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**THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZING
OF GUATEMALAN REFUGEES IN MEXICO
AND THEIR CAMPAIGN FOR RETURN,
1980 TO 1992**

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PACS H195: Senior Honors Thesis
Professor Stephanie Ballenger
May 1, 2018

"The same species who invented war
is capable of inventing peace.
The responsibility lies with each of us."
Seville Statement, May 16, 1986

...

Dedicated to the peace-seekers,
the peacemakers,
and all students of peace:
May we all be brave enough
to keep pursuing it.

ABSTRACT

Between 1981 and 1983 more than 100,000 mostly indigenous Guatemalans fled extreme violence and persecution in their country, and headed for Mexico. In exile they were largely ignored by international media and international institutions. This thesis highlights the development of political organizing among this refugee population during the 1980s, namely the creation of the *Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México* (CCPP), that allowed them to gain international recognition. This organization gave the refugee community a voice to participate in negotiations with the Guatemalan state that produced an agreement for the return of refugees in 1992. I argue that political organizing in the camps was made possible by the development of a collective identity that united the refugee population in Mexico. After contextualizing the refugee crisis by briefly describing the Guatemalan civil war, as well as the international reaction to the conflict, I examine the external and internal forces influencing refugee camps in order to understand the development of the CCPP.

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I am grateful to my professor, Dr. Stephanie Ballenger, whose guidance in this project has taught me to appreciate the research, rather than tolerate it. My advisor, Dr. Pablo Gonzalez, deserves special thanks for his reassurance, wisdom, and genuine support. There were so many occasions in which I walked into his office at my wit's end, having lost all direction, and in less than an hour I would leave there, motivated and even excited to continue working.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CARGUA	<i>Comité de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos</i>
CCPP	<i>Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México</i>
CEAR	<i>Comisión Nacional para la Atención de Repatriados, Refugiados, y Desplazados</i>
COMAR	<i>Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados</i>
CNR	<i>Comisión de reconciliación</i>
EGP	<i>Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres</i>
GARG	<i>Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados Guatemaltecos</i>
GNIB	Guatemala News and Information Bureau
NISGUA	Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1981 and 1984, thousands of Guatemalans made their way through the thick of the Ixcán jungle towards the Mexican border. One by one they travelled in a line along thin trails, often cutting their way through masses of overgrown brush, carrying the only thing they had left on their backs: their children. For many, it had been months, even a year, since they had seen their villages destroyed by the Guatemalan army, buildings burned and pillaged, neighbors brutally murdered. Those who were left after the destruction hid in the jungle, moving constantly to avoid detection by the army, who would surely kill them. In hiding, they trained their children to be quiet and always ready to flee and subsisted off harvests from secret cornfields or in the worst cases, just the peels of fruits. Deep in the jungle, they waited for the army to stop searching for them, move to another region, so that the villagers could reclaim their land and rebuild their lives. For thousands of Guatemalans however, the time eventually came, when food supplies were exhausted and the physical capacity to live in hiding ran out. So they made the difficult decision to leave Guatemala. They hiked along narrow jungle paths in a long and arduous journey towards the safety they believed they would find in Mexico.¹

¹ Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: a Guatemalan journey of courage, terror, and hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 127-128.



Figure 1. Map of departments in Guatemala.²

Beatriz Manz who spent decades living and researching in the Ixcán, El Quiché region, described these villagers travelling across Guatemala as, “a column of desperation— fearful, exhausted, and sick, ghosts of their former selves— but nonetheless determined.”³ These “columns of desperation” forged many paths across the Guatemalan landscape, from the Ixcán

² Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War: the Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 226.

³ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 128.

jungle in El Quiché, from the highlands of Huehuetenango, from San Marcos, and El Petén.⁴ Mostly Mayan, they represented many distinct ethnic groups, primarily the Q'anjob'al, Mam, Chuj, and Jakaltek.⁵ Yet from their diverse origins, these refugees were indeed determined, toting skills of community organizing and a spirit of solidarity that had begun to develop during the civil war period.⁶

Crossing the border into Mexico, the fleeing Guatemalans expected to find security and refuge from the many perils the civil war had brought. Instead, the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico was poorly equipped to support a flood of refugees, and the Guatemalans were met with many insecurities. In small refugee camps along the border, families took shelter in small, closely packed huts that let in cold drafts through the night. Children fell ill with malaria, fevers, and flu, and all felt the pangs of hunger between food provisions from the state. Unable to work or cultivate land, refugees were forced to rely on aid from the state and independent organizations.⁷

As the refugees weathered the difficulties of life in southern Mexico, they began to organize together in order to make their common concerns and demands heard. Though they had come from various villages across Guatemala, and represented many distinct ethnic and linguistic groups, the refugees in Mexico related to each other through their shared experiences of persecution and violence. This led to the establishment of many refugee-led institutions, most

⁴ Catherine L. Hanlon, "Guatemalan Refugees and Returnees: Place and Maya Identity," in *Journeys of Fear*, ed. Liisa L North and Alan B. Simmons (Quebec: McGill Queen's University Press, 1999), 215.

⁵ Deborah L. Billings, "Organizing in Exile: The Reconstruction of Community in the Guatemalan Refugee Camps of Southern Mexico," in *Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives*, ed. James Loucky and Marilyn Moors (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 75-76.

⁶ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 115-116.

⁷ Newsletter from GARG (vol. 7), "Document on Guatemalan Refugees," May 1984, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/n583xw03f>.

notably, the *Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México* (CCPP). It was the CCPP that succeeded in negotiating with the Mexican and Guatemalan states to come to an agreement in 1992 that would guarantee the safe return of refugees to Guatemala.

It is notable that the CCPP—made up of refugees, marginalized and persecuted in their home state of Guatemala, and consistently repressed in Mexico, their state of refuge—was able to gain recognition from both of these state governments in order to engage in official negotiations. This, in fact, was an unprecedented occurrence of popular participation in determining a durable solution for a refugee crisis. How the CCPP was able to form and ultimately shape the return process for Guatemalan refugees is the subject of this thesis.

This thesis began as a project to understand the efficacy of popular participation from a refugee community in organizing their own repatriations in order to resolve refugee crises. Yet the case of democratic organizing in the refugee camps of southern Mexico represents more than a troupe for understanding repatriations, or durable solutions to refugee crises more generally. The circumstances of the Guatemalan refugee crisis cannot be compared to any other, nor can the factors that led to refugee return there be replicated. Instead, the development of the CCPP, and indeed its very existence, is representative of the political power amounted by the Guatemalan refugee community, despite the systematic oppression they faced in their country and abroad. The success the CCPP achieved is an undeniable mark left on history by a people that the Guatemalan state, aided by many international actors, had attempted to erase from it. This research highlights the narrative of the Guatemalan refugees and their impact on the cultivation of peace and reconciliation in their home country.

I argue that the development of cohesive communities based on shared experiences and goals both before and after refugee flight, laid the foundations for the development of the social and political organization of refugees, especially in the formation of the CCPP. Despite being nearly invisible to the outside world throughout most of the 1980s, the refugee community in Mexico was able to build an expansive solidarity network among governmental and non-governmental organizations through the work of the CCPP, that allowed them to gain recognition by the Guatemalan government and negotiate an agreement for the return of refugees to Guatemala.

In the following thesis, I begin by outlining the historical context of Guatemala's refugee crisis including the systematic marginalization of the country's majority indigenous population, as well as the 1954 coup that would lead to a harsh dictatorship and the civil war. While the civil war marked a period of intense violence and oppression of indigenous communities, it was also a time of unification across ethnic and linguistic communities and a broadening of the notion of a Guatemalan identity. I will then discuss reactions to this war and the subsequent refugee exodus on the international scale in order to show the lack of international recognition of these events. Following this, I will detail the conditions of the refugee camps in Mexico including the internal and external factors of these camps that contributed to the political and social organization of the refugee community. Specifically, this organization culminated in the foundation of the CCPP, notable for its direct engagement with state actors and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Finally, I will analyze the negotiations between these parties in order to demonstrate the way in which the CCPP functioned and how it was able to gain recognition by the Guatemalan state. I end with a discussion on the implications of the Guatemalan refugee

return as well as its repercussions on Guatemalan society. While these organized returns have been lauded as successful by many observers, it is clear that much political unrest still prevails in Guatemala as refugees continue to flow from the country, making their way to Mexico and even farther north, twenty-two years after the civil war's end.

METHODOLOGY

The bulk of my research is drawn from the Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB) Archive, a collection of more than 11,000 documents gathered between 1963 and 2000 for the purpose of informing the public on the Guatemalan movements for peace and justice, indigenous rights, and labor rights. These documents include both published and unpublished policy briefings, correspondence, news clippings, activist reports, and peace accords and negotiations. Included sources are drawn primarily from Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States to represent the events of the civil war, the exodus and reception of refugees, refugee camps, and the international perception of the conflict.

The archive has been split up into four sections: Ephemera; Serials; Studies, Reports, and Other Publications; and News Clippings. The majority of my research is based off documents found under the Ephemera section, which includes materials published by indigenous refugee organizations, government actors, and activist groups, and the correspondence between them. These are particularly important in informing on how the CCPP gained legitimacy among established state and international actors by demonstrating how the CCPP was discussed and perceived by other actors, and how these other actors interacted directly with refugees. Refugee testimonies are also invaluable in this project, as they reveal the reactions of the refugee community to occurrences within the camps.

The Reports, pamphlets, and other publications section provide a number of documents from the UN and activist groups that help to characterize the conflict from an international perspective. UN resolutions relating to the refugee crisis add to an understanding of the perceptions of refugee organizations through an analysis of the timeline of when reports began to

recognize the CCPP and how the dialogue surrounding them evolved over time. Activist groups, more involved on the ground with the refugee population in Mexico offer more information on the needs and goals of refugees, as well as their resolve to take action to fulfill these.

Materials from the GNIB Archive will be supplemented by news articles from the *Proceso* Magazine Archives. *Proceso* is a Mexican news magazine founded in 1977 in Mexico City. Articles utilized here document the events that transpired in southern Mexico's refugee camps during the 1980s. Not only do these sources document the events that occurred, but they also offer insight into the way the Mexican public perceived these events through media.

CIVIL WAR

In 1954 a coup d'etat in Guatemala dissolved the democratically elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (1951-54), ending what is known as the golden period in the country. This period is known as such for the strides that were made by the central government to alleviate poverty and reallocate land in an equitable manner. In place of this progressive administration, the coup, backed and funded by the United States, installed a military dictatorship, loyal to international interests, namely the United Fruit Company. This marked the beginning of many decades of political violence in the country, and civil war that would last from 1954 to 1996 between the Guatemalan state and the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP), a leftist guerrilla movement.⁸

While Guatemala's diverse indigenous (mostly Maya) peoples have represented about 40% of the entire population, these communities have been historically and systematically marginalized at the hands of European elites. The change of power that followed the coup exacerbated this marginalization as it swiftly and forcefully moved land from the hands of indigenous communities to larger plantation owners and corporations that subsequently exploited indigenous and Afro-Guatemalan labor. Throughout the 1960s, the Guatemalan state consolidated its power under the army and began increasingly invasive and violent strategies to root out guerrillas from the rural population.⁹

As the state army gained power throughout the 1960s and 1970s, indigenous communities too, were developing their own forms of resistance and protection. This indigenous resistance was generated in two distinct ways. The first came from the substantial influence of

⁸ Jean-Marie Simon, *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny*, (New York: Norton, 1987), 21-23.

⁹ Simon, 20.

liberation theology, practiced in sectors of the Catholic Church that were prevalent in Guatemala's rural villages, that brought about the education and organization of indigenous communities. Liberation theology sought to empower individuals by "creating a community spirit, developing solidarity, and establishing rules that would bind people together."¹⁰ In Santa Maria Tzejá, a small village in the department of El Quiché, this was implemented through education focused on human rights that allowed community members to understand the power dynamics of Guatemala that oppressed indigenous people, fostering the resolve to resist the state as well as the realization of shared experiences of oppression across indigenous groups.¹¹ The Church's influence would again play an important role in inspiring indigenous refugees to unite and organize in the refugee camps of Mexico.¹² The fact that the influence of liberation theology was reaffirmed and continued to grow among indigenous Guatemalans in exile, demonstrates its significance among these communities and the strength of its principles of community spirit and solidarity. These principles were expanded to establish a more unified Maya identity across Guatemala, eventually leading to the pan-Maya movement. It was this broader identity based on shared experiences that allowed diverse peoples to overcome linguistic and ethnic barriers to form a united front to combat state marginalization and violence.¹³

¹⁰ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 111.

¹¹ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 208.

¹² Clark Taylor, "Challenges of Return and Reintegration," in *Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives*, ed. James Loucky and Marilyn Moors (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 95-96.

¹³ Billings, 79.



Figure 2. Map of Santa María Tzejá¹⁴

The second method of resistance that developed in Santa María Tzejá was the birth of the EGP, one of the largest guerilla groups resisting the Guatemalan state during the 1970s. Nearly half of the village's families had at least one person involved in the EGP to take up arms in resistance to escalating state-led terror. The EGP quickly developed comprehensive and effective strategies for evading and combating the state army. The guerrillas engaged in political work, logistical organization of battle fronts, and directing delivery of supplies. While the EGP established a presence in many peasant villages throughout the Ixcán region, the solidarity between guerrillas and villagers in Santa María Tzejá (largely due to the number of village

¹⁴ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*.

families directly involved, as well as the strong influence of liberation theology there) proved to be an effective strategy in resisting the Guatemalan army. This was especially because solidarity among community members prevented the army from turning villagers against each other to expose neighbors and friends as members of guerrilla forces, as was a common tactic of the army in other villages. The united community resistance allowed Santa María Tzejá to employ effective community-wide mechanisms to hide or otherwise react to advances made by the army. In this way the village was able to hold out longer against the Guatemalan state than other rural indigenous communities.¹⁵

While this concept of solidarity was incredibly strong in Santa María Tzejá, it was not unique to one village, but a vital component to the resistance movement of indigenous communities across the country. In fact, as Rigoberta Menchú demonstrates in her autobiography, the solidarity that had begun to develop within communities and across Guatemala's indigenous population played an important role in sharing effective resistance strategies in evading the army.¹⁶

By 1981 the state army, desperate to seek out the guerilla fighters hidden among the rural population, began to engage in a military strategy that came to be known as the "scorched earth campaign." The army used extreme force to invade and then decimate indigenous communities with the burning of homes and lands, murders, torture, and rape. This campaign destroyed more than 440 villages by the army's own count.¹⁷ It was this sudden and extreme use of violence that finally drove the villagers of Santa María Tzejá from their homes, along with more than one

¹⁵ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 97.

¹⁶ Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (London: Verso, 1984).

¹⁷ Hanlon, 215.

million Guatemalans. Of these, more than 100,000 refugees crossed into Mexico between 1981 and 1983 during the peak of the scorched earth campaign. Others remained displaced in Guatemala or fled to Belize, Nicaragua, or Honduras. Some refugees even made the long journey north to reach the United States, though they were not met with the warmest welcome from the United States government, which refused to acknowledge the fleeing Guatemalans as refugees, thus putting them at risk of deportation.¹⁸



Figure 3. Map of refugee flight from Guatemala.¹⁹

¹⁸ Catherine L. Hanlon, "Guatemalan Refugees and Returnees: Place and Maya Identity," in *Journeys of Fear*, ed. Liisa L North and Alan B. Simmons (Quebec: McGill Queen's University Press, 1999), 36.

¹⁹ Hanlon and Lovell, 39.

RECEPTION OF REFUGEES ABROAD

As the first refugees streamed across the Guatemala-Mexico border in search of security, they found themselves in the company of thousands of others who had made similar journeys. From across Guatemala, persecuted Mayas trekked single-file along arduous paths carved through the jungle by those who had fled before. At times the paths crossed streams and rivers. At other times the paths didn't seem to exist at all, disappearing into the thick of the jungle, where masses of overgrown brush obscured all. Parents carried small children— the last of their possessions— on their backs.²⁰ Children knew— had been taught from an early age— to remain quiet in case the soldiers should come near.²¹ The children knew to be fearful too. For most had already been traumatized by near escapes from death, and as they clung to their parents bodies or walked silently in their footsteps, they knew they were not safe yet.²²

Though this fleeing population had been broadly labelled as “the enemy” by the Guatemalan army, it was not a homogenous group. The peoples making their way through heavy tropical humidity across the country were diverse in their communities of origin, ethnicities, and languages. They fled from communities dispersed throughout El Petén, Huehuetenango, San Marcos, and El Quiché among other regions, and while most of those who fled were indigenous Maya, 10-20% were poor *ladinos*.²³ Among the 80-90% of refugees who were indigenous, many distinct ethnic groups were represented, primarily the Q'anjob'al, Mam, Chuj, and Jakalteq. Most of these groups primarily spoke their indigenous languages, and knew Spanish only as a second

²⁰ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 128.

²¹ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 127.

²² Victor Montejo, “Exodus,” in *The Guatemala Reader* ed. Grandin, Levenson, and Oglesby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 397; Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 128.

²³ *Ladino* is a term generally used to refer to non-indigenous Guatemalans.

language. Thus, even as the displaced Guatemalans could relate to one another on the basis of their shared social class, there was little else uniting them as a homogenous group.²⁴

Many groups of refugees reached the Guatemala-Mexico border in the early 1980s, where they were met with almost no formal aid. Instead, those who arrived first in 1981 and early 1982 found only other refugees like them, who had travelled for days and weeks across Guatemala, away from their homes, to find safety. Victor Montejo, a Maya-Jakaltek anthropologist, spent the late 1980s in the refugee camps of southern Mexico where he recorded the testimonies, full as they were of horror and loss, but also perseverance, of the Guatemalan refugees. In his writing he records the sadness he encountered, of so many families and communities broken apart, of so much violence that each of them had witnessed and experienced. Despite all that was different among the Guatemalan refugees, Montejo writes, “all the pain was shared, for everybody had suffered intensely.”²⁵

While the refugees had managed to find, at least for the moment, a haven from the violence that had threatened their physical security on a daily basis in Guatemala, they still carried the pain of all they had lost, and were faced with the daunting task of starting over in Mexico. With no international aid and no possibility of returning home, the refugees created their own temporary shelters and relied on the generosity of Mexican communities to survive.

Mexican Communities Respond

With no formalized system for the reception of refugees in Mexico in 1981 and early 1982, many *campesinos*²⁶ from Mexican border communities responded to the initial arrival of

²⁴ Billings, 75-76.

²⁵ Montejo, 395.

²⁶ The term *campesino*, translating to “farmer” in English, refers in this context to poor indigenous peasants.

Guatemalan refugees with great hospitality. Most refugees arrived to the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, where the local, mostly Maya population, “shared social, political, and cultural traditions with the refugees.”²⁷ According to Victor Montejo, these Mexican families showed such generosity to the Guatemalan refugees because, as poor *campesinos* themselves, they understood— at least in part – the desperation and needs of the refugees.²⁸ These similarities not only made Mexican communities more understanding and welcoming towards the refugees, but also gave the refugee population a sense of connection to their home communities.

Responding to the suffering they saw in makeshift refugee camps along the border, Mexican families brought supplies from their nearby villages to the Guatemalan refugees. Some brought food to cook, like corn and beans, others brought clothes, and still others offered work in exchange for food or pay.²⁹ These offerings were essential to the refugee population; with no state or international infrastructure providing aid, the exiled Guatemalans were entirely reliant on community support. It is perhaps this kindness that the first Guatemalan refugees were shown, together with the safety provided by being on Mexican soil, that caused so many of these refugees to retain an enduring affinity for Mexico even years later. Most telling is the remark by Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the Guatemalan winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in advocating human rights and the rights of indigenous people. Upon receiving her award, she stated that she would be glad to place the medal in the *Templo Mayor* museum in Mexico City.³⁰ The strong relationship that developed between poor Mexican *campesinos* and Guatemalan refugees comes into contrast with the harsh response of the Mexican state and even the negative

²⁷ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*, by Kate Doyle, Electronic Briefing Book (Web, November 2, 2003).

²⁸ Montejo, 397.

²⁹ Manz, *Paradise In Ashes*, 125; Montejo, 396.

³⁰ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

response of surrounding southern Mexican communities a few years later when Guatemalan refugees began to cross the border in much higher numbers.

Another extremely important actor responding to the plight of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, was the Catholic church in Chiapas led by Bishop Samuel Ruiz.³¹ The Church represented one of the first organizations to respond to the crisis with both relief aid and development projects that would provide long-term support to the refugee population. These projects would prove instrumental to the education, and subsequently, the ability to organize, of refugees in Mexico.³² This subject will be discussed in greater detail later on in this paper.

As the violence of the civil war picked up between 1981 and 1983, Guatemalans crossed the border to Mexico in much higher numbers, and as a result, the Mexican border communities' views of the refugees began to sour. By 1984 at least 100,000³³ Guatemalans had fled to Mexico, placing a strain on the already impoverished state of Chiapas.³⁴ Without state or international aid to support refugee camps, Guatemalans had to seek out job opportunities in Mexican communities in order to sustain themselves. Some Guatemalan families even decided to leave the refugee camps entirely, travelling farther north to assimilate themselves to Mexican society in order to obtain more permanent sources of work.³⁵ All of this cultivated an anxiety of the refugee population, that continued to grow and require more of the already limited resources in Chiapas, among Mexican villagers near the Guatemalan border.

³¹ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 125.

³² Report by the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal, "Refugiados Guatemaltecos en la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas México," July 1983, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/jd472x71w>.

³³ Hanlon and Lovell, 40. The accurate count is most likely much higher, but due to the lack of official refugee reception infrastructures, there is no way to know exactly how many Guatemalans entered Mexico during this time.

³⁴ Hanlon and Lovell, 40.

³⁵ Montejo, 398.

The increasingly negative view of the Guatemalan population was displayed in several ways, two of which are especially important to mention. First was the anti-Guatemalan sentiment that grew in Mexican communities and developed into a system of discrimination against Guatemalans. Refugees who could be recognized as such by their traditional dress or other attributes would be “looked down on, abused, disrespected.”³⁶ The Guatemalan families who attempted to travel north to escape the refugee camps often attempted to assimilate themselves to Mexican dress, language, and culture, not only to avoid Mexican immigration officials but also to avoid the negative attention that would come from being openly Guatemalan.³⁷

Second, were the cases of child theft, in which Mexican villagers took children by force or coercion away from refugee parents. In some instances villagers convinced Guatemalan parents that the children would be better taken care of by a Mexican family that could afford to feed and clothe them. Some parents were even paid a compensation for their stolen children. In other instances, as Montejo reports, people were seen “pulling babies from the arms of their mothers.” This more horrific scenario demonstrates the hostility that at times played out between the Mexican and Guatemalan communities in Chiapas. It also gave rise to one of the first instances of unified refugee mobilization when the refugee community quickly organized itself together in order to recover the children that had been taken.³⁸ Forms of refugee organization like this one will be discussed in greater detail later on in this paper.

³⁶ Montejo, 402.

³⁷ Montejo, 401.

³⁸ Montejo, 396.

The Mexican State Responds

Though the *campesinos* living in the border towns of Chiapas were the first responders to the arriving Guatemalans, rising numbers of these refugees necessitated the involvement of the Mexican government soon after. In mid-1982 the federal government of Mexico and the UNHCR agreed to open a representative office for this international organization in Mexico in order to address the needs of Guatemalan refugees.³⁹ Additionally, the *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (COMAR) was the Mexican organization dedicated to refugee aid. Neither of these organizations however, were involved in the initial response of the Mexican state to the arrival of Guatemalan refugees. The unofficial nature of the state's response, and the lack of any international oversight, in fact, severely threatened the security of the refugees.

Mexico's involvement in the Guatemalan conflict was complicated and often contradictory as the central government attempted to appease both the refugee population by upholding their human rights, as well as its own internal security and stability. This complexity can be seen in a number of ways in which the Mexican state's actions contradicted its international discourse related to the Guatemalan civil war. Throughout the conflict, the Mexican government often condemned the political violence of successive militaristic regimes in Guatemala, and denounced the actions the Guatemalan army took against civilian communities.⁴⁰ At the same time however, the Mexican government itself engaged in several abuses of refugees' human rights, including indiscriminate deportations, unofficial support of Guatemalan army raids on camps in Chiapas, and the use of violence in forced relocation of refugee camps.

³⁹ COMAR, *El Refugio Guatemalteco*, n.d., Web, Reference URL: http://www.comar.gob.mx/es/COMAR/El_refugio_guatemalteco.

⁴⁰ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

Beginning in 1981, before the establishment of a UNHCR office in Mexico, Mexican authorities were caught off-guard by the arrival of so many Guatemalan refugees crossing the border, and engaged in near-indiscriminate deportations of them.⁴¹ With no oversight from international onlookers or media, the Mexican army and immigration officials harassed and deported an unknown number of refugees to Guatemala where capture by the Guatemalan army meant torture or death.⁴² In international law, this type of deportation is prohibited by the Principle of Non-Refoulement, part of the UNHCR's *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees: 1951*. The Principle of Non-Refoulement states that it is a violation of the rights of refugees to send them back to the frontiers of territories where their life or freedoms would be at risk.⁴³ This right is further delineated in the 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. While Mexico was not, in the early 1980s, a signatory to these treaties, the Principle of Non-Refoulement was customary law, and thus universally applicable regardless of the treaties.⁴⁴ It would be naive to assume however, that international law such as this is truly enforceable everywhere given the lack of an effective enforcement mechanism. Furthermore, exiled Guatemalans in Mexico were not legally recognized as refugees by the UNHCR until mid-1982,⁴⁵ thus it is debatable whether the Principle could be applied in this case. Yet, the Principle of

⁴¹ Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 182; U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

⁴² U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

⁴³ UN General Assembly, UN, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, *The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol*, 28 July 1951.

⁴⁴ Mexico signed on to the Convention and Protocol June 7, 2000; Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 188-189.

⁴⁵ Hanlon and Lovell, 38; Hanlon, 217-218. Only a minority of the Guatemalans living in exile in Mexico were formally registered by the UNHCR and enjoyed legal rights in Mexico. The remainder of the population existed as "unofficial refugees" and were denied access to rights and protections under Mexican law due to their lack of legal status. The UNHCR however, did not open an office in Mexico until mid-1982 and considered only those taking refuge in official UN camps in the state of Chiapas to be legal refugees. Those who had fled to other Mexican states or other countries, went unregistered and were excluded from refugee protections.

Non-Refoulement, along with the Convention and Protocol, do provide a sense of the standards for human rights present in the international community during the 1980s.

Despite the presence of these international human rights standards, the Mexican government's deportation of refugees went unnoticed and unmonitored. While they might have also drawn international criticism regardless of any specific law, Manz points out that the Guatemalan refugee crisis was largely invisible to the international community until activist groups brought it to their attention in the mid 1980s.⁴⁶ Hanlon and Lovell's data supports this idea of the invisibility of Guatemalan refugees. They report that 30,000 Guatemalans had been registered as refugees by 1982, with the number of unofficial refugees "estimated at much higher levels."⁴⁷ Without even accurate numbers of the total refugees who arrived in Mexico, it is impossible to understand the extent to which the Mexican government deported them.

The practice of deportations was contrasted with the seemingly random provision of asylum to select refugees. At the beginning of 1982, some refugees were offered asylum by the Mexican government, which provided these individuals with documents allowing them to work and live in Mexico legally, while others continued to be deported. By November of 1982 deportations had officially ended, and the Mexican government had begun to give out F-8 visas. This documentation allowed refugees to remain in the country legally, although it severely restricted their ability to work and move. Under this visa, refugees could only pursue certain forms of work and were required to live in "official" camps within 50 kilometers of the Mexico-Guatemala border.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 188-189.

⁴⁷ Hanlon and Lovell, 40.

⁴⁸ Montejo, 398.

The Mexican government also infringed on refugee security by supporting some of the the Guatemalan army's counterinsurgency tactics that directly threatened the residents of refugee camps along the border.⁴⁹ Mexican support of these operations was largely motivated by the government's concerns for its own internal security and stability. The Mexican state feared radical guerrillas would spill over from the civil conflict and radicalize Mexican *campesinos*. Due to the similar socioeconomic makeup of Chiapas and Guatemala, the Mexican government worried that any contact between its population and Guatemalan guerrillas would lead to radicalization and popular uprising. This fear was exacerbated by Mexico's debt crisis which left many peasants across the country, especially in a poor state like Chiapas, unhappy with the Mexican government and in the government's eyes, more susceptible to radicalization.⁵⁰ For this reason, Mexican authorities would look the other way when the Guatemalan army crossed the border to pursue guerrillas as well as fleeing refugees into camps in Chiapas. Between 1982 and 1984 the Guatemalan army crossed the border numerous times in order to terrorize and even kill Guatemalan refugees in the place they had gone to for safe haven.⁵¹

Refugee rights were again disregarded in 1984 when the Mexican government, under the administration of President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88), attempted to relocate all refugee camps farther away from the border with Guatemala. The Mexican state hoped to move all refugees from camps in the state of Chiapas to camps in Campeche and Quintana Roo.⁵² This plan was implemented under auspices of upholding the security of Guatemalan refugees, yet it

⁴⁹ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

⁵⁰ Nora Lustig, "The 1982 Debt Crisis, Chiapas, NAFTA, and Mexico's Poor," *Challenge* 38, no. 2 (April 1995): 45-47.

⁵¹ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

⁵² Billings, 75.

was met with strong resistance from the refugee communities when announced. The main justification employed by Mexico for moving the camps, was the frequency of attacks on refugee camps located close to the Guatemalan border in Chiapas. However, Mexico privately allowed these attacks to take place, implying that the true reasoning behind the decision for relocation was in fact Mexico's own security and stability.⁵³

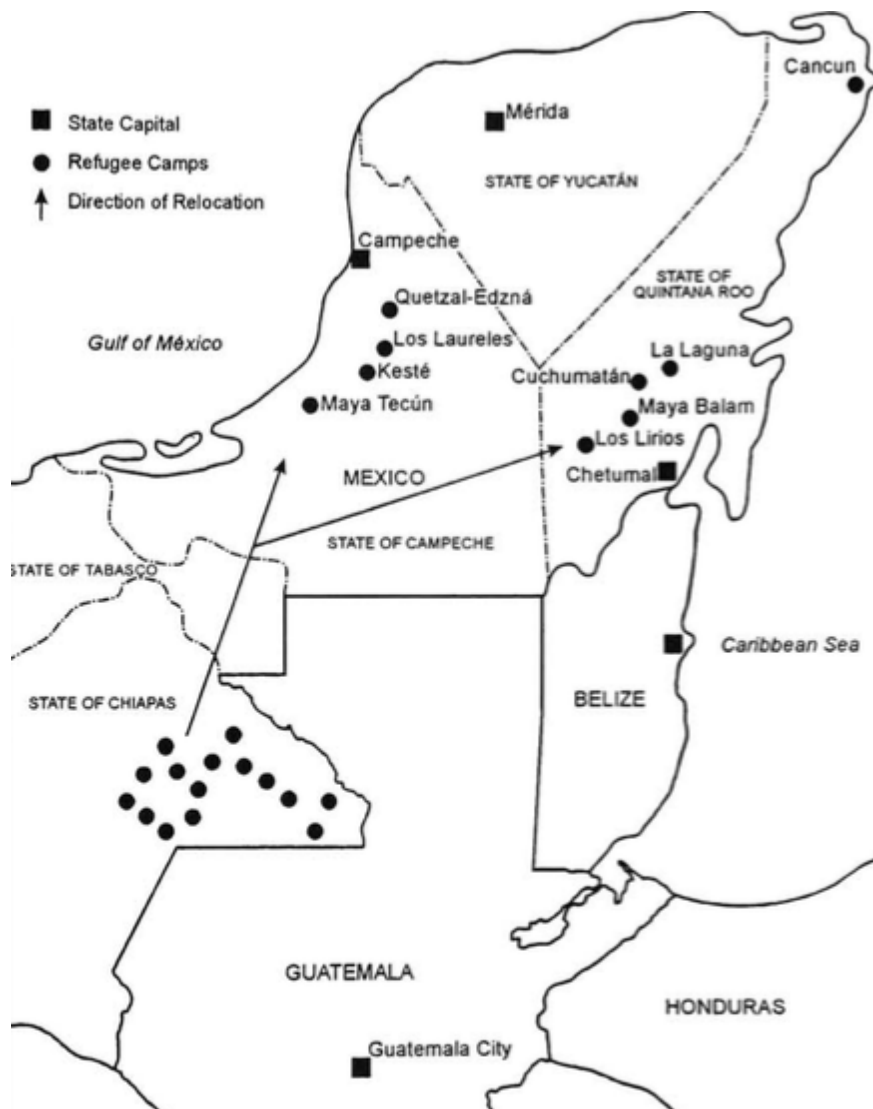


Figure 4. Map of 1984 relocation of refugee camps from Chiapas to Campeche and Quintana Roo.⁵⁴

⁵³ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

⁵⁴ Hanlon and Lovell, 41.

The Guatemalan refugees were strongly opposed to being moved for several reasons. They had come to know the refugee communities built up in Chiapas, and developed a sense of establishment there. Some refugees wrote letters expressing this sentiment to President de la Madrid. One of these stated, “We would like to stay here in Chiapas because we know the people, we have Mexican friends who give us places where we can live together away from the frontier...”⁵⁵ Even more than this though, the camps in Chiapas maintained the close connection refugees felt to their home country. From camps along the border it was possible to see the mountains of Guatemala in the distance, and even visit villages just across the border by bicycle. These trips were long even from camps like Villa Cocalito in Chiapas, from which it took twelve hours to reach nearby Guatemalan villages.⁵⁶ Campeche and Quintana Roo were much farther removed from the Guatemalan border. Moving again would mean giving up the proximity to their home communities that kept alive Guatemalan refugees’ hopes of returning there one day.⁵⁷

When the Mexican government encountered resistance among refugees to relocate, it quickly resorted to violence, not unlike that used by the Guatemalan army on the other side of the border, to forcibly remove refugees from camps in Chiapas. Human rights organizations as well as the Mexican media were present to document the human rights violations that ensued, bringing international attention to the crisis. America’s Watch reported in 1984 that the de la Madrid administration was responsible for numerous “arrests, burning of camps and cut-offs of

⁵⁵ Newsletter from Survival International USA, “Relocation of Guatemalan Refugees,” 1985, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=5425kb81t>.

⁵⁶ Montejo, 400.

⁵⁷ Montejo, 398-400.

food and services to those refugees who [did] not want to relocate.”⁵⁸ Where refugees had come to seek shelter from violence, they in fact encountered more persecution.

Labor and Movement of Refugees in Mexico

Fearing a forceful return to Guatemala or even refugee-directed violence in Mexico, some refugees took matters into their own hands and began to look for modes of survival other than remaining in refugee camps. Some groups of refugees travelled north into the interior of Mexico hoping to evade immigration officials by finding work and assimilating themselves to Mexican society.⁵⁹ The lack of security for refugees in Mexico due to indiscriminate and forced deportations drastically limited their mobility and ability to be self-sufficient.

In 1982 the Mexican government began offering limited legal protections to Guatemalans in exile there. This acquisition of legal status did little to expand the freedoms of refugees to work and move. When refugees began to receive F-8 visas at the end of 1982, they gained the right to stay in Mexico without fear of removal. However, these visas also placed heavy restrictions on their right to work and move. The F-8 visas motivated many refugees to move to Mexican villages and integrate themselves further into Mexican society in order to escape such severe restrictions on their movement. For others, the visa had the effect of heightening their aspirations to return to Guatemala when violence subsided, so that they could resume their lives and regain freedom of mobility and livelihood.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

⁵⁹ Montejo, 398.

⁶⁰ Montejo, 398.

INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE REFUGEE CRISIS

On the international stage, the Guatemalan refugees and the horrific violence from which they fled received little attention. In Guatemala, the state army led brutal attacks targeting rural indigenous villages. Across the border in Mexico, refugees suffered from hunger, illness, and grief for their lost loved ones. Yet there was almost no acknowledgement of this suffering from state actors or the UNHCR. It was this lack of support from state and international institutions that necessitated the extensive involvement of grassroots activism and humanitarian work to both aid refugees and draw attention to their situation.

When the Guatemalan conflict *did* receive international attention, those displaced were hardly the spotlight. Instead, governments like those in the United States and Mexico tended to view the conflict from the Guatemalan state's perspective, paying little mind to the masses of indigenous peasants uprooted, disappeared, tortured, and killed in the wake of state violence. In 1982 for example, United States President Ronald Reagan (1981-89) showed his support for Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), who was in power during the most brutal period of the civil war, characterized by the highest number of massacres of civilians.⁶¹ Following a meeting between the two presidents in Honduras, Reagan referred to Ríos Montt as a “man of great personal integrity... confronting a brutal challenge from guerillas.”⁶² By characterizing the civil war as a conflict of the government confronting a “brutal challenge from guerillas”, Reagan broadly painted the Guatemalan government as the “good” and the guerrillas as the “bad”. In doing so, Reagan disregarded the complexity of the war, the nuances of each

⁶¹ Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, xiv.

⁶² Ronald Reagan, “Remarks in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Following a Meeting With President Jose Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala” (speech, San Pedro Sula, Honduras, December 4, 1982), The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42069>.

party in combat, and the complicated social and economic history of the country that led to war. Instead, he blamed the war on the guerrilla forces, and showed his and the United States' support for the Guatemalan state's attempts to defeat them. Furthermore, while he mentioned the state and the guerrillas at war, he left out any mention of the hundreds of thousands of noncombatant Mayan peasants, displaced and persecuted by the war. It is unclear if Reagan was, in this instance, grouping these noncombatants together with the guerrilla forces, as the Guatemalan state did, or simply ignoring them.⁶³ Regardless, his statement, following a meeting that was intended to address the big issues stemming from the war, failed to acknowledge the most affected population: the indigenous Guatemalan civilians.

While the United States, geographically removed from the war in Guatemala, was able to ignore the mass exodus of people from the country somewhat easily,⁶⁴ Mexico was directly affected by it. The effects of this refugee flow however, were somewhat contained to the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The rest of Mexico had nearly no exposure to the refugee population, and for this reason, it was easy for the federal government to ignore. It was not until August 1981 that this began to change when the UNHCR sent a representative to Mexico to consult with representatives of COMAR on the conditions of Guatemalan refugees entering the country. In March 1982 the UNHCR opened an office in Mexico City to monitor the situation alongside COMAR and provide aid to a number of refugees.⁶⁵

⁶³ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*. At the same meeting between Reagan and Rios Montt in 1982, Rios Montt stated, "there [are] no refugees in Mexico," only guerrillas.

⁶⁴ Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 186-187. The United States was not entirely unaffected; some Guatemalan refugees made their way North to cross into American territory. Many of them however, were denied legal status by the United States government.

⁶⁵ Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 197.

While maintaining a presence in Mexico, the UNHCR provided assistance to only a small portion of the Guatemalan refugee population there. This contributed to an underestimation of the total number of refugees entering Mexico, and an overall misunderstanding of the severity of the refugee crisis internationally. Beginning in 1982, the UNHCR set up refugee camps to register Guatemalans crossing the border into Mexico. It was this registration that secured refugees legal status and access to UNHCR aid and protection in camps. Only a handful of the Guatemalans fleeing to Mexico however, were registered by the UNHCR.

In July of 1985, the UNHCR reported that approximately 43,000 refugees were receiving assistance in Mexico.⁶⁶ This is compared to other reports that estimate the total number of refugees arriving to Mexico from the start of the war to the mid-1980s to be anywhere from 100,000 to more than 200,000.⁶⁷ While it is impossible to be sure the total number of refugees due to a lack of infrastructure in Mexico to count and receive them into official camps, it is clear from these numbers that the UNHCR's services aided just a portion of the total refugee population. The fact that the number of refugees reported by the UNHCR was such a low estimate also allowed international onlookers to assume the refugee crisis was much less severe than it was. Though it was the job of the UNHCR and the Mexican government to provide for the refugee population, they showed little concern beyond offering minimal services. Because of this, activist and humanitarian organizations had to fill in these service gaps that were left.

⁶⁶ Fact sheet, "Refugees in Central America and Mexico: Central America and Mexico," July 1985, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/2n49t2790>.

⁶⁷ Fact sheet, "Refugees in Central America and Mexico: Central America and Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Hanlon and Lovell, 35.

Grassroots Activism in Refugee Camps and Abroad

The Guatemalan war and refugee crisis drew little attention from outside state actors. Instead, the crisis was brought to international attention through advocacy and information dispersed by independent human rights organizations, church groups, and journalists and researchers drawn to the region to report on atrocities being committed. These groups dedicated their work to the deliverance of relief aid to refugee camps and the publicization of conditions within Guatemala and in the refugee camps. In fact, these groups were responsible for shedding light on the human rights abuses and atrocities occurring in Guatemala and demanding responses from state governments and the UNHCR. Two of these groups, the *Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados Guatemaltecos* (GARG) and the Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB), published regular reports documenting news and refugee testimonies from Mexico's refugee camps.

The reports disseminated by the GARG and the GNIB offer important insight into the role these independent organizations played in making the refugee crisis known internationally. The GARG, based in Mexico City, was composed of mostly Guatemalan members, as well as some foreigners. They worked directly with the refugee population in Mexico to build relationships and subsequently gain insight into the situation of refugees in Mexico as well as of internally displaced people within Guatemala. This information was then published into reports that provided both background information on the history of Guatemala and the civil war, as well as news updates from inside the country and refugee camps abroad.⁶⁸ The fact that background

⁶⁸ Correspondence from GARG to members, "Document on GARG," n.d., Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/hd76s111r>.

information was included demonstrates that the GARG's reports were intended for an audience that did not necessarily have any knowledge on the war or the refugee crisis. The reports were meant to provide a comprehensive overview of the events that had been largely left out of international news.

The GNIB had a similar mission to that of the GARG, and was successful in drawing attention, especially in the United States, to the refugee crisis. Based out of San Francisco, California and founded in 1978, the GNIB was an activist group dedicated to supporting and informing the public on "Guatemalan movements for peace and justice, indigenous rights, and labor rights."⁶⁹ There were two main initiatives that this organization engaged in to fulfill its mission: the accompaniment of the refugee population in Southeast Mexico and the compilation of a comprehensive archive of materials documenting all aspects of the civil war. The first of these initiatives was based out of Comitán, Chiapas in Mexico, where GNIB members created relationships with refugees by working alongside them in the development of community projects in the camps. Similarly to how the GARG operated, the GNIB used its work with the refugee population to inform the newsletters it would send out to an American audience. These newsletters promoted a commitment to solidarity between all peoples, specifically between the American readers of the newsletter and the Maya population of Guatemala.⁷⁰

The second initiative of the GNIB was the creation of an archive that brought together more than 11,000 news reports, policy reports, correspondence, and other materials that detailed all aspects relating to the war. Besides the newsletters and reports that the GNIB and other

⁶⁹ Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library. Web.

⁷⁰ Newsletter from GNIB, "Document on Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico," July 1991, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/3484zj10w>.

organizations published, the GNIB archive brought together information from a wide variety of sources and perspectives to document the war and refugee crisis.⁷¹

⁷¹ Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library.

A SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT BEGINS: INTERNATIONAL IMPACT OF ACTIVISM

While official institutions including the UNHCR and state governments around the world failed to alleviate the human suffering of the persecuted peoples in and fleeing from Guatemala, activist organizations that developed in Central America initiated an international movement of solidarity with the Guatemalan people. The appearance of many of these organizations, like the GNIB and GARG, in southern Mexico and Guatemala in the late 1970s and early 1980s marked the beginning of what would become an international support network between activists in the region of Guatemala, and activists around the world.

Researchers, journalists, church groups, and human rights advocates who made their way to Central America documented the overwhelming human rights abuses occurring, and provided support to those affected. Subsequently, they transmitted the knowledge they gained from this back to their own communities and countries. Beatriz Manz for instance, arrived to Guatemala in 1973 and went on to document what she saw over the course of more than a decade of field work in Guatemala and Mexico, in a variety of publications intended for American audiences.⁷² Other advocates came from around the world support the Guatemalan people. Two nations in particular, the United States and Mexico, will be focused on here due to the substantial impacts activist groups had in each of them. In the United States, activist groups banded together to form a cohesive network that engaged in political campaigns to affect American foreign policy. Meanwhile, activist organizations in Mexico published written materials in books and newspapers that were intended to create a more understanding and favorable public opinion of the Guatemalan refugees arriving across the border.

⁷² Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 35.

Impact in the United States: Taking Political Action

The GNIB had a significant impact in the United States as it represented a part of the initial solidarity movement between activists in the United States and the indigenous peoples of Central America. When the GNIB was formed in the late 1970s, few organizations like it existed. As the violence of Guatemala's civil war picked up however, more and more activists were drawn to the region to document human rights abuses and contribute aid. These activists returned to the United States to create organizations in solidarity with the affected communities they had visited in Central America. By 1981 enough such organizations had developed alongside the GNIB to warrant the creation of a network to unite them, the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA).⁷³

The formation of NISGUA represented a bridge between grassroots activism and formal policy-making. Responding to the limited U.S. media coverage of the events in Guatemala during the 1970s and early 1980s, NISGUA was created in order to empower the U.S. organizations in solidarity with Guatemala, by giving them a united national voice. It was intended to coordinate between the many solidarity organizations in the United States and Central America, to unify their objectives and voice these through the NISGUA lobbying group on Capitol Hill.⁷⁴ In this way, the information collected and refugee goals advocated internationally by the GNIB and other organizations were turned into concrete political actions.⁷⁵

⁷³ Discussion paper, "Discussion paper of NISGUA strategy," n.d., Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/p5547s39h>.

⁷⁴ Discussion paper, "Discussion paper of NISGUA strategy," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

⁷⁵ Review of strategy, "Review of NISGUA's major campaigns since 1986," n.d., Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/jm214q16v>.

There were three main action areas NISGUA engaged in to achieve its goals. First, was the regular production of written reports detailing current information and analysis on Guatemala and U.S. intervention. NISGUA's reports were intended to inform the American public of the Guatemalan conflict and refugee crisis because of the United States media's failure to provide adequate coverage of these events. In this way, the reports were essential to NISGUA's goal of gaining popular support from the American public. They were widely distributed throughout the United States in order to educate Americans so that they could become more involved activists in NISGUA's campaigns.⁷⁶

The second of NISGUA's action areas was the building of strong ties between American and Guatemalan activists. This was accomplished through educational tours for American delegations in Guatemala, and for Guatemalan delegations in the United States, as well as the creation of an emergency rapid response network. Educational tours were intended to increase solidarity between the activists of Guatemala and the United States by allowing delegates from each country to reach an understanding of the other's perspective. Especially by visiting Guatemala when conditions permitted, American activists were able to show their support for the organizations that Guatemalans had created to defend their fundamental human, economic, political, and social rights.

The rapid response network was another way to strengthen relations between these activists and show American support for the Guatemalan popular movement. The network was a system in which NISGUA members responded to human rights abuses in Guatemala by sending messages directly to President Vinicio Cerezo (1981-86) or sponsoring ads for Guatemalan radio.

⁷⁶ Discussion paper, "Discussion paper of NISGUA strategy," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

These actions advocated and provided some warning or protection to activists operating in Guatemala.⁷⁷

NISGUA's third focus was to challenge the U.S. agenda of intervention in Guatemala so that the revolutionary movement would be able to accomplish its long term goals. While NISGUA acknowledged that it could not prevent U.S. intervention entirely, it hoped at least to prevent this intervention from defeating the revolutionary movement entirely and allow them to be more effective in their campaign against the state. To this end, NISGUA targeted its efforts at using public opinion to put pressure on Congress to shift existing U.S foreign policy towards Guatemala including military aid and sales. In order to engage public opinion, NISGUA consistently participated in campaigns and mobilizations initiated by Central American organizations, increasing their popularity in the United States.⁷⁸

As NISGUA gained momentum and popularity throughout the 1980s, the actions it took became more influential in drawing attention to the Guatemalan conflict and increasing solidarity between American activists and their Guatemalan counterparts. One example of this is the Campaign to Support the Popular Movement, launched in 1987. The goal of this campaign was to enhance American support for the Guatemalan popular movement and challenge the idea that the new government of Guatemala, led by President Cerezo, represented the coming of democracy to the country. NISGUA's campaign centered around a speaking tour entitled, "Guatemalan Voices: The People's Story", in which activists from Guatemala spoke at 215 events in 87 cities across the United States. The activists shared both personal stories as well as

⁷⁷ Discussion paper, "Discussion paper of NISGUA strategy," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

⁷⁸ Discussion paper, "Discussion paper of NISGUA strategy," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

analyses of Guatemala's popular movement, especially in context of the Cerezo administration. The campaign resulted in increased awareness of the Guatemalan war, especially the atrocities committed by the state, as well as increased political action aligned with NISGUA's goals.⁷⁹

Throughout the 1980s and by means of various campaigns and movements like the Campaign to Support the Popular Movement, NISGUA was successful in publicizing human rights abuses in Guatemala and broadening the anti-intervention movement in the United States. These actions were informed by the organizations NISGUA represented. Thus, the presence of NISGUA itself as well as all of the campaigns it engaged in, demonstrate the effects grassroots organizations like the GNIB had in the United States.

By the end of the 1980s NISGUA had come to represent the strength and extent of the solidarity movement in support of Guatemalan activists. This is part of what Ana Rodriguez has referred to as a, "discursive shift toward solidarity, sanctuary, and collaborative political work"—especially among U.S. Latino/as in the 1980s, as activists in Central America turned toward grassroots organizing and activism to achieve their political goals.⁸⁰ While the United States government continued to support the Guatemalan state in the civil war, NISGUA and the organizations it connected represented a popular solidarity movement in the United States that was developing in support of the Guatemalan refugee community in Central America.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Review of strategy, Review of NISGUA's major campaigns since 1986, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

⁸⁰ Ana Rodriguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 131.

⁸¹ The increase in solidarity movements and U.S. activism was also aided by the arrival of Central American refugees and migrants to the United States.

Impact in Mexico

In regards to the impact of nongovernmental organizations in Mexico, it is critical to understand the ways in which these organizations responded to the needs of refugees that were left unmet by official state institutions. As discussed, neither the Mexican state nor the UNHCR mission in Mexico had the capacity to provide services to all Guatemalans taking refuge in the country. In response to this lack of adequate support for the entire refugee population, a plethora of humanitarian and religious organizations arose to meet the needs of refugees. The effect of these organizations in Mexico was twofold. First, the work of NGOs was the work of information. They collected data and conducted personal interviews with refugees that would inform reports and news articles published on the refugee crisis throughout Mexico. These publications, put out by organizations like the GARG as well as Mexican newspapers, helped educate the Mexican population on the situation unfolding in the southern region of their country and across the border in Guatemala.⁸² Second, humanitarian and religious organizations collected and distributed necessary aid including food and medical supplies to refugee camps, and initiated development projects in the camps.

Mexican public opinion of the Guatemalan civil war and refugee crisis was largely shaped by the publication of written materials including newspaper articles, editorials, and even books. Due to the direct influence of the Guatemalan refugee crisis on Mexican society, as well as the shared Mayan cultural history between the two nations, Mexican public opinion of the war and refugee crisis was rife with preconceptions.⁸³ As discussed earlier, in the section on

⁸² "La 'Migra' Mexicana, Temor Para Los Refugiados Guatemaltecos," *Proceso*, January 16, 1982, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/132678/la-ldquomigra-rdquo-mexicana-temor-para-los-refugiados-guatemaltecos>; Correspondence from GARG to members, "Document on GARG," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

⁸³ Montejo, 402.

Reception of Refugees Abroad, there were varying levels of acceptance of refugees among the Mexican communities that greeted them along the border. Farther from the border, in Mexico City however, where a majority of the country's population resided, there was little to no knowledge of the refugee crisis.⁸⁴ For this reason, written materials that detailed the conflict from which refugees fled and the conditions in which they lived in camps played an important role in developing an understanding of the Guatemalan civil war as well as the refugee population among the Mexican public.

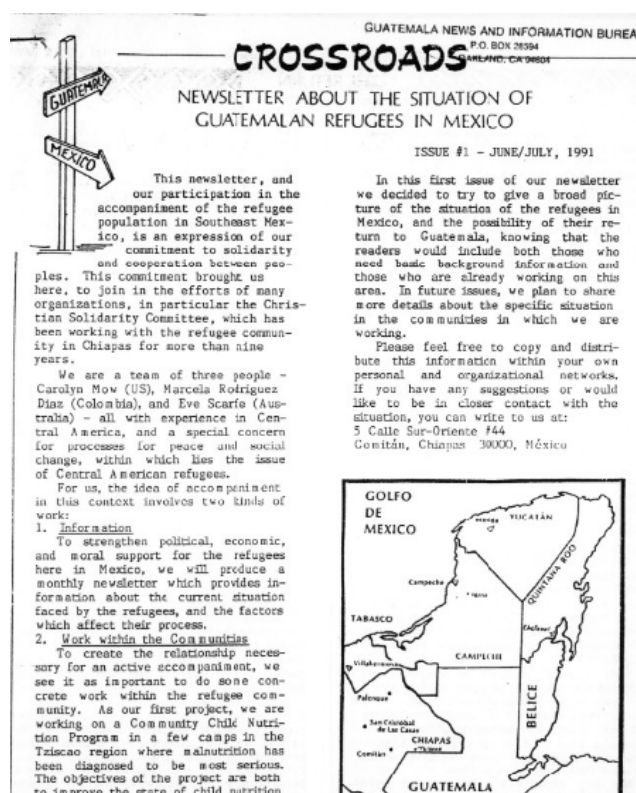


Figure 5. GNIB Newsletter sent to members.⁸⁵



Figure 6. GARG Newsletter sent to members.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Dr. Pablo Gonzalez, conversation with author, Berkeley, CA, February 27, 2018.

⁸⁵ Newsletter from GNIB, "Document on Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

⁸⁶ Newsletter from GARG (vol. 7), "Document on Guatemalan Refugees," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

The GARG was influential in Mexican society through its production of regular reports on the conditions of refugee camps, but even more so, through the publication of two books, “Informe de un genocidio: los refugiados guatemaltecos” and “La Contrainsurgencia y los refugiados guatemaltecos”. These longer works allowed the GARG to provide a fuller picture of the context and history that led to the influx of refugees across the Mexican border, than was provided in short news reports. Published out of Mexico City, both books were informed by refugee testimonies as well as investigations done by GARG members in southern Mexico and Guatemala.⁸⁷

Religious organizations were also prominent actors in advocating for the Guatemalan refugee community in Mexico. These organizations included the *Comité de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos* (CARGUA), the *Comité de Ayuda a los Inmigrantes Fronterizos*, and the *Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de Las Casas* (*Comité Cristiano*). These organizations were founded in response to the human suffering they saw among Guatemalan refugees who had crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border and continued to live with fear, hunger, and uncertainty.

Each of these organizations, like most of those operating in Mexico, put out regular reports detailing the conditions of refugee camps and denouncing violations of refugee rights. These reports were sent out to the organizations’ members within Mexico. They were also translated into various languages and distributed around the world via church-group networks.

⁸⁷ Report on Guatemalan genocide, “Informe de un genocidio: los refugiados guatemaltecos,” February 1983, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/objects/bg257g02j>; Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, *La Contrainsurgencia y los refugiados guatemaltecos* (Cuenca, Ecuador: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales de la Universidad de Cuenca, 1984).

Such reports were influential in drawing the attention of official institutions like the UNHCR to respond to human right abuses. This can be seen in a telegram sent to the UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland by Bishop J.A. Ramos in July of 1984. In the message, the Bishop calls attention and requests an immediate response to the alleged killing, torture, and denial of food to Guatemalan refugees. He names the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal as having publicly denounced these crimes in Chiapas and bringing them to the attention of the Bishop himself. The Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal is the broader church network of which the *Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal* is a part. In this alert, written in English and translated into three languages (Spanish, French, and German), it is possible to see the powerful influence of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal. It was able to gain the attention of an international influencer, Bishop Ramos, who then relied on the Diocese's information to seek out the response of the UNHCR.⁸⁸

Religious organizations were also influential in their provision of material and development aid to refugee camps. CARGUA exemplifies this kind of organization. Founded in July 1982, CARGUA's primary goal was to serve refugee camps not yet supported by other agencies. In doing so, it delivered food, clothing, medical aid, and other necessities to refugee camps around Chiapas. Representatives of the organization initiated agricultural projects to educate refugees on the crops easily grown in southern Mexico, and health projects that promoted good nutrition and hygiene. These were especially important in helping the residents of

⁸⁸ Telegram from Bishop J.A. Ramos to UNHCR, "Alarmed by denunciations [*sic*] of Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal, Mexico. Request immediate investigation alleged torture and killing of Guatemalan refugees last week and denial of food to refugees," 13 July 1984, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=c821gk795>.

camps become self-sufficient when food and personal hygiene supplies could not be provided by outside organizations.⁸⁹

Other organizations, like the *Comité Cristiano*, created educational programs focused on literacy or Spanish language for adults and children, that would allow them to better adapt to life in Mexico. CARGUA also aided refugees in pursuing business endeavours by providing materials for refugees to make handcrafted goods and then transporting and distributing these goods for sale.⁹⁰ All of these projects were aimed at cultivating long-term benefits for those in refugee camps, in addition to the provision of supplies for more immediate need. These organizations' focus on long-term projects that would aid refugees to become more self sufficient was an important contributor to the refugees' ability to politically and socially organize across refugee camps.

⁸⁹ Document on functions of CARGUA, "Document on CARGUA," n.d., Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/tt44pp088>.

⁹⁰ Document on functions of CARGUA, "Document on CARGUA," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

REFUGEE CAMPS IN MEXICO

Seven hundred meters from the Guatemalan border inside Mexican territory, thousands of Mayan men, women, and children took refuge from the violence in their country, in a camp called Puerto Rico. Situated on the banks of the Río Lacuntún, Puerto Rico was the largest camp in Chiapas.⁹¹ Tents and shacks, hastily constructed out of nylon tarps and sheet metal, were clustered on the edge of the Lacandón jungle, far removed from any cities, towns, or even vehicle-accessible roads. As an American activist visiting the camp wrote in 1982, the "refugees [were] virtual prisoners without the need for guards." They were caged in by Guatemala and its army to the south, and the Río Lacuntún and so many hundreds of miles of jungle to the north. The only ways to reach the camp from inside Mexico, were by airplane or launch boat up the Lacuntún. Small airplanes flew visitors and officials to the camp, landing on dirt landing strips that were cleared by the refugees themselves. Supplies on the other hand, took a much longer journey. They would be sent by truck from larger cities outside Chiapas, to Palenque. There they would be driven eleven hours over a muddy trail to the Lacuntún where they were loaded onto launch boats and sent on a sixteen hour journey to the Puerto Rico camp.⁹²

⁹¹ Article from *Proceso* Magazine, "Thousands of Guatemalans await starvation in Chiapas: Interior Ministry blocks assistance: Puerto Rico the largest refugee camp: Better to die in Mexico than in Guatemala: Background notes," 16 January 1983, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web. Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/3n204034w>.

⁹² Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," 27 November 1982, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web. Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/pv63g1471>.

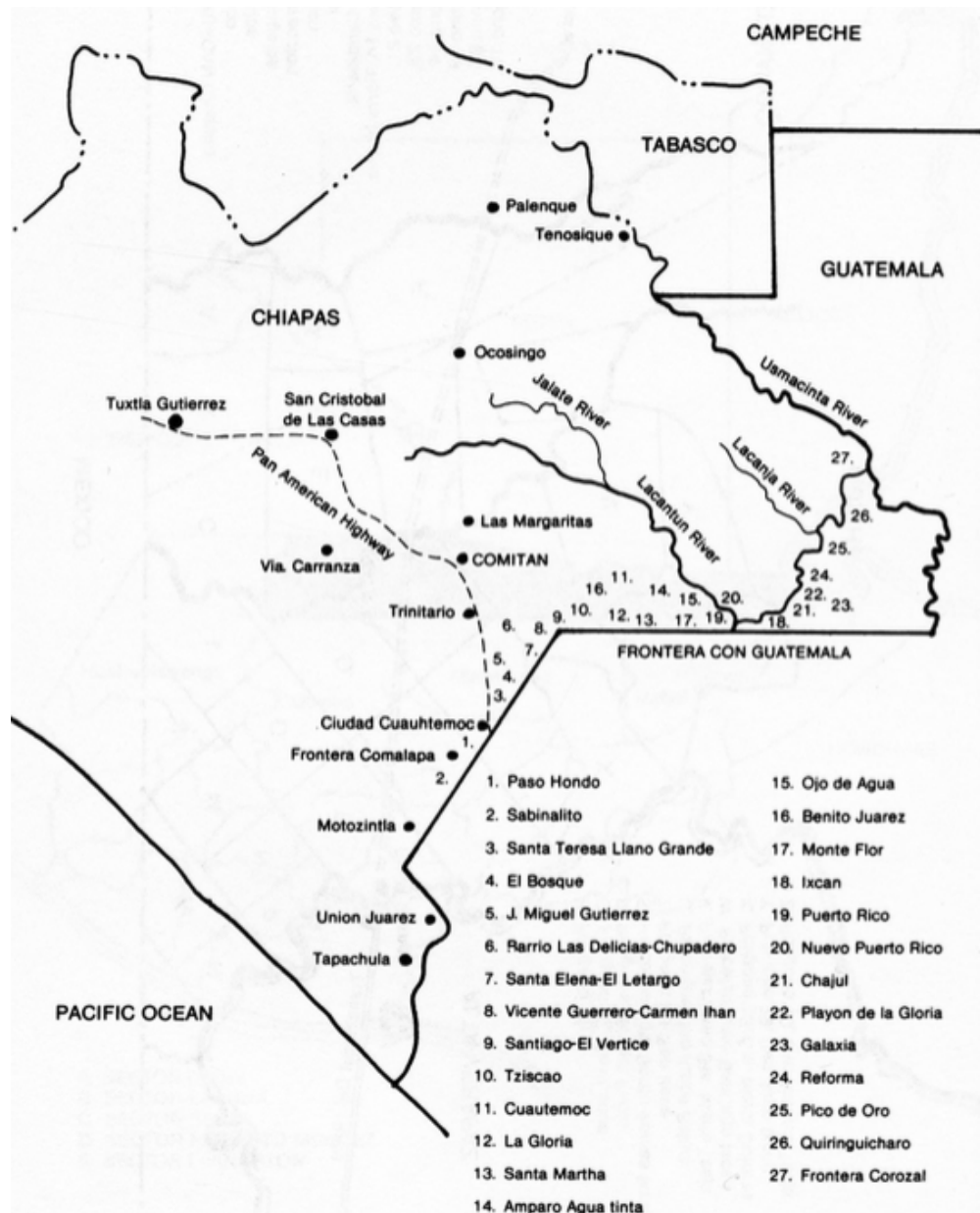


Figure 7. Map of refugee camps in Chiapas, Mexico.⁹³

Refugees crossing the border made their own harrowing journey to arrive at the camp. After travelling for sometimes up to fifteen days, taking cover from the Guatemalan army the whole way, refugees crossed into Mexico and came across the Puerto Rico camp.⁹⁴ While the

⁹³ Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 230.

⁹⁴ Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

border provided some security from the war they had fled, refugees still carried their hunger, illness, and fear in Mexico.

They arrived to the Puerto Rico camp exhausted, feet blistered and torn, carrying the weight of whatever belongings they could manage. Even the youngest children shared in this burden. Almost everyone arrived to the camp sick, the children malnourished.⁹⁵ Entering the camp, families made their way to one of the sturdier-looking, thatched-roof huts where officials from the Mexican Refugee Commission resided. There, the newly-arrived refugees waited, sometimes all day with no food or water, until an official emerged from the hut to point out an area where the group could make camp. Before sending them on their way, the official would give each family a sack of corn to sustain them until the next week.⁹⁶

While food rations in the camp varied widely, it is clear from the testimonies of numerous refugees and visitors to Puerto Rico, that hunger was among the top concerns of the camp's inhabitants. According to one activist who visited the camp in November of 1982, shortly after its founding, refugee families of six people were given about nine kilograms of corn, one kilogram of beans, and occasionally some salt every ten days. These amounts changed frequently depending on the official distributing food on any given day, however, no refugees in the camp were provided sufficient food.⁹⁷ Nearly all of Puerto Rico's inhabitants experienced debilitating

⁹⁵ Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Newsletter from GARG (vol. 2), "Document on Guatemalan Refugees," June 1983, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/vq27zp47f>.

⁹⁶ Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

⁹⁷ Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

hunger, yet this did not deter them from staying. Refugees interviewed in March of 1983 reported that they would rather be in Mexico, where they had to put up with hunger but could be free and safe, than return to Guatemala.⁹⁸

As a result of the lack of adequate food supplies provided in the camps, together with an undersupplied medical program, the malnourishment and illness with which refugees arrived to Puerto Rico often worsened once there. Being the largest camp in Chiapas, Puerto Rico was one of the few that had a medical clinic. Visiting medical brigades implemented precautionary sanitary measures like the establishment of latrines, in order to prevent diseases.⁹⁹ Camp doctors and their assistants attempted to treat refugees suffering from illnesses including malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhea. However, the lack of medication and medical supplies as basic as cotton and alcohol, limited the clinic's effectiveness at curing illnesses that ran rampant.¹⁰⁰

According to Doctor Alejandro de la Torre of the United Nations Children's Fund, there were times when children in Puerto Rico died due to the lack of "a single bottle of intravenous fluid."

¹⁰¹ The inability to treat illnesses permeating the refugee population, combined with the absence of adequate food supplies resulted in a steadily rising death toll in the camp. Intern doctors working in Puerto Rico reported that no official medical records were kept within the camp, making it impossible to track an accurate number of refugee deaths. Estimated mortality rates

⁹⁸ Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Newsletter from GARG (vol. 2), "Document on Guatemalan Refugees," June 1983, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/vq27zp47f>.

⁹⁹ Margarita Nolasco, "El Miedo y el Desempleo Corroen a Cien Mil Refugiados Guatemaltecos", *Proceso*, Dec. 10, 1983, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/137568/el-miedo-y-el-desempleo-corroen-a-cien-mil-refugiados-guatemaltecos>.

¹⁰⁰ Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁰¹ Nolasco, "El Miedo y el Desempleo Corroen a Cien Mil Refugiados Guatemaltecos."

vary widely in various testimonies and accounts taken from different time periods in Puerto Rico. The intern doctors estimated in 1982 for example, that in one week there might be 100 deaths in the camp.¹⁰² Another doctor reports that Puerto Rico's cemetery was inaugurated in October of 1982 , and by December of that year 95 Guatemalan refugees who had died in the camp were buried there.¹⁰³

About 180 miles south of Puerto Rico, a smaller camp, called Cuahtemoc, was situated near the Montebello Lakes in Chiapas. By 1984, 1100 individuals had taken up residence there. Ten by twelve foot huts were packed alongside each other across cleared land. The huts were built of strung-together stakes and topped with heavy corrugated tar paper as roofing. With dirt floors and drafty walls, the structures provided little shelter from the cold. The only source of heat in fact, came from the open fires refugees would make inside their huts for cooking. The rations they received were similar to those given out in Puerto Rico, and Mexican officials did not allow refugees to cultivate their own land, leaving refugees unable to escape their hunger.¹⁰⁴

Like Puerto Rico, the refugees at Cuahtemoc suffered from many illnesses, and received little medical attention to remedy them. Doctors working with the Catholic church would attend to patients in the camps, but were severely limited by lack of personnel and supplies. According to a report from the Central America Medical Aid, seven out of ten children in the camp suffered

¹⁰² Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁰³ Article from *Proceso* Magazine, "Thousands of Guatemalans await starvation in Chiapas: Interior Ministry blocks assistance: Puerto Rico the largest refugee camp: Better to die in Mexico than in Guatemala: Background notes," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁰⁴ Letter describing visit to refugee camps from Central America Medical Aid representative to members, "Guatemalan refugees in Mexico," May 1984, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL:<http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/m900nv472>.

from some degree of malnutrition, and most of these malnourished children experienced illness as well. The most prevalent diseases in the camp were respiratory, stemming from the combined effects of cold and smoke in refugees' huts.¹⁰⁵

Camps like Cuahtemoc, small and hidden away from public eye in the jungle region, were particularly vulnerable to suffering from a lack of supplies and infrastructure. Because they received little attention from outside the camp, they were reliant on Mexican immigration officials and any humanitarian organizations that found their way to these camps. Even Puerto Rico however, suffered from lack of supplies and infrastructure, despite being the largest and most well-known camp in Mexico.¹⁰⁶

In 1984 the Mexican government attempted to relocate all Guatemalan refugees away from the Guatemala-Mexico border, to official UNHCR-sponsored camps in Campeche and Quintana Roo. As discussed in the previous section, the majority of Guatemalan refugees resisted this move, and in response, the Mexican government resorted to the use of force to remove refugees from established camps in Chiapas. Some 40,000 refugees arrived in Campeche and Quintana Roo by the end of 1984¹⁰⁷ and were put into new camps there based on their communities of origin in Guatemala or the refugee camps they had come from in Chiapas.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Letter describing visit to refugee camps from Central America Medical Aid representative to members, "Guatemalan refugees in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁰⁶ Letter describing visit to refugee camps from Central America Medical Aid representative to members, "Guatemalan refugees in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Margarita Nolasco, "El Miedo y el Desempleo Corroen a Cien Mil Refugiados Guatemaltecos."

¹⁰⁷ Newsletter from Survival International USA, "Relocation of Guatemalan Refugees," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000). Thousands of others remained in Chiapas to resist relocation.

¹⁰⁸ Description of visit to refugee camps by South Texas Aid to Refugees, "Document on synopsis of a visit to the camps of relocated refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo," January 1985, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/6d56zx884>.

The UNHCR-sponsored camps, though restrictive of refugees' freedoms, had markedly better infrastructure and were better supplied than many of the camps in Chiapas. The Canasayab camp in Campeche, housed 7,525 refugees as of January 1995, and was divided into three areas, or "modules" as they were called. Houses were constructed in a similar way to Mexican homes in the area, with wooden poles for walls and tar paper lamina roofing. Each family had a six by four meter house on a plot of land 150 square meters in size. Water was provided through two deep wells and piped to various taps throughout each of the modules. Latrines were constructed on the periphery of each module, and some refugees even obtained supplies from camp officials to build smaller latrines on their own land.¹⁰⁹

Rations in Canasayab were much improved from what refugees had received in camps like Puerto Rico. Individuals were given a diverse range of food supplies each week including: 300 grams of rice, 750 grams of beans, 2250 grams of Minsa (a type of corn flour), 165 grams of cooking oil, 375 grams sugar, 200 grams of milk, 150 grams of pasta, 3 eggs, 150 grams of onion, 500 grams of cabbage, 300 grams of flour, and 300 grams of chicken or fish (alternating each week).¹¹⁰

Medical care was provided by the *Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social*. Each module had its own clinic, which according to a report from the South Texas Aid to Refugees organization in 1985, were well-staffed and well-equipped. In the same report, camp doctors identified the most serious ailments in Canasayab as respiratory diseases amoebic dysentery.

¹⁰⁹ Description of visit to refugee camps by South Texas Aid to Refugees, "Document on synopsis of a visit to the camps of relocated refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹¹⁰ Description of visit to refugee camps by South Texas Aid to Refugees, "Document on synopsis of a visit to the camps of relocated refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

While malaria and tuberculosis were present as in many of the camps in Chiapas, camp doctors reported that these diseases were stabilized in Canasayab. Aside from treating diseases, the main task of camp doctors was to seek out malnourished refugees, especially children, and attempt to provide aid that would improve their condition.¹¹¹

It is clear from these descriptions that conditions in the refugee camps of Mexico were poor. The infrastructure and resources available was improved in the UNHCR camps, like Canasayab. However, many Guatemalans still resisted the forced relocation to these better-equipped camps in 1984. This demonstrates the refugee community's enduring will to remain in Chiapas, near to Guatemala and in resistance to the Mexican state's attempts to control them.

External Actors in the Camps

As refugees coped with the many hardships prevalent in the diverse camps across southern Mexico, there were many factors that played roles in the daily lives of this population. The two main external actors exerting influence in the refugee camps were non-governmental organizations, including humanitarian and church groups, and the Mexican government. Each of these actors had important influences on the social and political dynamics of refugee communities within and across camps.

Humanitarian groups were some of the most attentive actors to the refugee crisis in the early 1980s. They provided both direct resource aid and developmental aid to Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. These humanitarian groups, like the GNIB, the GARG, and many others

¹¹¹ Description of visit to refugee camps by South Texas Aid to Refugees, "Document on synopsis of a visit to the camps of relocated refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

operating within Mexico and abroad, raised money and collected supplies to donate to the refugee population living in Mexico. Many of these groups were founded or began focusing their efforts on refugee aid, in response to the arrival of refugees from El Salvador in the late 1970s. In the early 1980s, their efforts began to be directed to the newly arrived Guatemalan refugee population. The supplies they collected to deliver to refugee camps included food, clothing, medical supplies, building materials for refugee housing, blankets, school books, notebooks, and kitchen utensils. One of the most famous humanitarian groups to engage in this work was the *Comité Cristiano*.¹¹²

The *Comité Cristiano*, with a wide network of members, often attempted to deliver these supplies directly to camps throughout Chiapas to ensure they would be put to good use. Aid provided by humanitarian organizations was essential to the refugees experiencing dismal conditions in camps where the Mexican state provided just bare minimum supplies, if that, for refugees to survive on. While the donations made by groups like the *Comité Cristiano* did not always make it to the refugees they were intended to aid— as will be discussed further on in this section— the supplies that did make it greatly improved refugee living conditions.¹¹³

The developmental aid that humanitarian groups provided in refugee camps not only benefited refugees in the short-term, but also had important long-term effects of improving refugees' abilities to communicate across camps and engage in political organizing.

Developmental aid often came in the form of long-term projects that humanitarian groups

¹¹² Report by the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal, "Refugiados Guatemaltecos en la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas México," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹¹³ Report by the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal, "Refugiados Guatemaltecos en la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas México," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

created alongside refugees in order to address issues beyond their immediate needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Some of the projects implemented throughout various Chiapas camps were related to education, health, and employment.¹¹⁴

The *Comité Cristiano* engaged with each of these areas in the camps it worked with. Education projects were related to supporting camp schools that had already been created by refugees. This included contributing learning materials like books and lessons, creating courses to improve literacy among adults, and teaching Spanish language. In many cases, these courses gave special attention to the education of women, allowing refugee women to learn to read and write, some for the first time. Health projects included teaching courses on first aid and illness prevention measures. Lastly, employment projects were attempts to create employment opportunities for refugees that would not create competition with Mexican workers in the same region. The *Comité Cristiano* went about this by building looms in camps where refugees could make artisan crafts to be sold in local markets, or ascertaining plots of land on which refugees could cultivate crops. All of these projects supported refugees in becoming more self-sufficient and less reliant on the Mexican state or any other providers of material aid. This self-sufficiency was an important factor in the refugees' maintaining of a sense of agency over their circumstances, that would lead to their ability to resist the will of the Mexican state.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Report by the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal, "Refugiados Guatemaltecos en la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas México," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Document on functions of CARGUA, "Document on CARGUA," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹¹⁵ Report by the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal, "Refugiados Guatemaltecos en la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas México," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

While the humanitarian assistance provided by solidarity and church groups from around Mexico and abroad provided a source of empowerment and agency for refugees, the Mexican state limited these results by exercising its power over the refugee population in two distinct ways. First was the state's strict control over the distribution of resources donated by humanitarian organizations. The Mexican government attempted to centralize all humanitarian aid collected by various organizations, in order to regulate its distribution. Rather than distribute the aid between camps however, the state more often hoarded these supplies, maintaining low rations for refugees. At the same time as many refugees were starving across Chiapas, storage warehouses in the camps were fully stocked with food supplies donated by humanitarian organizations.¹¹⁶ While the Mexican state did not officially document these actions, it is likely they were done as a means of exerting further control over refugee camps by limiting outside influences and aid to them.

The second way in which the Mexican government exercised control over the refugee population, was through the repeated and forced relocations of camps. The most poignant example of this happened in the 1984 relocation of camps from Chiapas to Campeche and Quintana Roo. Other, more localized instances of forced relocations occurred throughout the early 1980s. In one example, immigration officials arrived to the Dolores refugee camp not far from the Lacandón jungle on October 26, 1982 to announce the camp's immediate closure. On October 27, all of the camp's inhabitants were forced out under threat of imprisonment, with

¹¹⁶ Proceso Magazine Article, *Thousands of Guatemalans await starvation in Chiapas : Interior Ministry blocks assistance : Puerto Rico the largest refugee camp : Better to die in Mexico than in Guatemala : Background notes*, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Correspondence from visitor at refugee camps to friends, "Document on refugee encampment of Puerto Rico in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

nowhere to go and almost no time to even gather their belongings. Dolores camp, including the school, medical clinic, and all supplies stored there, was burned and destroyed by the immigration officials later that day. Relocations like this were common throughout Chiapas in the early 1980s. At will the Mexican government could force refugees to pick up and move yet again, never sure where they were headed. This maintained an air of uncertainty over the refugees' lives in camps and made them wary of the Mexican government.¹¹⁷

Creating a Collective Refugee Identity

Inside refugee camps, Guatemalans had to depend on themselves for labor, social organization, and the establishment of communication with others outside their own camp. As discussed, the Mexican officials put in charge of refugee camps engaged only briefly with the refugees they oversaw. They controlled refugee movement in and out of camps, as well as the distribution of food and resources. Aside from this however, refugee communities followed the rules of the camps and were otherwise left to fend for themselves.

While the Guatemalan refugee population consisted of a large variety of indigenous groups, their shared experiences of persecution in Guatemala, flight across the border into Mexico, and poor treatment in Mexico allowed these independent groups to develop a shared identity as Guatemalan refugees. A similar sense of community building across differences had already taken place in many villages throughout Guatemala, as discussed earlier on in this thesis with the case of Santa María Tzejá, as indigenous groups banded together in order to resist persecution by the state. The shared identity formed over time in Guatemala and strengthened

¹¹⁷ Report by the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal, "Testimonios - Informes," December 1982, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/bc386k22t>.

and broadened in Mexico allowed Guatemalan refugees to form communities in exile that transcended ethnic or linguistic boundaries.¹¹⁸

Refugees interviewed by the GARG between 1982 and 1984 in camps throughout southern Mexico repeated similar stories of persecution, the destruction of their village in Guatemala, and their difficult journey to Mexico, despite their varying ethnic groups, linguistic groups, or places of origin in Guatemala. Refugees hailing from the village of Nuevo Progreso in the department of Quiché, Guatemala reported stories of the destruction of their village and their decision to come to Mexico to the GARG in late 1982. One woman recalls that she did not want to leave her home, but was forced by circumstance. When the army came to Nuevo Progreso, she says, “Everything was burned. I left running from that place.”¹¹⁹ Benito Raxtún, interviewed in late 1983, tells a similar story of the destruction of his own village, Santa Teresa in the department of Zacapa. He tells how the state army’s helicopters arrived to Santa Teresa and hours later the soldiers began to burn everything and the people left running, all their belongings left behind to the army’s destruction.¹²⁰ In a third set of interviews, we see a similar story of escaping Guatemala told by a twelve year old boy from the department of San Marcos. “We left out of the need to save our lives, because the army arrived to kill.”¹²¹

These interviews reveal the similarities in the experiences of persecuted indigenous people across Guatemala. Each of the testimonies related above describes an individual

¹¹⁸ Billings, 79.

¹¹⁹ Newsletter from GARG (vol. 2), “Document on Guatemalan Refugees,” Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹²⁰ Newsletter from GARG (vol. 5), “Document on Guatemalan Refugees,” January 1984, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/objects/44558f34j>.

¹²¹ Newsletter from GARG (vol. 5), “Document on Guatemalan Refugees,” Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

experience in a unique department of the country, yet the stories are undoubtedly similar. The first interviewee came from Quiché, a department in northern Guatemala, that reaches up to the border of Mexico. The second, was from Zacapa, a department in eastern Guatemala, bordering Honduras. The last interviewee came from San Marcos, a department on the western border of Guatemala, neighboring Mexico. Despite the diversity between the refugees interviewed, they shared many of the same experiences. As Miguel Ángel Velázquez wrote in a 1982 newspaper article sharing the testimonies of Guatemalan refugees, “*Todos quieren hablar, dar su testimonio... Aunque, todos tienen la misma historia.*”¹²² These shared experiences allowed individuals from distinct indigenous groups to come together as a single community of people exiled from their home country.

Refugees continued to have shared experiences of turmoil once they reached Mexico. The constant relocation of camps, lack of food and other necessary supplies, and mistreatment by Mexican authorities broadened the set of experiences refugees shared with one another and allowed them to relate to each other in new ways. Arriving in Mexico, refugees from the same Guatemalan villages tended to stick together. They crossed the border as communities, and took up residence in refugee camps together. There, refugees shared stories and experiences with those who had arrived from other villages.¹²³ Furthermore, refugees in Mexico continued to build upon the set of experiences they shared with all refugees in the country. As detailed in the previous section, refugees in camps throughout Mexico faced many of the same hardships of

¹²² Newspaper article by Miguel Ángel Velázquez, “Campamentos testimonios de la represión,” 22 January 1982, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pudl.princeton.edu/objects/fq977w002>. Translation by author. “Everyone wants to speak, to give their own testimony... Although, everyone has the same story.”

¹²³ Billings, 82.

food deprivation and general insecurity from lack of legal status and initial lack of exposure to international media. In her research, Deborah Billings highlights this shared oppression and racism indigenous peoples had experienced in Guatemala, as well as the shared hardship of their flight from their homeland and the new lives they began to build in exile, as impetus for forming a group identity.¹²⁴

El Porvenir camp in Chiapas, was populated by Q'anjob'ales, Chujes, and Yolanhuits from around Guatemala. These groups marked linguistic and ethnic barriers between the people of the camp. Based on these groups, camp inhabitants formed sub communities within the camps, that were composed of inhabitants of a single ethnic or linguistic group, or came from the same Guatemalan village. The residents of El Porvenir however, transcended the boundaries of these smaller sub communities regularly in order to unite as a singular refugee community that acted in the benefit of the camp as a whole. When asked why they did this, one woman explained, "We are all in the same place. There is injustice, and we need to defend our lives. For those reasons we are organized."¹²⁵ This statement demonstrates the refugee community's consciousness that their actions as a unified group would be more effective than as smaller ethnic or linguistic groups.

Refugees' shared experiences that were developed during the civil war and exile from Guatemala allowed them to create a shared identity that united the diverse indigenous communities of Guatemala into one cohesive refugee community. This was an integral step toward their formation of politically active refugee organizations. The next steps in this process

¹²⁴ Billings, 77.

¹²⁵ Billings, 82.

were the formation of social organization in refugee camps and communication networks between camps and across the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Furthermore, the constant relocation of camps had the effect of detaching refugees' identities from their geographic location. As described in the previous section, refugee camps were often closed down by Mexican authorities with little notice, forcing refugees to pick up and move time and time again, with only the knowledge that their next settlement would be no more permanent than the last. For this reason among others, there was a significant resistance movement among refugees to the 1984 relocation proposed by the Mexican government to move all refugees from Chiapas to Campeche and Quintana Roo.¹²⁶

Organizing in Resistance: Relocation to Campeche and Quintana Roo

The 1984 relocation of refugee camps in Chiapas to Campeche and Quintana Roo demonstrated not only the human rights violations that refugees continued to endure in Mexico, but also the determination of the refugee community to engage in collective, political actions. As Mexico exerted its power over the refugee population, especially by way of the state army, the refugees used existing networks of communication within and between their camps in order to share information and coordinate political actions.

Though the Mexican government attributed its decision to move camps to Campeche and Quintana Roo to ensuring the safety of refugees by housing them further from the border, the state's actions during this process repeatedly violated refugee rights and added to their insecurity. According to several refugee testimonies as well as reports published by non-governmental

¹²⁶ Newsletter from Survival International USA, "Relocation of Guatemalan Refugees," 1985, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=5425kb81t>.

organizations, the Mexican army utilized force and coercion to push refugees out of the camps they had built up in Chiapas. This included the denial of necessary resources including food and medical aid; destruction of property, crops, and possessions; and the use of threats and intimidation.¹²⁷

The move also allowed the Mexican government and UNHCR to gain better control over the refugee population by moving them into well-monitored UNHCR-sponsored camps as opposed to the scattered and unstructured camps buried in the jungle region of Chiapas. In Campeche and Quintana Roo, Guatemalans would be registered as official refugees by the UNHCR, and their exit and entry to camps would be closely monitored.¹²⁸ This plan was hindered however, by the strong resistance it found among the refugees of Chiapas.

The refugee population almost uniformly across Chiapas rejected the proposed relocation, and many took action to avoid it. As described earlier on in this thesis, refugees largely rejected the relocation plan because it sought to move refugees away from the border with Guatemala. The camps in Campeche were more than 300 kilometers from the Mexico-Guatemala border, where some Chiapas camps were within 50 kilometers of the border.

¹²⁹ The increase in distance from their country would not only prevent refugees from visiting

¹²⁷ Newsletter from Survival International USA, "Relocation of Guatemalan Refugees," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Press release from Diocesan Press Committee, "Press release sent by friends of Bishop Samuel Ruiz informing of mistreatment of Guatemalan refugees by Mexican military," 11 July 1984, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=ms35t963t>; ¡Guatemala! newsletter, "Surviving relocation in southern Mexico: Testimony on refugees," April 1986, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=w95051695>.

¹²⁸ Description of visit to refugee camps by South Texas Aid to Refugees, "Document on synopsis of a visit to the camps of relocated refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹²⁹ Newsletter from Survival International USA, "Relocation of Guatemalan Refugees," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

Guatemala, but also remove them from ethnically Maya land shared between Chiapas and Guatemala where many refugees shared traditions or other cultural elements with Mexican *campesinos*. Other refugees resisted relocation because they had developed a familiarity with Chiapas and did not want to be uprooted again.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Newsletter from Survival International USA, "Relocation of Guatemalan Refugees," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

A VOICE FOR THE REFUGEE COMMUNITY

In December of 1987, Guatemalan refugees gathered at a general assembly in southern Mexico. There, the refugee community voted to name the CCPP as their official and legitimate representatives. The organization was intended to represent and voice the interests of the refugee community, most importantly, their desire to return to Guatemala under conditions of peace and security. As the official representative of the refugee community, the CCPP focused its work on gaining international support in order to be recognized as a legitimate negotiating body by the Guatemalan government, and furthermore, to be successful in ascertaining its goal of coordinating voluntary, organized, and collective refugee returns to Guatemala.¹³¹

The CCPP operated through democratic participation that involved refugees from all camps in Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. Refugees would gather at local general assemblies held in camps across Mexico to elect representatives to the CCPP by direct vote. These representatives would then hold meetings of the CCPP to relay information between them and discuss political actions. The CCPP kept the refugee community informed on the return plans its members formulated as well as the progress of engaging in dialogues with state authorities. This allowed the refugee population to have a strong voice through the CCPP, as their communities throughout Mexico were constantly updated and involved in determining the CCPP's actions. Furthermore, as the CCPP began to create return proposals to demonstrate its demands to external organizations, the representatives consulted with individuals in refugee camps throughout the process. In this way, the CCPP's agenda was shaped by the refugee

¹³¹ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 3," February 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/objects/b8515p45d>.

community's principal demand for the right to return freely to their villages in Guatemala, where they could live and produce on the lands that legitimately belonged to them.¹³²

The central plan created by the CCPP was for a voluntary, organized, and collective return to Guatemala for all refugees in Mexico. The three characteristics of this return were intended to ensure the security of all refugees involved and their long-term ability to remain in Guatemala. First, the return was to be voluntary to ensure that refugees were fully willing and ready to face the challenges of returning to Guatemala where their safety and freedoms may still be at risk. This characteristic of the CCPP's idea of return is shared with repatriations advocated by the Guatemalan government, represented by the *Comisión Nacional para la Atención de Repatriados, Refugiados, y Desplazados* (CEAR). Second, returns were to be "organized". This meant that the CCPP would establish all logistics of return, including the process of travelling to Guatemala as well as the more complex issues of what life for returnees would look like once they arrived. Third, returns were to be collective. This comes into contrast with the CEAR-led repatriations that were often individual, meaning that individual families would return to Guatemala on their own. The CCPP and refugee community believed that collective returns would provide refugees with more security and support as they travelled back to Guatemala and reestablished themselves in communities there.¹³³

In creating a comprehensive proposal for return, the CCPP not only consulted with the Guatemalan refugee community in Mexico, but it also made efforts to consult with the

¹³² Report from Secretaria de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, "Document on refugees National Dialogue and human rights with news clippings of various media," February 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/objects/3f462670h>.

¹³³ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 3," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

Guatemalan people who remained in their country as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations. The CCPP sent out countless letters, well documented by media outlets at the time, to community members, state officials, governmental organizations, and solidarity organizations to ascertain their input, especially when it came to resolving more complex issues like that of land distribution to returned refugees.¹³⁴ According to a document published by the *Secretaría de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos* in 1989, the CCPP hoped to engage all actors involved with the Guatemalan war to reach a collective solution to the country's problems.¹³⁵ In doing so, the CCPP created relationships with these actors, which allowed them to develop an extensive support network both domestically in Mexico, and internationally. This network would be integral to the organization's gaining of recognition as a legitimate negotiating body in talks with the Guatemalan government.

Despite the refugee community's naming of the CCPP as its legitimate representative in 1987, the organization was not recognized as an official negotiating body by the Guatemalan government until October of 1991. Between 1987 and 1991, the CCPP attempted to engage with the state on many occasions, yet the Guatemalan government systematically denied the organization's attempts to initiate talks. In 1988 for example, the CCPP initiated a correspondence campaign in which representatives sent letters to Guatemalan authorities requesting an open dialogue on how to resolve the refugee crisis. The Guatemalan government disregarded these attempts at communication, refusing even to acknowledge the CCPP as the

¹³⁴ Land reform was a principle issue in the negotiation of a refugee return to Guatemala. The CCPP advocated for the refugees' right to return to their original lands. However many of these properties had already been turned over to new owners.

¹³⁵ Report from Secretaría de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, "Document on refugees National Dialogue and human rights with news clippings of various media," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

legitimate representatives of the exiled Guatemalan population. The first opportunity the CCPP had to engage with the Guatemalan government came in 1989 at the National Dialogue.

Expanding their Solidarity Network: The National Dialogue

The National Dialogue was the first in a series of talks that brought Guatemalan and international actors together in search of peace for the country. As an integral step toward the peace process, the event also helped establish the CCPP as a legitimate and influential organization in this process as it was able to engage with governmental as well as non-governmental organizations regarding the refugees' needs and demands. The event, organized by the *Comisión de reconciliación* (CNR), brought together 47 organizations from around the world to discuss a resolution to the Guatemalan crisis.¹³⁶ They gathered in Guatemala City, first on February 20, 1989 in a Preparatory Assembly, and then again on March 1, 1989 to begin the National Dialogue. Participating organizations met in general assemblies as well as smaller commissions intended to generate and share ideas to address the many aspects of the crisis.¹³⁷ Representatives of the CCPP, aided by legal advisors, participated in three such commissions: the Commission of Human Rights, the Commission of Victims of Violence, and the Commission of Ethnic Groups.¹³⁸ These talks allowed the CCPP to continue establishing

¹³⁶ Report from Secretaría de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, "Document on refugees National Dialogue and human rights with news clippings of various media," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹³⁷ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 4," March 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/pk02cb813>.

¹³⁸ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 6," July 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=5h73px13q>.

relationships with national and international organizations, and gain widespread recognition that would be integral to their later success.

Although the CCPP came to be internationally recognized in large part as a result of the connections made at the National Dialogue, the refugee organization faced many obstacles in getting there. Initially, the CNR did not extend an invitation to the CCPP to attend the event. Only after the CCPP submitted many requests, as well as recommendations from high-ranking offices in support of the CCPP, including the Swedish Embassy and the representative of the UNHCR in Mexico, did the CNR concede and extend an invitation for the CCPP to attend the National Dialogue. The Guatemalan government, though a participant in the Dialogue alongside the CCPP, continued to deny the CCPP any recognition of its legitimacy.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the invitation from the CNR noted, that it would be unable to guarantee the protection of the CCPP's representatives while they participated in the Dialogue.¹⁴⁰ To remedy this, the CCPP reached out to its members as well as its solidarity network and requested support for its representatives who would be travelling to the National Dialogue. They also contacted media outlets to ensure that the event would be well-publicized. By the time the Dialogue occurred, the CCPP was accompanied by several members of a security team and advisors from organizations in

¹³⁹ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 3," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁴⁰ Report from Secretaría de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, "Document on refugees National Dialogue and human rights with news clippings of various media," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000); Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 3," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

solidarity with the Guatemalan population.¹⁴¹ Thus the obstacle of not being guaranteed security in fact served to strengthen the CCPP's solidarity network.

The CCPP's involvement in the National Dialogue is exemplary of the organization's democratic structure, that was present not only in the initial election of representatives, but also in the refugee community's continued participation in the actions taken by the CCPP. Preceding the CCPP delegation's trip to Guatemala to participate in the Preparatory Assembly, the representatives spent one week visiting refugee camps in Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. In this endeavour, the delegation intended to ensure that they had the support of the refugee community to participate in the National Dialogue on their behalf. Indeed, the delegation was met with banners of support carried by refugee communities, and blankets for the representatives to use during their stay in the camps. These visits resulted in the CCPP obtaining support from more than 80% of the refugee community.¹⁴² Once the Preparatory Assembly had concluded, the CCPP's delegation returned to Mexico briefly to visit the refugee camps once again, this time to inform them of the events that had transpired during the Assembly.¹⁴³ These visits to refugee camps demonstrate the consistent communication that existed between the CCPP and its members, that allowed representatives to continue adequately voicing their community's needs and concerns.

¹⁴¹ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 3," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁴² Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 4," March 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁴³ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 4," March 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

Furthermore, at the time of the National Dialogue, the CCPP was determined to expand its solidarity network with organizations in Guatemala and abroad. This network would aid the CCPP in gaining legitimacy and promoting its plan for refugee return. Leading up to and throughout the Dialogue, the CCPP reached out to many organizations and governments like the CNR, officials of the Guatemalan government, and Guatemalan labor unions, in order to create direct connections between them and the CCPP. A press release from the CCPP in March 1989 emphasizes how the representatives of the refugee community took advantage of their stay in Guatemala City during the National Dialogue, to meet with representatives and officials from governments, national and international organizations, and popular Guatemalan groups. The CCPP worked to gain their trust and support by sharing the refugee community's perspective and their hopes for the future, as well as the organization's proposal for return. While the refugee representatives made strong connections with many non-governmental organizations, they had difficulty even gaining access to Guatemalan government officials. The CCPP recorded that they were not received well when they arrived at government offices to request meetings with officials. However, as the CCPP noted in March 1989, its representatives were beginning to win the trust of some government officials little by little, as the representatives shared stories on the situation in which the refugees found themselves.¹⁴⁴ Though the CCPP delegation left Guatemala at the close of the National Dialogue still unrecognized by the Guatemalan government, they had laid important groundwork for establishing their organization as a legitimate negotiating body, capable of commanding the attention of the international community.

¹⁴⁴ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 6," July 1989, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=5h73px13q>.

Throughout the National Dialogue, the CCPP promoted its plan for refugee return to Guatemala, and while a return agreement did not directly result from these talks, the CCPP did make progress toward this goal. Their presence in Guatemala allowed the CCPP to expand its recognition nationally and internationally as the voice of the refugee community in Mexico. It also allowed them to disseminate and gain support for their return proposal to a newly expanded network of solidarity organizations. When the National Dialogue concluded however, it had become clear to the CCPP that despite this increasing solidarity, the Guatemalan government and army were unwilling to address the pressing issues regarding the refugee community that the CCPP had brought up.¹⁴⁵ Though a return would eventually need to be negotiated with the Guatemalan government, international support for the CCPP's plan helped put pressure on Guatemala to get there. This would contribute to their eventual recognition of the CCPP and the 1992 agreement on refugee returns that followed.

"Struggle to Return...": An Agreement is Made

Due to the continued refusal of the Guatemalan government to recognize the CCPP following the National Dialogue, the refugee community took matters into their own hands in initiating a negotiation process with the state by utilized the solidarity network they had cultivated. At the request of the CCPP, a Mediating Commission was founded in October 1990 with a mandate to facilitate a dialogue between the CCPP and the Guatemalan government. Members of the Commission included Bishop Rodolfo Quezada Toruño, president of the CNR; Ramiro de León Carpio, governmental human rights ombudsman of Guatemala; Roberto

¹⁴⁵ Report from CCPP, "Document on Guatemalan refugees in Mexico: Boletín de las Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México: Núm 6," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

Rodriguez, head of the UNHCR mission in Guatemala; and Ana Antonia Reyes, of the non-governmental Human Rights Commission based in Mexico. The Mediating Commission was to transmit the position and concerns of the refugee community, gathered through meetings in refugee camps, to the Guatemalan government and to arrange meetings between these parties, while the CCPP remained unrecognized.¹⁴⁶

The creation of the Mediating Commission was both an important step forward for the CCPP in the achievement of their goals, as well as a representation of the political power they had already amounted. The high-ranking members of this commission, hailing from internationally-recognized institutions, demonstrate the expansive solidarity network the CCPP had created. It had reached out to many of these organizations and even interacted with them during the National Dialogue. By forming part of the Mediating Commission, and in doing so, amplifying the voice of the refugee community to the Guatemalan government, these international institutions showed their support for the CCPP.¹⁴⁷

As a result of the Mediating Commission and the CCPP's efforts, the Guatemalan government recognized the CCPP in October 1991, allowing the two parties to begin direct negotiations on the refugee return. In a joint statement released that month, the parties expressed their good intentions for the negotiating process, and the CEAR acknowledged the CCPP as a legitimate negotiating body related to the returns of refugees.¹⁴⁸ Not only was this a significant

¹⁴⁶ Newsletter from GNIB, "Document on the situation of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000). In early 1991 the Mediating Commission and the CCPP agreed to form a multi-sectoral commission that would include representatives from the Guatemalan National Institute for Agrarian Transformation (INTA), the Guatemalan army, the CEAR, the CCPP, the dioceses of Huehuetenango and El Quiché, as well as old and new owners of Guatemalan land. The UNHCR was later included.

¹⁴⁷ Newsletter from GNIB, "Document on the situation of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁴⁸ Newsletter from GNIB, "Document on the situation of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico," December 1991, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive

moment for the Guatemalan refugee population, that had been subjected to relocations and repatriations beyond their control, but it was also an unprecedented moment in the history of refugee crises.

With the recognition of the Guatemalan government, the refugees gained the ability to shape the return process and determine their own future as they met with the Guatemalan government over the next year to negotiate a return agreement, a feat that had never before been accomplished by a refugee population.¹⁴⁹ Repatriations, explains scholar Katy Long, have almost entirely been initiated by tripartite agreements between the UNHCR, the refugees' host state, and their state of origin. In the more than forty years since the signing of the Refugee Convention, refugees themselves had never participated in the talks that shaped these repatriation agreements. Long argues that this is because the international community is primed to implement responses to refugee crises, rather than engage in political negotiations to address them. This makes it difficult for refugees to gain recognition as legitimate actors. Acknowledging this, it becomes clear that the success of the Guatemalan refugee population in gaining recognition by the international community, and specifically the Guatemalan government, was, and remains, unique. Not only were they able to voice their concerns and demands regarding repatriation in a forum that placed them alongside state representatives as political equals, but they were also able to fulfill these demands in the creation of a return agreement.¹⁵⁰

(1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=zp38wd84t>; Hanlon, 221.

¹⁴⁹ Agreement signed between the Guatemalan government and the CCPP, "Acuerdo para el retorno de los refugiados entre el gobierno y las CCPP : Documento Especial," 15 October 1992, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pucl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=v692t729x>; Katy Long, *The Point of No Return: Refugees, Rights, and Repatriation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 189.

¹⁵⁰ Long, 189.

On October 8, 1992 the Basic Accord for Repatriation was signed, confirming the CCPP's demands for voluntary, organized, and collective returns.¹⁵¹ The Accord was an undeniable success for the CCPP, as it confirmed each of the six demands they had advocated in their proposal for returns. A seventh point was added to establish mechanisms for verification on the adherence to this agreement. It was signed by the CEAR, representing the government of Guatemala; the CCPP, representing the Guatemalan refugee community in Mexico; and a number of witnesses including the International Consultation and Support Group for the Return (GRICAR) and the Mediating Commission, and even Guatemalan President Jorge Serrano (1991-93) as the witness of honor.¹⁵²

This list of signatories is in itself representative of the effectiveness of political organizing among the Guatemalan refugee population in gaining international recognition. Just ten years earlier, President Rios Montt had publicly denied the very existence of Guatemalan refugees. "There are no refugees in Mexico, [only guerrillas]" he had said at a meeting with President Reagan on December 8, 1982.¹⁵³ Moreover, the UNHCR had denied the refugee population full recognition by denoting only a small portion of the Guatemalans in Mexico as "official refugees."¹⁵⁴ Yet, in 1992 both the President of Guatemala and the international community, represented by the Mediating Commission, affirmed the existence of the Guatemalan

¹⁵¹ Agreement signed between the Guatemalan government and the CCPP, "Acuerdo para el retorno de los refugiados entre el gobierno y las CCPP : Documento Especial," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁵² Agreement signed between the Guatemalan government and the CCPP, "Acuerdo para el retorno de los refugiados entre el gobierno y las CCPP : Documento Especial," Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁵³ U.S. National Security Archive, *Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security*.

¹⁵⁴ Hanlon and Lovell, 40.

refugees as well as their status as political equals in the negotiating process, with their signatures on an official document.¹⁵⁵

“...Return to Struggle”: The Journey Home

The signing of the October 8 accords brought a renewed sense of hope to the refugee population in Mexico despite the many challenges that lay ahead of them. After more than ten years in exile, strains on the refugee community in Mexico and fierce desires to re-establish themselves in Guatemala compelled many refugees to take part in the CCPP-organized returns that began in early 1993. In Mexico, many Guatemalan families had begun to fear the permanent loss of their land in Guatemala if they did not return soon to reaffirm their ownership over it. Others feared that by remaining in Mexico they would begin to lose their Mayan culture, founded so deeply in their Guatemalan lands and communities. Aside from these fears, the conditions in refugee camps had also become more strained as refugees lived for prolonged periods of time with inadequate lands, no jobs, and recurring shortages of water and firewood.¹⁵⁶

Pulling the refugees back to their country, was a maintained commitment to their Guatemalan identity, as well as a desire to take part in the shaping of Guatemala's future. The refugees had no uncertainties that the return process would be difficult and dangerous. This is evident in the slogan they referred to throughout the return, “Struggle to return, return to struggle.” Though the civil war persisted in Guatemala, making it impossible to guarantee the security of refugees who took part in the returns, they saw themselves as part of the path toward peace for their country. “We know the conditions inside Guatemala are terrible,” one refugee

¹⁵⁵ Long, 189.

¹⁵⁶ Editorial written by David Loeb and Barbara Gottlieb, “Refugee return to Guatemala: Prospects still uncertain for justice life and peace,” n.d., Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pudl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=sq87bv80g>.

explained before leaving Mexico, “But with or without our return, the war will go on.”¹⁵⁷ The refugees were committed to bringing justice to Guatemala for the decades of violence and human rights abuses that had occurred, and believed that this justice could not be obtained from their position in exile.¹⁵⁸

This perspective on taking part in a Guatemalan peace was voiced by individuals interviewed as they boarded buses bound for the Mexico-Guatemala border during the first returns, and by the CCPP. In a statement given shortly after the signing of the return agreement on November 18, 1992, the organization announced, “We have decided to return, recover all our rights and contribute to the struggle for a better Guatemala, not just for some, but for all the people.”¹⁵⁹ Not only were the refugees committed to their return home, but beyond this, they had committed themselves to the overall reconciliation of the conflict that plagued their country.

¹⁵⁷ Report from Mexican NGO received by National Coordination Office on Refugees and Displaced of Guatemala (U.S.) “Document on first return of the Guatemalan refugees,” 25 January 1993, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pudl.princeton.edu/objects/wd375x36r>.

¹⁵⁸ Editorial written by David Loeb and Barbara Gottlieb, “Refugee return to Guatemala: Prospects still uncertain for justice life and peace,” Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000).

¹⁵⁹ Press release from the CCPP, “Struggle to return continues,” 18 November 1992, Civil War, Society and Political Transition in Guatemala: the Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000), Princeton University Digital Library, Web, Reference URL: <http://pudl.princeton.edu/sheetreader.php?obj=cj82k856n>.

CONCLUSION

On January 20, 1993 some 2,482 refugees crossed the border into Guatemala after what was for many, more than ten years in exile. As their sixty-six bus caravan left Comitán, Mexico bound for a settlement that would be called Victory-20th of January in the Ixcán jungle, the Guatemalans on board sang songs and shouted refrains to keep their spirits high. Betsy Crites was one of the twenty-seven volunteers from Witness for Peace, a non-governmental humanitarian organization, who accompanied the returning refugees on their journey home. She reports how the refugees sang the refrain, “Beloved homeland, we’re now returning!” as they crossed into Guatemala. Many struggles awaited these returnees just across the border. Nevertheless, the returnees’ spirits were kept high by the joy of being in Guatemala again.

It had been more than a decade since the Guatemalan army had initiated the scorched earth campaign that drove more than one million people from their homes,¹⁶⁰ more than 100,000 of whom crossed the border into Mexico. During the prolonged civil conflict, and even longer history of systemic marginalization of indigenous peoples in the country, Guatemala’s rural communities had shared experiences of oppression that would lead to the development of a shared identity between the diverse indigenous groups. The experience of fleeing their homes and journeying to Mexico expanded to the commonalities present between these groups, and as they interacted in Mexico’s refugee camps a new, Guatemalan refugee identity solidified to further unite the refugees that came from dispersed communities of origin and ethnic and linguistic groups.

¹⁶⁰ Billings, 75.

The establishment of this shared identity allowed the refugee population to politically organize in order to achieve their goals. This political organization began in an effort to resist the actions of the Mexican state that threatened refugee security, and progressively became more advanced, culminated in the creation of the CCPP. United by their common identity and their shared goal to return to their lands in Guatemala, the refugee community acted through democratically elected representatives to voice their demands internationally. The refugee community first needed to overcome the lack of international attention placed on them and the Guatemalan civil conflict. To this end, humanitarian and solidarity organizations like the GNIB, GARG, and NISGUA played an important role in drawing attention to the Guatemalan conflict and refugee crisis.

This network of organizations came to be integral to the success of the CCPP in gaining recognition by international actors including the UNHCR, as well as the Guatemalan state. This was in part a result of the solidarity organizations that were drawn to Central America in the 1980s to make known the human suffering occurring there, and in part a result of the CCPP's outreach to international actors of all kinds. Through the CCPP's outreach, they gained the recognition and support of many international actors. As the CNR, UNHCR, and other prominent organizations recognized the CCPP, the refugee organization gained legitimacy. This was demonstrated in the establishment of the Mediating Commission, created as a direct result of the CCPP's demand. Through the Mediating Commission, the CCPP was able to put political pressure on the Guatemalan government to recognize the CCPP in 1991, making way for the successful negotiation of a return agreement in 1992.

The narrative of the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico from their persecution during the civil war to their eventual return is not only an example of the impact of popular participation in determining a solution to a refugee crisis, but also of the resiliency and determination of a marginalized people. At the Guatemala-Mexico border, the sixty-six bus caravan carrying the first group of returning refugees was met with jubilant crowds of supporters, welcoming them home, contrasted by threatening police brigades, attempting to intimidate and control the actions and influences of the returnees.

Despite the unprecedented success of the negotiated return agreement, the refugees returning in early 1993 were travelling to a country still at war. They were motivated by an opportunity to take part in the creation of peace and reconciliation in their country. Today, twenty two years after the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords ended the war in Guatemala, there continues to be a steady stream of refugees fleeing the country. This has been a pattern of violence that results from a history of systematic marginalization of peoples combined with the power dynamics of foreign influences, namely U.S. interests. The subsequent migration and refugee flows out of Central America are hindered by a lack of international attention and obstacles to refugees' movement and recognition by state governments. In 2018 for example, we have seen a caravan of Central American migrants travelling through Mexico in order to escape violence or the threat of violence in their home communities. Yet they faced interference by the Mexican state which attempted to break up the caravan in transit, with support from the United States.

The political organizing of Guatemalan refugees during the 1980s represents a break that occurred in this pattern. In this instance, the refugee community, itself a marginalized group

inside and outside of their country, managed to attract attention, gain political power, and achieve its goals despite the obstacles they faced. This is the story that must be told and retold in order to promote the idea that powerful states and international actors do not always prevail in conflict. Instead, with the right circumstances and motivations, individuals can band together in a united goal and succeed.

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