



Testimony

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Conditions Creating Refugees
and U.S. Asylum Seekers
from Central America

Statement of

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International Migration and Cooperative
Economic Development



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Distinguished Members of the Commission:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our observations on Central American conditions that are generating refugees and the rapidly growing flow of Central Americans seeking asylum in the United States. Our statement is based on recent and ongoing work concerning the economic, political, and refugee situation in Central America.

An array of conditions and events, both natural and man-made, have led to economic crises and armed conflicts in Central America resulting in hundreds of thousands of people seeking refuge in neighboring countries and thousands more displaced within their own countries. The problems of widespread poverty and economic inequities continue in some countries at levels worse than a decade ago. Except for Costa Rica, the ability of Central American governments to effectively deliver social services and to generate job opportunities for the poor remains limited. Large numbers, estimated to be over 1.7 million in this decade, have left their countries and about 1.2 million, or 70 percent have entered the United States and Canada both legally and illegally.

The primary refugee generating countries are Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, all of which have experienced internal conflicts and severe economic hardships, particularly since the early 1980s. The primary countries of first asylum or initial refuge for the refugees are Honduras, Costa Rica, and Mexico.

Belize has received some refugees, mostly Salvadorans, and Guatemala, despite its problems, has also recently become a refuge for some Nicaraguans and Salvadorans. The majority of Central Americans applying for asylum in the United States are from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.

CONDITIONS IN REFUGEE GENERATING COUNTRIES

The economic and political situations in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are different, yet all of these countries have had difficulties with extensive economic and social inequities and the existence of human rights violations. El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala are experiencing active armed insurgencies within their borders. The reduction of the level of conflict depends on current Central American peace efforts and the willingness of the affected countries and other involved parties to implement the Esquipulas II agreements. In addition, there are currently evolving situations with outcomes that can influence emigration from Central America such as the emergence of a bipartisan U.S. policy towards the region, the election of a new President of El Salvador, the Sandinista government's ability to resolve the Nicaraguan economic crisis and to carry out promised future open elections, the regional governments' and United States' resolution of the future of the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance (contras), and the ability of the civilian governments of Guatemala and Honduras to retain their fragile democracies.

Conditions in Nicaragua

Since 1984, there has been a marked deterioration in the Nicaraguan economy because of adverse regional and extra-regional economic factors, the internal conflict, and disruptive economic policies. Inflation increased from an average of 32 percent per year from 1980 to 1984. In 1988, it stood at 20,000 percent;

although some reduction in the inflation rate was achieved, as of February 1989, the rate was increasing at a rate of about 100 percent per month.

The war and related military actions to depopulate certain areas of the country have displaced an estimated 200,000 families. In 1988 Hurricane Joan compounded the problem, generating an estimated 300,000 displaced persons and causing an estimated \$840 million in damages. An estimated 80,000 people left Nicaragua in 1988. We were informed during our December 1988 visit to Nicaragua that most of those emigrating are from the technical, professional and middle classes. Many went to Costa Rica and Honduras, and because Guatemala does not require visas, many reportedly went to Guatemala and then on to the United States by way of an "underground railroad" through Mexico. An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 Nicaraguans are believed to be in the United States illegally.

In March 1989, we testified before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs on U.S. policies affecting Nicaragua. We stated that because Nicaragua is pivotal to any regional solution for peace and stability, overall U.S. objectives toward Nicaragua must be approached in a comprehensive manner, not on a piecemeal basis. At issue is whether the United States should normalize relations with the Sandinista regime,

continue economic and political pressure, or offer economic incentives to encourage the promotion of democracy.

Conditions in El Salvador

El Salvador is currently the largest recipient of U.S. aid in Central America. Since 1981, it has received over \$3 billion. The aid has achieved progress in supporting a civilian, democratic form of government, averted the overthrow of the government by insurgents, and prevented an economic collapse. These efforts, however, have been severely hampered by the extremely limited absorptive capacity of the Salvadoran government, the lack of success in eliminating the insurgency, increased population growth, a 1986 earthquake, a drought, and the continuing regional economic crisis.

In 1987, the Salvadoran government had reduced the level of insurgency and active support for human rights matters had produced a concurrent decline in politically motivated deaths. However, we reported to Congressman Hamilton Fish, Jr. in May 1987, that most Salvadorans were experiencing "a pervasive fear of random violence." Salvadorans were concerned about the consequences of being viewed as sympathetic to either government security or guerilla forces. Some officials reported a widespread Salvadoran mistrust of government judicial institutions and

processes.¹ Since October 1987, the rate of political deaths has increased. Critics see the current conflict situation, at best, as a stalemate and both U.S. and Salvadoran officials agree that the insurgency will not be completely eliminated until the social and economic conditions contributing to it are eradicated and the insurgents participate within the democratic system. The ability of President-elect Cristiani's administration to effectively address this situation directly affects El Salvador's emigration and displaced persons problems.

We testified in March that the extent of the influence of the United States to resolve this situation is presently unclear. We stated then that, regardless of which party won the presidential election, the United States should encourage government-insurgent negotiations toward a settlement and condition U.S. assistance on government actions to reduce human rights abuses, enforce stricter financial controls over direct U.S. assistance, and implement democratic reforms. We expressed the view that, even if the insurgency continues, the United States needs to prioritize its objectives in El Salvador. If containing the insurgency takes precedence, economic reform and development will likely be delayed and prolonged balance-of-payments support will be required.

¹ILLEGAL ALIENS: Extent of Problem Experienced by Returned Salvadorans Not Determinable (GAO/NSIAD-87-158BR; May 12, 1987).

Over 200,000 persons, 4 percent of the Salvadoran population, are currently displaced. This represents a decline from an estimated 405,000 displaced in 1986, because they have returned to their homes, resettled, or emigrated. It is estimated that in this decade, as much as 800,000 persons, almost one quarter of El Salvador's population, have emigrated, most illegally, into the United States.

Conditions in Guatemala

Between 1978 and 1985 Guatemala experienced a period of intensely violent civil strife. The western highlands were devastated as military and guerrilla groups struggled for control of the countryside. Ruthless tactics employed by warring factions led to large scale movements of civilian populations seeking to escape the violence. Many displaced persons sought safety in less turbulent areas of Guatemala. Some fled as refugees to neighboring countries, especially Mexico, and others found their way to the United States.

The restoration of constitutional rule in 1986 under a popularly elected civilian administration has been accompanied by some economic stabilization and reduction in the reported level of human rights violations. However, Guatemala's overwhelming social and development problems, particularly among its indigenous Indian population, continue its vulnerability to a guerrilla threat and have not been resolved. Our review of U.S. programs in Central

America suggested that continuation of Congressional restrictions on military assistance to Guatemala should take into account the Guatemalan military's support of the civilian government and whether or not the governmental institutions established to protect and promote human rights can be effective.

The government is conducting programs and activities in the highland regions, which were the central focal point of the guerilla insurrection, to encourage and assist resettlement of displaced persons and refugees. These efforts are seriously hampered, however, by the Guatemalan government's resource constraints and limited absorptive capacity, the size, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the area, and the logistical difficulties of delivering assistance to such remote regions. Further, guerilla activity continues in some areas where returning refugees and displaced persons are settling and this threatens their safety.

Most of the villages we visited where repatriates and displaced persons have settled were characterized by limited economic opportunities and severely underdeveloped infrastructure. Lack of potable water is a major cause of disease among rural people and tuberculosis, malaria, and parasitical diseases are common. Infant mortality for the Indian children of these areas can reach 150 per 1,000 which is one of the highest rates in the world today.

NUMBERS AND CONDITIONS OF REFUGEES

As of August 1988, about 120,000 refugees from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala were registered with the UNHCR to receive temporary shelter, food, health and other humanitarian services. A description of the conditions and numbers of Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras and Costa Rica and of the displaced persons in El Salvador receiving UNHCR assistance is covered in a recently issued GAO report which we are submitting for the record.²

Large numbers of refugees are not registered primarily because they blend into the population and economy of the host country or, for political reasons, they receive support from sources other than the UNHCR. Estimates of their number vary. For example, unregistered Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras are estimated from 75,000 to 200,000, not counting the 50,000 Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance (contras) fighters and families supported directly by U.S. humanitarian assistance. State Department and UNHCR estimate that between 60,000 and 75,000 undocumented Nicaraguans are in Costa Rica. However, Costa Rican government sources suggest numbers as high as 250,000. An estimated 150,000 unregistered Guatemalans are in the Mexican state of Chiapas and from 50,000 to 70,000 Salvadorans are estimated to be in Mexican urban areas. The

²CENTRAL AMERICA: Conditions of Refugees and Displaced Persons (GAO/NSIAD-89-54; March 1, 1989).

State Department estimates there are about 4,500 refugees, primarily Salvadorans, in Belize.

Over 200,000 persons are currently displaced within El Salvador and estimates of displaced persons within Guatemala vary from 12,000 to 50,000. As many as 350,000 displaced persons are reported to be in Nicaragua.

While the flow of refugees has stabilized since the mid-1980s, conditions are such that they are generally unwilling to return to their homes until peace is restored and their safety and civil liberties can be guaranteed. Repatriations of some Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguan Indians are occurring from refugee sites in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Mexico.

Until recently, the primary refuge countries have willingly accommodated and assisted the refugees. However, economic and political strains from this are becoming evident. For example, the movement of families and supporters of the Nicaraguan resistance fighters into Honduras is considered by the Honduran Government to be a major security issue. Honduras and Costa Rica cite refugees as a source of declining health, economic, and security conditions. Costa Rica has established joint border patrols with Nicaragua and in February 1989 turned back about 300 Nicaraguans at the border.

ASYLUM APPLICATIONS

As previously discussed the conditions in Central America have contributed to large numbers of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans entering the United States and applying for asylum. The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reports a seven fold increase in Central American asylum requests over the past four years--from about 7,000 in 1985 to over 50,000 in 1988. The Los Angeles District Office received the most applications (28,500) and the Miami District Office was second (8,200). INS estimated that the 10 districts with the largest volume of applications will receive 76,900 in fiscal year 1989, a 37 percent increase from the previous year.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, our work has shown that continuation of the unsettled conditions in Central America will result in more challenges to the effective maintenance of U.S. immigration policies. A "get tough" policy by the INS regarding asylum applications may have an impact on reducing the number who apply, but does not address the very severe conditions that are motivating Central Americans to come to the United States and thus may not reduce the number of illegal Central American aliens entering our country.

Central America is at a critical juncture. Recent events including improved U.S.-Soviet relations, efforts by the Central American leaders to revive the Esquipulas II regional peace plan,

proposals for resettling the contras, deterioration of Nicaragua's economy, and the possibility of dialogue between the government and insurgents in El Salvador provide the United States and others a critical opportunity to guide and support efforts to bring peace and development to the Central American region.

GAO reviews of U.S. programs and activities in Central America suggest that the reduction of the numbers of Central Americans coming to the United States is directly affected by the ability of the Central American governments to achieve peace and economic stability, and for several of these nations to individually increase political stability, reduce social and economic inequities, and protect and promote respect for human rights. Bipartisan U.S. foreign policy initiatives, in agreement with other nations and international organizations, should continue to work towards these objectives.

This concludes my prepared statement. I would welcome any questions you may have.