CHAPTER 7 REPATRIATION AND RESETTLEMENT

The Mexican government has repeatedly expressed its desire that Guatemalan refugees ultimately be repatriated to Guatemala. However, this is not expected to happen in the near future. Refugees themselves and those who work with them say that refugees will take a wait-and-see attitude to determine if the political situation in Guatemala has changed since the January 1986 inauguration of Vinicio Cerezo, the first elected president in recent years.[1]

According to the Mexican government, repatriation of the refugees in the camps in Chiapas, Quintana Roo, and Campeche will occur only if two conditions are met: (1) the return must be voluntary and with security guaranteed, and (2) the refugees must return to their places of origin. [2] Initial repatriations involved turning the refugees over to the Guatemalan military, who took them to military barracks where they were quarantined until being taken to "model villages," where their activities were restricted and they were under military supervision. This procedure has been widely criticized. [3]

The repatriations that have taken place to date are 715 from July to December 1984; 204 in 1985; and 131 from January to March 1986. The 1986 repatriates included a much publicized group of 100 refugees arranged through the cooperation of Mexico, Guatemala, and the UNHCR. Although in theory exit visas must be obtained for persons illegally in Mexico who seek repatriation, an unknown number repatriate quietly and unofficially.[4]

Little is known about the results of recent repatriations. The UNHCR's official position is that it is not required to verify the outcome of voluntary repatriations. [5] UNHCR officials who recently accompanied repatriated refugees confirm that they do not know, for example, what happened to the refugees' lands during their absence or whether they had land to return to. Rather, they assumed that refugees are in the best position to judge the situation in their former homes. [6]

Refugees in camps in the south say that explicit pressure has not been put on them to repatriate as a result of Cerezo's election. However, the difficulties, limitations, and isolation of their lives in the camps create pressure for repatriation. Refugees in Chiapas were told previously that if they did not relocate to Campeche and Quintana Roo, they would be repatriated.[7] Some people have returned to Guatemala rather than be relocated to Campeche and Quintana Roo.[8]

Resettlement of refugees in a third country is a solution the Mexican government welcomes and makes simple. Most of those resettled are Salvadoran and, to a lesser extent, Guatemalan.[9] While Mexico pays none of the costs of resettlement, it expedites the procedure.[10] An exit permit can be obtained

quickly. The Mexican government does not deport those approved for resettlement even if they have not obtained Mexican visas. An applicant for resettlement whose case is being studied by a resettlement country may be given a temporary immigration status by the government, generally a tourist visa. The government made special arrangements following the September 1985 earthquakes for the Canadian Embassy to issue documents that would allow resettled refugees to leave Mexico.[11]

Despite the Mexican government's cooperation in resettlement, it is a very limited option. Compared to the numbers of Central Americans in Mexico, the numbers accepted are quite small. In 1985, Canada accepted about 850 Central American refugees in Mexico out of 3,000 refugees accepted from the region. From July 1984 to June 1985, Australia accepted 300 Central American refugees from Mexico out of 1,100 refugees accepted from Mexico, Central America, and Panama. In 1985, the Australian government reduced the total it would permit to enter. Sweden accepted a few Central Americans from Mexico. [12] Resettlement has to be arranged with the embassies and the government in Mexico City, a requirement which also restricts the number who are eligible. In addition, the distance of countries such as Australia, as well as the cost of resettlement and prospect of separation from family and culture, make these countries unattractive as resettlement areas. [13]

There are few resettlement opportunities in the hemisphere. No Latin American country has an express resettlement policy. Much of the area is in conflict. Countries that already have refugees do not want to admit others by resettlement.[14]

The embassies that arrange resettlement must operate in a very circumspect manner, which may prevent refugees from becoming aware of the possibility of resettlement. On the one hand, a resettlement program helps Mexico by resettling refugees. On the other hand, the Mexican government fears that the existence of resettlement programs will encourage refugees to come to Mexico.[15]

There are no written procedures from the Mexican government concerning resettlement. This allows the government to be flexible. If matters were handled in a legalistic way, the process would be more time consuming.[16] However, the absence of written procedures allows changes without warning, which also could work to the detriment of refugees.[17]