



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES REFUGEE

Vol. 2, No. 3

February, 1983

A Letter from the Jungle of Mexico a Few Hundred Yards from the Guatemalan Border. November 27, 1982.

The following dramatic account of conditions in a refugee camp in Mexico was received from a representative of an international organization working in that country.

Friends:

I was totally unprepared for what I found when I went to the refugee encampment in the Mexican jungle a few hundred yards from the Guatemalan border, where nearly 5,000 Mayan Indian men, women, and children have crossed some imaginary line thinking they would find shelter and safety.

In Guatemala, they face an active campaign of genocide. In Mexico, there are doctors, but they do not have medicine to treat the epidemics that rage. Nor cotton, alcohol, or soap. In this past week, at just this camp, the two intern doctors estimate 100 deaths. The newly improvised cemetery has about 30 graves, and the rest are buried near the small gatherings of nylon-tarp shelters.

The cause of death may be malaria, or tuberculosis, or diarrhea or whatever. Nothing is recorded. But the real cause is hunger.

This encampment is one of an estimated 25,000 in this jungle region. All the

refugees are survivors of massacres. Their accounts are vivid and clear. After the massacres, they tried to hide in the mountains, but after watching their children die one by one, some tried to find their way to Mexico. Sometimes they travelled for 15 nights, hiding, unable to cook for fear their campfires would betray them.

Then, like the 86 who were sitting outside the hut in which I was sleeping, they arrive in the encampments. Their feet are blistered and torn. They have their few

possessions on their backs — a few pots, maybe a blanket, whatever they could salvage. Even four-year-old children are carrying something on their backs, their heads bent down with the weight of the tumplines. There they sat until 4 p.m., without water or food.

Their arms are so thin. Yet everywhere one walks, there are smiles. 'Buenos dias!' 'Buenas tardes!' How can they maintain that harmony in the face of what is happening?

(Continued on p. 2)

ALSO FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

CANADIAN REFUGEE POLICY, 1983 3

RECENT RESETTLEMENT OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN
REFUGEES IN FRANCE
by Professor C. Michael Lanphier 6