

Canadian Truth Commission Attempts to Overcome Guatemalan Refugees' Fear and Cynicism

Judith Pyke

A Truth Commission for the Canadian Guatemalan community finished taking the last of its testimonies from refugees in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto, Canada on April 30, 1998. Altogether, the commission took 34 testimonies and documented 82 cases of human rights abuses in Guatemala. It was funded by Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs. The testimonies will be incorporated into a report being prepared by the year-long Truth Commission based in Guatemala, which will wrap up on July 31st, 1998.

Guatemala's thirty-five year civil war ended officially in December 1996, when government and warring guerrilla factions signed several peace accords. During the conflict, over 150,000 people died, 50,000 disappeared and thousands more were orphaned and widowed. One million people became refugees, out of a total population of 11 million.

"I think it's important from a Canadian perspective to recognize that we have people in our midst who are living with memories of these horrible situations" said Albert Koehl, a Canadian lawyer who helped initiate the Truth Commission in Canada, and who worked for the commission in Guatemala. However, Koehl acknowledges that many members of the Canadian Guatemalan refugee community, which he estimates at roughly 8,000, found that "the process just hurts too much" and did not want to participate. Others remain unsure whether the commission will have an impact on the situation in Guatemala. Those who did participate hope that public articulation of human rights abuses in Guatemala will engender public recognition of war atrocities

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and help Guatemalans and their country to begin to heal.

"This is good for future generations, and it's important to record Guatemala's history," said Francisco Hernandez, who gave testimony at the truth commission's proceedings. He is "tired of the bad situation in Guatemala" and does not want the violence to repeat itself. Hernandez came to Canada as a refugee fourteen years ago, after he was threatened with kidnapping by the army. However, Hernandez, like many Guatemalans, is unsure whether a truth commission or the peace agreement will usher in a new era for Guatemala.

"Latin America has a history of sudden reversals and coups, and it would be negligent to say that there is a guarantee that things are going to keep moving in a positive direction, but that's the hope," said John Tynella, who works for the United Nations in Guatemala. Tynella stressed that public participation in processes like the Truth Commission and the implementation of the peace accords has to overcome a strong sense of "apathy, skepticism and a sense that there really is no way to participate in the government." Despite the fact that there are more sanctioned opportunities for discussion, Guatemala's culture of fear persists, perpetuated by continuing government corruption and fundamental economic needs throughout the country.

The brutal killing of Bishop Juan José Gerardi in April, after he published a report on human rights abuses in Guatemala, sent a strong message to the Guatemalan Canadian community. There is a sense that repression is starting again, said Hernandez. He, like many others, urges that continued international presence and attention is essential if Guatemala is to continue on its path to restoring a civil and just society. ■

REPORTS

• Somali Refugees in Toronto: A Profile

By Edward Opoku-Dapaah
ISBN 1-55014-278-x, 130 pp., \$12.95.

This is the first comprehensive study of Somali refugees in Toronto. It examines the social, residential, and linguistic characteristics of Somalis, their participation in the local economy, and the activity of Somali community organizations. The report also contains valuable suggestions and recommendations concerning suitable and more efficient service delivery to this community.

• Cambodian Refugees in Ontario: An Evaluation of Resettlement and Adaptation

By Janet McLellan,
ISBN 1-55014-267-4, 142 pp., \$12.95.

This major study of Cambodian refugees in Ontario examines the effects of various forms of sponsorship on Cambodian resettlement. It also focuses on the linguistic, economic, educational, training and social dimensions of the whole process of adaptation. The delivery of services by governmental and NGO agencies as well as the effects of the past traumatic experiences of genocide and mass starvation on Cambodian refugees are fully discussed.

• Refugee Families and Children: A Directory for Service Providers in Metro Toronto

Compiled by
Dr. John Morris and Lydia Sawicki.
ISBN 1-55014-285-2, 39 pp., \$6.95.

This directory is designed for service providers who work with refugee families and children in Metro Toronto. Its aim is to improve service provision through networking and the sharing of training opportunities.

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