



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGEE

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON CENTRAL AMERICA

Refugees and Peace in Central America

As this edition of *Refuge* goes to press, news reports from Central America confirm the important gains which have been achieved through efforts to bring peace and democracy to the region. At the same time, there is much to be deeply concerned about. Violence continues at an intense level in some pockets and at a low level over wider areas. The peace process remains fragile. Democratic practices are spreading but remain weak and not fully tested in several countries. Many underlying tensions in civil society are unresolved. Particularly worrisome is the fact that the economies of the region are in very bad condition, in part due to the widespread destruction brought about by civil war.

The papers gathered together here recognize the challenges and risks which must be faced, yet they stress the positive side of current developments. They draw attention to the end of refugee flight from the region and to the growing return of asylees and displaced people. They point out that the self-organized return movement has a two-sided character: it contributes to peace just as it depends on peace for its success. Particular attention is given to

the strengths to be found in the return communities and among their international supporters.

The lead article by Brian Egan and Alan Simmons provides an overview of peace, development and repatria-

tion issues in the extremely diverse countries of Central America. This paper and the other articles in the issue all give more attention to the two countries—El Salvador and Guatemala—which experienced the greatest

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internal violence and refugee flight during the 1980s. Of these two countries, El Salvador is by far the more advanced in terms of peace and democratic process. The United Nations multidimensional peace building effort in El Salvador has had an enormous impact.

The late breaking news from El Salvador is centred on all the preparatory work going into the national elections to take place on March 20, 1994. A major effort has been under way with United Nations support to make the elections as democratic as possible under the circumstances. Registers of eligible voters had been in very bad shape. Large numbers of individuals were inscribed more than once. The lists contained tens of thousands of individuals who were deceased (many killed in the civil war) and others who had fled the country. Indications are that many of these problems have been eliminated, but additional problems remain. Large numbers of individual who would like to vote will not be properly registered in time to do so. The potential for abuse and still uncertain levels of voter turnout leave open how democratic the elections will be. A major uncertainty is what will happen should the opposition coalition win and overturn the government which has been in power over the past decade of civil strife. Democratic forces within El Salvador and the supportive resolve of external powers, however, point generally to a successful result, especially if success is judged in terms of the fraudulent and distorted elections of the past.

Guatemala is at an earlier stage in the peace process, yet here too the direction is positive. The Guatemalan military has until now steadfastly refused to accept a United Nations supervised peace process involving negotiation with insurgents. The military has viewed the civil war as purely an internal question. They have also viewed across-the-table negotiations as providing a legitimacy and status to insurgents completely at odds with Guatemalan military tradition. From the military's perspective, the insur-

gents are an enemy to be crushed and eliminated. Yet, international pressures are building on the Guatemalan military to adopt United Nations managed peace building process similar to that in El Salvador. The accords developed with the Guatemalan refugee community with respect to safe-return opened the door to negotiations, and other events are now leading to pressures for this mechanism to be expanded. The Chiapas revolt in the early weeks of 1994 sent deep shock waves to the Mexican government and on to other nations in the region. The extent to which continuing civil war in Guatemala could be the spark to set off an explosive revolutionary rise of a Mayan nation became a matter for greater regional concern. While the Guatemalan situation remains precarious and uncertain, the existing accords leading to refugee return, along with internal and international pressure for peace, provide a basis for guarded optimism.

Following a generally optimistic tone, four of the papers in this volume draw attention to the leading role in the peace, development and social change being played by returning refugees themselves. Tanya Basok's article observes that the refugees have been transformed by their experiences outside the country and by their relations to international and national agencies, both voluntary and official, in the return process. These experiences and the development of internal strengths gives the return community new leadership potential. In a separate paper, Finn Stepputat extends these arguments into the Guatemalan case in particular. He argues that the returning refugees bring with them a new "imagined community" with a potential for transforming political participation and public attitudes in Guatemalan society more broadly. A particularly striking illustration of a transformation in leadership potential concerns the changing roles of women in the Guatemalan return community, as noted in the paper by Frances Arbour. The fact that women refugees were often left in charge of their fami-

lies and made responsible for their communities during the period of exile led them to develop a whole new set of leadership and negotiating skills. Linda Geggie's article makes a parallel argument with respect to youths. Young Guatemalan refugees who grew up in Mexico have expectations for education, jobs and lifestyle that will lead to further transformations in the return community.

Also following a positive tone, three of the papers in this issue point to the key roles being played by international agencies and voluntary organizations. The paper by Lisa Kowalchuk and Liisa North documents the essential role of the multi-dimensional United Nations peace building effort in the El Salvador. They also evaluate the role of Canadian development assistance and foreign policies in that country, noting that the policy mix is often contradictory and leads to mixed outcomes. Their findings point to concrete recommendations for future efforts by official aid agencies and intergovernmental organizations in the region. Barbara Zerter and Beth Abbott, in

separate papers, focus on voluntary, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). They document the ways in which several Canadian NGOs have found ways to join together in a support role with respect to the Guatemalan return community. Their papers make clear that international solidarity is not just a matter of good will. Laying down and making operational workable objectives and strategies for specific activities—such as accompaniment—is an applied art where much has been learned by both the Canadian NGOs and their Central American counterparts.

In the context of an overall optimistic report, it is important that we also keep in mind the challenges and issues which must be faced in the future. Three book-review articles point to some of these issues. Barry Levitt's review of a detailed book on land use and the environment in El Salvador draws attention to the relationship between these factors and structures of power and social conflict in Central America. This is an important topic given that access to land and the dete-

rioration of the ecosystem are major problems which will continue to challenge efforts at peace and development in the region. George Lovell reviews two books on Central American refugees and migrants who have established communities in North America. His review serves to remind us that refugee flight from Central America has led to expatriate communities abroad that are unlikely to return. In fact the number of Central Americans abroad will likely continue to grow in the near future, even as peace, democracy and development spread in Central America. The future of these communities raises questions about migration policy and other aspects of social policy in North America. Finally, Lisa Kowalchuk reviews a volume which provides a detailed portrait of state violence in Guatemala. It is important to understand the roots of this deep seated violence in working toward solutions to the current situation. ■

Alan Simmons, Guest Editor



Drawing by D. Zakrzewski