
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 50 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)
Letters

To the Editor:

Dear Sir:

Your “Newsflash” in the September/October issue of “Refuge” stated: ‘The UNHCR has cancelled its agreement of co-operation with the Canadian Foundation for Refugees’.

While it is true that the UNHCR and the CFR are no longer parties to a written agreement which made them partners in the areas of fund-raising and public education, it is wrong to say that UNHCR no longer has an agreement to co-operate with the CFR.

The Statute of the UNHCR provides that the High Commissioner may establish ‘contact in such manner as he may think best with private organizations dealing with refugee questions’. We shall continue to provide the CFR with the best advice and support we can offer in matters of mutual concern, as we do for all other voluntary agencies working in this sector.

Yours sincerely,

Ishag H. Brown
Representative in Canada of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Our newsflash said the UNHCR cancelled its “agreement of co-operation” and not any informal arrangements to co-operate. Ed.

Editor’s Note:

Refuge would like to publish more articles by individuals working in the field. However, we have experienced some difficulties in obtaining such articles. Following is a quote from a letter sent by one such individual:

“Unfortunately I cannot help you in your request for an article for Refuge magazine. A number of individuals and agencies here have gotten into big trouble by writing for external magazines. I feel my first obligation is to the program here. Therefore, I must refuse. I would really like to help you though. I thought of writing a few thoughts down, perhaps anonymously. I feel this is doing the same thing as writing some sort of article so I must refuse totally.”

The Third International Conference on Soviet Jewry will be held in Jerusalem, March 15–18, 1983. The Presidium of the World Conference on Soviet Jewry called for the conference in response to the deteriorated situation of Jews in the Soviet Union. Further information may be obtained by writing to the Canadian Committee for Soviet Jewry, 212 Dunvegan Road, Toronto, Ontario M5P 2P2. (416) 489-7133.

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