes of the exile must be undertaken, especially in the churches, so as to increase popular support for the refugees' cause and give them greater protection.
- that of supporting refugees' own attempts at organization during their time of exile so that they may work out collective programmes of education and training equipping them both

to face the difficulties of exile more responsibly and to prepare for a constructive return to their own country.

(6) This definition of the role of each in the interest of better service for the refugees, postulates great efforts of coordination and cooperation both in field-work and in the agencies for international cooperation. There is a great risk otherwise of creating situations of injustice among the refugees, of useless duplication of efforts, of not determining an order of priorities, of misuse of funds.

This constitutes a new challenge for all the agencies, which are at a stage when they must rethink their activities and the means of carrying them out at a moment when needs are daily becoming more urgent and the economic and political context more threatening.

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Translated from the French  
WCC Language Service



Refugee Service, CICARMS  
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1. Correct my address as follows:

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2. Delete my name from your mailing list.

3. Add the following name(s) and address(es) to your mailing list:

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Signed:..... Date:.....