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México

Treatment of the Central American Migrant:  
Another Mexican Contradiction.

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Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter:

Mexico is a land of more contradictions than most. It touts itself as a democracy, while the actual president handpicks his successor. Government officials ad abneauseum proclaim the glories of the Mexican Revolution, religiously ignoring the many studies which show the poorer stratum of the population living in as precarious conditions as their pre-Revolutionary ancestors. And most recently, despite Mexico's repeated declarations of support and sympathy for the peoples of war-torn El Salvador and repression ridden Guatemala, her treatment of those who either seek refuge within her borders or who try to cross her territory to go to the United States, has been less than hospitable.

This past June between 1,500 and 1,900 Guatemalan peasants sought political asylum in Mexico's border state of Chiapas. These people fled after tortures and killing by the government's armed forces had occurred in their villages, or in the surrounding area.

Of the villages from which they came, the repression was most marked in El Arbolito. On June 29th, soldiers dressed as peasants and claiming to be from the left-wing Armed People's Organization, went door to door asking for food. Shortly after leaving the community, they returned in full uniform. Those who had supposedly provided food, 57 in all, were killed. Several were tortured in public prior to being fired upon.

During the month the Guatemalan refugees resided in Chiapas, the Mexican government provided them neither with food nor potable water nor any form of housing materials. Fortunately, a few private humanitarian groups did extend some assistance and the doctor in the local government clinic did the best he could with the medicines he had. No extra supplies were received despite the Guatemalans presence. Three children, unable to resist the difficult living conditions, died before the Mexican armed forces came

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to escort them back to their own country between July 16th and July 19th. Of those who had come in search of the solidarity and support so often publicly proclaimed by Mexico, only 50 were allowed to stay. The official position of the Mexican government was made clear when the Minister of Interior, Enrique Olivares Santana, stated: "What we are dealing with is a massive internment, which was motivated, promoted and spirited by the idea of obtaining a piece of land or a job in (our) national territory."

He went on to say that each case would be studied individually; those warranting political asylum would be granted such. Although the Mexican government assured them otherwise, most of the Guatemalans were convinced that punishment for humiliating their government would not be long in coming. They claimed that the names of the first 400 Guatemalans sent back on July 16th are now included in the lists of the disappeared or of those killed by the Guatemalan army.

Although nowhere near as dramatic, the government's treatment of the Central Americans bound for and found in Mexico's northern border area is also in contradiction with her international stance. The Baja California / California area is the most active crossing point for those illegally attempting to enter the United States from Mexico. While in 1978 and 1979 Nicaraguans made up the majority of non-Mexican illegals detained in this area by Mexican and U.S. migration forces, during 1980 and 1981, El Salvadoreans took the lead with Guatemalans being the second largest group.

The majority of Central Americans who cross into Mexico do so without papers. They must pay a bribe to get into the country as well as another five or more before reaching the northern border. Many of these bribes will be paid to the officers at the migration posts situated along the various bus, train or car routes north; additional ones will often have to be paid to other federal, state or municipal officials who also capitalize on the migrants precarious situation. The bribes requested increase in denomination as one nears the U.S. border. Near Guatemala they are as low as \$ 20, while the going rate in Rosita, the final immigration post near Mexicali is \$ 100 dollars. If any of these bribes are not paid, or, if the Central Americans are picked up within the border region after paying the Rosita quota, they are imprisoned. The prison personnel is also known to take its fair share of the Central Americans remaining money, as do lawyers who charge between \$ 1,000 and \$ 1,500 promising some type of asylum in return. Regardless of the fees paid, the only thing the migrants gain is a free bus ride back to El Salvador, courtesy of the Mexican government.

While a bus ticket for the 2,000 mile trip from San Salvador to the border cities of Mexicali or Tijuana costs approximately \$ 80, the average cost to get there for these people ranges between \$ 1,500 and \$ 2,000. Some of those fleeing their

countries do so on their own; others use the services of a smuggler. Even though there are college students, professors, and urban workers who make this trek, migration officials on both sides of the border maintain that the large majority are peasant farmers, and increasingly, they are accompanied by their wives and children.

The Central American migrants must wait in jail until enough are caught to fill a bus. The Tijuana prison, "El Ocho", provides the Central Americans with only one bowl of potato soup a day. Whatever additional comforts they might want all carry a price tag: a plate of eggs with beans and 3 tortillas, \$ 2.50 dollars; a mattress, \$ 5.00; a blanket, \$ 2.00; a bath, \$ 2.00; or a local phone call, which should cost 20 cents, \$ 1.00. When entire families are detained, the children and infants are sent to a juvenile center in a different part of the city. Fortunately, the Central Americans lodged in the Mexicali prison seem to enjoy better living conditions and do receive a more substantial diet: oatmeal and milk accompanied by two rolls in the morning, beans and a roll in the afternoon. The Mexicali prison does not separate the children from their parents.

At present, an average of two bus loads are shipped out of the Baja California area each week. The bus goes as far as the Guatemalan border. Once there, the Guatemalan government takes responsibility for their own, and buses the El Salvadoreans on. The El Salvadorean migrants have reportedly undergone brutal interrogations by their government upon arrival; there have also been allegations that some were killed. But even for those who don't suffer such consequences, there is little reason for celebration; most who fled sold everything they owned to do so. Thus, they return with few or no resources with which to survive until work is found.

I asked Dr. Sánchez Valenzuela, Delegate of Migration for the Ministry of Interior in Mexicali, why the Mexican government was so concerned about apprehending Central Americans who were obviously on their way to the United States and thereby in no way threatened to occupy Mexican jobs or burdened Mexican social service programs.

"We're helping the U.S. (government). They've got to deal with over 500,000 illegals a year. We're not able to stop Mexicans from going over the border, or from being in the border area. But we can stop El Salvadoreans without papers."

Finally, and perhaps the most contradictory of all, is the case of the El Salvadoreans who try to cross Mexico legally, by carrying Mexican tourist visas. Although not subjected to extortion in south or central Mexico, they are treated in the same manner as those without papers once they enter the northern border region. When questioned about this, Dr. Ernesto Sánchez Valenzuela informed me that, in fact, these people are illegals. He explained

that Mexican visas specify exactly where one can travel in the Republic. Further, that if a Central American has no relatives in the nearby Mexican towns and is traveling with limited funds that close to the border, it is obvious that he or she is planning to cross over. That is considered sufficient reason to be imprisoned and subsequently deported. My asserting that I had never had my passport limited to any particular part of the country, nor been asked how much cash I carried, or if I had relatives in the area didn't phase him in the least. Straight out I was told I was wrong, and immediately he moved on to other points he considered more interesting. I insisted. The pattern was repeated: flat out denial and subsequent change of topic.

Even if such a law does exist, which seems unlikely and would be completely unconstitutional, the particular criteria for enforcing it do not. While Dr. Sánchez Valenzuela maintains that a Central American with a valid visa must have at least \$ 150 or \$ 200 dollars to be in the border zone, Sr. Primitivo Lomelí, the highest level migration officer in Tijuana, claims that \$ 2,000 to \$ 3,000 is the quantity required.

José Luís Pérez Canchola, director of the Center for the Investigation and Study of Migration, a Tijuana based group actively involved in the defense of undocumented migrants, spoke at length of the extortion and poor prison conditions suffered by the migrants. He concluded that it was total hypocrisy for the Mexican government to be demanding a more humanitarian treatment for its undocumented workers, given the way it abuses the Central Americans. His organization has done its best to publicize the unenviable situation of these migrants. And, with the flow of Central Americans increasing, their work should be made easier. While the Mexican authorities detained some 3,000 El Salvadoreans last year, the U.S. detained 11,792. This was quite an increase given the U.S. authorities 1976 figure of 7,890. And for each one caught, the U.S. Border Patrol estimates that two to five slip through.

The likely patterns of escalation of the civil war in El Salvador, and intensification of the Guatemalan government's repression could trigger significant increases in their emigrant population. In fact, perhaps sufficiently significant to alter Mexican policy vis a vis these Central Americans. But then again, who knows. Mexico is a land of more contradictions than most. And perhaps, for that very reason, she has acquired an impressive ability to live with them. It is quite possible that there will be no resolutions of Mexico's contradiction concerning the Central Americans. Or, that the only possible resolution will come when the civil strife which forces those people north, ceases.