

as well as an uncertain sociopolitical environment in Guatemala, where civilian rule is still very much in the shadow of the military, make the presence of international observers essential for the security of the refugees, both during the return process as well as in their initial resettlement in new communities.

A full evaluation by all members of the consortia is presently in progress. However, some preliminary observations can be made. For instance, the Canadian consortia provided the Guatemalan refugees with timely and substantial support. This support was instrumental in consolidating their fledgling organizations and establishing the structures necessary to effectively carry out the many different aspects of the return and resettlement program. Project "A" provided well trained accompaniers and was recognized for its excellent coordination with refugee leaders. (See Beth Abbott in this issue).

Internally, this collaboration provided the members of the consortia with the opportunity to strengthen their working relations. In addition, the fact that the Canadian NGOs involved the Canadian Embassy in some aspects of the return, helped build official understanding of and commitment to the return. A twenty-seven minute video on the first return sponsored by the consortia and shown on national television also helped to raise Canadian public awareness of the issue. One final observation is that at an international level, consortia support encouraged the ongoing dialogue with the UNHCR and other governmental bodies involved in the refugee return process.

Conditions in Mexico's Chiapas state as well as inside Guatemala are being carefully monitored given the many large scale returns still to take place. Once the evaluation by the consortia members is completed, new funding options for a possible Phase III will be considered within a broader perspective of continuing Canadian support for the Guatemalan refugees' dream of returning home. ■

Project Accompaniment: A Canadian Response

Beth Abbott

International accompaniment is important... without international accompaniment, the people are like worms the army can just step on...

—Guatemalan refugee in Mexico awaiting return to the Petén

Project Accompaniment is a national network which was formed so that Canadians could offer a coordinated response to the requests for international accompaniment by the Guatemalan refugees. The work of Project "A" in the 1990s grew out of the relationships built between Canadian individuals and groups and the Guatemalan refugee community in Mexico throughout the 1980s. The church community in British Columbia, for example, has been a particularly important sector offering many forms of accompaniment for over a decade now.

Through Project "A," Canadians from coast to coast have come to understand that accompaniment involves our physical presence with the refugees together with development of dedicated and informed support in Canada. It means continued exchanges between Guatemalans and Canadians based on mutual support in efforts for social justice. It means, most immediately, attentive international vigilance and support for the refugees, both those returning home, and those remaining for the time being in Mexico.

In planning their return to Guatemala, the refugees' representatives (known as the Permanent Commissions) clearly outlined the basic conditions they would need to successfully carry the process forward. One of these conditions was our presence while they were still in the camps, as they journeyed home, and perhaps most importantly, after they had returned. Guatemalan refugees are returning to a country where violence and repression are a daily fact of life. Many returnees are resettling in the most

highly militarized regions of Guatemala; regions which have never stopped being "home" despite the years in Mexico. Through Project Accompaniment, a growing number of Canadians are ensuring that the refugees' right to return home is respected. The Project Accompaniment network is supported (financially and in many other ways) by the major national churches in Canada as well as by numerous nongovernmental organizations which work for social justice in Guatemala and Mexico. In rural communities, large cities, and everywhere in between across Canada, Project "A" members are actively engaged in:

Emergency response. The project continues to build a network with the capacity to respond to acts of intimidation, violence or injustice committed against the refugee population, the returned refugees, or the international accompaniers;

Education. The project produces and distributes educational materials about the human rights situation in Guatemala and the refugees' return from Mexico;

Lobbying and advocacy. The network monitors and encourages fulfilment of the October 1992 agreement outlining the refugees' right to return. It encourages the Canadian government to play a supportive and productive role in the refugee return; and

Physical accompaniment. The project trains and prepares Canadians to physically accompany the refugees as they organize for return, make the trip home and resettle in their communities. All volunteer accompaniers are supported by a group or community in Canada which helps them to raise funds, prepare for their accompaniment stay, and develop follow-up plans. ■

Beth Abbott works with Project Accompaniment in Halifax (3rd Floor, 3115 Veith Street Halifax, N.S. B3K 3G9).