

ICVA Consultation on Refugees and Displaced Persons in Central America

In late November 1985, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) convened a meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica, on Refugees and Displaced Persons in Central America. The consultation brought together approximately 70 people representing 40 agencies. The resolution adopted by the consultation concerning Salvadorean refugees in Honduras reflects a common analysis shared by the participants with regard to the nature of the problem. Although this resolution is not binding on ICVA or any of the agencies represented at the meeting, its intent was to provide useful guidelines for agencies or organizations with an interest in the issue. What follows is the text of the ICVA resolution:

The situation of the Salvadorean refugees in Honduras is a result of broad, complex and rapidly evolving political considerations relating to the Central American region. Voluntary agencies committed to serving the basic needs of the Salvadorean refugees must work within the context of the Honduran national political reality. The current situation has raised a number of issues, including:

1. Protection of the refugees;
2. The effects of Honduran governmental restrictions on NGO programmes;
3. The need to improve channels of communication among the parties involved;
4. Relocation of the refugees from Colomoncagua and San Antonio.

1. Protection

The attack on Colomoncagua in August 1985 is a further demonstration of the very insecure situation of the Salvadorean refugees. It also highlights the importance of significant international presence in the camps and the need to reinforce this presence. Protection is the primary task of the UNHCR. While the UNHCR increased the number of its

protection officers following the attack, the current situation requires a greater presence. The voluntary agencies are willing to increase their staff in the camps and urge the UNHCR to do likewise. The UNHCR should develop mechanisms through which international agencies and governments could support the UNHCR's expressed need for more protection officers in the camps.

2. Programmes

In view of the unlikely possibility that any durable solution will be found in the foreseeable future, and because of the specific needs which result from the demographic composition of the Salvadorean refugee population in Honduras, it is of the utmost importance that support for activities in the fields of education, human development, training and production be maintained if not developed. In concrete terms, this implies that such activities should not be sacrificed because of budget cuts, and that efforts must be redoubled to minimize the effects of any such financial restrictions through appeals to the international community. Efforts must be made to persuade the Honduran authorities to lift the restrictions with regard to free movement of the refugees between the sub-camps of Colomoncagua. Efforts must also be made to permit freer access to the camps for agency personnel, visitors and press.

3. Communication

Recognizing that the UNHCR has a different mandate and hence works under different restrictions than the agencies, we welcome the improved dialogue that has developed between the agencies and the UNHCR.

We also feel that this dialogue must become yet more meaningful out of mutual

concern for the fundamental human rights of the refugees. An important aspect of this is respect for the views of the refugees themselves. Interested parties (refugees, the UNHCR and NGOs) must establish effective channels of communication at all levels -- camp, domestic and international -- based on mutual respect for each other's independence.

4. Relocation

In the relocation issue, the Honduran Government should exercise its sovereignty within the context of its national and international obligations. The fundamental concern of the agencies is with the human rights of the refugees in Honduras. Present conditions in Honduras, including the demonstrated hostility of the Honduran armed forces to the refugees, make a peaceful relocation of refugees from Colomoncagua and San Antonio highly unlikely. Indeed, the agencies are seriously concerned that a relocation could result in loss of life. At the same time, we recognize that it is not the task of the agencies to persuade or dissuade the refugees to relocate.

We recognize that the best solution for refugees is peace in El Salvador, permitting voluntary repatriation, and that the present situation of the refugees in Colomoncagua is a difficult one. In the meantime, we feel that the refugees should be allowed to stay where they are with improved protection and greater opportunities for self-sufficiency. The present situation calls for an on-going dialogue on the part of refugees, the Honduran Government, the UNHCR and the voluntary agencies. Given the present situation in Honduras, we do not foresee that adequate and appropriate conditions for relocation can be established in Honduras. However, agencies reaffirm their commitment to uphold the basic human rights of refugees to live in safety and dignity.