

Governments Choreograph Dance of Indifference for Central American Migrants

Hundreds of thousands of Central Americans leave their countries to look for work and peace in the north: many remain in Mexico.

Mexico's southern border has its "wetbacks" too —although nobody calls them that— who illegally cross the Suchiate River from Guatemala into Chiapas.

Most of them arrive in Mexico with the intention of reaching the United States, fleeing armed conflicts, military repression and ever-increasing economic stress in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. An estimated two million people have been displaced by the Central American conflicts, and perhaps half a million of these are now living in Mexican territory.

Nonetheless, only 42,000 receive official aid from international organizations and the Mexican government: these are the Guatemalan Indian peasants who fled their country during the military governments headed by General Romeo Lucas (1978-1982) and General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983). Most of these refugees arrived in Mexico between 1981 and 1983. Approximately half of them still live in Chiapas in crowded refugee camps, while the other half have been resettled in the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, in self-sufficiency and integration projects. This latter group has received the migratory status of "temporary workers," while those still in Chiapas are in the country as "border visitors." In all cases, the children born in Mexican territory are entitled to Mexican citizenship.

Sergio Aguayo, professor and researcher at the Colegio de México's School of International Studies, says there are some 400,000 "forgotten Central Americans" in Mexico. Like the illegal immigrants in the U.S., they are subject to exploitation by employers and extortion by corrupt officials; they have no access to state health facilities and even have difficulties getting the kids enrolled at school, since they often lack the necessary documents. They also risk arrest and deportation; according to Dr. Aguayo, some 40,000 Central Americans were deported through the border crossings over the Suchiate River, near Tapachula, Chiapas, in the first ten months of 1986.

The great majority of illegal immigrants in Mexico are from El Salvador, and they do not generally remain in the southern border areas, but move north immediately to try and reach their main objectives: work, dollars and safety from the guns and bombs made in U.S.A.— which make life impossible at home. The interrelationship between the United States and Central America is easily detected by observers. U.S. intervention and military involvement in the area have caused millions of displaced persons to leave their homes. More than one million Salvadorans are now estimated to live in the U.S. For these people, Mexico is but a stepping stone to the "American Dream".

The Salvadorans who remain in Mexico assimilate into the local population and usually manage to survive with the help of relatives, friends and charitable or political organizations. Only 5,000 Salvadorans in Mexico City receive help from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR): supplementary food hand-outs and medical assistance.

The Salvadorans are recognized as "refugees," it is possible for them to seek asylum in a third country. Both the Canadian and Australian governments have representatives in Mexico who interview and approve a limited number of persons for their refugee resettlement programs. For example, since 1983, Australia has received 1,000 Salvadorans each year, some directly from El Salvador and others from Mexico.

Most of the Central American immigrants who remain in the southern border area of Chiapas are from Guatemala. They look for work in the coffee, cacao, cotton and banana harvests in the Soconusco area. As in the United States, these transitory "illegal" workers from the south are badly treated and overexploited. Tapachula, the biggest city in the Soconusco, reportedly has plenty of Central American women who despair of their economic situation at home and who travel north to earn money from prostitution.

Analysts of Mexico migratory-political problems say that Mexico is in the middle of the sandwich: from the south apparently never-ending floods of people who can no longer tolerate the political, social and economic deterioration in their countries; from the north, pressures from a super-power with an increasingly militarized border.

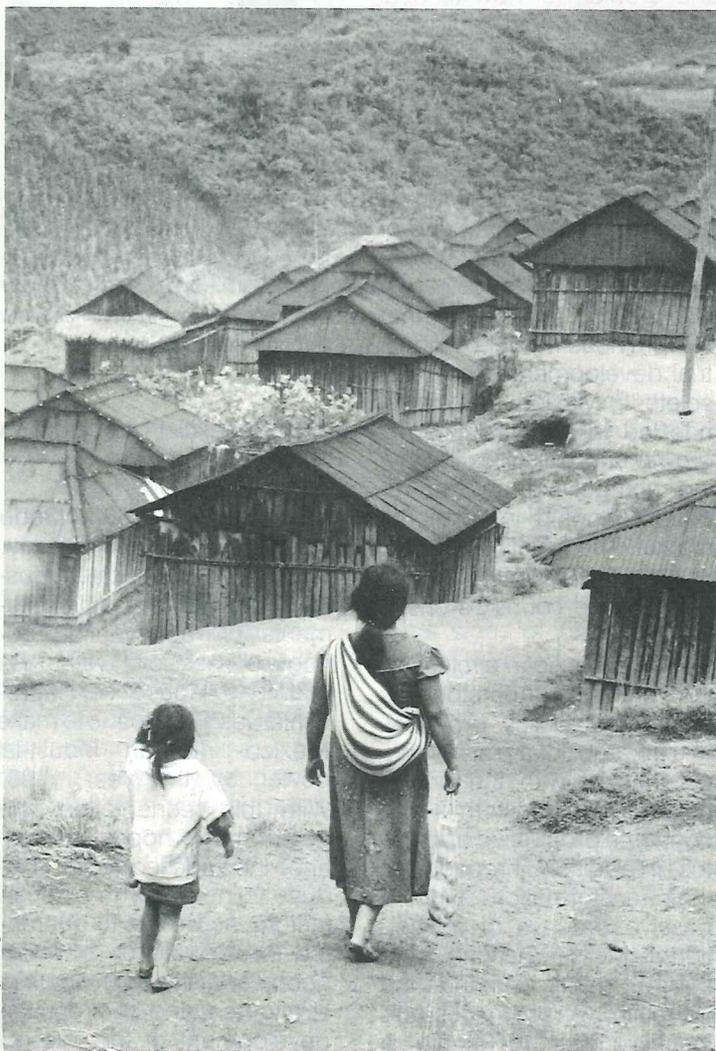


Photo by Sergio Dorantes

Refugee camp in Montebello, on the Mexico-Guatemala border

A Catholic priest in Guatemala recently told me that 150 to 200 people leave his parish each week to go north; a nun from the Good Shepherd Order, working in the border town of Mexicali from 1981-1983, said that during that time some 4,000 Central Americans would pass through town each month with the intention of crossing into the U.S. Sister Bertha told me she used to work in Mexicali's prisons and that two buses would leave each week with illegal immigrants on board, bound for the southern border at Tapachula.

María, a woman imprisoned along with her 4-year-old son in Mexico City in 1985 for not having her papers in order, told me the immigration Detention Center was full of Central Americans awaiting deportation. In this unending cycle of journeys deten-



Photo by Jackie Buswell

Malnutrition ravages the refugees. A baby in the hospital in Chiapas

tions, deportations, escapes and new attempts, families disintegrate and people lose each other; but the tide continues. The search for the American Dream is seen by some as the only escape valve for Central America.

The "forgotten Central Americans" in Mexico and the United States are unusually termed "economic immigrants". Those who are forced to leave their homes because of war or internal violence, but who remain in their own country, are called "displaced persons." Those who flee to another country because of a well-founded fear of losing their lives if they remain, are termed "refugees" by the UNHCR. While Mexico has a tradition of receiving exiles from other countries—from Spain in the 1930s and Latin America in the 1970s—only the 42,000 Guatemalan peasants under the care of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) are actually considered refugees.

Economic immigrants have no rights; they are left to fend for themselves. Displaced persons seem to have no rights either; at least in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, they are totally dependent on their own efforts and local charity for their survival. A refugee, however, who has crossed a border for fear of political persecution, does have some rights; they may receive aid from the UNHCR to remain in the country of first asylum or be resettled in third countries, such as Sweden, Canada or Australia.

The situation in Central America is of such political violence and instability, that Mexico and other countries in the region—except the United States—have proposed another definition of the word refugee: "those persons who have fled from their countries because their life, liberty or security has been threat-

the nation

ened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have gravely affected public order" (Cartagena Declaration, November 1984).

Dr. Aguayo criticizes both Mexico and the U.S. for their "dance of indifference" with respect to the human drama of Central American migration. However, he says that Mexico has the best policy in the region and a more humane approach to the problem. In a way, he says, Mexico has tried to ignore the problem, while at the same time seeking a regional solution. In fact, many of those deported from the U.S. as undocumented Mexicans are Central Americans. Officers don't bother to ask where the "wetback" is from, for the simple reason that it is

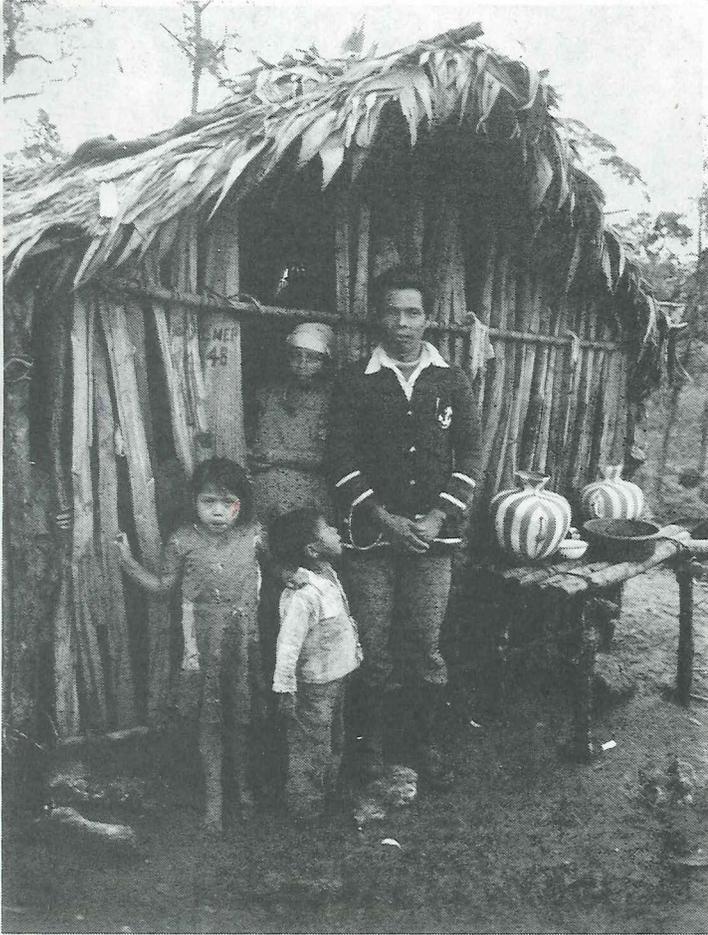


Photo by Sergio D. es

Hoping someday to return to their land and country

more costly to deport someone to Honduras or El Salvador than to Mexico. Dr. Aguayo says the United States does not recognize any Central Americans as refugees or asylum-seekers, yet accepts that two of its allies, Canada and Australia, interview Central American refugees in Mexico.

Mexico, in its current economic crisis, cannot afford to be too generous or too humanitarian with the floods of migrants, says Aguayo. Thus, one can explain the Mexican government's apparently ambivalent attitude: a certain leniency and tolerance towards the illegal immigrants in its territory, coupled with arrests and deportations.

Mexican Foreign Minister, Bernardo Sepúlveda, has repeatedly stated that Mexico needs peace in Central America, since an "increase in the region's armed conflicts would bring very grave consequences for Mexico".★