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Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico.

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With her fine Indian features, fuchsia-pink blouse and hand-woven skirt, she could have been the model for a Guatemalan tourist poster. But the tears which rolled down Maria's cheeks and the story she told made her the least likely of government propaganda agents.

"And just 15 days ago, no less, only 8 days ago the police came to our home. We ran and for that reason we are alive and here today. I left my house alone, abandoned..."

Maria is a Guatemalan Indian, a 25 year-old mother of five, and a refugee in Mexico. She used to live in Tacana, a small village located near the border. Less than a week ago, the police came knocking at her door. She was alone with her children: her husband was harvesting coffee in Mexico. When the head of the household is not found at home, the police often assume he is fighting with the guerrilla forces which are trying to overthrow the military-backed government of Romeo Lucas Garcia. In such cases, his wife and children suffer the consequences: intimidation, torture, and/or death. Within minutes after the police departed, Maria fled with her children, abandoning her house, her animals, her past.

For over two months, she had crept over the border each evening to sleep in Mexico, being terrified that the Guatemalan military might arrive and burn her house down in the middle of the night, as they had to many others in her village. But after the police visit, she decided that even staying in the village by day was too dangerous. As long as they find means of subsisting in Mexico, and as long as the fighting continues in their homeland, Maria and her husband are determined not to return to Guatemala. Their sentiments are shared by many of the other refugees.

The people in Mexico's southern border state of Chiapas are accustomed to having Guatemalans working and living amongst

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them. For more than a century, Guatemalans have been migrating to Chiapas to harvest coffee. The harvest season runs from September through January, and in recent years an average of 80,000 have come for the picking. While most Mexican coffee plantations pay them less than the minimum wage of U.S. \$ 8 dollars per day, the Guatemalans still earn about double what they would in their own country.

However, this not a normal year. The Ministry of Interior estimates that more than 180,000 Guatemalans are currently in Mexico. While those who have swelled the numbers are also looking for means of holding body and soul together, their main motivation for being here is not economic, but political. As Maria, they feel they are fleeing for their lives.

The Guatemalans who seek refuge in Mexico fall into one of three groups: individuals who the Guatemalan government has identified as undesirable elements, such as labor and peasant leaders; people of a profession which by its very nature is considered subversive--these include priests, teachers, doctors, university students and lawyers; and, peasants who have the misfortune of living in rural communities which are suspected of, or potentially could help the insurgents. This last group, the peasants, is over 80% of the refugee population.

As the refugees have neither passports nor visas, they do not enter at the 17 legal border crossings. Rather, they travel through the mountains, usually following the well-established routes of the coffee-workers. Unlike the U.S.-Mexican border, there is no immigration surveillance system on Mexico's southern border; the cross is easily made.

Within a matter of days, the coffee harvest will have ended, thereby drying-up the main source of employment easily available to the Guatemalans. How many will try to stay is still unknown. Well-informed sources estimate that it will be in the thousands, if not tens of thousands. Already hundreds have taken to the mountains to be further away from the public eye, and to try to eke out an existence on a plot of rented land. Still others have headed for the Lacandona jungle, hoping to be employed by the Mexican government in the building of a highway. The living and working conditions are so precarious there that few Mexican have been willing to work on the project. In the southern states, there are Guatemalan university students who are working as street sweepers, and teachers as bricklayers. A smuggling racket has rapidly developed: the going-price for safe passage to Mexico City is U.S. \$ 400 dollars.

Those who were lucky enough to obtain employment on the coffee farms at least now have some resources with which to buy a piece of land or tied them over until a new job is found. But there are thousands who have arrived with little more than the clothes on their back, hoping to be helped by

their Mexican neighbors.



Guatemalans working on the La Fortuna coffee plantation. While the regional minimum wage is 200 Mexican pesos a day, they were being paid 140 pesos.

To date, the Mexican record has been mixed. While many of the Mexicans on the border, particularly the peasants, have given food, clothing, shelter, and even arable land to the refugees, there are others who have taken advantage of these people's misfortune. Almost always, the Guatemalans are paid less than the minimum wage. Some employ them for several weeks, then refuse to pay them, and threaten to turn them in to the immigration service. While the immigration officers used to settle for a U.S. \$ 4 dollar bribe, they are now demanding between U.S. \$ 20 and 40 dollars. The Guatemalans know that this is not just the price of liberty; it can be the difference between life and death.

Teresa, a churchworker who has helped many of the refugees explained, "in the months of November and December, those returned by the Mexican immigration authorities often appeared the following day in the rivers (flowing north from Guatemala), dead and with torture marks in evidence."

A little more than a year ago, a group of 1,400 Guatemalan peasants fled to Mexico after several people in their villages had been tortured and killed. For a month, the Mexican government tolerated the group of refugees. However, it did not extend them any food, medical, or housing assistance. When in early February, the Mexican army escorted the Guatemalans back, it was severely attacked by the Mexican press.

Since then, the Mexican government has changed its policy vis-a-vis the Guatemalan refugees. In October 1981, the Minister of Interior, Olivares Santana, publically announced that no more massive deportations of Guatemalans would be authorized. Those who work with the refugees report that while the Mexican immigration authorities still threaten the refugees with deportation in order to collect payoffs, the official policy is one of "hands-off". And the 4,000 Guatemalans who have arrived, and set up rustic settlements along the border during the last 2 months, have been treated to food, medical and housing assistance, compliments of the Mexican government.

Why the government has so radically changed its behavior is open to speculation. Mr. Luis Ortiz Monasterios, director of the Mexican Committee of Assistance to Refugees claims that, "the general discussion in the Mexican government has never been whether or not to help the refugees but how we were going to help them." Others, as Professor Sergio Aguayo of the Colegio de Mexico, a prestigious think-tank in Mexico City, say that the change has more to do with a new current in high government circles which advocates the bringing of Mexico's behavior vis-a-vis the refugees in line with its international position of solidarity with the people of Guatemala. Mexican president Jose Lopez Portillo is one of the more distinguished members of this new school of thought. Still others stress the important role played by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCR). UNCR, which in 1981 won the Nobel Peace Prize for its work in refugee resettlement throughout the world, has been trying to persuade Mexico to take a more flexible stance with regards to the Guatemalan refugees for more than a year.

Some believe that the real test of Mexico's mettle is yet to come. With the recent massive mobilizations of Guatemalan military forces in the northern provinces, thousands of new refugees are expected to arrive. Unlike the major influxes of political refugees previously attended by Mexico - the Republicans at the end of the Spanish Civil War, the Chileans who fled with the fall of Salvador Allende, and the Argentinians who came after the military takeover in 1976 - this one has few of the highly-educated professionals which Mexico needs, and many nearly-illiterate peasants. Mexico already has serious un- and underemployment problems,

and its southern border state of Chiapas, where the majority of the Guatemalan refugees enter and settle, is one of the poorest and most conflictive in the country. Already the Ministry of Labor is studying which states can absorb the refugees and provide them with employment, with the least disturbance to their local economies. It is still to be seen whether or not Mexico will be willing and able to assist all the Guatemalans who turn to her for help.

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