



Directorate of
Intelligence

micro
S8B

~~Secret~~
NOFORN-NOCONTRACT

CTA/GI 84-10152

Central America: The Refugee Dilemma (U)

An Intelligence Assessment

~~Secret~~

GI 84-10152
September 1984

Approved for Release

JUN 2000

18

1 5 4 3



Directorate of
Intelligence

~~Secret~~
NOFORN-NOCONTRACT

Central America: The Refugee Dilemma (U)

An Intelligence Assessment



~~Secret~~
GI 84-10132
September 1984



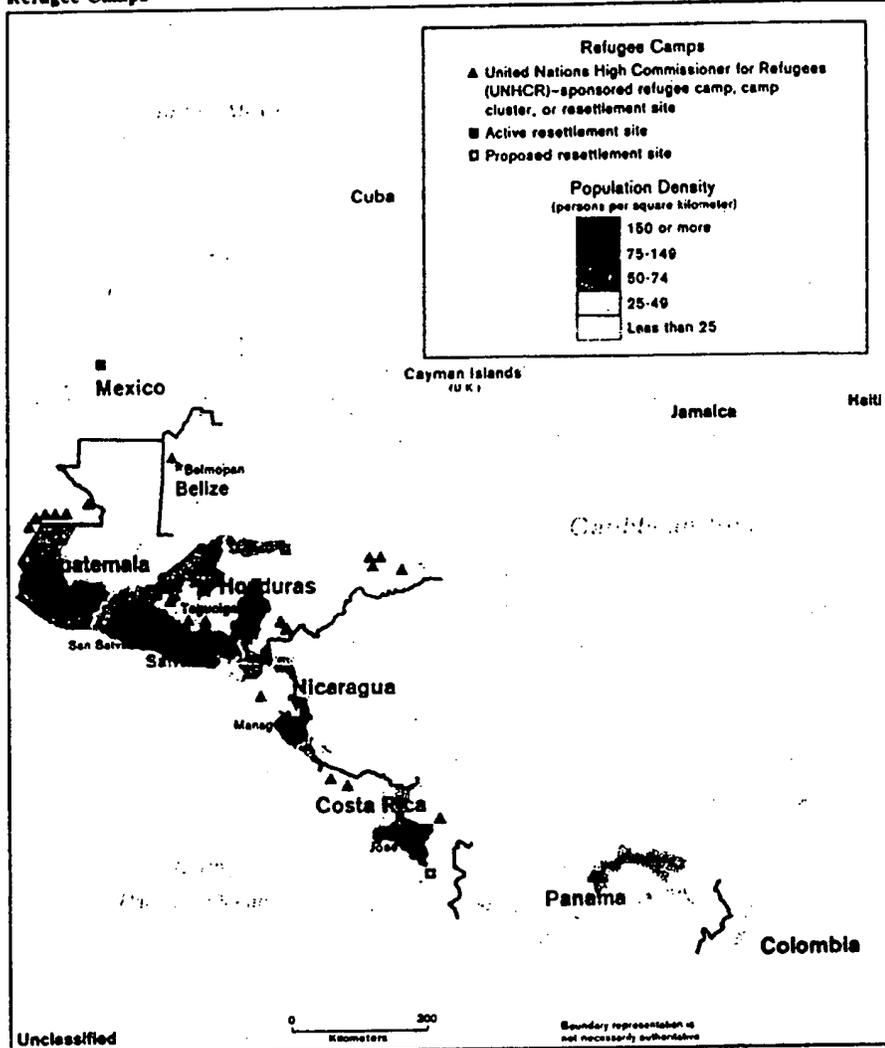
**Central America:
The Refugee Dilemma (U)**

Key Judgments
Information available
as of [REDACTED]
was used in this report.

Central American refugees represent a serious and growing dilemma. The diverse, sometimes conflicting demands of humanitarian concerns, security interests, national pride, and limited local domestic resources present complex issues that will be difficult to resolve:

- Although the outflow from Central America has slowed over the past year, the number of refugees is large and increasing.
- Even if many refugees repatriated, most would probably join the masses of displaced persons in their home countries, and the need for international assistance on a regional basis would remain high.
- Displaced persons, especially those in sensitive border zones, will continue to be susceptible to subversion and to complicate counterinsurgency efforts.
- Given their large numbers and the lack of absorptive capacity in host countries, refugees could become a source of instability.
- As the capacity of Central American countries and southern Mexico to absorb refugees is filled, more and more refugees may seek to enter the United States.
- We believe that Guatemala, El Salvador, and, increasingly, Nicaragua could produce major new outflows of refugees. Nicaragua's deteriorating economy, combined with the insurgency, has sparked a large-scale displacement of persons, and is creating new refugee outflows. [REDACTED]

Refugee Camps



Central America: The Refugee Dilemma (U)

Introduction

Political turmoil and violence coupled with economic deterioration have spurred an unprecedented movement of people within and from Central America over the past five years. We estimate that Central America and Mexico are now burdened with more than 1.1 million displaced persons (DPs). This estimate includes 800,000 who have been uprooted from their homes but remain in their native countries. Another 350,000 have fled to neighboring lands. In addition to these two groups, there are perhaps several hundred thousand economic migrants who have moved temporarily or permanently from one country to another within the region. (See appendixes A and B.) This paper does not examine in depth the large migration to the United States, about which we have little information.

Sources of Refugees

Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala are the three major sources of refugees in Central America. The political background against which the refugee situation has developed in each of these countries has varied. During the past five years, El Salvador and Guatemala, with tough anti-Marxist regimes and records of atrocities both by rightwing death squads and leftist guerrillas, have produced the largest outflows of refugees. However, an effective counterinsurgency program and improvements in Guatemala's human rights performance have sharply reduced the flow from that country. And, in El Salvador, suppression of the death squads and movement toward a more democratic political process have helped to reduce and even reverse the flow of refugees. On the other hand, a general deterioration of human rights conditions in Marxist Nicaragua during the past few years has resulted in that country's emergence as the region's most important generator of refugees. The numbers of internally displaced persons have remained stable in El Salvador and Guatemala but continue to increase in Nicaragua.

The Role of Nicaragua. Nicaragua is the current principal source of refugees in Central America and the only country of the region to officially force

Definitions and Sources

People who have been forced from their homes by war or oppression are generally termed displaced persons or DPs. If they remain in their native countries, they are referred to as internally displaced persons. DPs who have fled across an international border are known as refugees. The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defined a refugee as a person who "... owing to religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality (or habitual residence) and is unable, or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." In Central America, political refugees are often difficult to distinguish from people who have left their homes primarily for economic reasons. (U)

Most of the estimates in this study have been derived from various reports of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Unfortunately, not all of the UNHCR data are reliable, much being based only on estimates by host governments whose own sources and data bases are questionable.

Other important sources of information on numbers of refugees used in this study include reports contained in the State Department's annual Country Reports on the World Refugee Situation. However, these draw mainly on the same material as the UNHCR and suffer the same weaknesses. Occasionally, Central American refugee or immigration officials will estimate the numbers in their own countries, but the bases for their estimates or even their definition of "refugee" are seldom provided. Thus, all figures in this report must be used with caution.

*The United Nations
High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*

The UNHCR has programs in Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. It oversees, rather than manages, these programs, usually providing one representative and several observers in a host country. It also provides the funding for refugee needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Aid is indirect, being channeled through public or private organizations such as the Red Cross or World Relief. These, in turn, coordinate other relief efforts such as Caritas or Catholic Relief Service. The UNHCR's direct involvement in refugee programs is minimal. (U)

Some of the UNHCR-sponsored refugee camps in Honduras and Costa Rica have been used by leftist insurgents. Although there is no evidence of direct links between UNHCR officials and the guerrillas, the guerrillas reportedly have received aid from certain personnel of private relief organizations working in the camps.



In 1983, the UNHCR expended more than \$23 million in assistance to Central American refugees, a figure that is expected to exceed \$24 million this year. Specific figures for UNHCR programs are as follows:

	Million US \$	
	1983	1984
<i>Honduras</i>	13.3	10.3
<i>Costa Rica</i>	4.1	5.5
<i>Mexico</i>	4.0	6.0
<i>Nicaragua</i>	1.9	2.4

(U)

In addition, refugee maintenance depends on contributions by numerous private voluntary charitable organizations and government assistance in the form of services such as health care and schooling. We do not have reliable data on the costs of these types of refugee assistance. (U)

relocation of selected nationals. Harsh treatment of opponents of the Sandinista regime—refugees cite murder and torture—the insurgency, plus the large-scale impressment of youth into military units to fight insurgent forces have led to a sizable flow of people from Nicaragua over the past two years. The figures in this paper are estimates.

Somoza's fall marked the beginning of an outflow of a diverse group including supporters of the former regime, disillusioned ex-Sandinistas, and persons who felt persecuted on racial and religious grounds. On the basis of UNHCR [redacted] we estimate that more than 100,000 Nicaraguans have

fled to other Central American countries since the Sandinistas came to power in 1979. Some 19,000 Miskito and Sumo Indians have fled eastern Nicaragua into Honduras. The largest exodus of Indians occurred from mid-1981 to early 1982, when the Government of Nicaragua brutally and systematically cracked down on Miskito resistance to clear a swath of territory along the northern border for security. In December 1983, more than 1,000 fled north with a local Catholic bishop. Since then, individuals, families, and groups of a hundred or more have continued to escape into Honduras.





Macoron, in Honduras, once housed up to 10,000 Miskito Indians from Nicaragua. Most have been dispersed to other nearby sites, and the facility is now used largely as a reception center for those who continue to flee Nicaragua. (U)

Although the plight of the Indians has drawn most international attention, most Nicaraguan refugees are *ladinos*, the Spanish-speaking mestizos who make up the dominant element of the country's population. About 83,000 have fled to both Honduras and Costa Rica. Many are campesinos, simple peasants trying to escape violence between government forces and anti-Sandinista insurgents. Some arrive in Honduras undernourished after a monthlong hike through the mountains. They complain of Sandinista mistreatment, severe religious persecution, and attempted Marxist indoctrination of their children. We think the outflow is continuing.

As with other Central American countries, internally displaced persons have proved at least as troublesome as refugees in Nicaragua. We estimate from press reports that internally displaced persons now total about 100,000. The Sandinistas resettled about 10,000 Miskito Indians from the Rio Coco area to detention centers inland from Puerto Cabezas during 1982, and they forced the relocation of residents in northwestern and southern border areas in 1983. In September of last year the Sandinistas claimed that 65,000 Nicaraguans had been displaced by counter-revolutionary activities.

Attacks by insurgents on Nicaraguan ports have raised concern for the security of inhabitants. Following an attack on Corinto, in October 1983 the government announced its intention to relocate the entire population of approximately 20,000. Press reporting indicates that some 1,500 women and children were evacuated from Potosi early this year. Continued deterioration of Nicaragua's economy and internal security probably will increase the number of DPs, many of whom are likely to flee to Honduras or Costa Rica. Additional refugees could also be generated if the Sandinista government fails to fulfill its promise of open and honest elections in November.

El Salvador. We estimate that some 220,000 Salvadoran refugees are now residing in other Central American countries or Mexico. UNHCR and other data indicate that approximately half are in Mexico, a third in Guatemala, and most of the balance, some 50,000, about evenly divided between Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras. The flow to Honduras was reversed in 1982 after Tegucigalpa relocated Salvadorans from several camps along the border to a new site at Mesa Grande. Over the past year, there has been some additional voluntary repatriation from both Honduras and Nicaragua, although the total numbers remain small. The only significant refugee movement from El Salvador this year has been prompted by the forced recruitment policy implemented by the insurgents.

Some 1,500 Salvadorans have fled to Honduras from insurgent-controlled areas near the northern border—and this was followed by voluntary repatriation to areas of El Salvador under the control of government forces.

An estimated 450,000 Salvadorans have been internally displaced by the insurgency. They not only tax limited domestic resources and outside assistance, but also form a pool of potential supporters and recruits for insurgent forces as well as the government. Perhaps 10 percent of these internally displaced people live in an array of DP camps maintained by the government or private relief agencies. The quality of these camps

~~Secret~~

varies considerably. Most of the displaced live with relatives or in shantytowns throughout the country. Most are poor *campesinos* from rural areas of northern and eastern El Salvador. For most, life in the shantytowns, where the government is providing services such as water and facilities such as schools, may be an improvement over their situations before displacement. Getting these people to return to their original residences may be difficult even after peace is restored.

Guatemala. We estimate that some 120,000 political and economic refugees from Guatemala have moved to other Central American countries and Mexico since 1979. About 75,000 of these are former seasonal migrants who entered Mexico to harvest coffee and cotton and did not return to Guatemala. They are not recognized as refugees by the UNHCR. An additional 43,000 Guatemalans, some 42,000 of whom are in Mexico, are recognized.

The insurgency in Guatemala expanded in 1980 after almost a decade of near dormancy. In 1981 the government began a major counterinsurgency effort, and two years of widespread combat led to an exodus of natives from areas where the fighting was most intense. Over the past two years, the government, through military and civic actions, has regained control of much of the contested area.

Only a few who had fled such areas, however, are starting to return. Many refugees are probably guerrilla sympathizers.

Guatemalan insurgents use some of the camps for support—and are unlikely to return in the near term. Others continue to fear the violence induced by insurgency or reprisals by the government if they try to return.

To improve its international image, the Government of Guatemala has encouraged Mexico to establish a formal repatriation program.

To entice the refugees to return voluntarily, the Government of Guatemala is constructing model villages close to the border.

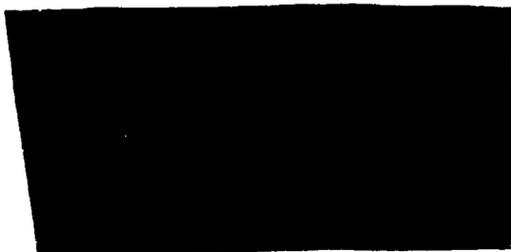
An equally pressing problem for Guatemala is resettling an estimated 250,000 internally displaced persons. A major civic action program that includes

rebuilding villages was initiated by the military in 1982 and has significantly set back Guatemalan insurgents over the past two years. However, the insurgency has not been eliminated and some parts of the country remain only marginally controlled by government forces. Moreover, economic constraints preclude adequate care for all DPs.

Host Countries

With the exception of El Salvador, every country from the Rio Grande to the Panama Canal has refugees. Mexico is the most important in this regard, but Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala also support large numbers of refugees. Each of these countries has serious security, economic, and social problems that make refugees an increasingly sensitive political issue.

~~Secret~~



Honduras. Security concerns and political considerations have made refugees a major issue in Honduras.

[redacted] a special commission has been formed to review policy options. Honduras shelters about 60,000 refugees, of whom about 37,000 are participants in UNHCR programs. Nearly 18,000 Salvadorans reside in three camps sponsored by the UNHCR—Mesa Grande (10,000), Colomoncagua (6,600), and San Antonio (1,300). Nicaraguan refugees, some 42,000, are more scattered and ethnically diverse than Salvadorans. While thousands are now self-sufficient in Honduran society, many still need public and private assistance. Approximately 16,000 Miskito and Sumo Indians from Nicaragua have been resettled in a scattering of small towns in northeastern Honduras under the auspices of the UNHCR. An additional 3,000 who do not receive UNHCR assistance remain in some two dozen small settlements near the Nicaragua border. Over the past year, there has been an increasing influx of Nicaraguan *ladinos*. About 3,000 are nearly evenly divided between UNHCR-sponsored refugee sites in Jacaleapa and Teupasenti. A small number of Guatemalans have also sought refuge in Honduras; they are maintained in a UNHCR-sponsored camp at El Tesoro [redacted].

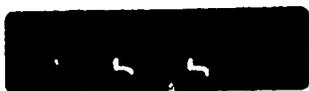
Costa Rica. Costa Rica, Central America's only well-established democracy, has traditionally maintained an open-door policy. Until recently, its borders were only marginally controlled and its immigration laws only loosely enforced. Recent regional political tensions and the refugees they have created, are threatening the country's security and liberal traditions. We estimate that Costa Rica now has approximately 70,000 refugees. Some 20,000 of these—about evenly divided between Salvadorans and Nicaraguans—have officially registered as refugees; the 50,000 balance consists almost exclusively of Nicaraguans who have entered Costa Rica illegally or entered legally and simply overstayed their visa. Approximately 2,800



Costa Rica has placed relatively few refugees in camps. The two facilities for Nicaraguans—Tilaran (above) and Limon (below)—are former construction camps. [redacted]

refugees are maintained in three camps funded by the UNHCR: Tilaran, with 2,200 Nicaraguans; Limon, with 300 Nicaraguans; and Los Angeles, with 300 Salvadorans. Economic constraints and the rising number of refugees have made prompt integration increasingly difficult. [redacted]

Guatemala. Many thousands of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans have fled to Guatemala. The number of refugees in the country is unknown, but estimates range from 10,000 to 100,000. The UNHCR has estimated the Salvadoran refugee population alone at 70,000. [redacted] many of the Salvadorans are former seasonal migrants who remained in Guatemala after the harvest season



~~Secret~~

rather than return to El Salvador. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Guatemala has no assistance program for Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees. [REDACTED]

Nicaragua. Nicaragua hosts some 17,500 refugees from other Central American countries, mostly Salvadorans. In 1980 the first refugees came directly on ferries across the Golfo de Fonseca, but starting in 1981 most refugees have traveled overland through Honduras. The Salvadoran refugee situation has remained relatively stable in Nicaragua during the past year, with a small outflow matching an equally minor inflow. Because Nicaragua integrates refugees quickly into the general population, only one small refugee camp and processing center remain. Near Leon, it housed some 450 Salvadorans in 1983. About 3,000 Salvadoran refugees are receiving assistance from the UNHCR. The only other significant group of refugees in Nicaragua are approximately 500 Guatemalans, of whom about 100 are receiving aid from the UNHCR. (U)

Belize. A sparsely populated country with undeveloped land, Belize is culturally distinct from the major refugee-generating nations of Central America. Its 160,000 inhabitants are almost evenly divided between creoles (blacks) and noncreoles (mestizos, Indians, and others). Anything that threatens this balance is viewed locally with great concern. Consequently, the government's refugee policy has become a sensitive political issue. We estimate that there are 6,000 Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees in Belize. Government policy calls for their integration into society, preferably through land-development projects involving joint participation with Belizean families. One such project involving some 250 Salvadorans is now under way near Belmopan. To offset concern among the creole population over the incorporation of more mestizos, the government agreed to establish with the UNHCR a land-settlement program for Haitians in southern Belize. In April the government announced a grace period in which illegal aliens should register and formalize their status or face deportation. [REDACTED]

Panama. Panama is reluctant to receive refugees, although a small resettlement facility for Salvadorans has been established. Most Central American refugees in Panama probably have adequate skills to

sustain themselves without causing significant problems. Public references to an immigration bomb by high-level Panamanian officials late last year was apparently intended to raise awareness of a potential influx. [REDACTED]

Refugee Problems

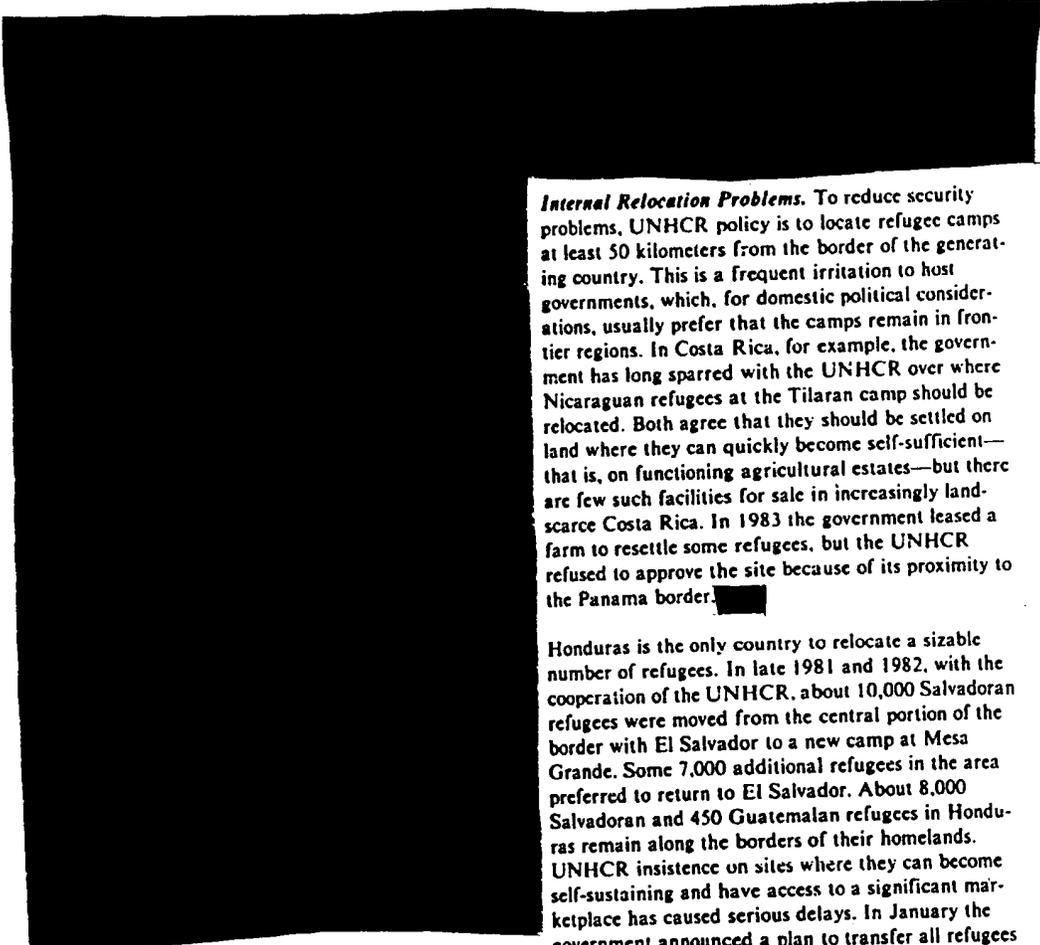
Besides the heavy economic burdens refugees impose on their hosts and relief agencies, refugees present many other problems for both generating and receiving countries. [REDACTED]

Security Problems. Refugees create international security concerns that contribute to regional tensions. The usual preference of refugees to remain close to their homelands makes their camps potential support bases for insurgents and, in some cases, targets for cross-border raids by government forces. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Residents of Honduran villages in the border zone have publicly complained of abuse by Salvadoran insurgents using the Mesa Grande refugee camp for shelter, and a guerrilla recently apprehended at that camp claimed that the insurgents use it to cache arms. [REDACTED] a guerrilla supply corridor exists between Mesa Grande and the border with El Salvador. Honduran officials have

~~Secret~~

~~Secret~~



Internal Relocation Problems. To reduce security problems, UNHCR policy is to locate refugee camps at least 50 kilometers from the border of the generating country. This is a frequent irritation to host governments, which, for domestic political considerations, usually prefer that the camps remain in frontier regions. In Costa Rica, for example, the government has long sparred with the UNHCR over where Nicaraguan refugees at the Tilaran camp should be relocated. Both agree that they should be settled on land where they can quickly become self-sufficient—that is, on functioning agricultural estates—but there are few such facilities for sale in increasingly land-scarce Costa Rica. In 1983 the government leased a farm to resettle some refugees, but the UNHCR refused to approve the site because of its proximity to the Panama border. [REDACTED]

Honduras is the only country to relocate a sizable number of refugees. In late 1981 and 1982, with the cooperation of the UNHCR, about 10,000 Salvadoran refugees were moved from the central portion of the border with El Salvador to a new camp at Mesa Grande. Some 7,000 additional refugees in the area preferred to return to El Salvador. About 8,000 Salvadoran and 450 Guatemalan refugees in Honduras remain along the borders of their homelands. UNHCR insistence on sites where they can become self-sustaining and have access to a significant marketplace has caused serious delays. In January the government announced a plan to transfer all refugees from Colomoncagua and El Tesoro to the Aguan Valley of northern Honduras. In mid-July, the plan was suspended because of concern that Salvadoran refugees would be receiving better treatment than Honduran peasants and that the new location might attract more refugees. [REDACTED]

recently criticized vehemently workers at refugee camps for cooperating with the insurgents and have vowed to increase security. They have also vowed to screen all foreign workers assigned to refugee camps.



~~Secret~~



~~Secret~~

Guatemala views the return of refugees from Mexico as an important part of improving its international image.

Both the Guatemalan Government and the UNHCR have pressed the Mexicans to move the camps. In April, Mexico announced its intention to relocate the refugees near Campeche more than 196 miles from the border. The schedule has not been made clear; however, several thousand refugees were relocated in June and early July. Mexico has publicly stated that it will not force either repatriation or relocation.

Some Guatemalan refugees prefer to remain near their homeland and fear movement to a possibly hostile new environment.

Mexico probably hopes that many refugees will return home voluntarily.

A few refugees have voluntarily returned to Guatemala from Mexico since the relocation began.

Competition for Land and Jobs. Local resentment against any preferential treatment of refugees is a sensitive issue for host countries. In Honduras, the government's announced intention to transfer Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees to Yoro department triggered petitions and protests by natives. Until recently, on the other hand, little popular concern was expressed over the influx of Nicaraguan Miskito Indians in eastern Honduras. This year, some articles have appeared in the native press on the deforestation Miskito resettlement is causing and on how Honduran Miskitos of the area are being overwhelmed.

arrivals are now held at the Mocoron reception center rather than quickly resettled.

Health Hazards. The outbreak of disease and the threat of epidemics are recurring concerns. The Government of Costa Rica declared a health emergency along its northern border area in the fall of 1982 because of malaria among Nicaraguan refugees. Also

~~Secret~~

~~Secret~~

at that time, the Mexican Government's public health coordinator in Chiapas blamed Guatemalan refugees for a worsening local health situation and the fact that almost 20 percent of the state's population had tuberculosis. [REDACTED]

Outlook

Central America could generate many more refugees together with all of the interrelated problems they create. Depending on political and military developments in the region, any of the current principal source countries could produce sizable outflows. The most immediate threat of an exodus lies in Nicaragua, where the insurgency has focused on sparsely settled portions of the country rather than the more densely populated western core. In El Salvador and Guatemala, the potential remains for a return to widespread insurgency and increased political repression. Should this occur, or should one or both of the countries fall to insurgent forces, a massive outflow of refugees could be expected. [REDACTED]

For the near future, most Central American refugees are likely to remain in their host countries and to present a multitude of regional problems. The conflicting demands of border security, refugee desires to be near their homeland, and domestic political stability in the host countries will continue to create tensions. The governments sheltering large refugee populations lack the financial and technical resources to support these groups in a manner that would lead to economic self-sufficiency. Thus, a greater need for international assistance and innovative diplomatic initiatives can be anticipated. [REDACTED]

Central American refugees will continue to be of direct concern to the United States for more than purely humanitarian reasons. The refugees contribute to political instability in the region and heightened tensions between neighboring countries. Continuing political upheaval may turn today's refugee within Central America into tomorrow's illegal immigrant in the United States. [REDACTED]

~~Secret~~

BLANK PAGE

~~Secret~~

Appendix A

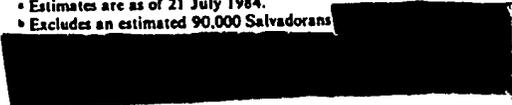
Estimates of Central American Refugees in Mexico and Central America *

From	In							Total
	Mexico	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	Panama	Belize	
El Salvador	10,000 * (0)	70,000 (0)	17,900 (All)	17,000 (400)	10,000 (300)	1,300 (300)	5,000 (250)	131,200 (79,150)
Guatemala	118,000 (42,000)		500 (All)	500 (0)			1,000 (0)	120,000 (42,500)
Nicaragua			42,000 (19,000)		60,000 (2,500)			102,000 (21,500)
Total	128,000 * (42,000)	70,000 (0)	60,400 (37,000)	17,500 (400)	70,000 (2,800)	1,300 (300)	6,000 (250)	353,200 (83,150)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the number of refugees in UNHCR refugee camps or resettlement projects.

* Estimates are as of 21 July 1984.

† Excludes an estimated 90,000 Salvadorans



~~Secret~~



BLANK PAGE

Appendix B

The general economic picture in Central America has been bleak for the past five years. Large foreign debts, coupled with declining production and deteriorating terms of trade, have caused severe balance-of-payments problems. Economic activity within the region has declined nearly 20 percent, and unemployment has risen to unusually high levels. See the table.

Central American Economies, 1983

	Population (millions)	Population Growth (percent)	Change in GDP (percent)	Per Capita Change in GDP (percent)	Unemploy- ment (percent)	Balance of Payments (million US \$)	Public Foreign Debt (billion US \$)
Guatemala	7.9	2.9	-2.0	-4.9	20	-283	1.4
El Salvador	5.1	2.6	-1.0	-3.6	30	-130	1.4
Honduras	4.1	3.5	-0.7	-4.2	25	-168	1.9
Nicaragua	3.0	3.6	-2.0	-5.6	20	-645	3.8
Costa Rica	2.4	2.5	0.8	-1.7	10	-342	3.5

This appendix is Unclassified.