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THE WARS IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

[Central America is the] most dramatic and divisive foreign policy issue since the Vietnam war. It has dominated the front pages of newspapers for many months; co-opted almost all of the prime moments of national television news; fueled acrimonious exchanges in Congress; and ignited a national protest movement, centered in the universities and the churches but reaching into unions, professional associations, and the cultural community.

MARK FALCOFF, *Commentary*

The revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were each the product of decades of struggles over land, resources, and power. However, what began as localized conflicts became international crises that affected dozens of nations, including neighboring Costa Rica, Honduras, and Mexico; hemispheric allies such as the United States and Canada; and even Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the European Community. Thousands of Central Americans died, and millions were uprooted as a consequence of the domestic and foreign policy decisions of these various actors. But just as local political conflicts became internationalized, so, too, did their eventual resolution. The negotiated peace settlements and the reintegration of the displaced involved some of these very same actors, who through diplomacy, investment, and aid tried to establish peace, social and political stability, and economic opportunity in the region.

THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

In 1979, the Sandinista rebels overthrew the US-supported government of Anastacio Somoza Debayle. The Somoza family—Anastacio Sr. and his sons, Luis and Anastacio (Tachito)—had controlled Nicaraguan politics since 1934, thanks in some part to the United States, which helped them to consolidate their political control. From the Truman to the Ford admin-

istrations, the Somozas were regarded by the United States government as reliable allies in the Cold War¹ and were rewarded with millions of dollars in economic and military aid, much of which found its way to private coffers. US support also guaranteed the Somoza dictatorship millions of dollars in loans from the international banking community, as well as substantial investments in the nation's industries. US corporations, in particular, benefited from their government's relationship with the dictatorship. Not only did Nicaragua get most of its imports from the United States, but US corporations also controlled thousands of acres of Nicaragua's most fertile land and owned or managed the leading mines, the railroads, and the lumber and banking industries.

The extensive US presence in Nicaragua's national life never guaranteed the people peace or socioeconomic mobility. The majority of the three million Nicaraguans lived in extreme poverty, and high infant mortality, illiteracy, and unemployment were common features of day-to-day life.² Two percent of the farms controlled nearly half of the tillable land, and over two hundred thousand peasants were landless. In turn, the Somoza family's wealth was estimated at more than a billion dollars. The Somoza family was said to control one-third of the country's acreage; the nation's construction, meatpacking, and fishing industries; the national airline and major television station; and banks, radio stations, and various other businesses. American investors made handsome profits from their ventures in Nicaragua: US investments yielded hundreds of millions of dollars in yearly income that was exported back to the United States.³

The extreme disparities in wealth and the corruption in the highest echelons of the government raised the consciousness of the citizenry, especially labor organizers, university students, journalists, and public intellectuals. Prior to 1972, the US-trained Nicaragua National Guard helped to keep the opposition weak and disorganized by assassinating over thirty thousand of the dictator's opponents and driving thousands more into exile.⁴ (A former US Speaker of the House once called the Guard "murderers, marauders, and rapists.")⁵ However, after an earthquake devastated the capital city of Managua in December 1972, the forces of opposition expanded. Strikes and demonstrations increased in the months after the earthquake as Nicaraguans protested the blatant theft of international aid and the shameless corruption of government officials who financially profited from the devastation.⁶ Inspiring the protests was the politically

moderate editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who used his small opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, to meticulously document the corruption and abuse of authority.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) increased its support base at this time. Founded in Havana in 1961, the FSLN favored a revolutionary political and socioeconomic agenda.⁷ Over the next eight years, the Sandinistas, as members the FSLN were popularly called, waged war against the dictatorship, kidnapping and ransoming prominent political officials and business leaders and attacking military garrisons, government offices, and other symbols of Somoza's authority. Determined to eliminate the FSLN, the Nicaragua National Guard increased its surveillance of the population as well as its campaign of imprisonment, torture, and assassination. The Guard especially targeted the northern provinces, where the Sandinistas were believed to have their greatest support. Even the political moderates came under attack: Chamorro was jailed and finally assassinated in 1978. This action, more than any other, turned the political tide. A two-week general strike calling for Somoza's unconditional resignation evolved into a full-scale, nationwide insurrection. By May 1979 the Sandinistas controlled the nation's major towns and cities, including parts of Managua.⁸

On July 17, 1979, Somoza fled to Miami with some of the senior commanders of the National Guard.⁹ Rank-and-file members of the Guard were left to protect what remained of the government, but without leadership the Guard easily crumbled. Many of the soldiers fled to neighboring countries, especially Honduras, to avoid the retribution that would inevitably follow. On July 19, a coalition of moderates and leftists took control of Nicaragua's government. Calling itself the Government of National Reconstruction, the coalition debated ways to rebuild the war-torn country, provide desperately needed social services, and encourage the consumer and investor confidence needed for economic growth.

The ideological cleavages among the coalition members proved difficult to overcome. While all were committed to agrarian reform and basic social welfare programs such as universal health care, literacy, and free public education, they disagreed on the roles that the private sector and the multi-party political system would play in the new Nicaragua—if any. The more radical members of the FSLN saw no role for such institutions in their socialist state. As this segment assumed control of the national directorate

and the armed forces, moderates in the coalition, such as Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (the widow of the slain newspaper editor) and Alfonso Robelo (the founder of the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement), felt increasingly silenced and shut out of the decision making. Particularly disturbing to the moderates was a series of measures taken to consolidate the government's authority and protect against counterrevolution: the suspension of elections for six years; restrictions on the press, free speech, free association, and other civil liberties; the strengthening of the internal security apparatus; increased defense spending; the arrival of Cuban and East European advisers and Soviet arms shipments; and the export of arms to Salvadoran rebels.¹⁰ By 1982 several moderates had resigned from the coalition or gone into exile, including former Sandinista Edén Pastora Gomez, the famed "Comandante Zero" who had led a spectacular and much publicized attack on the National Palace.¹¹ Many middle- and upper-class Nicaraguans also chose to exile themselves to the United States, Costa Rica, and other countries during this transitional period rather than live in what they perceived as an evolving communist state.

Most nations in the hemisphere, with the notable exception of Central American neighbors Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, cautiously welcomed the change in Nicaragua's government. Despite its thirty-plus years of assistance to the Somoza government, in the final year of the revolution Mexico offered the Sandinistas tactical support and then recognized the new government almost immediately. In the 1980s, Mexico became one of Nicaragua's principal trade partners, providing Nicaragua with most of its oil even though that strained Mexican relations with the United States and potentially sabotaged Mexico's own economic relationship with its northern neighbor. With a long history of challenging the United States and supporting leftist movements in Latin America,¹² Mexico became the region's most vocal critic of US policy in Nicaragua, but it also viewed itself as a "middle power" that could negotiate an easing of tensions in the region.¹³

Since the 1960s, Mexico's evolving status as a major oil producer had increased its diplomatic clout, and the Central American crisis provided an opportunity for asserting a new status in the hemisphere. As early as 1981, José López Portillo (president, 1976–1982) tried to arrange talks between the Sandinistas and the Reagan administration to discuss a nonaggression pact but failed to convince Washington.¹⁴ López Portillo's suc-

cessor, Miguel de la Madrid (president, 1982–1988), later launched the regional peace initiative known as Contadora. Mexico’s philosophical position was best summarized by de la Madrid: “Every country in the continent must do its utmost to restore peace and avoid war by respecting and upholding the sovereign right of its people to decide their own destiny and by rejecting interventionist solutions of any kind.”¹⁵

Canada’s response, on the other hand, was substantively different. Ottawa officially welcomed the end of the Somoza era and even prohibited Somoza’s entry into the country when he asked to relocate there, but postponed recognition of the Sandinista government.¹⁶ Throughout the 1980s Canadian policymakers opposed US policy in Nicaragua and criticized the militarization of the region, but avoided any official condemnation of the United States that might strain US-Canadian relations, especially in trade and commerce.¹⁷ Instead, they tried to use their diplomatic influence behind closed doors, with limited success.

As the most powerful nation in the hemisphere, the United States shaped the tone and content of the political debate over Nicaragua throughout the next decade. With billions of dollars in regional investments and a moral commitment to the expansion of democratic institutions, the United States had a geopolitical interest in containing revolution in the Americas. However, US policy shifted dramatically in a relatively short period of time. Immediately following his inauguration in January 1977, President Jimmy Carter declared US aid to individual Latin American countries contingent upon their human rights policies, and thus withdrew economic and military aid from the Somoza dictatorship.¹⁸ Although his administration would have preferred—and tried to negotiate—a more centrist government in Nicaragua, Carter officially recognized the Sandinista government and hoped that it would offer its country peace, security, and basic civil liberties. The United States granted Nicaragua close to a hundred million dollars in emergency aid during 1979–1980; helped to restructure Nicaragua’s massive international debt (estimated at 582 million dollars); and facilitated over two hundred million dollars in new loans and grants, all with the goal of maintaining positive relations and avoiding the mistakes the United States had made with Cuba twenty years earlier.¹⁹

The symbolic significance of such actions was considerable given the role the United States had played in supporting the Somozas and their National Guard during the previous forty-five years. However, in light of

this history, the Sandinistas were understandably suspicious of any US involvement—a suspicion that was not completely unwarranted. Key figures in the Carter administration, among them National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, were equally suspicious of the Sandinistas and the role Nicaragua might play in exporting revolution in Central America. They worked to steer US policy away from this more accommodationist position, and it was this philosophical perspective that ultimately dominated in the Carter administration. By the end of 1980, the administration had been forced to shift its attention to the Middle East and the hostage crisis in Iran, but the CIA worked behind the scenes in Nicaragua, funding a variety of anti-Sandinista organizations with the goal of eroding the Sandinistas' popular support.²⁰ Shortly before leaving office, Carter canceled the remaining aid promised the Sandinistas in protest over the shipment of arms to Salvadoran rebels.

US-Nicaraguan relations collapsed after Ronald Reagan moved into the White House in January 1981. The Reagan administration, particularly hard-liners such as Alexander Haig, Elliott Abrams, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and William Casey, acknowledged that the Sandinista revolution and the conflicts in Central America began as nationalist struggles for socioeconomic and political justice.²¹ However, the Cold War framed the gathering of intelligence, the interpretation of the data, and ultimately the policymaking in this administration. They were determined not to let post-Vietnam guilt interfere with the containment of what they saw as a growing Cuban–Soviet–East European presence in the region. Congress accepted the administration's evidence that Nicaragua had become a base for exporting communism in the region and appropriated the funds that the administration needed to carry out its policy of containment. They supported the economic embargo on Nicaragua and redirected aid to the “Contras”: *contra-revolucionarios* on the Honduras–Nicaragua border, whom the Reagan administration directed to stop the flow of arms from the Sandinista government to the leftist guerrillas of the FMLN (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation) in El Salvador.²²

By the end of Reagan's first term it was clear that the administration was interested in more than just containing the flow of arms in Central America: it was using the Contras to destabilize—and overthrow—the Nicaraguan government.²³ Honduras and Costa Rica were critical to this campaign, and by the mid-1980s the United States had directed millions

of dollars to both these countries for the establishment of camps and safe houses from which the Contra operatives could conduct their operations.²⁴ As in the CIA-sponsored raids in Cuba in the 1960s,²⁵ the Contras' military maneuvers were designed to force the Sandinistas to commit the Nicaraguan armed forces to domestic defense and to create a climate of political instability that would erode popular support and encourage revolt. The Contras were instructed to bomb industrial and other economic targets, but excerpts of a CIA training manual later published in the press revealed that they were also trained in kidnapping and murder.²⁶ By 1983, the CIA itself was directly engaged in sabotage—bombing Nicaraguan oil reserves and mining harbors, for example—in clear violation of international law and the United States' own Boland Amendment, which prohibited assisting or using the Contras to overthrow the Nicaraguan government or to provoke conflict between Nicaragua and Honduras.²⁷ Congress responded with the second Boland Amendment in 1984, which severed lethal aid to the Contras once and for all. Nicaragua filed a complaint against the United States in the World Court for the mining of its harbors, and two years later the court officially condemned the United States. However, neither domestic pressure nor international sanction deterred the Reagan administration from its foreign policy objectives: the administration turned to the illegal sale of arms to Iran in order to redirect the profits to its Contra protégés.²⁸

The Reagan administration's policy in Nicaragua drew criticism at home and abroad. Critics argued that US policy only served to increase poverty and homelessness in Nicaragua, destabilize neighboring countries and producing a large-scale regional migration. NGOs such as Amnesty International, Americas Watch, Church World Service, and the International Red Cross documented the human toll produced by the militarization of Central America. While public opinion polls showed that most Americans could not locate Nicaragua on a map,²⁹ a vocal and influential minority protested US policy and ultimately forced Congress to monitor the administration's support of the Contras. Not since the Watergate scandal had Americans taken so passionate an interest in the activities of their government, and the administration received thousands of letters from Americans who warned that Central America would become another Vietnam.³⁰ Such popular pressure undoubtedly influenced the congressional and judicial scrutiny that followed the discovery of the illegal sale of arms to Iran.

In the years following the Iran–Contra hearings, the Bush administration continued to undermine the Sandinistas, albeit through more traditional pressure—the economic embargo, diplomatic isolation, and financial support of opposition groups. In 1989, when the Sandinista government finally agreed to elections under the terms of the Esquipulas II peace plan, most knew that their days in power were numbered. The United States funneled millions of dollars to the opposition parties to ensure the Sandinistas’ defeat. In February 1990, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, representing the National Opposition Union (Unión Nacional Opositora, UNO) coalition of fourteen political parties, was elected president of Nicaragua by over half of the war-weary electorate (the elections had an 86 percent voter turnout). The United States finally lifted its economic embargo and provided millions of dollars to help rebuild the society that, only months before, it had tried to destroy.

The opposition’s victory came at a high price for the Nicaraguan people: thirty thousand dead; fifty thousand wounded; and three hundred thousand left homeless. And over half a million Nicaraguans remained outside their country, the majority of them in the United States, waiting to see what type of society would evolve in their homeland.

DEATH SQUADS AND GUERRILLAS: THE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL CONTROL IN EL SALVADOR

As in Nicaragua, the civil war in El Salvador was rooted in the unequal distribution of power. An oligarchy of landed elites known as the Fourteen Families controlled 60 percent of the farmland, the entire banking system, and most of the nation’s industry.³¹ Eight percent of the nation’s five million people controlled half of the nation’s income, while over one-quarter of the rural population was poor and had been pushed off their land to make room for agricultural estates dedicated to the production of coffee, the country’s principal export.³² Since 1932, the country was ruled by a series of generals with close ties to the oligarchy, whose interests they protected, and they were equally zealous in weeding out any challenges to their authority. A peasant uprising in 1932, for example, led to *la matanza*: the murder of over thirty thousand Salvadorans by the army and vigilante groups.³³

Nineteen seventy-two proved to be a landmark year in Salvadoran pol-

itics, as it was for Nicaragua. After the fraudulent elections of 1972, more and more Salvadorans engaged in strikes, demonstrations, and other acts of civil disobedience against the government of Fidel Sánchez Hernández. The Catholic Church played an indirect role in catalyzing such behavior. As one of the principal institutions in El Salvador (and Latin America), the Catholic Church had historically helped to maintain the unequal power relationships by encouraging the poor and the oppressed to passively accept their fate on earth in hopes of greater glories in heaven. However, by the 1960s, a more radical wing of the Catholic Church preached what it called a “theology of liberation”: the fundamental idea that poverty and oppression were not God’s will, and that God’s children had the right to challenge oppressive institutions, structures, and conditions in every sector of society.³⁴ Moreover, according to liberation theology, the Catholic Church was obligated to condemn these unjust institutions and assist the faithful in their struggle for liberation. Across El Salvador, and throughout Latin America, the more radical nuns and clergy organized *comunidades de base* (faith communities) that encouraged villagers and townspeople to meet weekly for a closer reading of the Bible and particularly the social justice teachings of Jesus’s New Testament. This theology was not new or radical, they argued, but rather a return to the original teachings of Christ.³⁵ To those who held power in Salvadoran society, this theology—whether new or not—was certainly radical enough to threaten their positions of privilege. Particularly worrisome was the fact that this theology was preached by even the highest-ranking clergyman of their society, the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who used his weekly radio sermons to condemn the abuses in Salvadoran society and to urge President Carter to withdraw military aid.³⁶

Whether influenced by liberation theology or the Sandinista and Cuban revolutions, a number of groups emerged in El Salvador to demand social justice: organizations such as the People’s Revolutionary Block, the Front of United Popular Action, and the Popular League of February 28. Each drew its rapidly growing membership from different segments of Salvadoran society—university students, teachers, trade unionists, as well as the urban and rural poor—and used a variety of tactics to challenge the authority of the elites, from traditional forms of civil disobedience to guerrilla warfare.³⁷ A number of guerrilla armies also emerged, such as the Popular Liberation Forces, the People’s Revolutionary Army, the Armed Forces of

National Liberation, the Central American Revolutionary Workers Party, and the Armed Forces of Liberation.³⁸

The protests continued even after October 1979, when a new military-civilian junta overthrew the violent government of General Carlos Humberto Romero. The junta, comprised of junior and somewhat progressive military officers as well as civilian representatives and church leaders, passed a number of modest reforms, including an agrarian reform program, a minimum daily wage, a ban on paramilitary groups, and tax and banking reforms. However, few of these reforms were ever enforced. Within months, the civilian and church representatives had resigned from the junta in protest, and the power continued to rest with the old guard. From 1979 to 1982, three junta governments attempted to enact modest reforms, with very limited success.

The principal agencies of Salvadoran national security tried to eliminate the rebels and dissenters. The centralized intelligence agency known as ANSESAL and its affiliate, the Democratic Nationalist Organization (ORDEN), a nationwide network of government informants and paramilitary groups founded in 1968,³⁹ used violent measures to control the civilian population. Protesters were arrested and beaten, expelled from the country, or murdered. The armed forces were assisted in these efforts by privately funded paramilitary groups such as the White Warriors Union, the White Hand, the Anti-Communist Forces for Liberation, and the Organization for the Liberation from Communism, among many others, whose interlocking membership consisted of soldiers, off-duty police officers, and “the sick young sons of affluent Salvadorans.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the paramilitary groups received their funding from members of the oligarchy, some of them living in Miami.⁴¹ These groups, appropriately nicknamed the *escuadrones de la muerte*, or “death squads,” employed particularly gruesome tactics. Those believed to have ties to insurgent groups or who challenged the established order in any way—through labor organizing, sermons and public speaking, classroom instruction, publications and journalism—were tortured, raped, and killed. Thousands of mutilated corpses appeared in town sewers, garbage dumps, street gutters, and shallow graves, left by their torturers as a warning to others: eyes gouged, tongues and limbs severed, breasts, genitalia, and throats slashed. One group’s signature method of assassination was twelve gunshots in the face at point-blank range.⁴² So many Salvadorans were found dead or missing

that the Catholic Church's Legal Office, the principal agency that documented the abuses, could not keep up with all the reports of the missing and killed. A favorite target of these death squads were nuns and priests, especially those affiliated with the more liberal Maryknoll and Jesuit orders that preached liberation theology.⁴³ Flyers circulated throughout the capital city of San Salvador, urging the population: "Be a patriot, kill a priest!"⁴⁴ According to Americas Watch, eighteen priests were killed in El Salvador from 1972 to 1989.⁴⁵

Nineteen eighty was a particularly violent year: over eight thousand civilians were killed, and yet no one was arrested for the murders. Among the victims were some very prominent leaders whose violent deaths were meant to intimidate the opposition. In February, one of the more progressive civilian members of the government, Attorney General Mario Zamora, was assassinated during a dinner party at his own home, shot a dozen times in the face.⁴⁶ In March, Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot and killed while saying mass at the cathedral. At his funeral procession, the military fired into the crowd of thirty thousand mourners, killing thirty and wounding hundreds. In December, four US church workers, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan, were kidnapped and murdered. Their raped and mutilated bodies were later found half buried in shallow graves. Throughout 1980, the military purged itself of its most progressive members to silence dissent: officers were demoted, reassigned to diplomatic posts, exiled, or assassinated.⁴⁷

As in Nicaragua, the assassination of prominent leaders—in this case Zamora and Romero—served to unite reformers and revolutionaries. After the government failed to properly investigate death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, believed to have ordered the assassinations,⁴⁸ the various political parties, religious organizations, trade unions, and peasant groups joined forces to create the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) under the leadership of former junta members Guillermo Ungo, Roman Mayorga, and Ruben Zamora.⁴⁹ Five guerrilla groups also joined forces under the FMLN.⁵⁰ The FDR and FMLN eventually reached a compromise and united under the banner FDR-FMLN.

Public pressure at home forced the Carter administration to place a temporary embargo on military aid to El Salvador—an embargo that was lifted in the final months of his administration, when the FMLN launched a new counteroffensive against the Salvadoran government. As in Nicaragua,

Carter favored a more centrist government and tried to negotiate one under the direction of Ambassador Robert White. The administration applauded the junta's decision to appoint as president José Napoleón Duarte, the moderate Christian Democrat candidate who was denied victory in the fraudulent 1972 elections, imprisoned, tortured, and sent into exile. Carter—and later Reagan—regarded Duarte as someone who offered a political alternative to both the leftists and the rightists, and could help to rein in the more reactionary elements of the Salvadoran government. Through Ambassador White, the Carter administration also tried to convince the more progressive politicians to remain in the junta rather than join forces with the FDR-FMLN. However, Duarte proved ineffective in ending the violence. In 1981, the Catholic Church's legal office in San Salvador reported that the death squads and the government security forces killed 13,253 civilians. (In comparison, casualties at the hands of the guerrillas were always many fewer.)⁵¹ Particularly shocking was the massacre at El Mozote. In December 1981, the Atlacatl battalion, regarded as the Salvadoran army's most elite group of US-trained soldiers, killed 936 villagers in the Morazán province, mostly at the village of El Mozote. Over half of the victims were children under the age of fourteen.⁵² Despite the international press coverage, the United States denied the massacre until 1992, when forensic scientists began unearthing the mass graves.⁵³ Assassinations decreased by the end of 1984, as a result of US pressure, but the Salvadoran military increased its bombing of villages on which the guerrillas depended for shelter and food. Over seventy thousand were left homeless as a result of this campaign.⁵⁴

US military aid to El Salvador continued despite the blatant human rights violations and intense international opposition, and despite the December 1980 United Nations resolution calling for an end to military support of the Salvadoran government. As in Nicaragua, the hard-liners in the Reagan administration portrayed the Salvadoran civil war as part of the East-West struggle, in which the United States had a moral duty to contain Cuban/Soviet expansionism.⁵⁵ Even their closest hemispheric allies were unable to influence US policy. As early as February 1980, Canadian and Mexican representatives met to discuss their mutual opposition to US intervention in Central American affairs. Canada cut off aid to El Salvador in November 1980, and along with Mexico and most nations in the hemisphere supported the UN resolution. In August 1981, Mexico and France

extended official recognition to the FDR-FMLN, in an attempt to prevent “foreign military intervention in the Salvadoran conflict” and “allow the Salvadoran people to decide their own destiny”.⁵⁶ The following year Mexico tried to negotiate a peace between the FDR-FMLN and the Salvadoran government, independent of the United States, but the initiative was unsuccessful.

In order to continue providing aid, the US Congress required evidence that El Salvador was making significant improvements in human rights. Members of the Reagan administration either denied or downplayed news reports of civilian casualties, claiming that only leftist guerrillas were caught in the crossfire. They assured Congress that El Salvador was taking significant steps toward democracy and ending the violence. In 1982, when right-wing forces regained control of the Salvadoran government, the Reagan administration convinced D’Aubuisson, now president of the National Assembly, to allow Alvaro Magaña to become president and at least give the appearance of a more centrist government. And in 1984, the administration facilitated the election of Christian Democrat Duarte in the country’s most expensive election, so that he could immediately initiate peace talks with the FDR/FMLN.⁵⁷ Public statements by the hard-liners in the Reagan administration showed their willingness to lie about what was happening in El Salvador. Commenting on the murder of the four American churchwomen, both Secretary of State Alexander Haig and UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick brought up the women’s alleged connections to the guerrillas. In one interview Kirkpatrick suggested that the women got what they deserved: “The nuns were not just nuns. The nuns were also political activists. We ought to be a little more clear about this than we usually are. They were political activists on behalf of the Frente. And somebody who is using violence to oppose the Frente killed these nuns.”⁵⁸ Commenting on US policy, a US diplomat who served in Central America during the Reagan years stated: “Unless they see a guy like D’Aubuisson running a machete through somebody, they’re inclined to ignore it. . . . There is absolutely zero conception of what these people are really like, how evil they really are.”⁵⁹

Congress found the administration’s arguments and evidence compelling enough to continue sending aid. Throughout the 1980s, El Salvador remained on the list of the top five nations to receive aid from the United States. All in all, the United States provided six billion dollars in economic

and military aid to El Salvador during its twelve-year civil war. The United States also facilitated the transfer of millions of dollars in aid from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Agency.

While the different parties struggled for control of the Salvadoran government, thousands of people were uprooted from their homes or murdered. By 1986, over half a million Salvadorans were internally displaced, dependent on the government for their survival, and over one million had fled to other countries.⁶⁰

THE “SCORCHED EARTH” POLICIES OF THE GUATEMALAN MILITARY

In Guatemala, a state of war began in 1954, when a CIA-sponsored military coup overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman and thwarted the country’s decade-long campaign for agrarian reform.⁶¹ For the next forty years, a series of military officers ruled the country. As in Nicaragua and El Salvador, opposition groups in Guatemala during this time frame challenged the institutions that concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a small percentage of the population. Two percent of the population controlled 72 percent of all private land,⁶² while 60 percent of Guatemalans earned roughly two dollars a day harvesting export crops such as coffee, sugar, and cotton. Workers and their families endured inhumane conditions at home and at work: inferior housing with no running water, sewers, or electrification; and access to health care and education was limited. Workers were offered few legal protections, and attempts at unionization were violently discouraged.

The Maya of the highlands of Guatemala, who comprised half of Guatemala’s population of eight million and were the backbone of the agricultural economy, were especially poor and victimized. Multinational corporations, with the encouragement and support of various dictatorships, confiscated Indian land for oil production, mining, and cattle raising. Consequently the vast majority of Maya families were either landless and forced to work for others, or farmed holdings of less than seven hectares (the bare minimum needed to support a family). Mayas had the highest infant mortality rate in the country (134 per 1,000 live births compared to 80 per 1,000 for the *ladinos*),⁶³ and their life expectancy was six-

teen years lower than for *ladinos*. Only 19 percent of Mayas were literate as compared to over 50 percent of the rest of the population. They were a voiceless and heavily exploited majority, whose intense poverty made them, the government feared, prone to insurgency. As early as the 1960s, the army moved into the highlands and kidnapped and killed those suspected of trying to form agricultural cooperatives, unions, or political groups.⁶⁴ Between 1966 and 1976, fifty thousand people were murdered.⁶⁵ Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, the “Butcher of Zacapa,” who assumed the “presidency” in 1970, was among several of Guatemala’s leaders who exemplified the strategy. He is reported to have stated: “If it is necessary to turn the country into a cemetery in order to pacify it, I will not hesitate to do so.”⁶⁶

Various guerrilla groups operated during the 1960s and 1970s to challenge the dictatorships. In 1982, the four principal guerrilla armies joined to form the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). Their platform included agrarian reform and price controls; equality between Indians and *ladinos*; democratic representation; and civil liberties such as freedom of expression and religion.⁶⁷ The government tried to control the population and erode the guerrillas’ popular base through special programs such as the euphemistically called *frijoles y fusiles* (beans and rifles) and *techo, tortillas, y trabajo* (housing, tortillas, and employment), which provided food and other aid in exchange for service in the *patrullas de autodefensa civil* (civilian defense patrols). At the height of the civilian patrol system, the *patrullas* counted nine hundred thousand members.⁶⁸ The violence against the opposition reached new levels of barbarism from 1981 to 1984, during the governments of Generals Romeo Lucas García, Efraín Ríos Montt, and Oscar Mejía Víctores.⁶⁹ The army burned fields and killed livestock to destroy the guerrillas’ food supplies. Individuals remotely suspected of assisting the guerrillas, no matter how young, were viciously tortured and killed.⁷⁰

The Mayas were especially targeted. Accused of harboring or supporting the rebels, entire villages were burned to the ground by the *kaibiles*, the government’s elite counterinsurgency units, many of whom were young Indians forced to wage war against their own people.⁷¹ Entire communities were slaughtered. Soldiers used guns, knives, and machetes, or doused their victims with gasoline and burned them alive. Bodies were mutilated before and after death: limbs and heads severed, women’s breasts

cut off and stuffed into the mouths of their dead children. Even fetuses were cut out of their mothers' pregnant bodies to ensure that there would be no survivors.⁷² One scholar has appropriately called this period "the time of mass terror."⁷³

As one example, on July 17, 1982, five hundred Guatemalan army troops entered the tiny Chuj Indian village of San Francisco, rounded up the men, women, and children, and brutally murdered roughly 350 villagers. The four men who survived the massacre did so by hiding in the mounds of corpses to await the chance to escape into the jungle, and into Mexico. "I was under about ten bodies," reported one fifty-seven-year-old survivor. "Then the soldiers began shooting again. . . . I lay still, my face covered in blood, and they lifted me and said, 'This one is done,' and threw me on a pile of bodies." Later that night he escaped the village and traveled nine hours on foot to reach the border of Mexico.⁷⁴ Throughout the early 1980s, Mexican *campesinos* in Chiapas reported that the rivers flowing from Guatemala were filled with so many corpses—many exhibiting the visible signs of torture—that it became impossible to bury them all. The smell of burning and rotting corpses became an everyday fact of life along the Guatemala–Mexico border.⁷⁵

The army called such actions "scientific killings" designed to eliminate the rebels' base of support. (Many of these atrocities were chronicled by Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú in her controversial memoir *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.)⁷⁶ Survivors and nearby villagers fled deeper into the mountains to avoid a similar fate, or crossed the border into southern Mexico, where they hoped to find refuge among kindred cultural groups. Those who appealed for amnesty or who were caught by the Guatemalan military and allowed to live were "reoriented": interrogated for information on the guerrillas and then subjected to "reeducation" classes for twelve to fifteen hours every day for several months, where they were lectured on the "falsehoods" of the guerrillas' political campaign. Finally, in strategic areas, the so-called *polos de desarrollo*, inhabitants of towns and villages, were relocated to heavily patrolled "model villages," where their actions were strictly regulated.⁷⁷

The government's policy of indoctrination and cultural annihilation continued in the model villages. Residents were allowed to speak only Spanish, and Catholicism and indigenous rituals were strongly discouraged in favor of some form of evangelical Protestantism—particularly that

espoused by Ríos Montt himself—that taught subservience to authority.⁷⁸ The traditional Maya government was replaced with army-appointed commissioners and the civilian defense patrols that spied on camp residents and controlled the movement of the villagers. As part of the government’s rural pacification policy, the Maya populations were forced to engage in public works projects, including rebuilding the structures and communities that the army had so assiduously burned down.⁷⁹

From 1978 to 1984, approximately 100,000 Guatemalans were killed and 40,000 “disappeared” (their whereabouts unknown and presumed dead); 440 villages were destroyed, and 750,000 people internally displaced. Over a quarter-million people fled the country.⁸⁰ The Catholic Church was one of the few institutions to denounce the human rights violations. In one of their many official protests, the Conference of Guatemalan Bishops denounced the “massive assassination” of Indians and *campesinos*, as well as the lack of democratic institutions that could guarantee the welfare of the Guatemalan people. “Guatemala has experienced, and continues to live and endure a grave crisis,” wrote the bishops in one 1984 document, “and [the country] is sinking further into the abyss.”⁸¹ As in El Salvador, clergy, nuns, and missionaries became popular targets for the counterinsurgency units, forcing many to flee the country and form the Guatemalan Church in Exile.⁸²

US aid to Guatemala shifted according to human rights reports and the domestic pressure that these elicited. Military aid was temporarily suspended in 1977, but the United States continued to train officers in the Guatemalan armed forces, facilitate corporate investments, and provide humanitarian and development assistance to those in power. After a meeting with General Ríos Montt in Honduras in 1982, President Reagan remarked that Ríos Montt was a man of “great personal integrity” whom human rights monitors had given a “bum rap.”⁸³ Military aid was reinstated a few years later. But in March 1990, under domestic and international pressure, the Bush administration recalled its ambassador in protest over the Guatemalan government’s failure to investigate and punish human rights abuses; and military aid once again ceased in 1992.

As with the rest of the United States’ Central America policy, its actions in Guatemala drew international criticism, particularly from its neighbors. This time, Canada served as cosponsor of the 1982 UN resolution condemning Guatemala. But to the disappointment of many Canadians, that

was as far as Ottawa went to distinguish its foreign policy from that of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Mexico, in turn, was surprisingly less critical of Guatemala's human rights violations than it was of El Salvador's rightist regime, much to the dismay of moderate-to-left groups within Mexico. The silence was inconsistent but pragmatic: the Guatemalan conflict was closer to home and threatened to spill over into Mexico's southern states. Thousands of Maya refugees crossed Mexico's southern border and sought safety in the state of Chiapas, also home to a large Maya population that was actively involved in legal disputes over land and labor. Local and federal officials feared that the refugees would conspire with domestic opposition groups, and debated ways to control the border. The Guatemalan army, in turn, charged that the refugee camps were guerrilla bases and, beginning in 1981, crossed the border into Mexico to kidnap or murder suspected guerrillas. Nationalists demanded that their government stop this brazen violation of their sovereignty, but the Mexican government sent contradictory signals: while filing official diplomatic protests, it assisted Guatemala in its hunt for subversives and deported thousands of refugees. Not surprisingly, much of the rhetoric coming out of Mexico City blamed the country's problems on the United States, but the government was pragmatic enough to avoid any direct confrontation with either the United States or Guatemala. Domestic concerns far outweighed ideological commitments. In this particular instance, Mexico's policy vis-à-vis Guatemala complemented Washington's.

THE REFUGEES

Before 1970, migration within Central America was common. People migrated within and across borders for temporary work in farming, construction, and domestic service. Salvadorans had the longest tradition of cross-border migration, particularly to Honduras, where 350,000 had settled by the end of the 1960s, lured by the higher wages offered by the banana companies.⁸⁴ In administering the most densely populated country in Central America, the Salvadoran government encouraged seasonal or permanent migration of rural workers and unemployed urban dwellers as a safety valve to avoid uprisings such as the one that occurred in 1932. In 1967, the Honduran government tried to discourage further Salvadoran immigration through legislation that restricted land ownership to the

Honduran-born and, by mid-1969, through the deportation of three hundred thousand Salvadorans. Hostilities between Hondurans and Salvadorans climaxed in the 1969 “soccer war”: violence erupted at a series of soccer matches between the national teams of both countries, giving expression to the resentment that Hondurans had long felt toward the Salvadorans who had migrated illegally to their country and claimed land, especially in the disputed border territories. Thousands were killed and over a hundred thousand people left homeless. In the wake of the war, the countries severed relations with each other, and the Honduran government closed the border to further Salvadoran migration.⁸⁵

Guatemalans, particularly Maya Indians, also had a migratory tradition, especially to Mexico’s Soconusco region and Chiapas in general (which had been part of Guatemala until 1824). There they found a Maya and mestizo population that shared cultural similarities. As Mexican workers sought employment in higher-paying industries, the Guatemalans provided the labor critical to the region’s agricultural industry: an estimated twenty thousand to one hundred thousand seasonal workers in Mexico each year.⁸⁶ Until the 1990s, illegal immigration was tolerated to maintain an abundant pool of low-wage labor for the harvest of coffee beans, sugarcane, and other agricultural products. The border was fluid, and trade, commerce, and family ties extended across national boundaries. Thus the historical, cultural, and commercial ties between Chiapas and Guatemala pointed to the artificiality of the political border.

Migration to more distant countries such as the United States and Canada was less common, although a few thousand Central Americans lived in cities such as Washington, San Francisco, New York, and Miami by end of the 1970s. As the wars escalated, these smaller northern populations served as magnets, encouraging further migration.⁸⁷ The 1980 census in the United States, for example, counted 94,447 Salvadorans and 63,073 Guatemalans, and close to half had arrived in the previous five years. The detention of undocumented Central Americans on the United States–Mexico border also increased. In 1977, the first year for which such statistics are available, more than seven thousand Salvadorans and over five thousand Guatemalans were apprehended.⁸⁸

Despite a migratory tradition within the region, the Central American nations were ill prepared to deal with the refugee crisis of 1974–1996. The wars in Central America displaced millions of people and forced them

to migrate internally and across borders. As with most migrations, people traveled wherever they had networks of family, friends, or countrymen that could take them in and assist them in finding jobs. They followed established patterns of migration: Salvadorans traveled to Honduras and Guatemala because they had done so for decades; and Guatemalans crossed the border into Chiapas. But with each passing year, populations emerged in less traditional areas of settlement: Salvadorans settled in Mexico, Guatemalans in Belize, and Nicaraguans in Costa Rica. The clustering of several Spanish-speaking countries in a small geographic territory made it comparatively easy for migrants to move and seek safer opportunities elsewhere.

The international press commonly referred to these migrants as refugees because political upheaval played a role in their migration, but their legal status was far from clear and varied from country to country. According to article 1A(2) of the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”⁸⁹ Even though most Central American countries were signatories to the UN Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol, and to several regional conventions,⁹⁰ the constitutions of most were not encoded with formal procedures through which to recognize refugees or grant asylum. These countries also demonstrated varying levels of commitment to the convention’s principles of *non-refoulement* (unforced return) and refugee assistance.

Complicating matters, most Central American migrants did not meet the strict UN definition of refugee status, having fled their countries because of the generalized climate of violence rather than a “well-founded” fear of persecution for the listed categories. By 1980, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) readily admitted that the Convention and Protocol were too restrictive, and advocated a more lenient response to the so-called *nonconvention refugees*: those who did not meet the strict definition of the term but who had fled their homes, crossed an international border, and were living in refugee-like conditions. In May

1981 the UNHCR recommended that all Salvadorans who had left their country since the beginning of 1980 be considered bona fide refugees under a prima facie group determination because they had been displaced by political events and were likely to suffer if physically returned to their homeland.⁹¹ Three years later, the nonbinding Cartagena Declaration tried to offer further guidance in dealing with the Central American refugee crisis. According to the declaration, refugees were “persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety, or liberty have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.”⁹²

Each country conducted its own domestic debate on what constituted a refugee, and what types of programs should be made available to those so designated (i.e., asylum or temporary safe haven; resettlement; work authorization; social services, repatriation, etc.). Most governments preferred to view the Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans living among their populations as economic migrants because it freed them from any responsibility. Statistics compiled by state, private, and international agencies demonstrated how politicized the debate, and the collection and interpretation of migration data, became. In 1982, for example, the US Department of State estimated that 225,000 Guatemalans had been “displaced” by the political turmoil; the Roman Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Guatemala, in turn, estimated that as many as 1 million Guatemalans had been displaced.⁹³ Ironically, agencies often arrived at different statistics using the same sources; for example, using data provided by the Mexican government, the US Department of State concluded that 5,000 Salvadoran refugees were in Mexico, while the UNHCR placed the number at 120,000, and other NGOs estimated as many as half a million.⁹⁴ Estimating the number of refugees and displaced persons was an inherently difficult task given the spontaneous and transient nature of this population;⁹⁵ but US government statistics were generally much lower than those compiled by the UNHCR and other NGOs because of their stricter definitions of refugee status. As the principal supplier of military aid to Central America, the United States was also reluctant to admit that its policies caused displacement and generated refugees. Instead, they categorized this migration as economically driven, and their statistics reflected this bias. Human rights organizations, in turn, were accused of inflating the num-

bers to promote their own political agenda, namely, increasing their operational budgets and critiquing state policies. Unfortunately, US government estimates were disproportionately influential in determining the amount of emergency aid available to those affected by the wars: by 1984 the UNHCR received one-third of its funding from the United States, and US contributions were adjusted according to the reports and estimates provided by the country's own State Department.⁹⁶

The lack of protection offered by states, then, became one more means by which migrants became the victims and pawns of foreign policy decisions. Human rights organizations and other NGOs were at times the migrants' only advocates, urging a broader definition of their status that would facilitate their accommodation, and assisting in their temporary or long-term integration into host societies.⁹⁷

In Nicaragua, the first large-scale migration out of the country began during the mid- to late 1970s, when the fighting between Sandinista rebels and the Somoza dictatorship was most intense. An estimated two hundred thousand Nicaraguans fled to other countries during this period, although the majority are believed to have returned after the Sandinista victory in 1979.⁹⁸ A second wave of emigrants left after 1979 because of the Sandinistas' policies and/or the upheaval caused by the Contra war. For those who chose to leave the country, wealth, language, availability of transportation, and historical patterns of migration all played a role in determining the country of first asylum. The majority of middle- to upper-class exiles, for example, who perhaps had once studied or vacationed in the United States and had the financial resources to return, traveled to cities like Miami, Los Angeles, and Houston, where they found employment in the large Latino enclaves. Those interested in supporting the counterrevolution were particularly drawn to Miami, where exile groups such as the Nicaraguan Democratic Front were working with the US government to oust the Sandinistas. Other exiles/refugees migrated to neighboring and more familiar Spanish-speaking countries such as Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama.

The Salvadorans and Guatemalans followed a similar pattern. Those threatened by the warring factions were the most likely to leave. Salvadoran migration increased after October 1979, when the death squads intensified the campaign against the opposition. According to the UNHCR, half a million Salvadorans fled their homeland during the period 1979–1982.

By the end of the 1980s, one million people were estimated to have migrated, and over half a million were internally displaced.⁹⁹ In turn, Guatemalan migration increased during 1982–1984, when the governments of Ríos Montt and Mejía Víctores escalated their counterinsurgency campaigns. According to UNHCR estimates, over one million people became internal migrants or refugees in Guatemala during the 1980s. According to US estimates, only one-fourth of the Salvadorans and Guatemalans displaced by the war received assistance, mostly in camps and settlements in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Mexico. The UNHCR placed the number as low as 10 percent.¹⁰⁰

The countries that bordered Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala suddenly found themselves reluctant hosts to thousands of refugees. Humanitarian concern for the refugees was tempered by political and economic considerations: politicians feared that comprehensive assistance would encourage the refugees to stay permanently within their borders and increase resentment among nationals, who would have to compete with the refugees for jobs, housing, and social services. The presence of thousands of dissidents and rebels could also potentially destabilize their own countries. Central American governments therefore tried to discourage large-scale migration, and isolated the refugees in rural areas far from their population centers, where they would draw as little attention as possible, and their movement and activities could be controlled. The UNHCR as well as NGOs such as OXFAM, Catholic Relief Services, and the Church World Service played a critical role in helping the region to cope with the refugee crisis. By 1990, an estimated hundred international NGOs and six hundred grassroots NGOs operated in Central America.¹⁰¹ However, paramilitary groups often equated assistance to refugees and displaced persons with support for guerrilla insurgents, and interfered with the delivery of humanitarian assistance and harassed, arrested, and even murdered aid workers.¹⁰²

The UNHCR advocated resettlement in neighboring countries because such an arrangement would facilitate eventual repatriation. The UNHCR provided millions of dollars in funding to local government agencies to establish camps and to provide emergency food and medical care. Unfortunately, the agency's budget, stretched by refugee crises around the world, limited the amount of assistance it could offer in Central America. The refugee camps that emerged throughout the region varied in quality and

in the level of social services. Camps that were designed as a temporary measure became permanent housing; some residents remained in their camps for as long as ten years with limited opportunities for education and recreation. In many cases, camps housed thousands more than they were designed to hold, and individual countries restricted the refugees' movements outside the camps as well as their opportunities to engage in wage-earning labor. International NGOs experimented with "durable solutions"—projects designed to make the refugees self-supporting through farming, artisanry, or industrial shops—but budgetary constraints limited the quality of these programs as well.¹⁰³ Not surprisingly, most refugees bypassed these camps altogether. Instead they chose to live as anonymously as possible as illegal immigrants in major cities. Others decided to try their luck further north, seeking employment in the more developed economies of Mexico, the United States, and Canada.

Honduras and Costa Rica provide important—and opposite—case studies of the regional responses to refugee accommodation and assistance. Honduras became one of the principal refugee-recipient nations in Central America, in part because of foreign policy decisions that placed the Contra soldiers and their families in camps on the Honduras-Nicaragua border, but also because of traditional patterns of migration. The Honduran government recognized the UNHCR's principle of *non-refoulement* in its domestic legislation, but did not have formal procedures for determining refugee status.¹⁰⁴ The government (which had reestablished diplomatic relations with El Salvador in 1980) insisted that Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees live and work in certain zones and not within the general population. The UNHCR established "reception areas" along the border, where refugees were met and transported to one of several camps or supervised settlements, which some likened to concentration camps because of the visible army presence patrolling the zones.¹⁰⁵ These camps included Colomancagua, La Virtud, Guarita, El Amitillo, Guajiniquil, Los Hernandez, and San Antonio, but the largest camp was at Mesa Grande, which offered the most protection from roving Salvadoran army units who frequently crossed the border to kill suspected rebels. By 1983, the camps and settlements housed 18,000 Salvadorans and 550 Guatemalans.¹⁰⁶ The security violations made life extremely difficult, as did the normal tensions, rivalries, and anxieties that accompanied the concentration of people in a small geographic space.¹⁰⁷ The inability to sustain themselves through agricul-

ture, construction, or other trades made the refugees dependent on relief agencies, and this further decreased morale among the camp population. If the Salvadorans left these camps, they forfeited their refugee status and became subject to deportation.

Ironically, Honduran policy toward Salvadorans and Guatemalans stood in direct contrast to the government's treatment of Nicaraguan refugees. Thirteen thousand five hundred Miskito Indians, regarded as political allies in the US-Honduran Contra War, were allowed to settle on agricultural land or work in internationally funded refugee projects, as long as they remained in the Mosquitia region.¹⁰⁸ Nicaraguan *ladinos* were also more favorably treated: they lived in settlements, but unlike the Salvadorans, were granted freedom of movement. By the end of the decade, government sources showed that the number of official refugees from Nicaragua had increased steadily each year but the number of Salvadorans had not, reflecting Honduras's more generous policies toward the former. However, government sources estimated that as many as 230,000 Central Americans lived illegally in Honduras.¹⁰⁹

The Honduran army carried out its separate immigration policy. Honduran families living along the border were warned by the military not to assist any refugees or aid workers, or they would face reprisals. On May 14, 1980, when four thousand Salvadorans tried to cross the Sumpul River into Honduras to escape the Salvadoran army's campaign in Chalatenango, they were met by the Honduran military and forced to return at gunpoint. More than six hundred people were then massacred by Salvadoran troops.¹¹⁰ A few months later, in March 1981, seven thousand tried to cross the Lempa River into Honduras to escape the military actions in Cabañas, but as they crossed the river they were shot at by both Salvadoran and Honduran soldiers.

The UNHCR tried to negotiate minimum safeguards for the refugees with local civilian and military authorities, but these agreements were repeatedly violated.¹¹¹ Relief workers were continually harassed, and refugees were kidnapped, interrogated, and tortured by Honduran army officers, or turned over to Salvadoran authorities. On August 29, 1985, for example, Honduran soldiers entered the Colomoncagua refugee camp and kidnapped, raped, and murdered some of the residents. In February of the following year Honduran soldiers once again entered Colomoncagua, and this time set up machine guns around the perimeter of the

camp, including the soccer field, as a means of surveillance as well as psychologically harassing the camp residents.¹¹² Hoping that international pressure would force the Honduran and Salvadoran armies to respect refugee rights, the Evangelical Committee for Development and Emergency in Honduras, working with various international NGOs, created a “visitors program”: hundreds of volunteers from North America and Europe traveled to Honduras to live and work in the camps, serve as bodyguards, and act as witnesses to the human rights violations. Teams of volunteers patrolled the border and accompanied the refugees as they traveled to the various camps. No army incursions occurred in camps or villages where the international visitors resided; but when the program ended at mid-decade, the kidnapping and torture resumed.¹¹³

Costa Rica’s experience, in turn, demonstrated the difficulties that even stable democracies faced when reconciling national interests with international commitments. Unlike Honduras, no military force patrolled the border of Costa Rica and repatriated refugees at gunpoint.¹¹⁴ Many of the refugees entered the country with tourist visas, which had to be renewed every thirty days. However, Costa Rica had signed the UN Convention and Protocol,¹¹⁵ and in 1980 passed a law outlining the criteria for and benefits ascribed to refugee status. According to Costa Rican law, refugee status was temporary but granted recipients basic rights and protections. Only documented refugees were allowed to seek employment, for example, and could lawfully do so as long as they did not displace Costa Rican workers (90 percent of employees in a given enterprise had to be Costa Rican, and receive 85 percent of the salaries). Documented refugees were also eligible for the same government services as nationals (medical care and education, for example). The government established the infrastructure to provide these services, but the cost was borne by international relief agencies. Thus, the Costa Rican government committed itself to humanitarian assistance while protecting its citizens and national resources. The National Commission for Refugees worked with the UNHCR and other international NGOs to coordinate refugee assistance, but was dependent on the financial support that these agencies provided. In 1985 when the UNHCR cut back drastically on its financial aid, the Costa Rican government was forced to make corresponding adjustments in its refugee assistance programs.

An estimated forty thousand Salvadorans and Nicaraguans were assisted

in Costa Rica by 1989.¹¹⁶ According to Hayden some twenty thousand Salvadorans entered the country, most of them arriving between 1980 and 1982, and as many as two-thirds obtained refugee status.¹¹⁷ A dozen camps were established to house the refugees; international NGOs sponsored durable solutions projects, which were designed to make the refugees self-supporting.¹¹⁸ Refugees were allowed to seek employment outside these projects but more often than not found the bureaucracy difficult to navigate—a process made deliberately tedious to discourage competition with nationals.¹¹⁹ Not surprisingly, most refugees who came to Costa Rica bypassed the official refugee network, as they did in other countries; they preferred freedom of movement and economic self-sufficiency in the underground economy, even if it meant forfeiting rights, protections, and services. According to the UNHCR, by 1989, as many as 100,000 Salvadorans and Nicaraguans in Costa Rica lived undocumented. Government agencies placed the number as high as 290,000, 90 percent of which were believed to be Nicaraguan.¹²⁰

As the strongest economy and democracy in Central America, Costa Rica offered migrants safety and opportunities for advancement regardless of their legal status. Thus, refugees who chose to settle here during the 1980s were among the least likely to return to their homelands once repatriation became possible.¹²¹ In 1992, President Rafael Calderon signed a decree that allowed Central American refugees to legalize their status and apply for permanent residency if they could prove residence in the country for at least two years.¹²²

Refugee-producing nations also became refugee-receiving nations. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua all signed the UN Convention and Protocol but exhibited different levels of commitment to refugee assistance. An estimated 145,000 Nicaraguans and 70,000 Salvadorans lived in Guatemala by the end of the 1980s, but the government barred UNHCR participation. El Salvador, in turn, did allow the UNHCR to help, and by 1991 the UNHCR had assisted 750 Nicaraguan refugees; however, an estimated 20,000 Central American refugees lived illegally in the country, assisted primarily by the Salvadoran Catholic Church, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other international NGOs. The Salvadoran Catholic Archdiocese, for example, operated several camps that provided haven for roughly six thousand refugees.¹²³

Nicaragua had the most liberal policy: over seven thousand migrants,

most of them Salvadorans, received official refugee status and were granted freedom of movement and work permits. With the assistance of the UNHCR, the Sandinistas resettled some three thousand to cooperatives along the Pacific coast. Even though the Nicaraguan government encouraged refugees to regularize their status and become permanent residents, and granted them a host of benefits unavailable in other countries, one study showed that 77 percent wished to return to their homeland, a rate comparable to refugees in other countries.¹²⁴ Some twenty thousand lived and worked undocumented during the 1980s, preferring to remain outside the reach of the government.¹²⁵

By 1989, six nations—Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize—reported an aggregate eight hundred thousand immigrants, of which 10 percent were officially documented as refugees and received assistance from local governments and international agencies.

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN PEACE PLAN

Most countries in the Western Hemisphere rejected the Reagan administration's categorization of the political conflict as an East–West struggle, and opposed the administration's emphasis on a military solution. In January 1983, representatives from four Latin American governments—Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, and Colombia—met on the island of Contadora, off the coast of Panama, to try to draft a regional peace plan independent of the United States. In 1984 the so-called Contadora Group offered a twenty-one point proposal for a peace settlement that tried to address the concerns of the various parties involved. Included in its list of recommendations were the removal of foreign military advisers from Central America; an end of support to guerrilla movements; and the eventual institution of democratic, pluralist governments, with socioeconomic reconstruction.¹²⁶ The proposal was drafted into treaty form and circulated to the nations of the hemisphere for discussion. The following year Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay formed the Contadora Support Group (or Grupo de Lima) to lend support for a negotiated peace settlement.

The Reagan administration publicly stated its support for Contadora but undermined the negotiations.¹²⁷ The Contadora proposal recognized the legitimacy of the Sandinista government and called for an end to US support for the Contras, which were terms that the administration refused

to accept. Administration officials insisted that the Sandinistas could not be trusted to uphold the terms of the peace accords, and the United States would ultimately have to reestablish its military presence in Central America. The United States enlisted the aid of Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica (the so-called Tegucigalpa Bloc) to help stall the peace process by challenging individual points in the proposed plan. By the end of 1985, the United States had succeeded in stalling the negotiations.

By 1987, however, a new political climate facilitated the renewal of diplomatic efforts. Throughout the 1980s, the US Congress had become increasingly critical of the Reagan administration's militaristic policies, and by 1987 had significantly reduced aid to the Contras and to El Salvador, eroding Reagan's national mandate. The Sandinistas, in turn, had been able to contain the Contras to the border of Honduras, albeit at great moral and economic cost to their country, and exacerbating the popular discontent that would eventually displace them at the voting booth. In Costa Rica, newly elected president Oscar Arias Sánchez was less willing than his predecessor to allow his country to be used by the United States in their geopolitical agenda. Arias took the initiative and resumed the regional peace talks in 1986 (for which he was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize). The presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica met in Esquipulas, Guatemala. (Interestingly, Esquipulas is home to the shrine of the Black Christ, which attracts the second largest number of pilgrims in the Americas, after Mexico's shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The choice of setting perhaps symbolized regional leaders' hopes—and prayers—for peace.) Finally, on August 7, 1987, the participants signed a peace accord appropriately entitled "Procedure for the Establishment of a Strong and Lasting Peace in Central America" (also called Esquipulas II or Arias Plan.) The peace plan addressed national reconciliation; democratization and free elections; the termination of aid for insurrectionist forces; the nonuse of territory to attack other states; arms control; economic development; international verification and follow-up by UN peacekeeping forces; as well as a timetable for fulfillment of these commitments.

As part of the negotiated settlement, the Contra leadership agreed to a disarmament plan, and the Sandinistas agreed to open and democratic elections and an amnesty program for Contra soldiers who wished to be re-integrated into Nicaraguan society. However, when both parties refused

to act in good faith, the five Central American presidents were twice forced to reconvene—in Tesoro, El Salvador (in February 1989), and Tela, Honduras (August 1989), to discuss ways to overcome the impasse. As a result of these meetings, the Sandinistas agreed to move up the scheduled elections to February 1990; to allow opposition parties freedom to organize and campaign; and to allow international observers access to the country to guarantee the fairness of the voting process. In turn, the United States and Honduras were asked to immediately demobilize the Contras. Both nations agreed to cooperate; US cooperation was secured, in part, because of the international outcry that came after the 1989 murder of six Jesuit professors of the Central American University and their two housekeepers.¹²⁸ However, when the Contras refused to demobilize, the United Nations Observer Group in Central American (ONUCA), a 625-member peacekeeping agency staffed by Canadians, Spaniards, and West Germans, stepped in to assure compliance along the Nicaragua-Honduras border.¹²⁹

The various multinational accords tried to restore peace and address some of the fundamental issues that had caused civil war. However, in 1990, Central America was worse off economically than prior to the civil wars.¹³⁰ Democratization and social and economic reforms have come slowly and unevenly, and some have argued that the accords only served to restore US hegemony in Central America. In February 1990, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and her UNO coalition assumed the presidency of Nicaragua. The United States finally lifted its economic embargo and provided millions of dollars to help rebuild Nicaragua's war-shattered economy. But many of the social problems that produced war—intense poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy—have continued to plague Nicaragua into the next century. In El Salvador, the guerrillas and the government agreed to a negotiated settlement on December 31, 1991. The electoral process facilitated an FMLN presence in the Salvadoran legislature, but the right-wing ARENA party—the party of D'Aubuisson and other death-squad leaders—continued to dominate Salvadoran politics. In Guatemala, UN-led discussions between the URNG and the government failed until 1996, when a peace accord was finally signed. However, thousands continued to disappear or suffer political violence. In Guatemala there were 1,406 documented violations of human rights in 1996 alone: 112 unlawful executions, 785 assassinations, 302 threats, 179 attempted murders, and 6 cases

of torture.¹³¹ Years after the peace accords were signed, people continued to be murdered or “disappeared,” among them Guatemalan Bishop Juan Gerardi, who only two days before his death released the Catholic Church’s official documentation of human rights abuses during the country’s thirty-six-year civil war.¹³²

In the Esquipulas II accords, the Central American presidents agreed to address the problems faced by refugees, repatriates, and displaced persons. In May 1989, representatives from the five Central American nations, Belize, and Mexico, as well as the UN general secretary, the UNHCR, and over sixty NGOs working in the region, convened the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA), in Guatemala City, to discuss refugee rights, repatriation and integration, and assistance to the internally displaced.¹³³ In preparation for the conference, each nation evaluated the assistance needed to either integrate or repatriate the refugees and illegal immigrants within its borders.¹³⁴ CIREFCA then discussed specific development and assistance projects and ways to attract international funding for these projects.¹³⁵ From 1989 to 1992, local and international NGOs channeled 238 million dollars in international funds to assist in the repatriation or reintegration of these populations.¹³⁶

Although small numbers repatriated as early as 1983, full-scale repatriation to Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala did not begin until each nation had negotiated a cease fire and guaranteed basic rights, including the right to live in safety and without retaliation and the right to participate in the political process. For example, the majority of Nicaraguan refugees who chose to repatriate from Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador did not do so until after the Sandinistas’ electoral defeat in February 1990; 25,000 repatriated immediately following the elections, and 71,500 returned by 1993.¹³⁷ In El Salvador, 30,000 refugees had returned within a year after the negotiated peace settlement.¹³⁸ Similarly, while thousands of Guatemalan refugees had returned from Mexico by 1990, the vast majority returned after the peace accords in 1996.