

## A Perspective on Salvadorean Refugees: Interview with Rubén Zamora

Rubén Zamora served as Minister of the Presidency in El Salvador under the first junta following the coup that toppled the government of General Carlos Humberto Romero on October 15, 1979. Zamora resigned from the junta early in January 1980. His brother, El Salvador's Attorney-General Mario Zamora, was assassinated on February 25, 1980. His life threatened, Rubén Zamora eventually had to flee, and has lived in Nicaragua and Mexico ever since. He was instrumental in the creation on April 1, 1980 of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), a coalition of political and student groups, trade unions and mass organizations. At present he is the chief negotiator of the FDR and its guerrilla arm, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Zamora visited Canada early in November and met with senior officials at the Department of External Affairs, Members of Parliament, NGOs, and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He delivered lectures at several Canadian universities and found time to give the following interview to *Refuge*.



**Alex Zisman:** In spite of the election of a civilian government led by José Napoleón Duarte, and the call to eradicate human rights violations and return the country to an "effective democracy", the exodus of Salvadorean refugees has not diminished considerably, and at certain times has even substantially increased. How can one account for this?

**Rubén Zamora:** I believe that the explanation of this phenomenon has a political character. In El Salvador we have a civilian President of the Republic, but the regime continues to be military in nature in so far as the government is one of counterinsurgency. What determines the actions of Duarte's government is precisely this counterinsurgency policy which generates bombardments and artillery attacks against the civilian population. This obviously continues to produce refugees who have to abandon their places of origin and move away to other places. Refugees continue to flock because fundamentally nothing has changed.

**Alex Zisman:** How do you view the situation of Salvadorean refugees within the present Central America context?

**Rubén Zamora:** I believe that a large percentage of Salvadorean refugees in Central America, Mexico and other countries wish to return to El Salvador whenever that becomes

*Rubén Zamora: "Being a refugee, in spite of all the sadness and the difficulties it entails, can also become an asset."*

possible. This is an important phenomenon, because in some countries the refugees can acquire some knowledge, some types of training, which will be very useful once El Salvador becomes a truly just and democratic society. Nevertheless, we must clearly distinguish the case of countries such as Mexico, with a vast metropolis such as Mexico City, where Salvadorean refugees are dispersed among the city's 18 million inhabitants, from that of other countries such as Honduras, where the refugees have kept close to the Salvadorean border, and form communities which are strongly structured, where an attitude to return and a Salvadorean identity are firmly held. So much so that these communities have been able to fight and fend off the attempts by the United States and the Honduran governments to remove them from the border. It seems to me that the attitude of Salvadorean refugees in Nicaragua towards their country of origin is similar to that of their counterparts in Honduras. The future of the refugees lies in resolving the Salvadorean problem and, contrary to what the Reagan Administration is saying -- that a revolution in El Salvador would only create a flood of refugees -- I believe that if a just, democratic and peaceful regime could be achieved in El Salvador, many thousands of

refugees would return immediately to the country to live and produce there as they did before.

**Alex Zisman:** Both in El Salvador and in Guatemala some unofficial factors prevail -- namely the effective control and presence of the military -- which prevent an immediate return to true democracy. Nevertheless we are led to believe that the conditions are ripe to encourage a return of refugees. What do you have to say about this?

**Rubén Zamora:** I believe that one of the tactics deployed by the Duarte government to legitimize itself before the international community has been precisely that, to try to tell everybody that they can return and that no problems exist. We have even detected in some cases attempts to forcefully induce refugees to return to the country. It seems to me that Duarte's claim does not correspond at all with reality. There are concrete cases of refugees who have returned to the country and even refugees in the United States who, because of United States immigration law, were deported back to El Salvador, have fallen in the hands of the security forces and disappeared. In this respect we believe that the conditions to ensure the return of refugees could only exist when the country really achieves peace and justice. Only

then will the returning refugee have not only a minimum of security in his personal life, but also some means to develop an economic activity. And this implies of course, socio-economic reforms in the country. It also implies that the country must achieve peace to allow reconstruction to take place.

**Alex Zisman:** Canada has implemented a visa system to screen potential refugees from countries such as El Salvador. What could be the implications of such measures?

**Rubén Zamora:** I do not believe in the effectiveness of such measures. The United States also has this visa system and it is fairly restrictive. Nevertheless the flow of illegal immigrants into the United States continues. Sometimes these systems only lead to corruption at the embassies of the country implementing them, since economic interests are also at stake. In this respect I believe that a much more flexible policy is not only more humanitarian for a country such as El Salvador which evidently is in a state of war, but could even prevent a series of social evils such as extortion and deceit, sometimes experienced by our citizens who have to leave for other countries precisely because of the legal restrictions imposed upon them.

**Alex Zisman:** What options do you see for the Salvadorean refugees all over the world? How should they face the present situation?

**Rubén Zamora:** First of all I believe that refugees should try to maintain their cultural identity. I do not think the correct thing to do is to accept that the situation of temporary exile should be turned into one of permanent resettlement. On the contrary, we must always hold high the ideal of return to our own country. Hence the need to maintain a cultural identity as much as possible through community centres and refugee organizations as well as through traditions, information and analysis of what is taking place in El Salvador. But, at the same time, I also believe that as Salvadorean refugees we must understand that we cannot -- and that it should not be our intention to -- become merely a burden to the country where we arrive. On the contrary, as useful human beings, we should be able to develop a constructive, productive attitude to the country granting us refuge. In this regard I believe that exile, or the fact of being a refugee, in spite of all the sadness and the difficulties it entails, can also become an asset, the asset of being able to contribute some of the richness of our culture to those countries receiving us. We can enrich their culture while trying at the same time to learn and to receive some of the cultural and productive richness of these countries, so as to be able to contribute more to our own country when we return.

## Political Refugees from Peru: Interview with César Elejalde Estenssoro



*César Elejalde Estenssoro: "I imagine that those [Peruvian citizens] claiming refugee status because of political persecution are doing so in order to have a reason to justify their illegal presence in foreign countries."*

Since 1980 a ruthless guerrilla movement -- the Maoist-inspired Sendero Luminoso or Shining Path -- has been frantically trying to undermine Peru's democratic foundations amid a vicious escalation of subversion and state repression. The conflict, pitting the secretive and well-organized Sendero extremists against elements from the armed forces, has claimed thousands of dead and disappeared. Numerous victims were civilians hopelessly and unwillingly caught in the middle of a dirty confrontation. Several Peruvians, allegedly threatened by the political implications of this violent conflict, have become refugee claimants in Canada. César Elejalde Estenssoro, Ombudsman and President of the National Council of the Magistracy of Peru, spoke to *Refuge* about some aspects of his country's present situation during a brief stopover at Toronto's Lester B. Pearson International Airport.

**Alex Zisman:** Over the last few years a small but nonetheless significant number of Peruvian citizens, fearing political persecution in their country of origin, have requested refugee status in Canada. Do you have any reason to doubt the validity of these claims?

**César Elejalde Estenssoro:** We have not received in Lima any accusations at the Human Rights Office of the Public Ministry concerning refugees. I imagine that those claiming refugee status because of political persecution are doing so in order to have a reason to justify their illegal presence in foreign countries. From an economic

perspective the situation in Peru is very difficult, and many people want to leave the country.

**Alex Zisman:** Yet various observers claim that persistent human rights violations both by Sendero Luminoso and the armed forces give ample reason for many people, including those caught in the middle of the conflict, to seek refugee status. What do you have to say about Peru's human rights record?

**César Elejalde Estenssoro:** In Peru we are experiencing an authentic democracy. The Peruvian Constitution establishes in its first article that the object of the State and the Nation is to ensure that individuals have all the pertinent guarantees. The aim of the whole Constitution is to respect human rights. The first article refers to the fundamental rights of a person, an unusual thing within the structure of Peru's previous constitutions, which always started by declaring that Peru was a republican country, etc. One has access to adequate legal appeals such as the right of protection and habeas corpus, which protect the rights of individuals with extremely expedient legal procedures. There are no political prisoners in Peru. The prisoners who call themselves political prisoners are the terrorists. They become common delinquents because they are not accused for their ideas but for their deeds, attacks against human lives, against both private and state property. There is no persecution of any sort in Peru with the exception of those who are sought by justice for deeds typified in the penal code. Nobody is condemned without an adequate trial. I very much doubt the truth behind the statements of those who flee Peru claiming that they are being politically persecuted.