



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGEE

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Central American Refugees: Resettlement Needs and Solutions

In the last decade, more than 1,600,000 Central Americans have become refugees. Most of them are Salvadoreans and Guatemalans fleeing military repression. What is their destination? Most Guatemalans cross the border over to Mexico. Some of them "make it" to the United States, where they join the army of "illegals". Salvadoreans move in various directions: Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, Honduras, Mexico and the United States. Some of these countries (Honduras and Mexico) place refugees in camps. Other countries (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Belize) offer so-called "durable solutions" projects designed to make refugees self-sufficient. Guatemala does not recognize refugees. Mexico, in addition to maintaining camps, implements some agricultural projects for Guatemalans. Many of these refugees, with or without legal status, in camps or integrated into projects, apply for third country resettlement in Canada or Australia. Why do so many refugees prefer settlement in distant countries in spite of the language barrier and problems of cultural adaptation they will have to face? What are the problems with "regional resettlement"?

Sandra Pentland and Denis Racicot discuss violation of human rights of Salvadorean refugees in Honduran camps: intimidation, rape, murder and arrests are practised by the Honduran army. Pentland and Racicot analyse abuse of refugee rights from the point of view of the geo-political interests of the United States. Refugee camps at the border of Honduras and El Salvador interfere with U.S. plans for military operations

in the area. This explains the constant pressure placed on refugees to move to other camps. Resistance by the refugee population to relocation plans provokes attacks and arrests of some Salvadoreans who are accused of supporting Salvadorean guerrillas. The article focuses on the August 29, 1985, attack on the Colomoncagua camp and consequent events.

The situation in Costa Rica does not look as bleak. By and large, lives of Salvadorean refugees are not in danger. They are allowed freedom of movement inside the country and a chance to become self-sufficient through "durable solutions" projects. However, Tanya Basok argues that these projects have not been viable. Some of the reasons for the failure are due to administrative errors which could be corrected. However, without the UNHCR emergency aid (which was discontinued in December 1985), only a small number of projects can be implemented, leaving most of the Salvadorean refugees with no means of economic survival.

How does Canada respond to this refugee crisis? There is no Canadian Embassy in Honduras and no Canadian immigration officers in the camps. Thus, it is extremely

difficult for Salvadoreans in Honduras to migrate to Canada. In Costa Rica the situation is somewhat better: at least, there is a possibility to apply. However, last year the quota for the region served by the Canadian Embassy in San Jose (which includes El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama and Costa Rica) was 1,025 people. Some 200-250 refugees were from Costa Rica and they included not only Salvadoreans, but also Nicaraguans, Cubans and Guatemalans.

Another way of immigrating to Canada is through an in-land status determination procedure which, according to Charles Smith, is inefficient and, in many cases, unfair. He criticizes this procedure through which four out of five claimants get rejected because they are perceived as "economic immigrants". Smith argues that most of the Central Americans in Montreal are not "economic immigrants" but have a valid claim for refugee status.

What are the solutions, then? Improved security and protection measures in Honduran camps, more development funds directed towards "durable solutions" projects, increased immigration levels and a fair and more efficient refugee status determination procedure.

Tanya Basok

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