WHAT FUTURE PROSPECTS?

Exodus and the Struggle for Deliverance: Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico

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The plight of refugees, for example, the Vietnamese, the Sudanese and the Nicaraguans, has received much attention in recent years. Mostly one reads of communal degeneration and squalid living conditions in refugee camps and a seemingly universal desire of refugees to emigrate to the United States, Canada and Europe, in search of a better standard of living. One refugee group that has remained virtually unnoticed, however, is the Guatemalan Indians in southern Mexico. While in exile they have nurtured and developed their communities, in the hope of returning someday to rebuild the devastated villages they left behind.

Since 1981, more than 100,000 Guatemalans have arrived seeking refuge from military oppression in their homeland. Of these, 75,000 have settled in camps along Mexico’s southern border, and more arrive each month. In March of 1989, for example, immigration authorities documented 1,000 Guatemalans entering Mexico in search of political asylum. In the summer of last year, I lived and worked in Guatemalan refugee camps with the Christian Committee in Solidarity, a Catholic Church relief agency that ministers to the 50,000 refugees living in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Here, in these small refugee communities, many people shared with me their personal stories of exodus.

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In my village the army soldiers abused anybody they suspected of supporting the guerrillas,' explained José, a 25 year old refugee. 'If you had long hair or a beard, that provided enough grounds for their suspicion. Often, there were beatings or disappearances, and a couple of days later a body would show up. I didn't want to wait around until my turn came.'

In my village,' remembered Juan, another refugee in his mid-twenties, 'we did everything collectively. A person had only to mention that he wanted to build a house, and the whole community turned out—all the men with tools and wood and all the women with food for everyone, the whole town, down to the smallest child. For this, the army called us Communists, just because we helped our neighbours. One night the soldiers came and arrested five men. Everyone came out to their houses to confront the soldiers, protesting the innocence of the five compañeros. The soldiers took them away. Four of them were never seen again, and one escaped—he showed up in the village a few days later, his tongue cut, feet burned and bruises all over his head. The soldiers came several times after that, starting fights with people or disappearing them. [Civilian disappearances at the hands of the military are so frequent in Guatemala, that “to disappear” has become a transitive verb.] One day, they even beat several old people, my grandfather among them, with a rubber hose. After Ríos Montt took power in 1982, the soldiers came with planes and bombs. We became so frightened that we hid up in the hills. At night the mosquitoes were horrible, and we all had to sleep on the ground. One night the soldiers came into our village and they killed our animals and burned all our houses. After we watched the flames destroy our homes, we walked north to Mexico.'

A third refugee, Manuel, also told me his story.

'We lived in La Láguna, three villages away from the town of Nenton, where the army post was located. There had been a lot of guerrilla activity in the surrounding hills. On January 3, 1982, at one a.m., the soldiers entered into Nueva Catarina, the first village outside the town, killed 14 people and burned all of the houses. Three days later they did the same in Limonar, the second village, killing six. After that, all of us in La Láguna went up into the mountains to hide. Another three nights later, from where we were hiding, we watched the soldiers burn our deserted homes. We decided to leave; there was no life left for us there.'

These refugees are victims of the Guatemalan military's merciless efforts to wipe out the country's thirty-year-old guerrilla insurgency, a movement made up of university intellectuals, workers and landless peasants. The insurgency arose following a 1954 U.S. backed military coup ousting the democratically elected Arbenz government, which was then carrying out an ambitious agenda of reforms, including rural education and land redistribution. While the guerrilla movement has enjoyed periodic and scattered support among the peasants in the countryside, it has achieved little military success in its thirty-year effort.
Exodus and the Struggle for Deliverance

In the late 1970s, the Guatemalan army adopted a new strategy to combat the insurgency: depopulation of the countryside; by removing the guerrillas' only source of support—small Indian farming communities—the military hoped to starve them out. This strategy achieved its most effective results under the leadership of General Rios Montt, who became president in late 1981. During the general's reign of terror, the Catholic Church in Guatemala documented thousands of disappearances each year, destruction of crops by fire and chemical defoliants, poisoning of wells and many civilian massacres, including one of the most horrendous, the murder of 350 worshippers during Sunday mass in a small village called San Francisco. Guatemala's swollen cities and the flight of hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans from their homeland since 1982 testify to the success of the military's efforts.

The military's rural campaigns aim not only to destroy potential sources of support for guerrillas, but also to put down any organizing efforts or protests among the villagers themselves. In most villages, all men between the ages of fifteen and fifty must work an unpaid twenty-four hour shift every eight days in local 'civil patrols.' Failure to report for duty on any given day serves as grounds for suspicion of collaborating with the guerrillas. The army often transports these local patrols to other regions and uses them to put down labour unrest among peasants there. The civil patrols thus serve a dual function of keeping track of the whereabouts of all the men in a village and controlling the activities in villages in other areas. According to many refugees, military control of private life is so tight in some villages that soldiers patrol the streets to stop people listening to radio news reports in their own homes.

In recent years the military has also set up several 'model villages,' where it resettle landless or 'displaced' peasant families. Here, the army educates peasants in the virtues of free enterprise, the backwardness of traditional Indian life and the evils of communism. Residents are reportedly subjected to four hours of political re-education each day, and the model villages are designed to mix peasants from Guatemala's dozens of distinct Indian cultures. Living with Indians from other regions forces residents to speak the only available common tongue, Spanish, thereby losing their local languages and the particular traditions and customs of their region. While the government extols the virtues of these model villages as its version of much needed land reform, they serve simultaneously as a highly effective means of breaking up traditional Indian communities that have occupied the same land for many hundreds of years, and amalgamating the cultures that have held them together into a newer, more 'advanced' national culture.
Refugees have generally found ready acceptance among the Mexican peasants, with whom they share much in the way of culture and lifestyle, despite the national boundary that separates them. However, many arrive frightened, hungry and very often sick after many days of crossing the mountains, and from early 1981, the Catholic Church has provided food and medical attention to the weary newcomers. As their numbers grew, two agencies arose to undertake the massive relief effort necessary to aid the tens of thousands of Guatemalans streaming across the border. The first was the Christian Committee in Solidarity of the Diocese of San Cristobal, sponsored by Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, which arose out of the Church's first ad hoc efforts. The second was the Mexican government's Commission for Refugee Relief (known by its Spanish acronym, COMAR).

These two agencies helped the scattered refugees to organize camps which today vary in size from four to four hundred families. These camps have in turn helped the refugees preserve their old communities and way of life, and have made relief efforts more manageable. The Christian Committee provides the refugees with some basic foodstuffs, medicines and many sorts of material to support community projects, such as schools or collective farming efforts. COMAR distributes goods donated each month by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), such as corn, beans, cooking oil and canned beef. COMAR also provides monthly doctors' visits, school supplies and tar-laminated cardboard roofing for the refugee's houses, built of dried corn stalks or tree branches lashed together with vines. The food provisions from the Diocese and COMAR are enough for approximately two weeks of each month, and are intended to encourage the refugees to be partially self-sufficient. Most refugees rent land from surrounding Mexican landowners to raise corn and beans in individual or collective plots. When not working their own small fields, they work for the Mexican farmers.

Life in the camps is difficult. The refugees occupy the land where they are settled only by leave of the surrounding landowners and the Mexican government. Their houses, substandard accommodations by any measure, provide little protection in the rainy season from the sheets of water which the wind blows right through them, soaking everything inside and reducing the dirt floors to mud. For refugees in many camps, the nearest water is often twenty minutes' or half an hour's walk from where they live, and a source of intestinal parasites and amoebic dysentery. Not surprisingly, none of the camps has electricity. Despite these hardships, however, the camps for the most part have provided the refugees with safety and sustenance.

Guatemalan military incursions across the border and into the camps in 1983 and 1984 shattered the security of exile, and were
intended to frighten the refugees to return to Guatemala and to discourage others from seeking security in Mexico; among the victims were both refugees and Mexican peasants. The Mexican government reacted against these incursions as violations of its national sovereignty; it protested vigorously through diplomatic channels, while quietly building up its troops along the border, to discourage any similar Guatemalan actions in the future.

In addition to its diplomatic and military responses to Guatemalan aggression, the Mexican government in mid-1984 declared a plan to transfer the refugees from the border region of Chiapas to the neighbouring states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, in the interest of national security. When the refugee communities resisted the move, preferring to remain in Chiapas, closer both geographically and culturally to their native villages, the Mexican authorities' initial promises of greater security and offers of better land turned into threats and ultimatums. Despite vigorous protests in the camps, the authorities eventually carried out the transfer of 12,000 refugees to Campeche and 8,000 to Quintana Roo, often without warning in the middle of the night and, in a few instances, at gunpoint. The Christian Committee publicized the refugees' protests against forced relocation, and international denunciations of the government's new policy brought it to an end. Once the refugees secured a promise from the Mexican authorities not to transfer them without their consent, many communities moved farther into Chiapas, settling 20 or 30 kilometres from the border, in order to reduce tensions.

Out of the relocation crisis grew a new consciousness among the refugees of a need for greater organization as well as the requisite level of security and stability necessary to achieve it. With help from the Christian Committee, the refugees chose camp representatives to attend meetings at which they share information, talk about issues facing the camps and formulate policy options to take back to their respective communities for discussion. The higher level of communication fostered by the representatives in and between the camps has enabled the refugees to develop unified and coherent positions on issues that concern them, and has led to a more peaceful and co-operative relationship with the Mexican authorities.

The Christian Committee has also helped the refugees establish health clinics in every camp, providing medicines and a series of workshops for delegated healthcare promoters from each camp; the workshops include everything from treating amoebic dysentery to extracting teeth. The healthcare promoters in each camp have successfully campaigned to inoculate all children against major childhood diseases, improved hygiene in the homes, cared for those suffering from occasional outbreaks of malaria, and provided outpatient care for
refugees returning from hospital after surgery or treatment for a serious illness. In many areas, the refugees have shared their enjoyed superior healthcare with the surrounding population.

The refugees also maintain their own independent school system in the camps, educating their children using Guatemalan primary school curricula. In daily classes from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., the children learn not only reading, writing, mathematics, geography, agricultural science and social studies; they also prepare for and celebrate Guatemalan holidays and festivals. COMAR has provided blackboards, Mexican primary school textbooks and school supplies to all the camps. The Christian Committee has helped by providing additional school supplies, Guatemala textbooks and, most importantly, continuing preparation workshops for camp teachers, many of whom have received no more than a second or third grade education themselves.

The refugees do not limit education in the camps to children. Many communities hold regular adult literacy classes and the Christian Committee is planning a new drive in the coming year to encourage these efforts in all camps. Rural illiteracy in Guatemala remains at a dismal 90%; among the refugees, however, all the children and increasing numbers of adults have learned to read since their arrival in Mexico.

In the past years, most camps have seen the establishment of co-operative stores selling items such as salt, sugar, biscuits, soap, cigarettes, candy and even Coca-Cola. Co-operative members contribute seed money, which determines the proportion of the business they own. The members use this initial capital to stock the store, raising prices slightly to keep up with inflation and earning profits that go into a community chest, to provide for an orphans and widows fund, as well as ready cash for emergencies. Co-operative members always include women and men; members take turns working in the store each day. The Christian Committee provides regional warehouses and many basic items at wholesale prices, and regional committees of refugees organize ordering and distribution. The refugees also buy goods from retail stores in nearby towns. The Committee holds regular monthly meetings to provide a forum for sharing business problems among directors of all the co-operatives in a given region, at which the Committee also offers lessons in basic accounting and business skills.

In camps with successful stores, residents have undertaken other co-operative business ventures. With training provided by the Christian Committee, regional trading networks have been set up, for products such as shirts, pants, dresses and shoes manufactured by camp co-operatives. Every few months, co-operatives send their products to a warehouse provided by the Christian Committee where they pool the items and divide them proportionately, according to each co-operative’s contribution. The co-operatives in each network also select
individuals to serve as regional auditors and quality control inspectors. These inspectors check up on co-operatives every few months, help with minor business problems, and offer advice. All the co-operatives have written charters drawn up by members, specifying work responsibilities and methods for distributing goods among themselves.

In order to preserve the magnificent weaving traditions of Guatemalan women, the Christian Committee has helped women in many camps to organize handicraft co-operatives. These enable women in the camps to sell their work world-wide through a catalogue published by the Christian Committee, and to receive all of the profits from their work. Instead of dying out due to the poverty of life in the camps, weaving thrives among refugee women, earning them small sums of money to supplement meagre incomes and encouraging them to pass on the art to their daughters.

The role of the Christian Committee in all of these community developments has been continually changing. Just as the initial role of providing relief to the refugees shifted to imparting skills with which to become more self-sufficient, so, as the refugees have achieved greater organizational sophistication and confidence, has the Committee begun to step back into a more subtle supporting role. While it still provides training courses in healthcare, education and business, it also frequently offers facilities and food for conferences called by refugee organizations themselves, while maintaining only an observer presence.

In response to offers of repatriation by Guatemala’s newly elected civilian government in late 1987, the refugees sent delegates to a general assembly of refugees representing all of the camps in Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo to discuss the prospects. Before the establishment of the Permanent Commission, as the assembly is now known, the Christian Committee had served as the voice of the refugees to the outside world. Since 1987, the Permanent Commission has represented the refugees in negotiations with the Mexican and Guatemalan governments and sent an observer delegation to the International Conference on Central American Refugees, held in Guatemala City in June 1989.

Eager to improve its international human rights image, the Guatemalan government of Vinicio Cerezo has used several tactics to encourage the refugee’s return. In 1986, it sent government representatives to visit the camps, telling the refugees that military repression in Guatemala had ended with the election of a civilian government which recognized and respected the human rights of all Guatemalans. Cerezo also created the Special Commission for Aid to Repatriated Persons. Despite these measures by the government, the refugees remained sceptical, owing to the continuing sounds of shelling, the stories of human rights violations, and the flow of refugees. By the end of 1987, the government’s invitation became a threat: the lands of refugees
from the Guatemalan border state of Ixcan would be given to other peasants if these refugees did not return 'in a reasonable time period.' In response, the Permanent Commission drafted and sent a letter to President Cerezo outlining six conditions for their return:

1. Return to Guatemala must be voluntary, organized and collective.
2. Returnees must be allowed to take possession of their lands and property in Guatemala.
3. The Government of Guatemala must recognize and respect the rights to life and individual and communal integrity of the refugees.
4. The Government of Guatemala must recognize and respect the rights of returnees to organize and associate freely.
5. The Government of Guatemala must permit returnees to be accompanied by national and international observers, nongovernmental organizations and representatives from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
6. The Government of Guatemala must allow the Permanent Commission to move freely both inside and outside Guatemala.

The Cerezo government has rejected these conditions without comment.

The Permanent Commission has also entered into negotiations with COMAR, which is presently proposing a plan to consolidate the refugees in ten or twelve large camps. By doing so, COMAR seeks to centralize and facilitate the planning of an organized return and to offer state medical care and state certified primary education in the meanwhile. It also hopes to establish greater control over the refugees' activities in Mexico. The Permanent Commission has met several times to discuss the COMAR proposal, and has disseminated information through delegates in the camps for discussion and consideration. Many refugees are wary of COMAR's desire to take control of their communal activities and the education of their children. They have left their homeland and struggled for many years in the camps to preserve their traditional way of life and culture and are sure to be careful not to jeopardize the successes that they have achieved.

With military repression on the rise again in Guatemala, the prospect of return is nowhere on the horizon. Yet despite the poverty and uncertainty in which they live, Guatemalan refugees living along the Mexican border continue to preserve their past and to educate and organize their communities for the future. They are moving not towards a simple return to their old homeland, but towards deliverance in a new Guatemala.