
Relocating Refugees

by
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This is an edited version of the Barber-Brownstone "Report of the UNHCR Regarding the Protection of Refugees in Durable Solutions". Martin Barber is Director of the Brownstone is a professor of Political Science at the University of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation Canada.

Introduction

There is continued widespread concern about plans to relocate the nearly 20,000 Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees from their present camps to new sites in the interior of Honduras. In addition, there is concern regarding the access of new arrivals to reception centres in the border area and regarding the security situation within the camps.

It is important to note a number of significant factors.

1. The attitude of the Honduran Government to the different groups of refugees is quite distinct. The 13,500 Misquito refugees from Nicaragua are being allowed to settle on agricultural land in the Mosquitia area of Honduras. The 2,000 Ladino refugees from Nicaragua are living in two Honduran villages near Danli; although they have freedom of movement they are not at present allowed to take paid employment within the Honduran economy. The 18,000 Salvadoreans and 550 Guatemalans are restricted to camp sites under Honduran military control.

2. The total of 34,500 refugees from three countries now living in Honduras represents only a very small part of the vast number of people who have been uprooted as a result of the continuing conflict in Central America. We believe that the UNHCR, through the UN Secretary-General, should now make available his good offices to the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua to assist them in alleviating the desperate plight of displaced persons within these countries. Estimates of the numbers of such people vary, but figures of over one million in Guatemala alone and of 450,000 persons in El Salvador have been reported to us by reliable sources.

3. The key to much of the debate over the situation of the refugees in Honduras is the clear definition of ap-

propriate durable solutions and of when and how such solutions can be promoted and implemented.

4. We do not try to offer ready-made solutions to a complex and difficult problem. We do believe, however, that our analysis of the issues involved can be of help to those who must make decisions.

Position of the Government of Honduras

1. At the most general level, the Government of Honduras will continue its humanitarian policy of accommodating refugees now in Honduras and of admitting additional refugees. A continued flow was anticipated. The Government of Honduras was not prepared to sign the Geneva Convention but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was considering the question.

2. The Government of Honduras has taken a firm decision with respect to relocation on grounds of national security. One part of this decision is not to relocate either the refugees in Mesa Grande or the Nicaraguan refugees. The other part is to relocate the refugees in the El Tesoro, San Antonio and Colomoncagua camps. Reference was made to the proximity of Colomoncagua to the border and security problems related to guerrilla activity. The Commission for Refugees has informed the refugees of Colomoncagua of its firm intention to proceed with relocation. The timing of relocation remains uncertain. The government regards relocation as a "necessity" but not a matter of "urgency". Furthermore, there is no decision on the matter of relocation sites. These are now being sought through the joint work of the armed forces and the National Institute of Agriculture (a technical institute which has responsibility for administering the Honduran Agrarian Reform Law).

3. The Salvadorean and Guatemalan

refugee situation is seen as temporary.

Given this and given the government's responsibility to the Honduran peasantry seeking land under the Agrarian Reform Law, the Minister stated that it would not be possible to consider allocating more extensive land resources for the Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees in a relocation context. He was open, however, to extension of workshop activities as part of the refugees' economic base.

4. Colomoncagua would be retained as a reception centre in which refugees would be received initially and relocated to an interior camp following a brief stay.

5. General satisfaction was expressed regarding the work of UNHCR and the various service agencies. While the refugee program did not constitute a significant fiscal or programme burden on the government, reference was made to costs associated with immigration and military functions.

Position of the UNHCR

1. The UNHCR believes that all the Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees in Honduras should be relocated to a new site(s) in the interior of the country, since UNHCR is unable to guarantee their security in the places where they are now living. This policy applies to the refugees in Mesa Grande, even though that camp is substantially further inland than the other camps and even though the refugees there have already been relocated from camps and villages at La Virtud and Guarita.

2. The UNCHR also intends to ensure that the refugees can achieve full food self-sufficiency, with increased freedom of movement and access to markets, and lead a more normal and dignified life than in the present camps. Efforts are currently being concentrated on ob-



Camp Benito Juarez, Chiapas, Mexico

which has gone into building up the present camps. They claim they would not be willing to work on creating the infrastructure in a new location.

3. In response to the UNHCR's suggestion that representatives of the refugees visit the proposed new sites, the refugee leaders said that even to do that would be to compromise their position.

4. Refugees in both Mesa Grande and Colomocagua expressed their satisfaction with the material conditions of life in the camps and their gratitude to the UNHCR and the agencies for their assistance.

5. In concluding their written petition, the refugees in Mesa Grande state, "For these reasons we say once and for all 'No!' to relocation, and if they want to relocate us by force, it would be better to let us return to die in our places of origin in El Salvador".

Position of the Agencies

We learned that agency workers have played a comprehensive support role in the camps. Although individuals involved have a primary technical responsibility with respect to functions such as health, education, infrastructure, workshops, and others, in reality their total role includes: (a) direct technical activity, (b) training of refugees in technical roles, (c) assistance in forming refugee organizations and camp structures, (d) supplementary protection, (e) maintaining a communications channel, (f) personal counselling and support. All of this results from the direct contact

which agency workers have with refugees and, in Mesa Grande and El Tesoro, the fact that they live in the camps and share many aspects of daily life there. As a result, the agency workers see themselves as basically "with the people", supporting them. listening to them and responding to them. This is, in their view, the relationship they want and must have as supportive individuals. That is, they must respect the refugees' decisions; they must voice the desires of the refugees and they must be channels of communication to the UNHCR and to their own agencies on behalf of the refugees.

Agency workers may not necessarily reflect the official positions of the agencies themselves.

1. They reject both the security argument and the possibility for any improvement in human rights or socioeconomic conditions of refugees relocated elsewhere in Honduras. Their explanation for the relocation policy tended to stress political-military purposes on a national and regional scale.

2. They oppose the specific position of the UNHCR on relocation and feel the way in which it has been presented by the UNHCR has worked against a constructive dialogue between the UNHCR and the refugees.

3. Attempts to relocate are expected to produce tragic results in terms of virtually forced repatriation at great personal danger, serious loss of morale, physical and psychological damage,

and loss of the impressive progress which has been made in building up infrastructure and services in the camps. (Since many agency workers were personally involved in the relocation from La Virtud and Guarita to Mesa Grande, they reflected the same difficult experiences that the refugees had.) They shared the refugees' justifiable satisfaction with what had been achieved in existing camps.

4. Agency workers as individuals and groups say they would stand with the refugees in opposition to relocation and would not abandon them.

Analysis

Our basic approach is predicated first and foremost on our responsibility to the refugees and our identification with their tragic situation, which means supporting them, listening to them and respecting their decisions. It is predicated also on the experience and understanding of the groups and individuals working supportively with the refugees. At the same time it is essential to understand the national and regional context in which they find themselves as defined by the Government of Honduras (and in observations made to us by Honduran citizens involved in human rights and other aspects of Honduran life), and by the relationship between the Government of Honduras and the UNHCR, and by the policies and programmes of the UNHCR in the region.

1. The refugee and agency workers do not find either the UNHCR or the Honduran Government relocation policies acceptable, with the important exception of the government's decision to retain the Mesa Grande camp.

• As refugee camps, and accepting the obvious constraints, the present locations and internal conditions are not a question at issue. Indeed, any objective analysis would find a remarkable adjustment in terms of material daily life and of a healthy community situation. The people and support workers have worked very hard under difficult conditions to produce impressive results which they identify as their achievements and which they resist abandoning. Furthermore, there has been little evidence of security problems in either Mesa Grande or Colomocagua for some time, although a serious incident did occur in El Tesoro recently. It is therefore difficult for us to anticipate a significant improvement in an already

reasonably secure situation.

- The refugees all define their stay in Honduras as temporary, and this brings into question the UNHCR arguments favouring relocation which are based on considerations of expanding the refugees' land base, access to markets, and freedom of movement. None of these are being demanded by the refugees who are quite prepared to stay in present camps under present conditions at Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua. Quite literally, refugees are not requesting "freedom" in Honduras.

- The Mesa Grande refugees and agency workers have vivid and painful memories of the relocation from La Virtud and Guarita and neighbouring villages, and they have received little assurance that another relocation will not be a repeat performance. The refugees at Colomoncagua are fully aware of the La Virtud relocation.

2. The refugees, when we raised the possibility of their being confronted with relocation, stated their preferred options; that is, resettlement to a third country or repatriation. Unfortunately, both options appear to us to be highly doubtful, in terms of the availability of a suitable third country on the one hand, and the enormous risks in repatriation on the other. In the latter case, under present circumstances the refugees would not have UNHCR protection available.

3. In relation to the institutions on which the refugees are primarily dependent, that is, the Government of Honduras and the UNHCR, two main comments emerged which affect their response to relocation:

- There is a profound lack of confidence in the UNHCR promises surrounding relocation.

- There is virtual certainty that, despite being received by Honduras, the Honduran Government and military regard them with a high degree of suspicion in terms of their political character, compounded by the historical tension between the two countries.

Under such circumstances the best option for the refugees would appear to be the status quo, and we feel that this is the best basis for continued discussions involving the refugees, the UNHCR and the Government of Honduras.

4. We have found it difficult to understand the logic of the UNHCR's position in some regards. If the UNHCR believes

that there are serious security risks for the refugees in their present camps, then we would expect them to be taking urgent measures to move them to safer sites. (We noted that no such sense of urgency was expressed either by the Honduran Government or by the refugees themselves.) However, the conditions which the UNHCR are imposing on the relocation plans (essentially enough land to allow self-sufficiency in food) would seem to militate against any likelihood of a speedy relocation. Our discussions with the Government of Honduras led us to believe that the government was unlikely to accede to these conditions.

Recommendations

1. The UNHCR should accept the policy of the Honduran Government to retain the present camp at Mesa Grande. If the site should become overcrowded, then new arrivals might be placed in a new camp.

2. The UNHCR should not pursue the

idea of relocating the refugees in Yoro or Olancho, or any other province in sites which would lead to self-sufficiency in food and access to Honduran markets, since we believe this to be an unrealistic objective in the circumstances which exist in Honduras.

3. If and when the Honduran Government nominates a site(s) for the relocation from Colomoncagua, San Antonio and El Tesoro, the UNHCR should examine the proposal in the light of the views of the refugees and should consult directly with the refugees and agency workers in the three camps.

4. The UNHCR should use its good offices to help in relieving the appalling plight of displaced persons in Central America, particularly in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. In addition, the UNHCR should seek to develop ways of monitoring the situation of refugees who have returned voluntarily to El Salvador and of obtaining all possible guarantees for their security.

Number and Nationality of Refugees Under UNHCR Assistance in Honduras

<u>NATIONALITY</u>	<u>CAMP</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Guatemalans	El Tesoro	567
Nicaraguan (Miskitos)	Rio Warunta	3,235
	Rio Mocoron	5,683
	Rio Patuca	3,770
	Cocobila	230
	Tapamlaya	247
	Prunmitara	186
		<hr/> 13,351
Nicaraguan (Ladinos)	Jacaleapa	1,008
	Teupasenti	990
		<hr/> 1,998
Salvadoreans	Mesa Grande	10,238
	Colomoncagua/San Antonio	8,154
		<hr/> 18,392
	TOTAL ASSISTED	34,308

Source: UNHCR

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