

BOOK REVIEW

Repatriation Under Conflict in Central America

Edited by Mary Ann Larkin,
Frederick C. Cuny
and Barry N. Stein

*(Hemispheric Migration Project, Center for
Immigration and Refugee Assistance,
Georgetown University and Intertext Institute,
Washington and Dallas, 1991.)*

Reviewed by
Sheilagh Knight-Lira

This book describes the voluntary repatriation that took place under conflicting conditions in Central America from 1981 to 1990. From Costa Rica and Honduras to Nicaragua, from Mexico to Guatemala and from Honduras to El Salvador, refugees decided to repatriate when the governments responsible for their flight were still in power, when neither amnesties, repatriation agreements nor special programs were necessarily in place to assist them in returning home. The refugees described here are the 20 percent of Central American refugees — mostly poor, rural families — did not permit them to flee very far into the U.S. and Mexico, but who could only escape to immediate safety across the border and from there, decided to return home "under conflict."

Presented in a case study format, the research presented here refers to phenomena that have never before been systematically analyzed by scholars. Monographs and reports that vary in objectivity and methodology have been published and they have provided partial descriptions of the phenomena. While repatriation to Central American countries has been occurring since 1981, research into certain flows — Salvadoran and Guatemalan in particular — was not considered feasible until the late 1980s, given the repressive conditions in the countries of origin. With the impetus of various international events pertaining to the Central American peace process and refugee crisis negotiations — visit of UN High Commissioner Hocke to Central America in 1985, the signing of

the Esquipulas II Agreement in 1987, the Tela Agreement and International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) in 1989 — conditions for research into Central American repatriation were gradually set and research began in 1989.

The goal of this particular study is to contribute to the understanding of repatriation and to the policy debate about when and how to assist refugees on their way home. Therefore, one of the main foci of the study is to look at the many actors in the repatriation process and the roles they play. Of these actors, host governments are portrayed as generally anxious to be rid of the thorny refugee problem and as adopting limited and sometimes controversial policies in the refugees' "favour." Chapter III, a look at Mexico's refugee policy and Chapter IV, on Salvadoran refugee programs, describe this type of governmental role in excellent detail. In contrast, the role played by the Sandinista government in repatriation is depicted as generally conciliatory: the granting of autonomous status to indigenous regions in 1987 is a key element in the repatriation of Miskito and Sumu refugees living in Honduras.

The role of various national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs such as the Church and voluntary agencies) is represented as generally beneficial (providing material support and in-camp technical skills training) but also as occasionally detrimental to the repatriation process. In Chapter IV, authors Patricia Weiss Fagen and Joseph Eldridge describe how international volunteers were of great assistance to Salvadoran refugees, but contributed in one instance (not the only one) to a two-day delay in crossing the Honduran border (IV, 158). This leads Adolpho Aguilar Zinser, in his conclusion to the book, to suggest that NGOs maintain a visible yet discreet presence during the repatriation process.

As for the UNHCR, viewpoints on its role vary according to the case study. The UNHCR in Mexico is deemed (at worst) as "often bending over backwards to avoid offending the host government and quietly tolerat[ing] abuses against refugees and repatriates under its

protection" (III, 106). Aguilar Zinser explains that this is a deliberate government strategy, recalling that Mexico is not a signatory to the Geneva convention and tolerates little international interference in its refugee policy formulation and program administration (III, 78-87).

The UNHCR in Honduras/El Salvador, on the other hand, is viewed as functioning quite efficiently with the resources available to it and unenviably trying to balance its humanitarian role with its diplomatic and administrative duties: refugee demands must constantly be weighed against agency procedure, host government requirements and restrictions (IV, 131-136, 155-163).

Refugee motivation for repatriation is another major focus of the study. Motivations are many, varying from the emotional (desire to be reunited with family), to the ethnoreligious (indigenous Nicaraguans' desire to be once again on the land of their ancestors), to the economic (Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica benefitted from job opportunities, improved health care and education facilities and were thus less motivated to return), to the political. Examples of the latter include dissatisfaction with conditions in the refugee camps and with relocation of camps. Undertaken by the UNHCR in both Mexico and Honduras in response to host government pressure to move away from borders where the refugees could "collaborate," the relocations provoked on occasion large waves of spontaneous repatriation (III, 82-84; IV, 132). Weiss Fagen and Eldridge also point out that the mass repatriations (i.e. up to 4,300 people during one move) to El Salvador were also politically motivated: repatriates wished to return as large groups in order to guarantee their safety during the return, as well as to "demonstrate their political will and organizational strength" with respect to the Salvadoran government (IV, 177).

Conditions awaiting the refugees upon return to Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador are also amply described in an attempt to understand the scale of the repatriation phenomena (described

numerically in all three cases). Repatriates to Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador all face difficulties in recovering or receiving land, due to "re-assignment" of land tracts since or before their departure, as well as having to cope with war-ravaged community infrastructures. Linked to this is the key issue of repatriates' protection and security, or lack of these, in their newly resettled communities. Guatemalan and Salvadoran repatriates are particularly affected by disappearances and military harassment. Disturbing cases of particular families and individuals experiencing these difficulties are cited by the authors. These conditions explain why Guatemalan repatriation has been relatively unsuccessful, with approximately 10 to 15 percent of the original official refugee population having repatriated (that is to say, between 4,600 and 6,900 individuals) (III, 64, 107), while almost all Salvadorans and Nicaraguans have decided to repatriate.

Since this is an initial study of the repatriation process in Central America, theoretical reflections are kept to the minimum. However, repatriation patterns of three types are identified: unassisted, spontaneous repatriation outside of formal channels; voluntary repatriation of small groups assisted by the UNHCR; and massive repatriation assisted by UNHCR. Distinctions are drawn between urban and rural refugees and repatriates. The effect of the repatriation process on the evolution of the *campesino* (peasant or country-dweller) identity towards a more urbanized, collective entity is described.

There are several limits to the study of which the reader should be aware. First, the case studies deal only with officially recognized refugees "because the population is identified and the data exist" (Preface, viii). As the authors duly recognize, the question of "undocumented workers," the more numerous "unofficial" refugees, remains to be addressed (Conclusion, 191). Secondly, the study favours refugee and UNHCR viewpoints in particular. NGO roles are given a cursory glance and are generally referred to en bloc. In

Chapter II, the authors note summarily that "NGOs carried on with the same activities with which they had been occupied" before repatriation occurred in Nicaragua. In Chapter III, the author notes the need for NGOs to become involved in the scrutiny and material support aspects of the Guatemalan repatriation process and that the absence of NGOs has contributed to a predominance of military and national security considerations, as well as resulting in insufficient material support to repatriates. Chapter IV provides the best analysis of an NGO—the role of the Christian Committee of the Displaced in El Salvador (CRIPDES) in the Salvadoran repatriation process.

The authors of the studies come from various backgrounds that provide a strong and diverse vision of Central American repatriation. Marvin Ortega and Pedro Acevedo are, respectively, Director and Research Associate of the Itztani Research Institute in Managua, Nicaragua. As a result, their research is particularly rich in fieldwork detail regarding Nicaraguan communities. Aguilar Zinser, the author of the Guatemalan repatriation study, is professor of international relations at one of Mexico's foremost universities, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Aguilar Zinser's ability to structure, conceptualize and be constructively critical make his contributions to the book (both the case study and the global conclusion) fine reading. Weiss Fagen and Eldridge, the authors of the portion of the book on Salvadoran repatriates are "old hands" on the Central American scene. Weiss Fagen is Public Information Officer at the Washington, D.C. office of the UNHCR, while Eldridge is Director of the Washington Office of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. Their study is particularly good in its examination of all the decision-making processes and interaction of the various actors in the repatriation process—refugees, UNHCR, Honduran and Salvadoran governments and agencies, as well as international agencies.

The concluding chapter provides recommendations for NGOs, the

Mexican government and the UNHCR about appropriate future roles and government policies that may be adopted in order to facilitate the repatriation process. Future areas of study are also suggested for researchers interested in the Central American repatriation problem.

For those interested in reading about other case studies that are part of the "International Study of Spontaneous Voluntary Repatriation," the project research also include studies of returns to Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Burundi and Ethiopia. Initiated in 1986, this worldwide study of which the Central American case studies are part, was sponsored by the Ford Foundation and directed by Frederick Cuny and Barry Stein. ■

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risks of imprisonment, torture and even death."

The Canadian Council for Refugees has been calling for an appeal on the merits of the case since the determination system came into effect in 1989. Case after case has shown the urgent need for a meaningful appeal.

The CCR is disturbed by the language and orientation of the government's statements. The emphasis on control and abuse, not justified by any available statistics, will undermine public sympathy for refugees. Furthermore, it will serve to dismantle Canadian achievements in refugee protection and erode our humanitarian record.

The CCR is disappointed that the government did not choose to address the need for changes through a process of frank and open discussion between all concerned parties. The CCR is interested in a constructive exchange with the government on how the present system could be improved. We trust that adequate time will be given to the review of these extensive amendments. ■

Refuge

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