

Canadian Consortia Supports Guatemalan Return

Barbara Zerter

During the early 1980s, almost two hundred thousand Guatemalans fled to Mexico to escape their own government's scorched earth policy. Of these, some forty-five thousand are officially recognized as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and are living in camps in southern Mexico. It is estimated that another one hundred and fifty thousand Guatemalans are dispersed throughout Mexico without being officially recognized either by the UNHCR or by the Mexican authorities. Refugee leaders indicate that many of these refugees wish to return to Guatemala and that consequently, they have initiated a return process which may take up to five years to complete. Although some refugees have returned to Guatemala in individual family groups, many Guatemalan refugees formed new communities while in the camps. The members of each new community now wish to return to Guatemala together.

A collective return is a complex process requiring a great deal of planning, organization and complex negotiation with the Guatemalan authorities regarding the lands on which the refugees will resettle. In some cases the refugees will return to lands they previously owned while in other cases new lands must be allocated or purchased. In addition, negotiations must take place with the Guatemalan military, which still views the refugees as counter-insurgents—an attitude that threatens the returnees' security.

Canada supports the refugees' desire to return home through funds provided by a consortia of thirteen Canadian international development organizations and the humanities funds of three unions. Consortia participants include: the Canadian

Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (CCODP), the Jesuit Centre for Social Justice and Faith, Oxfam Canada, the Anglican Church in Canada, Inter Pares, CUSO, Save the Children Canada, the United Church of Canada, Project Accompaniment, the Canadian Autoworkers Social Justice Fund, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund, and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Humanity Fund, with Horizons of Friendship as the lead agency.

The Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Fund (R and R) of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) matched the funds provided

In Mexico, the work of organizing and preparing for the refugees' return to Guatemala is being carried out by their own organizations. These are the Permanent Commissions of Guatemalan Refugees (CCPP) and the Association of Dispersed Guatemalan Refugees (ARDIGUA).

In Guatemala, the returning refugees are being assisted in the re-establishment of their communities by a number of Guatemalan non-governmental and church organizations which include the Coordination of Guatemalan NGOs, Cooperatives for the Accompaniment of People Affected by the Armed Conflict, the

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by the consortia members. In 1992-93, the consortia funded an initial phase of the repatriation in which twenty-five hundred refugees returned to the Quiche region of Guatemala. This initial return took place on January 20, 1993. As another twelve thousand Guatemalans proposed to return the following year, the consortia approved a second phase of support to the refugees in June of 1993.

All the participants in the consortia are members of the Central America Monitoring Group (CAMG) and have extensive programming experience with refugees and the displaced in Central America.

The Mexican/Central American component of the program is being coordinated through the Project Counselling Services for Latin American Refugees (PCS). PCS provides the direct contact between the Canadian consortia and the refugee and Guatemalan organizations working with the exiles.

Protestant Churches through CIEDEG and various diocese of the Roman Catholic Church.

The consortia has not limited its participation in the return process to financial support. As members of the CAMG, all members participated in monitoring the situation both in Mexico and in Guatemala, preparing information for the media, briefing parliamentary delegations and responding to violations of agreements regarding the repatriation. Field visits by consortia members were made to both Mexico and Guatemala to acquire first hand knowledge of conditions in the refugee camps and in the repatriated communities respectively, as well as to meet with the different actors in the return process.

An important component of this initiative is the funding of an ongoing Canadian accompaniment program through Project Accompaniment or Project "A." Recent complications in Mexico due to the situation in Chiapas

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