

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Refugeedom and Humanitarianism in Cold War Central America:

Refugees in Honduras during the 1980s

Fionntán O'Hara

A thesis submitted to the Department of International History of the
London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, London, April 2024

Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made. This thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent.

I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party.

I declare that my thesis consists of 90,965 words.

Abstract

This thesis looks at Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras during the 1980s. During this time, Honduras, firmly allied with the United States (US), was involved in both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts from which the refugees had fled. Those from El Salvador came from regions in which the leftist guerrilla group, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, were particularly strong. The Honduran government saw these refugees as dangerous and potentially destabilising and thus they were confined to closed refugee camps. On the other hand, those from Nicaragua crossed into Honduras following conflict with the Sandinista government and so their anti-Communist credentials were, in the eyes of the Honduran government, secure. These refugees were granted freedom of movement. Comparing these two cases, this thesis explores the way in which refuge was politicised and intrinsic to the way the Cold War unfolded in Central America.

An array of actors were involved in the camps and settlements for these refugees; the refugees themselves, the Honduran government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the US embassy in Honduras, and a number of national and international aid and solidarity organisations. Moreover, the camps were also linked to guerrilla groups in El Salvador and Nicaragua. This thesis examines the interactions between these different groups, all of whom were operating in the context of the Cold War. In doing so, the thesis shows how the Cold War both limited the space for humanitarian action, but also how the Cold War shaped competing visions of humanitarianism. At the same time, refugees, and guerrilla groups linked to them, successfully utilised humanitarian demands and language to influence the actions of state and transnational actors. By taking a multi-archival approach along with oral histories, this thesis brings together both refugee and institutional perspectives, therefore enabling it to highlight the evolution and contested nature of refugeedom in Cold War Central America.

Acknowledgements

Four and something years can go very fast. When writing a PhD thesis they can also go very slow, and so I'd like to thank everyone who encouraged me along the way, it was needed!

Thank you to my examiners, I hope you find this thesis interesting.

My biggest thanks go to my supervisor, Tanya Harmer. Since I came to the LSE as a master's student, she has been unwaveringly supportive, encouraging, and kind to me. Thank you for always urging me to 'write one more sentence here', for highlighting strengths in my work that I could not see, and for your always insightful (and impressively quick) feedback.

Starting research just as a global pandemic got underway was certainly daunting. A special thanks is due to those librarians and archivists who scanned material for me to use, and so made this time more fruitful than it might otherwise have been. Unable to travel to archives during 2020, I turned to carrying out oral history interviews online. My heartfelt thanks to everyone who responded to emails and messages about their time in Honduras some forty years ago.

Conducting oral history interviews and listening to people's experiences, emotions, and reflections has been a privilege. This thesis would be much poorer in their absence, and so I thank everyone who was prepared to share their memories of the past with me.

My research trip to El Salvador in 2022 was particularly rewarding. It is no exaggeration to say that this would have been impossible without the help of Teresa Cruz. Thank you for encouraging me with my broken Spanish, for your friendship, company, openness, and help, it is forever appreciated. Thank you to Marisol, Roberto, Deisy, Evelyn, Tita, and Doña Emma for your warmth and help, and to Ebony at Voices on the Border.

Research trips to El Salvador, Switzerland, the United States, and France, would not have been possible without the generous support of the LSE International History Department and the LSE Phelan US Centre for which I am very thankful. I am thankful too

for those archivists working in the many different archives whose material makes this thesis what it is. I am truly grateful to the LSE for funding this PhD through a studentship.

From the first day of my PhD, I was warmly welcomed into the LSE PhD community by Molly Avery and Eline van Ommen. Both have been incredibly helpful and generous in the years since, thank you for your friendship. Undertaking a PhD in the company of Medha Bhattacharya and Charlotte Eaton has made the process much more fun than it might otherwise have been, thank you, I look forward to celebrating. At LSE and farther afield, thanks to those who offered friendship, support, and feedback on various bits of this thesis, in particular Anna Cant. The conference on Refugees and the Global Cold War was especially inspiring, thank you Bastiaan Bouwman. For instilling in me an interest in the history of humanitarianism during my undergraduate, a thanks to Kevin O'Sullivan. Thanks too, to Róisín Healy for encouraging me to think ambitiously during that time.

My life outside academia is what made this thesis possible. During my PhD, I continued to work part-time, and thanks is due to Will Mayne for being so flexible with this. One silver lining of 2020 was the chance to go home to Galway for several months. It was truly wonderful to spend such a long (if, given the context, strange) time back with my family. They have been a constant source of love and support, thank you to my siblings Ferdia, Meadhbh, and Kevin, and my mother, Patricia. Endless family discussions during my childhood no doubt sparked my (initially reluctant) interest in history – thank you. Back in London, I feel tremendously lucky to have such an incredible group of friends. Thank you for all the fun over the past few years. You know who you are, but a special thanks to Travis, Hugh, Carys, and Dylan who have been here from start to end. Don't be too shocked that I have finally finished, although I can't quite believe it either.

Finally, to Vanessa, thank you for showing me so much happiness, and for your endless enthusiasm, support, encouragement, and love.

Abbreviations

AFSC – American Friends Service Committee

AIM – American Indian Movement

ANACH – National Association of Honduran Peasants

ARDE – *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance)

ARENA – *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (Nationalist Republican Alliance)

CEDEN – *Comité Evangélico de Desarrollo y Emergencia* (Evangelical Community for National Development and Emergencies)

CEDOH – *Centro de Documentación de Honduras* (Documentation Centre of Honduras)

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CIREFCA – International Conference on Central American Refugees

CIS – Council for Inter-American Security

CISPES – Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador

CMA – Civilian Military Assistance

CODE – *Comité de Desarrollo y Emergencia* (Development and Emergency Committee)

CONARE – *Comisión Nacional para los Refugiados* (National Commission for Refugees)

COSUPUCA – *Comité de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Centro America* (Committee of Solidarity with the Peoples of Central America)

CRIPDES – *Comité Cristiano Pro-Desplazados de El Salvador* (Christian Committee of the Displaced)

CRS – Catholic Relief Services

DNI – *Dirección Nacional de Investigación* (National Investigation Directorate)

EC – European Community

ERP – *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army)

ERTC – *Ejército Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (Central American Workers' Revolutionary Army)

ETA – *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Freedom)

FAL – *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación* (Armed Forces of Liberation)

FDN – *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Democratic Force)

FENASTRAS – *Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños* (National Federation of Salvadoran Workers)

FMLN – *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)

FOA – Friends of the Americas

FPL – *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces)

FSLN – *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front)

FUNACAMH – *Frente de Unidad Nacional Campesino de Honduras* (United Front of Honduran Peasants)

FUSEP – *Fuerza de Seguridad Pública* (Public Security Force)

GAO – Government Accountability Office

ICVA – International Council of Voluntary Agencies

IITC – International Indian Treaty Council

ILCR – Indian Law Resource Centre

IRA – Irish Republican Army

KISAN – *Kos Indianka Aslasa Nicaragua* (Nicaragua Coast Indian Union)

LSF – *Liberté Sans Frontières* (Freedom Without Borders)

MASTA – *Moskitia Asla Takanka* (Unity of La Mosquitia)

MCC – Mennonite Central Committee

MISURA – Miskito, Sumu, Rama

MISURASATA – *Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Asla Takana*, (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Working Together)

MOPAWI – *Mosquitia Pawisa* (Agency for the Development of La Mosquitia)

MSF – *Médecins sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders)

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NHAO – Nicaraguan Humanitarian Affairs Office

NRF – Nicaraguan Refugee Fund

NSC – National Security Council

ONUSAL – United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador

ORDEN – *Organización Democrática Nacionalista* (National Democratic Organisation)

RN – *Resistencia Nacional* (National Resistance)

SHARE – Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research and Education Foundation

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UNG – National Peasant Union

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNO – United Nicaraguan Opposition

US – United States

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

WCC – World Council of Churches

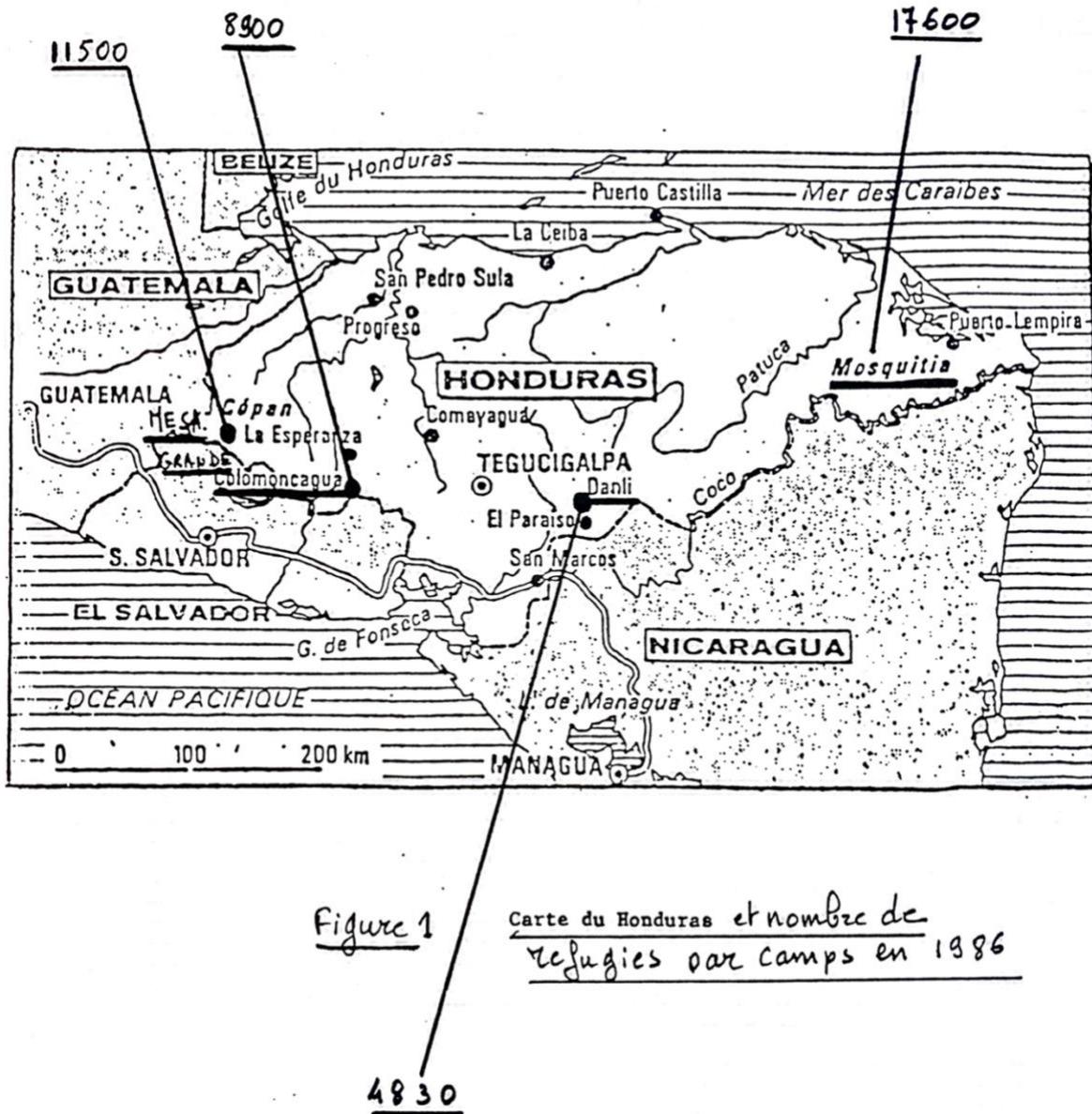
YATAMA – *Yapti Tasba Masrika nani* (Descendants of Mother Earth)

Table of Contents

Map of Refugee Camps in Honduras	10
Introduction	11
Chapter 1: A Solution of Last Resort: Arrival in Honduras and the Establishment of Refugee Camps (1970s – 1982)	37
Chapter 2: Contested Meanings of Refuge: Shaping Life in Honduran Refugee Camps	83
Chapter 3: Contested Relocations: Moving Refugees from the Border	123
Chapter 4: A Moral Salve: Cold War Refugee Politics in the United States	167
Chapter 5: The Contested Governance of Refugee Camps (1985 – 1989)	200
Chapter 6: Repatriation and Peace	244
Conclusion	280
Bibliography	294

Map of Refugee Camps in Honduras

Figure 1: Médecins sans Frontières map of refugee camps in Honduras with approximate camp population, 1986.



Source: as contained in file Honduras 80 – 88 réfugiés Salvadoriens, Médecins sans Frontières archives, Paris.

Introduction

Memories of life as a refugee in Honduras adorn the walls of Doña Emma's house in Chalatenango, El Salvador. As state-sponsored violence and repression intensified at the beginning of the 1980s she, and her children, crossed the border into Honduras, joining 9,000 other Salvadorans in the refugee camp of Mesa Grande.¹ On her wall today is a photograph of one of her sons, killed by the Salvadoran military after he crossed back from Honduras to El Salvador with the country's left-wing guerrilla group, the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN). A drawing, sketched by Doña Emma's son during his time in Honduras, depicts the refugees' flight from El Salvador, showing the Salvadoran military killing and bombing civilians. Next to the drawing hangs a photo of a young woman from the Basque Country. A medic who worked with the refugees in Honduras, she too was killed by the Salvadoran military after joining the FMLN's campaign in El Salvador. Alongside their photos, is a picture of Father Brendan Forde, the local priest in Chalatenango, who frequently visited Doña Emma, until his death in 2023. Originally from Ireland, and known affectionately as Padre Bernardo, he also assisted Doña Emma and other refugees from Mesa Grande as they returned to El Salvador in 1986 in the midst of the ongoing civil war.²

In the North of El Salvador, in Ciudad Segundo Montes, Morazán, during a field trip in 2022, I again encountered international connections. Ciudad Segundo Montes, like Doña Emma's community, was formed by refugees returning from Honduras, this time from the camp of Colomoncagua, once home to 8,000 Salvadorans.³ In the middle of the town's local museum, which is dedicated to preserving the memory of the community's time in Honduras,

¹ Leonardo Franco (UNHCR Geneva), 'Numbers of Refugees as of 30 September 1983 in the Northern Latin American Countries covered by R.O San José, B.O Mexico, and B.O Tegucigalpa', 30/9/1983, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.GEN.Sal Vol.3, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees archive, Geneva (hence: UNHCR).

² Author's visit to Chalatenango, November 2022.

³ Franco, 'Number of Refugees...'.

hangs a European Union flag.⁴ A photograph of an Irish humanitarian worker who spent nearly a decade in Colomoncagua and who is described by the museum's manager as a 'great leader' is also prominently displayed. Nor are such international connections confined to the past. At the community's annual celebration commemorating the date of the refugees' return, posters point to Spanish government funding of local health projects. 'Long live the community, long live international solidarity' is the closing line of many of the celebration's speeches, statements which are passionately echoed by the audience.

Former refugees are not the only ones with vivid memories of their time in Honduras. 'Honduras' explained Roberto Meier, a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) officer, 'marked me for life'.⁵ Posted to work in refugee camps in Honduras in 1984, at the start of his decades long UNHCR career, Meier, who is Argentinian, remembers the intense pressure of working in Honduras, and the difficulty of providing assistance in a highly politicised Cold War environment. Coming from FMLN strongholds, and fleeing El Salvador because of Salvadoran military incursions into that territory, the refugees were understood by the Honduran regime as being threatening to Honduran national security because of their presumed connections to the FMLN. In the context of Cold War Central America, the FMLN represented not just a threat to the Salvadoran government but, as the Honduran state understood it, a threat to the entire region, particularly in the aftermath of the 1979 triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in neighbouring Nicaragua. The Honduran government and military, allied with their Salvadoran counterparts in countering what they saw as a regional revolutionary threat, viewed those who assisted these Salvadoran refugees with suspicion. As a result, recalled Meier, they saw the UNHCR as working for the Left. Refugees, and those working with them, were occasionally killed by the Honduran military.

⁴ Author's visit to Morazán, October / November 2022.

⁵ Roberto Meier, author's interview, online, 20/4/2021.

Meanwhile, the refugees were confined by the military to closed camps from which they were not permitted to stray. Despite this hostility and danger, Honduras still represented a reprieve from the scorched earth campaign of the Salvadoran military.

These Salvadoran refugees, spread out among four camps, and who numbered 19,000 by 1983, were not the only group who sought refuge in Honduras.⁶ In the aftermath of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) victory and the fall of the Nicaraguan dictator, General Anastasio Somoza García, thousands of exiled Nicaraguans returned home. But others began to leave. The first to do so were Somoza's most ardent supporters and former members of his National Guard.⁷ Many went to Honduras, where, supported by Argentinian and American advisors, they soon organised in armed opposition to the Sandinistas.⁸ These counterrevolutionaries, or Contra, as they became known, were soon joined in Honduras by Miskito Indians who left Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast as the Sandinista's relationship with the country's indigenous population deteriorated.⁹ A small number of refugees from other indigenous groups soon followed.¹⁰ Many Miskito Indians viewed Sandinista attempts to expand the reach of the Nicaraguan state to the country's previously overlooked, and culturally distinct, Atlantic Coast with suspicion. Among a population in which the majority were members of the Moravian Church, mistrust of the Sandinista government's communist links was also strong. For their part, the

⁶ Franco, 'Number of Refugees...'; The number of refugees varied throughout the decade, partly because of refugee movements but also because of inaccuracies in statistics.

⁷ For information on Nicaraguan ladino refugees in Honduras see Elvia Elizabeth Gómez García, 'Refugiados Nicaragüenses y desplazados en Honduras en la década de los ochenta', *Historia Contemporánea* 65, (2021): 163 – 195.

⁸ Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America 1977-1984*, (Ohio: Center for International Studies: 1997).

⁹ Key works which focus on Nicaragua's Indigenous populations and the Atlantic Coast include Baron Pineda, *Shipwrecked Identities: Navigating Race on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast* (London: Rutgers University Press: 2006); Charles Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State*, (California: Stanford University Press: 2011); Mateo Jarquín, 'Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981-1982', *Cold War History* 18 (2017): 99-107.

¹⁰ Differences between the Miskito refugees and the small number of Mayanga refugees are explored in Chapter 1.

Sandinista government interpreted Miskito demands for greater autonomy as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) manoeuvre against the Revolution. By 1983 over 15,000 Miskito refugees had crossed into Honduras from where an armed Indian opposition to the Sandinista regime now operated.¹¹

Unlike Doña Emma and her fellow Salvadorans, these refugees from Nicaragua were not confined to closed camps by the Honduran military. Indeed, their ‘camps’ were often more akin to settlements, whereby refugees were offered land by the Honduran government. Although this stark difference can partly be attributed to the fact that the Miskito refugees crossed into the Honduran Mosquitia, a region relatively untouched by the Honduran state and home to Honduras’ Miskito Indian population, the experience was largely shaped by the fact that the Honduran government did not see these refugees, as they did the Salvadorans, as ideologically threatening.¹² In fact, while the Honduran military lent support to the Salvadoran military in fighting the FMLN, it supported the various Contra groups in their war on the Sandinista Revolution.

Despite these differences the Miskito refugees were, like their Salvadoran counterparts, assisted by the UNHCR. Initially housed in a refugee camp at Mocerón, and eventually dispersed across a string of settlements in the Honduran Mosquitia, a number of national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provided humanitarian and developmental relief to them. Like the Salvadorans, they too sought to utilise international connections to draw attention to their plight. As the Contra’s US-sponsored war against the Sandinistas intensified, and as the Miskito Contra forces became increasingly intertwined with the wider Contra movement, many humanitarian workers grew concerned

¹¹ Franco, ‘Number of refugees...’.

¹² For more on the Honduran Mosquitia, including the relationship between the Honduran Miskito population and the Nicaraguan refugee population see Danira Miralda Bulnes, *Latwan laka danh takisa: los pueblos originarios y la guerra de baja intensidad en el territorio de la Moskitia, República de Honduras*, (Tegucigalpa: Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia: 2012); Isabel Chiriboga, *Espíritus de vida y muerte: los Miskitu Hondureños en época de guerra*, (Honduras: Editorian Guaymuras: 2002).

that the Miskito refugees, and the humanitarian aid network attending to them, were being utilised by the Sandinista's opponents to justify the Contra War.¹³ As with the Salvadoran refugee camps, then, unpicking events in the Mosquitia brings out a complex history of refugeedom shaped by a plurality of actors and situations operating in the midst of localised conflicts and the global Cold War.

Research Questions and Methodology

This thesis examines the Salvadoran refugee camps of Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua and the Miskito refugee camps and settlements (collectively referred to as camps here) in the Honduran Mosquitia.¹⁴ There are multiple ways in which one could write the history of these camps. A history told from the refugees' perspective would detail the experiences, challenges and opportunities faced by this population, and the ways in which they tried to improve their situation and advocate for change in their home countries. Indeed, in her seminal 2010 work, *Beyond Displacement*, historian Molly Todd has done just that, convincingly and rightly arguing that the Salvadoran refugee camps were places of *campesino* activism.¹⁵

Foregrounding refugee voices through extensive oral history interviews, Todd's scholarship challenges narratives of refugees as apolitical and passive victims of war, and highlights continuities between life before and during refuge. An alternative approach could be to write a history from the perspective of the UNHCR or humanitarian organisations. Fiona Terry, a former practitioner with Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), took this approach with *Condemned to Repeat?*, published in 2002, which looks at refugee camps in Honduras and

¹³ For works on the Reagan administration's war on the Sandinistas see Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977 – 1990*, (New York: Free Press: 1996); William Robinson & Kent Norworthy, *David and Goliath: Washington's War Against Nicaragua*, (New York: Monthly Review Press: 1987); Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, (Boston: South End Press: 1988).

¹⁴ Along with Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande were two other smaller camps for Salvadoran refugees – San Antonio and Buenos Aires, both located near Colomoncagua. Where relevant, particularly in chapter 5, events in San Antonio are referred to in this thesis.

¹⁵ Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press: 2010).

shows how the FMLN and Contra forces used refugee assistance for their own ends.¹⁶ These case studies, along with ones on Pakistan, Tanzania, and others, are used by Terry to investigate how the misuse of humanitarian aid by armed forces can prolong conflicts, a moral dilemma faced by NGOs. A third, but by no means final, method of writing this history could be to analyse the diplomatic relationships between Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and the UNHCR in regard to these camps. Such a history would be incomplete without paying attention to the role of the United States whose diplomatic, economic, and military influence in Honduras sharply increased during this decade.¹⁷

Building on this existing scholarship, this thesis takes a different approach. It writes the history of these camps from multiple perspectives, using them as places in which to examine the interaction between the range of actors involved with them. Most notably, this includes the refugees themselves, their associated guerrilla groups (the FMLN and the Contra), the Honduran government, Honduran civil society groups, the UNHCR, international aid and solidarity organisations, and the Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, and US governments. This thesis examines how, over the course of the decade, these actors influenced, shaped – and competed with one another to shape – life within the camps. In doing so, each sought to define what it meant to be a refugee, collectively, therefore, determining the shape of ‘refugeedom’ in Cold War Honduras. What follows is a study of these alternative visions of refugeedom and their implications on the ground in Honduras and further afield for the regional and global Cold War and its relationship with humanitarianism.¹⁸

¹⁶ Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (London: Cornell University Press: 2002).

¹⁷ Works on Honduras are discussed in further detail later, but a particularly useful text here is Deborah Schulz & Donald Schulz, *The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1994).

¹⁸ The concept of refugeedom is discussed shortly and it is a term with a history dating back to the First World War but, as defined in the important article ‘What is Refugee History, now?’, it incorporates both state and non-

On one level, this thesis is a local history, tightly bounded both spatially and temporally. As Kevin O’Sullivan and Enrico Del Lago have noted, such ‘micro-studies’ have the potential to ‘lay bare the true mechanics of humanitarian action’ by combining the specificity of humanitarian work with the context under which it occurs.¹⁹ In this vein, this is simultaneously a global history. The actors at which this thesis looks were highly aware of, and influenced by, the global context in which they operated. As Sebastian Conrad has highlighted, this melding of the micro and global is not as contradictory as it might first appear, with global history encompassing works which analyse ‘one concrete subject in its spatial and social specificity’ while positioning that subject in its global context.²⁰ Refugee camps are particularly well-suited to this approach, being places in which the local, international, and transnational interact. In this respect, they are, in Jochen Lingelbach’s description, ‘portals of globalisation’; spaces, like urban centres, port cities, or metropolises where actors with different ‘identitarian spatial references’ come together.²¹

A history told from multiple perspectives is necessarily multi-archival. The UNHCR archive in Geneva offers the perspective of that institution and its staff, but also contains valuable insights into the manoeuvrings and priorities of the Honduran government. As other scholars of refugee history have noted, the numerous letters and petitions from refugees and their supporters to the UNHCR also allow for a recovering of the refugee voice, detailing frustrations with the Honduran authorities and the UNHCR itself.²² These petitions, along with the reports of camp visitors, help build a picture of camp life while also showing how

state actors which define ‘refugee as a category’ while insisting ‘upon the need to consider refugee as an active and assertive historical presence’. Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, Peter Gatrell, ‘What is Refugee History, now?’, *Journal of Global History* 17 (2022): 1

¹⁹ Kevin O’Sullivan and Enrico Dal Lago, ‘Introduction: Toward a New History of Humanitarianism’, *Moving the Social* 57, (2017): 8.

²⁰ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2016), 129.

²¹ Jochen Lingelbach, ‘Refugees in the Imperial Order of Things: Citizen, Subject, and Polish Refugees in Africa (1942-50)’, *Africa Today* 69 (2022): 80.

²² P. Gatrell, A. Ghoshal, K. Nowal, A. Dowdall, ‘Reckoning with Refugeeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History’, *Social History*, 46 (2021): 70-95.

concerns for these refugees fit with wider campaigns on human rights and the Central American conflicts. The archives of the American Friends Service Committee, the British Refugee Council, War on Want, and Pax Christi all shed light on linkages between refugees, humanitarian workers, and human rights activists, as do the holdings of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley on the Sanctuary Movement and Going Home Campaign.

As becomes clear throughout this thesis, there was significant diversity in the humanitarian relief organisations working in these camps. Nationality, religion, political-alignment, and different understandings of humanitarianism separated these organisations. Along with information available from the UNHCR archives, the archives of Médecins sans Frontières, the Mennonite Central Committee, Oxfam UK, and Save the Children UK all provided material by which to build out this complex story.

The Digital National Security Archive's collections on El Salvador and Nicaragua proved invaluable in providing the US side of the story, as did the CIA's Freedom of Information Act Online Reading Room. Reports from the British Embassy in Honduras, found in the United Kingdom's National Archives, regularly detailed Honduras' internal political situation, the refugee situation, and developments during the Contra War.

The thesis also draws on over 70 oral history interviews conducted during this project. These interviews, among the richest sources for understanding the history that follows, include accounts from former UNHCR officials, aid practitioners, US government officials, and former refugees. The latter, largely conducted during research in Morazán and Chalatenango in El Salvador, proved vital for two reasons. The first is in helping to construct an understanding of what it meant to be a Salvadoran refugee in Honduras during the 1980s. This necessarily echoes and builds upon existing research, particularly that of Molly Todd.²³

²³ Oral history interviews are but one method of relocating refugees 'to the centre of historical enquiry'. As Gatrell et al. have written, refugee voices can be found in letters and petitions. Luis Roniger, meanwhile, has

Secondly, former refugees spoke candidly and openly about their collaboration with the FMLN, recalling with pride the work they did while in the camps. By contrast, such work had been carried out in strict secrecy at the time. And, while the Digital National Security Archive and archives of the Hoover Institute give a US and Salvadoran intelligence perspective on this collaboration, these interviews were key to understanding the dynamics of power within the camps by providing an insider's, rather than outsider's, perspective. That many former refugees were now willing to break this secrecy is likely due to the passage of time and the legitimising effect of the FMLN's electoral victory in 2009 and subsequent decade in government. At the same time, oral history interviews with former refugees are not representative of the entire refugee experience. The former refugees of Mesa Grande interviewed for this thesis largely returned to El Salvador in 1987, and so were unable to provide detail on life in the camp after that time. Interviews were also conducted in areas heavily populated by former refugees. Those interviewed were therefore less likely to have clashed with the wider refugee community than those who chose to live elsewhere. For this reason, this thesis also draws on UNHCR protection reports to gain insight into the difficulties faced by dissenting refugees.

Unfortunately, the current political situation in Nicaragua precluded research in that country and, as a result, the Miskito perspective is less developed than that of the Salvadoran refugees. Nonetheless, the papers of Bernard Nietschmann, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, and Martin Diskin, three American academics with an extensive interest in, and involvement with, Nicaragua's Indian population provided insight to this story.²⁴ So, too, did the archives

highlighted the role of testimonial literature of Latin American exile. P. Gatrell, A. Ghoshal, K. Nowal, A. Dowdall, 'Reckoning with Refugeeedom'; Luis Roniger, 'Displacement and Testimony: Recent History and the Study of Exile and Post-exile', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 29 (2016): 111-133.

²⁴ The papers of Bernard Nietschmann and Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz are held in the Bancroft Library, Berkeley while the papers of Martin Diskin are held by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The work of Ortiz and Nietschmann is discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

of the Moravian Church Board of World Mission in Pennsylvania which contain correspondence from refugees and reports which detail refugee perspectives.

In bringing together these voices this thesis asks three over-arching questions. The first asks, what do we learn about the Central American conflicts of the 1980s by looking at them through the lens of refugee camps? Refugee camps were not merely overshadowed by these conflicts but were theatres of them. Within these theatres, actors defied easy categorisation along an East-West Cold War divide. Instead, actors melded the language of the Cold War with that of humanitarianism and human rights, seeking to cast their very political objectives in apolitical language. Refugees, I argue, played the role of a moral salve, with Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees used (not necessarily cynically) by the Left and Right to justify their stances on the Central American conflicts. By focusing on refugee camps, where campesinos and indigenous people came into frequent contact with combatants, solidarity activists, humanitarian workers, and others, we also gain new perspectives on the violence, resistance, political, cultural, and social projects embedded within these conflicts.

Secondly, this thesis asks, what shaped humanitarianism in 1980s Honduras? This, certainly, is related to the previous question, with the Central American conflicts hugely impacting humanitarian action. Yet beyond, and related to the Cold War, were other factors. Most concretely, this question asks how different actors – the refugees, governments, the UNHCR, aid agencies, and others – tried to influence humanitarian aid within the refugee camps and for what reasons. Beyond this, the thesis also examines the political and ideological forces constructing different visions of humanitarianism in the 1980s. In this regard, the specificity of the 1980s is important. By this stage, as is more fully discussed below, some humanitarian actors had begun to adopt the language of human rights, melding two previously distinct fields together. At the same time, the changing nature of the Cold War

meant that humanitarianism and the defence of human rights were increasingly being invoked to justify geopolitical interventions. By posing this question within the confines of the refugee camp, and thus bringing together debates around the conceptualisation of humanitarianism with attempts to influence the provision of humanitarian assistance, this thesis reveals the decentralised and at times chaotic ways in which humanitarianism and refugee politics operated in the context of violent conflict and the Cold War, and with what consequences.

The third and final question posed by this thesis is how the Cold War shaped experiences of refugeedom in Central America. From this simple question comes a range of sub-questions. Refugeedom, after all, is a broad term, incorporating the relationship between relief workers and refugees, the ‘rules and practices’ of government and other officials in managing refugees, along with the ‘cultural and social worlds of refugees’.²⁵ The Cold War, meanwhile, certainly includes US policy in Central America but, as historians including Odd Arne Westad, Greg Grandin, and Tanya Harmer have argued, it was a multi-dimensional conflict encompassing local, regional, transnational, and international actors operating in a multiplicity of spaces.²⁶ Moreover, as Harmer has noted, ‘ideas at the heart of the global Cold War’ became ‘enmeshed into the fabric of society, politics, and individuals’ worldviews’ leading, as Grandin and Gilbert Joseph have described it, to the ‘internationalisation and politicisation of everyday life’.²⁷ Taking into account these conceptual frameworks, this thesis examines how the Cold War, in both its ideological and geopolitical dimensions, impacted refugees, refugee policy and practice, and humanitarian action in 1980s Honduras.

²⁵ P. Gatrell, A. Ghoshal, K. Nowal, A. Dowdall, ‘Reckoning with Refugeedom’, 75

²⁶ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2005); Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2011); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2011).

²⁷ Tanya Harmer, *Beatriz Allende: A Revolutionary Life in Cold War Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2020), 4; Gilbert Joseph, “What We Now Know”, *In From the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War* Gilbert Joseph, Daniela Spenser, Emily Rosenberg (eds), (North Carolina: Duke University Press: 2008), 4.

Particularly relevant to this question is the comparative element of this thesis. The Salvadoran and Miskito refugees fell on opposite sides of the Cold War divide. One group was linked to a left-wing guerrilla movement which opposed a US ally while the other was linked to a US-supported guerrilla movement which opposed a Cuban-supported revolutionary government. As briefly outlined earlier, this, along with other factors discussed in Chapter One, led the Honduran government to confine the Salvadoran refugees to closed camps and the Miskito refugees to open ones. The comparative aspect of this thesis should not, however, be taken as a suggestion that there was a symmetry between the groups. It is important to acknowledge that the scale of the violence from which the Salvadoran refugees fled was far beyond that faced by the Miskito refugees. An estimated 75,000 people were killed during the Salvadoran Civil War, with the state responsible for the vast majority of killings.²⁸ Civilian deaths far-outnumbered combatants.²⁹ According to Americas Watch, meanwhile, some 300 civilians were killed by Sandinista security forces.³⁰ The challenges faced by these two groups while in Honduras were also often very different in nature, and this thesis does not attempt to equally divide its analysis between the two populations. Nonetheless, the stark differences between the two have much to tell us about the Cold War's impact not just on refugee policy, but also on humanitarian action. In some instances, concern for each refugee population was, as in the case of the Ronald Reagan administration, largely predicated on whether the population's plight served one's position in the Central American conflicts. That both Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees faced serious protection problems in Honduras, albeit of different scales, speaks to the fact that the Nicaraguan refugees' position

²⁸ Mitchell A. Seligson & Vincent McElhinny, 'Low-Intensity Warfare, High-Intensity Death: The demographic impact of the wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 21 (1996): 211-241

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.; The report of the United Nations sponsored Truth Commission on the Salvadoran Civil War means that statistics on that conflict are more readily available than the Contra War. However, even those that dispute the Americas Watch figure put the number of civilians killed by the Sandinistas at 2,000 demonstrating that the two conflicts were of a completely different scale and nature.

as a moral salve to the Contra cause did not overcome their position as refugees, an inherently vulnerable group.

Honduras in the 1980s is a particularly fruitful site by which to look at the relationship between humanitarianism, regional conflict, and the Cold War, which has a relevance outside of the specific context in which this thesis is grounded. Displacement was a feature of the 1980s Central American Cold War, with millions internally displaced or forced to cross international borders. Although estimates vary, an August 1982 UNHCR publication put the number of refugees in Mexico and Central America at nearly 300,000.³¹ The situation related to El Salvador was particularly extreme – by 1986 over one million had left the country while half a million were internally displaced.³² In Guatemala, these figures stood at over 250,000 and over 750,000 respectively.³³

Although Honduras was neither the Latin American country with the largest Central American refugee population during this time (Mexico), nor the Central American country with the largest such population (Guatemala), it stands out for several reasons. The first is that, as already discussed, it hosted refugees on both sides of the Cold War divide. Second, Honduras was itself an active participant in the Central American conflicts, assisting both the Salvadoran military and the Contra. Finally, although Honduras was not home to the largest Central American refugee population, it was home to the largest UNHCR-assisted population.³⁴ Moreover, while other countries, such as Thailand and Pakistan, were also home to highly politicised refugee programmes during this time period, the Honduran government – unlike its Pakistani or Thai equivalents, which became directly involved – was

³¹ ‘UNHCR Information: Central America, September 1982’, Save the Children UK archive, Cadbury Library Birmingham, SCF/OP/4/HOD/11 (hence: SCF).

³² Christina Garcia, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2006), 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁴ ‘UNHCR Information: Central America, September 1982’.

determined to keep the actual organisation of these programmes at arm's length.³⁵ The relative autonomy which the Honduran government thus granted the UNHCR, coupled with the depth of Tegucigalpa's involvement with the Cold War, means that Honduras offers an illuminating case study of the Cold War's interaction with humanitarianism and humanitarian actors.

Historiography

In charting the history of refugee camps in Honduras, this thesis draws on, and contributes to, three distinct strands of historiography. The first is that on the Central American conflicts of the 1980s.³⁶ Given that this thesis looks at both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts, along with the situation in Honduras, this literature was important in ensuring that this thesis grounds the refugees in the specific national and regional contexts from which they came.

The Salvadoran conflict has given rise to a broad body of historical work, from Russell Crandall's *The Salvadoran Option*, which details the support given to the Salvadoran government by three successive U.S. presidential administrations – Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush – to Elisabeth Wood's *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, which tackles the question of why some peasants supported the guerrilla forces of the FMLN, and why some did not.³⁷ The FMLN, founded in October 1980 at the urgings, as Andrea Oñate-Madrado has highlighted, of Fidel Castro, united five leftist guerrilla forces, the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP),

³⁵ See, for example, Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat*.

³⁶ While a more focused discussion of select works follows, see: Dirk Kruijt, *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America*, (New York: Zed Books: 2008); James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America*, (London: Verso: 1988); Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (New York: W.W. Norton: 1993); William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1998).

³⁷ Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003); Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2016).

the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación* (Armed forces of Liberation, FAL), the *Resistencia Nacional* (National Resistance, RN), the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL) and the *Ejército Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (Central American Workers' Revolutionary Army, ERTC).³⁸ This Cuban link notwithstanding, the FMLN, Joaquín Chavez persuasively argues, was strongly rooted in the local Salvadoran context, with its military campaign drawing support from a peasant movement which turned into a 'potent rural insurgency'.³⁹ By bringing together the Old and New Salvadoran Left, the FMLN, Chavez demonstrates, 'fomented a radical anticapitalist ideology among peasant communities' although, at the same time, the involvement of these communities in the insurgency was 'first and foremost a matter of survival'.⁴⁰ Eschewing a focus on the FMLN, Molly Todd, meanwhile, details the political activism and organisation of Salvadoran refugees in Honduras.⁴¹

This thesis' contribution to the historiography of the Salvadoran Civil War is twofold. Although it reiterates Todd's conclusions regarding the agency of the Salvadoran refugees, it differs in its conclusions regarding the nature of their participation in the Salvadoran conflict. It explicitly outlines the FMLN's role within the camps, and the refugees' contributions to the FMLN's military (not only political) struggle. It is important to note that detailing the role played by these refugee camps in the FMLN's campaign does not justify the refugees' persecution by the Honduran military, regardless of the fact that such persecution was done on that basis. To follow this thinking is to remain trapped within the zero-sum logic of the Cold War. Rather, detailing how and why refugees risked their lives to support the FMLN, even when they were removed from the conflict's immediate violence, demonstrates the

³⁸ Andrea Oñate-Madrado, 'The Red Affair: FMLN-Cuban Relations during the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-92', *Cold War History* 11 (2011): 133-154.

³⁹ Joaquín M. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017): 198

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 202, 220.

⁴¹ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*.

depth of support for the FMLN's campaign. Moreover, acknowledging the refugees' FMLN links means that the refugees' astuteness in navigating a complex regional and global landscape and understanding the limits of what they could say at the time, can be fully brought to bear.

Establishing the FMLN's role within the camps also allows this thesis to analyse the differences between FMLN factions. Although the RN and FAL had a presence in Mesa Grande, the FPL dominated here while the ERP was the sole force in Colomoncagua. Both the FPL and the ERP were the largest of the FMLN factions, collectively accounting for nearly 70% of FMLN combatants by 1984.⁴² Within El Salvador, each group had its own base of support, principally Morazán for the ERP and Chalatenango for the FPL, two of the poorest departments in El Salvador.⁴³ While the FPL adopted a Maoist approach of a 'prolonged people's war', the ERP ascribed to Che Guevara's foco model in which the ERP's role would serve as a vanguard.⁴⁴ The FPL, as Chavez has described, was one of Latin America's first guerrilla organisations to 'formulate an alternative revolutionary paradigm to Guevara's foco', combining social movements with urban and rural guerrillas.⁴⁵ The FPL therefore had a more developed civilian support base than the more militaristic ERP.⁴⁶ The ways in which this, and other, differences impacted the daily life of those living in refugee camps is, however, largely absent from existing work.⁴⁷ The different loyalties of Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua allow for an exploration of these differences, showing the multi-faceted impact of these allegiances, from gender roles to the manner of the refugees' return.

⁴² Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilisation in El Salvador*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013), 252.

⁴³ Leigh Binford, 'Hegemony in the Interior of the Salvadoran Revolution: The ERP in Northern Morazán', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4 (1999): 5.

⁴⁴ Viterna, *Women in War*, 247.

⁴⁵ Chavez, *Poets and Prophets*, 169.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁷ Jenny Pearce's ground-breaking work explored the FPL's relationship with those in the liberated zones in Chalatenango, Jenny Pearce, *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1986); Jocelyn Viterna has looked at how experiences varied by FMLN faction within El Salvador, Viterna, *Women in War*.

While not the focus of this thesis, events in the smaller Salvadoran camp of San Antonio, aligned to the ERTC, and home to about 1,500 refugees, are detailed in Chapter Five.

In comparison to the existing literature on the FMLN, less has been written on the anti-Sandinista guerrillas, or the Contra. Existing works have largely focused on the Contra's role within the Ronald Reagan administration's Central American policy with the role of Miskito Indians in opposing the Sandinista government rather overlooked.⁴⁸ A notable exception to this is Mateo Jarquín, who has shown how Nicaragua's 'ethno-racial fissures' contributed to the breakdown of relations between the Sandinista revolutionary government and those on the Atlantic Coast.⁴⁹ As demonstrated by Jarquín, the armed Miskito insurgency was rooted in issues which transcended Washington's war on the Sandinistas.

Although some, such as Verónica Rueda Estrada, give an overview of the personalities and divisions characterising the armed Miskito movement – from groups more closely linked to the wider Contra cause, to those eager to stress their independence from it – a detailed history of this movement has not yet been written.⁵⁰ This thesis does not attempt such a history, but the experiences of Miskito refugees in Honduras were so closely linked to developments and conflicts within the Miskito Contra movement that an understanding of refugee life is not possible without detailing these. In this respect, this thesis adds to our understanding of the Contra War, exploring the Miskito Contra's complicated and evolving development and the ways in which this impacted daily refugee life.

In particular, as the decade progressed and as the Miskito Contra grew increasingly linked with the wider Contra movement, Miskito refugees became disillusioned with those who claimed to represent them. As will be discussed, the Miskito guerrilla leadership was

⁴⁸ See, for example, the previously cited works by Sklar, Robinson & Norsworthy, and Kagan.

⁴⁹ Mateo C. Jarquín, 'Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981-1982', *Cold War History* 18 (2017): 101.

⁵⁰ Verónica Rueda Estrada, *Recompas, recontras, revueltos y rearmados: Posguerra y conflictos por la tierra en Nicaragua 1990-2008*, (Mexico: Instituto Mora: 2015), Ch. 2.

riven with rivalries, giving rise to a number of different splinter groups. The earliest of these, *Miskito, Sumu, Rama and Sandinista, Asla Takana* (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Working Together, MISURASATA), formed in November 1979, initially emphasised its support for the Sandinista Revolution but this soon gave way to opposition.⁵¹ In 1981 MISURA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama) was formed. The largest and best-funded of the Miskito movements, it operated from Honduras while MISURASATA was primarily based in Costa Rica. Outside of these Miskito groups, the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Democratic Force, FDN), also based in Honduras and comprised of mostly former members of Somoza's National Guard, and the *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, ARDE), led by former Sandinista combatant Edén Pastora from Costa Rica, made up the bulk of Contra forces.⁵² Although it was the FDN which, at the start of the decade, was most closely linked to the CIA, all groups eventually came into the CIA's orbit as they searched for weapons and funding.

Historians of Latin America have long argued that transnational and international factors, in relation to domestic dynamics, were hugely important in shaping the Cold War in the region.⁵³ In the Nicaraguan case, recent works by Eline van Ommen and Mateo Jarquín have shed light on the international dimensions of the Sandinista Revolution and in so doing have also revealed a lot about the domestic history of the FSLN government.⁵⁴ In the Salvadoran case, there is a rich body of work on the role of solidarity activists within the

⁵¹ Eric Rodrigo Meringer has written on the evolution of Miskito organisation before and after the Sandinista victory. Eric Rodrigo Meringer, 'The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation: Intraethnic division among Nicaragua's Miskito people during the Sandinista era', *The Oral History Review* 37 (2010): 1-17.

⁵² For a background on the Contra forces see William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press: 1998), 257-267.

⁵³ For recent scholarship on Latin America and the Cold War see *Latin America and the Global Cold War*, Thomas Field Jr, Stella Krepp, Vanni Pettina (eds), (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2020).

⁵⁴ Eline van Ommen, *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War*, (California: University of California Press: 2023); Mateo Jarquín, *The Sandinista Revolution: A Global Latin American History*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2024).

conflict with Héctor Perla emphasising the role played by Salvadorans within these groups.⁵⁵ Although historians have looked at the Contra's transnational links with the extreme Right (of which more, later), there has been little work done on the links between the Miskito Contra and Indigenous rights activists. A notable exception is a chapter by James Jenkins in *Beyond the Eagle's Shadow* which, like this thesis, details some of the connections between the Miskito Contra and Indigenous rights activists in the US.⁵⁶ These activists were strange – and uncomfortable – bedfellows of the Contra's Cold War which, as will be shown, ultimately fractured Indigenous rights groups.

While van Ommen, Jarquín, and others including Jessica Stites Mor focus on the transnational links of the Left, historians have also recently shed important new light on the extreme Right.⁵⁷ Molly Avery has, for example, detailed Chilean and Argentine support for the extreme Right counterrevolutionary movements in Guatemala and El Salvador, while Kyle Burke has revealed the network of non-state actors involved in the Contra War.⁵⁸ Although Burke, Avery, and Patrice McSherry note the role of Honduras in supporting both the Contra and the Salvadoran military, however, an analysis of Honduras' role – including its geographical positionality, its government, its local population and non-state actors' involvement – in the Cold War has not yet been carried out.⁵⁹ A further contribution of this thesis then is to examine, through the lens of refugee camps, the history of Honduran

⁵⁵ Héctor Perla, 'Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement', in *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 136-58

⁵⁶ James Jenkins, "The Indian Wing: Nicaraguan Indians, Native American Activists, and US Foreign Policy, 1979-1990", in *Beyond the Eagle's Shadow: New Histories of Latin America's Cold War*, ed. Garrard, Lawrence, Moreno, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 2013).

⁵⁷ Jessica Stites Mor, ed. *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity in Cold War Latin America*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2013).

⁵⁸ Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2018); Molly Avery, 'The Latin American Anticommunist International: Chile, Argentina and Central America, 1977-1984' (PhD Dissertation, London, London School of Economics and Political Science: 2022); See also, Aaron T. Bell, 'Transnational Conservative Activism and the Transformation of the Salvadoran Right, 1967-1982' (PhD Dissertation, Washington D.C, American University, 2016).

⁵⁹ Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield: 2005).

government, military, and civil society.⁶⁰ While not disputing Honduras' role as a staunch US ally, this thesis highlights how the Honduran government's domestic concerns at times challenged, and triumphed over, Cold War ones. It also shows the differences which existed between and within government and civil society groups as they responded to the refugees' arrival in Honduras.

The second strand of historiography to which this thesis contributes is that on the history of humanitarianism. This is a rapidly growing field, incorporating sweeping histories such as Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity*, to works by Young-Sun Hong and Timothy Nunan which, eschewing the tendency of earlier work to focus on the West, draw attention to the humanitarian policies and efforts of communist states during the Cold War.⁶¹ The aforementioned work by Fiona Terry and David Rieff's *A Bed for the Night* represent another segment of this literature, with both focusing on the unintended consequences of humanitarian aid, and the ways in which assistance can be utilised by warring parties.⁶² In describing how the FMLN and Contra attempted to use humanitarian assistance to further their own strategic goals, this thesis adds to this body of work, showing how both groups benefitted materially from refugee camps while also using them to boost their image.

A key contribution of this thesis is, however, to move beyond such narratives over how aid is 'misused' or humanitarian intentions are 'subverted'. Certainly, this is part of the

⁶⁰ In understanding the Honduran context, this thesis draws on the following works, among others: Darío Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1996); James Morris, *Honduras: Caudillo Politics and Military Rulers*, (London: Westview Press: 1984).

⁶¹ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, (New York: Cornell University Press: 2011); Timothy Nunan, "Graveyard of Development? Afghanistan's Cold War Encounters with International Development and Humanitarianism", in *The Development Century: A Global History*, Macekura. Stephen; Manela, Erez, (eds), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2018), 220 - 239; Young-Sun Hong, "The Algerian War, Third World Internationalism and the Cold War Politics of Humanitarian Assistance", in *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, Paulmann, Johannes (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2016), 289 - 309

⁶² David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, (London: Vintage: 2002); Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?*

story, particularly when examining the Reagan administration's murky efforts to funnel aid to the Contra. But, as this thesis outlines, aid workers who understood themselves to be acting in a humanitarian capacity at times knowingly assisted guerrilla groups involved in the conflicts. For some, solidarity with the oppressed and humanitarianism were natural companions, whereas for others, anti-Communism and humanitarianism went hand in hand. Uncovering and tracing these connections therefore responds to calls to better integrate histories of solidarity movements with histories of humanitarianism, while also furthering our understanding of humanitarianism's links with more militant forms of activism.⁶³ Individuals, as this thesis demonstrates, defy neat categorisation and the lines between different forms of activism were frequently blurry, giving rise to multiple forms of humanitarianism.

The impact of human rights rhetoric on humanitarianism has been the subject of historical scrutiny, including within the context of the Salvadoran Civil War. In particular, Kevin O'Sullivan has shown how the experiences of humanitarian NGOs in that conflict, and the convergence of Liberation Theology and 'leftist-derived solidarity...under the umbrella of human rights', normalised rights-based activism in humanitarian practices.⁶⁴ That refugees in Honduras frequently framed the demands they made of humanitarian agencies in human rights terms, fits with such work on the growing overlap between humanitarianism and human rights.⁶⁵ More significantly however, this thesis shows how, in the Salvadoran camps, rights-based humanitarianism came into conflict with the demands of refugee leaders, and the priorities of solidarity-based humanitarians.

⁶³ Matthew Hilton, Emily Baughan, Eleanor Davey, Bronwen Everill, Kevin O'Sullivan, Tehila Sasson, 'History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation', *Past & Present* 241 (2018): e1–e38.

⁶⁴ Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Civil War in El Salvador and the Origins of Rights-based Humanitarianism', *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021): 246-265.

⁶⁵ This was certainly not unique to those in Honduras. As Elizabeth Holzer has highlighted, refugees often appeal to human rights rather than refugee protection, even though refugee protection is on a firmer legal standing. Elizabeth Holzer, 'What Happens to Law in a Refugee Camp?', *Law & Society Review*, 27 (2013): 865.

Attempting to police and manage the relationship between these different humanitarianisms was the UNHCR. While there are notable exceptions, including Gil Loescher's *The UNHCR and World Politics*, the UNHCR has not been the subject of much historical scrutiny.⁶⁶ The institution has, as Jussi Hanhimäki has highlighted, attracted even less attention from Cold War historians.⁶⁷ An important contribution of this thesis then is to help integrate scholarship on the UNHCR with scholarship on the Cold War. The UNHCR, as this thesis demonstrates, certainly struggled to fulfil its mandate of refugee protection in the context of Cold War Honduras but, nonetheless, it maintained a surprisingly high degree of latitude and influence. With the Honduran government looking to the UNHCR to take charge of refugee assistance, UNHCR officials recognised that this provided them with an opportunity to simultaneously increase their capabilities in refugee protection. This complicates the thinking that increased responsibilities in the area of relief necessarily weakens UNHCR independence in refugee protection.⁶⁸ In this respect, this thesis also draws on literature by scholars such as Maja Janmyr on the UNHCR's work in states which, like 1980s Honduras, were not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁶⁹

Thirdly, and relatedly, this thesis builds on the diverse range of scholarship on refugees and refugee history. Drawing on oral history interviews with former refugees, along with other sources, this thesis follows the 'refugee-focused approach' proposed by Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell.⁷⁰ While it builds on work by those, such as Carl

⁶⁶ Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR in World Politics: A Perilous Path*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001); see also, Sara Cosemans, 'The Internationalisation of the Refugee Problem: Refugee Resettlement from the Global South during the 1970s', (PhD Dissertation, Belgium, KU Leuven: 2021).

⁶⁷ Jussi Hanhimäki, 'Introduction: UNHCR and the Global Cold War', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27 (2008): 4.

⁶⁸ Loescher, for example, concludes that increased responsibilities in refugee relief increases UNHCR dependence on donor states, thus weakening its independence in terms of protection. While this is certainly true, this thesis shows how responsibilities in refugee relief can create opportunities in the realm of protection. Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, 221.

⁶⁹ Maja Janmyr, 'The 1951 Refugee Convention and Non-Signatory States: Charting a Research Agenda', in *International Journal of Refugee Law* 33 (December 2021): 188-213.

⁷⁰ Banko, Nowack, Gatrell, 'What is refugee history, now?', 2.

B. Tempo and Loescher, who show how the Cold War shaped the asylum and refugee policy of nation states, it therefore does so within the wider framework of refugeedom.⁷¹

The focus of this thesis on refugee camps facilitates this. As Liisa Malkki, Michel Agier, Adam Ramadan, and others, have demonstrated, camps are more than the places of ‘bare-life’ theorised by Giorgio Agamben.⁷² The observation by Kirsten McConnachie that camps can simultaneously be places of containment and places where populations develop ‘capacities of community governance’, along with Ramadan’s work which posits that Palestinian refugee camps ‘in Lebanon’ are not ‘of Lebanon’, has clear parallels with the cases studied by this thesis.⁷³ Calling for scholars to ‘interrogate the spatialities of camps’, Ramadan poses a series of research questions, including ‘how do the sovereignty of camps work out? How are camps assembled and how do they function?’.⁷⁴ In grappling with these questions, this thesis draws on McConnachie’s *Governing Refugees* in which she outlines how authority over camp life is negotiated between ‘multiple sovereign or quasi-sovereign actors’, including the refugees themselves.⁷⁵

Relatedly, historians have pointed to the fact that refugee camps offer a specific lens through which to interrogate the world. In particular, Jana Lipman argues that, to understand refugee politics, we ‘must look at the camps, the places that hosted them, and the people inside’.⁷⁶ Anne Irfan’s *Refuge and Resistance* does just that, examining Palestinian refugee

⁷¹ Carl B. Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and refugees during the Cold War*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2008); Gil Loescher & John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America’s Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present*, (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers: 1986).

⁷² Adam Ramadan, ‘Spatialising the Refugee Camp’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, (2013): 65-77; Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order, and Legal Pluralism*, (London: Routledge: 2014); Liisa H. Malkki, ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricisation’, in *Cultural Anthropology* 11, (1996): 383; Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, (Cambridge: Polity: 2011).

⁷³ McConnachie, *Governing Refugees*, 92; Adam Ramadan, ‘In the Ruins of Nahr Al-Barid: Understanding the Meaning of the Camp’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 40 (2010): 51.

⁷⁴ Ramadan, ‘Spatialising the Refugee Camp’, 75.

⁷⁵ McConnachie, *Governing Refugees*, 80.

⁷⁶ Jana Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Repatriates* (California: University of California Press: 2020), 4.

camps as spaces shaped ‘by the states that host them, the UN agency that administers them, and the refugees that reside in them’.⁷⁷

As hinted at in the opening of this introduction, refugee camps in Honduras brought people from a variety of backgrounds into daily contact with one another with lasting impacts. By delving into these encounters, this thesis uses refugee camps as a means to bring together the various methodologies, topics, and conclusions of the works covered in this literature review. There exists a rich, and growing, body of work on the Cold War in Latin America which incorporates the voices of previously marginalised groups. In particular, the history of exile is a growing field, but is one that does not yet incorporate Central American refugees sufficiently.⁷⁸ Equally exciting is the work being done on the transnational and international elements of this period. Refugee camps, as places over which refugees, diplomats, humanitarian workers, solidarity activists, guerrilla groups, and others, contested sovereignty, provide the ability to put these two historiographical trends in conversation with one another. Moreover, refugee camps in Honduras were simultaneously spaces of the Cold War and humanitarian spaces. This liminality allows this thesis to respond to calls to integrate refugee history and global history in ‘mutually productive and constitutive ways’, showing how historical analysis of refugee camps has a relevance outside of refugee studies and the history of humanitarianism.⁷⁹ If refugee camps are a particularly useful place in which to examine the interaction of the Cold War with humanitarianism, then the 1980s are an equally rich time in which to do so. As with refugee camps, this decade straddled the world of the Cold War, which was hardening anew, and a world in which humanitarian rhetoric and the

⁷⁷ Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 13.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Luis Roniger, James Naylor Green, Pablo Yankelevich (eds.), *Exile and the Politics of Exclusion in the Americas* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press: 2012); Tanya Harmer, ‘The View from Havana: Chilean Exiles in Cuba and Early Resistance to Chile’s Dictatorship, 1973-1977’, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 96 (2016): 109-146.

⁷⁹ Banko, Nowack, Gatrell, ‘What is refugee history, now?’, 19.

language of human rights were growing in importance. Neatly categorising actions and actors as either Cold War or humanitarian was, as this thesis demonstrates, all but impossible.

Chapter Structure

The thesis that follows consists of six chapters. In general, they adopt a chronological approach although, as each deals with a specific theme, this is not absolute. Furthermore, while each chapter looks at both Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees, equal space is not given to each group in every chapter. Chapter One details the arrival of the two refugee groups to Honduras at the start of the decade, outlining the reasons behind their flight and their reception, both by the Honduran government, and by Honduran civil society and national and international humanitarian agencies. Chapter Two, which covers the period after the refugees' arrival to roughly the middle of the decade, describes the shape of life within the refugee camps. In this, it looks both at the meanings given by the refugees to their time in exile, and to the efforts of the UNHCR to insulate the camps from the logic of the Cold War. Chapter Three then looks at the UNHCR's attempt to move the two refugee populations away from the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan border, a move resisted by many refugees. By examining this development, which lasted until 1985, this chapter looks at the myriad competing interested groups seeking to shape the camps' utility and connections. Chapter Four moves beyond Honduras, focusing on how domestic US politics shaped the actions of the US government and activist groups as they engaged with refugees in Honduras. Chapter Five covers the second half of the decade, looking at the governance of the refugee camps, and using this as a means to interrogate different visions of humanitarian action. Finally, Chapter Six looks at the refugees' repatriation and its connections to regional peace negotiations, ending with the refugees' departure from Honduras at the end of the decade. Before turning to the conclusion, an epilogue touches on continuities and legacies of

refugeedom after the camps' closure. Before getting to this epilogue, however, we must rewind to where the history of refugees in Honduras began: with their departure from their home countries and arrival.

Chapter 1: A Solution of Last Resort: Arrival in Honduras and the Establishment of Refugee Camps (1970s – 1982)

On 14 May 1980 hundreds of people sheltered in the small village of Las Aradas in the Salvadoran department of Chalatenango, having fled their own towns and villages in the face of persecution by the Salvadoran military and the paramilitary group *Organización Democrática Nacionalista* (National Democratic Organisation, ORDEN).¹ A historically demilitarised zone bordering the Río Sumpul and the Honduran border, Salvadoran campesinos had previously gathered here before taking temporary refuge in the Honduran hills.² On this occasion, however, government forces surrounded those at Las Aradas, indiscriminately shooting and forcing hundreds into the swollen waters of the river.³ On the opposite banks meanwhile, Honduran forces stood waiting and armed, ready to force people back toward the firing Salvadoran troops who were assisted by two helicopters.⁴ By the end of the day, an estimated 600 Salvadoran civilians had been killed or drowned.⁵

This massacre was not an aberration. On the Salvadoran side, it was but one in a series of attacks carried out by the Salvadoran Right. The complicity of the Honduran military was again evidenced in March 1981 in eerily similar events, this time on the banks of the Río Lempa, where, as is detailed shortly, an estimated 200 people were killed or drowned.⁶ Despite this complicity in violence against those fleeing El Salvador, Honduras was a place of relative refuge compared to the violence they had fled from. Even after these

¹ Asociación Sumpul, 'Historical Background', accessed 17/9/2023, <https://www.asociacionsumpul.org/historical-background>; See also, UN Security Council, Annex, From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, S/25500, 1993, 5-8.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.; Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2010), 83.

⁶ *NYT*, 8/6/1981.

events, in fact, Salvadorans continued to cross the border, fleeing the violence inflicted upon them. By August 1981 an estimated 26,000 Salvadoran refugees had arrived in Honduras, part of the estimated 294,000 Salvadoran refugees across Central America and Mexico by this point.⁷

Over a year later, in December 1981, along another Honduran border river, civilians again came into conflict with their government's military, although with much less bloody results. Here, indigenous communities along the Río Coco fled to Honduras rather than be forcibly relocated by Sandinista troops as they sought to clear the border area of counter-revolutionary forces. While indigenous communities asserted that these events, which became known as Red Christmas, were the result of a government military operation against them, Managua asserted that they were responding to a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) backed operation to launch attacks on Nicaragua from Honduras.⁸ The end result, whatever the case, was the flooding of refugees across the Río Coco and into Honduras, something which continued apace. By February 1982, an estimated 5,000 refugees had arrived, increasing to 15,200 by September 1983.⁹

This chapter looks at the arrival of both Salvadoran and Nicaraguan Miskito refugees to Honduras. In doing so, it focuses on how the refugees arrived in Honduras and how the Honduran government, military, and civil society responded to their arrival. The causes of the refugees' flight had a profound impact on Honduras with the civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua demonstrating, through the strength of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la*

⁷ UNHCR San José to UNHCR Geneva, 'Refugee Statistics', 1/9/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.Gen.Sal Vol.2, UNHCR archives Geneva (hence: UNHCR); This is more than the previously quoted 19,000 figure – as refugees were confined to camps many chose to return to El Salvador.

⁸ Mateo C. Jarquín, 'Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981-1982', *Cold War History* 18 (2017): 92

⁹ Catherine Bertrand (UNHCR Geneva) to UNHCR San José, 1/2/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.Gen.Sal Vol.3, UNHCR.

Leonardo Franco (UNHCR Geneva), 'Numbers of Refugees as of 30 September 1983 in the Northern Latin American Countries covered by R.O San José, B.O Mexico, and B.O Tegucigalpa', 30/9/1983, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.GEN.Sal Vol.3, UNHCR.

Liberación Nacional's (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) campaign and the Sandinista's victory, that the country was now on the frontlines of the global Cold War. Despite Honduras' nominal transition to democracy, the National Security Doctrine took hold with General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez's consolidation of power. In this climate, the Salvadoran refugees were viewed as a security threat while both Contra leaders and Nicaraguan refugees were welcomed.

If the Cold War undoubtedly determined how the different refugee groups were received, it was not the only issue that defined the Honduran government's reception of refugees. Unable to prevent the Salvadoran refugees from arriving and lacking the resources to control them, the Honduran government turned to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for assistance. Examining the UNHCR's arrival reveals the ways by which the institution sought to introduce humanitarian norms and refugee rights to Honduras, a non-signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, just as Cold War anxieties seemed to run contrary to such norms. The chapter also explores the impact of the refugee arrivals on the local Honduran population. As we shall see, those who sought to champion the rights of Salvadoran refugees found themselves under the scrutiny of Honduran security forces, facing harassment and intimidation. In the Honduran Mosquitia, meanwhile, a region historically far from Tegucigalpa's reach and priorities, inhabitants suddenly found themselves faced with a huge growth in population and the arrival of the Honduran military and Contra groups into their lands.

After looking at the arrival of Salvadoran refugees to Honduras and detailing the arrival of those from Nicaragua, this chapter then examines the responses of the Honduran government, the UNHCR, and Honduran civil society to the unfolding situation.

Becoming Refugees

There are many ways, notes Antonio Rodríguez, a former refugee of Mesa Grande, by which one could begin telling the story of Salvadoran refugees in Honduras.¹⁰ Rodríguez himself chooses to start with an overview of the increasing repression faced by campesinos during the 1970s, describing how the Salvadoran National Guard and ORDEN would call on houses seeking and killing community and trade union organisers while destroying property. It is a story retold by many former refugees. Teresa Cruz, a child when she and her family arrived at Mesa Grande, recounts how, from 1977 onward her family would spend the nights sleeping in the mountains, returning home only to cook, for fear of attacks by paramilitary or military forces.¹¹ The wisdom of this strategy was brought to bear when, in 1979, government forces burnt down her family home, luckily with no one inside. Her mother's position as a Catechist in the Catholic Church and her father's role as a trade unionist had likely contributed to this targeting.¹² From then on, her family moved from village to village until, by the end of 1980, her parents decided to cross the border into Honduras.¹³ Other former refugees recall horrifying details from such a flight; the murder of parents, days spent hidden underground breathing through a bamboo shoot, a decision taken to leave only days prior to a massacre, and parents suffocating babies as they tried to stifle their cries as soldiers approached their hiding place.¹⁴

Such stories are far from atypical. By the mid to late 1970s, in the face of mounting government repression and violence, many families and individuals in rural El Salvador chose to leave isolated hamlets and homes and move to larger settlements. By this time, rural areas in Chalatenango, Guazapa, Cinquera, San Vicente, Usulután, and Morazán had

¹⁰ Antonio Rodríguez, author's interview, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 26/10/2022.

¹¹ Teresa Cruz, author's interview, online, 6/9/2021.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Various author's interviews conducted in El Salvador October / November 2022; See also Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 68-70.

effectively become war zones with paramilitary and government forces targeting peasant communities and those involved in mass organisations.¹⁵ In areas of particular guerrilla strength, which included those along the northern border region, many of those unsympathetic to the FMLN began to relocate elsewhere, often moving to garrison towns.¹⁶ The result was that those remaining in these zones were, broadly speaking, those who had some sympathy with the FMLN.¹⁷ In Chalatenango, entire hamlets had joined the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL) insurgency in the late 1970s, again, largely in response to mounting state terror, while in northern Morazán, most recognised the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP) as the legitimate authority.¹⁸

As government forces conducted sweeps through these areas, inhabitants responded by temporarily abandoning their homes and seeking refuge in woods and mountains in withdrawals known as *guindas*.¹⁹ While this practice was initially limited to men, as the targeting by government forces and paramilitaries widened, entire communities began to go on *guindas* which ranged from hours to months.²⁰ Joining a *guinda* was not simply a decision to remove one's family from a situation in which they could get caught up in clashes between guerrillas and government forces. With the Salvadoran military's adoption of scorched earth tactics, civilians themselves were targets as the army sought to deprive the FMLN of any support.²¹ Whole communities uprooted themselves in the face of sheer terror, with Ester Arteaga recalling how her hamlet of Las Aradas was largely abandoned by May 1980 after

¹⁵ Chávez, Joaquín M., *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017), 206.

¹⁶ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*, 208; Leigh Binford, "Hegemony in the Interior of The Salvadoran Revolution: The ERP in Northern Morazán." *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4 (1998): 15.

¹⁹ Jenny Pearce, *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*, (London: Latin America Bureau: 1986), 210; Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 58

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*, 206.

national guardsmen had raped, hanged, and beheaded numerous inhabitants in addition to destroying crops.²² Many of those who eventually sought refuge in Honduras were the survivors of such atrocities; Rufina Amaya, one of the few who survived the Mozote massacre of November 1981 during which the Salvadoran military killed over 811 civilians, made her way to Colomoncagua having witnessed the slaughter of her town, hiding as she heard the screams of her own children being murdered.²³

For many, crossing into Honduras was not initially understood as a long-term decision. Those on *guinda* occasionally sought temporary refuge along the border, crossing over to Honduras before returning to El Salvador. By 1979, however, more long-term relocation had begun to take place, particularly by those with family in Honduras.²⁴ As a full-scale civil war developed, the situation for many in El Salvador simply became intolerable, sparking an ever-greater flow of refugees into Honduras.²⁵ Flows corresponded to sweeps by the Salvadoran military. A military campaign in Chalatenango in March 1980, for example, led an estimated 4,500 Salvadorans to cross the border over the course of four days while, similarly, an April campaign in Morazán resulted in 3,500 refugees arriving at Colomoncagua.²⁶

Changes in the FMLN's tactics also impacted refugee flows. Prior to the FMLN's January 1981 final offensive, guerrilla troops were organised as an army, dominating territories with large populations that supported it.²⁷ Although many had already crossed into Honduras by this stage, including with the help of guerrillas in some instances, FMLN

²² Ester Arteaga as cited in Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*, 226.

²³ Steve Cagan & Beth Cagan, *This promised land, El Salvador: the refugee community of Colomoncagua and their return to Morazán*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press and Cagan: 1991), 17.

²⁴ Beatrice Edwards, Gretta Tovar Siebentrit, *Places of Origin: The Repopulation of Rural El Salvador*, (Lynne Rienner: London: 1991), 86.

²⁵ Leonel González, Claudia Sánchez, and Iosu Perales. *Con sueños se escribe la vida: autobiografía de un revolucionario salvadoreño*. (México, D.F.: Ocean Sur: 2009), 146

²⁶ George Reimer, 'Report on Visit to Honduras, June 16-22, 1980', Honduras 1980, Mennonite Central Committee archives, Akron PA, (hence MCC).

²⁷ Sánchez, *Con Sueños Se Escribe La Vida*, 146.

leaders were divided over a policy of encouraging, and occasionally demanding, that civilians remain in war zones; torn between balancing the resources needed to defend such a population versus the support which this population could supply.²⁸ By 1984 however, as guerrilla forces were reorganised into smaller units in response to the new agility of military and paramilitary troops, it became difficult to maintain a large civilian population alongside guerrilla bases. As a result, the elderly and young were sent by the FMLN to camps in Honduras.²⁹

Although those arriving in Honduras had faced similar conditions in El Salvador, there were notable differences in how those from different regions arrived. At least at the start of the decade, those coming from Chalatenango and Cabañas appear to have crossed the border in a more spontaneous manner than those from Morazán. Those crossing into Honduras from Morazán included members of the ERP such as Esteban Chicas Sánchez, who was among the first to arrive at Colomoncagua. He recalls how, in December 1980, ERP commanders instructed him to cross the border with a group of civilians.³⁰ By contrast, according to Ángel Serrano, a member of the FPL, the first people to cross from Chalatenango and Cabañas were not similarly organised and it was not until later that the FPL began to coordinate the removal of civilians from their zones.³¹ Under Joaquín Villalobos, the ERP was the most militaristic of the FMLN groupings and, unlike FPL leaders, Villalobos was most hopeful about the potential outcome of the 1981 Final Offensive.³² Such was the focus on a military victory, that Villalobos, according to Miguel Castellanos, a member of the FPL's Central Committee, supported the evacuation of the ERP's civilian population.³³ This

²⁸ Philippe Bourgois, 'The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador', *Ethnography* 2.1 (2001): 16.

²⁹ Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013), 2

³⁰ Esteban Chicas Sánchez, author interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 8/11/2022.

³¹ Ángel Serrano, author's interview, online, 3/10/2021.

³² Courtney E. Prisk (ed), *The Comandante Speaks: Memoirs of an El Salvadoran Guerrilla Leader*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1991), 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 40.

was both a protective measure, and a means by which to ease the burden on combatants and free up resources.

FMLN decisions impacted not only how refugees arrived but also who arrived. Refugee recollections suggest that, with the ERP in control of what was essentially an evacuation of civilians from Morazán, age played a key role in determining who the ERP deemed eligible to cross the border. For example, Blanca, who fled with her family to Colomoncagua, was singled out by her ERP escorts and told to return to the war zone with them on account of her age.³⁴ Only the elderly and those under 14 or 15 were, according to Blanca, permitted to cross with ERP help.³⁵ Similarly, Buenaventura Hernández, who arrived at Colomoncagua at age 13, recalls how ERP commanders were initially reluctant to allow her to leave for the camp because of her age.³⁶ Those deemed old enough were, according to Hernández, required to stay and assist the ERP.³⁷ In other instances, it was leaving El Salvador rather than staying which was decided by the ERP. In Lucinda Perez's case, despite her desire to stay in El Salvador, ERP commanders instructed her to leave for Colomoncagua with her four children in January 1982 as there were insufficient resources to care for them.³⁸ This is not to say that, even at the start of the decade, the FPL had no role in the flight to Honduras. In accounts of the Río Lempa massacre, survivors recalled how FMLN guerrillas who were present launched a counterattack on Salvadoran military forces, thereby allowing some civilians to escape.³⁹

That the FMLN was relatively more involved in the refugees' flight from Morazán than from other provinces created differences between Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande.

³⁴ Blanca as quoted in Viterna *Women in War*, 100

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Buenaventura Hernández, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

³⁷ Ibid.; See also Viterna, *Women in War*; 100.

³⁸ Lucinda Perez, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 11/11/2022.

³⁹ See, for example, 'Remembering Río Lempa: FOIA Documents Released to Mark 35th Anniversary of Massacre', 17/3/2016, Unfinished Sentences, accessed 10/3/2022, <https://unfinishedsentences.org/reports/foia-rio-lempa/>

While the entire refugee population was skewed toward the very young and elderly, this was most evident in Colomoncagua. According to a 1985 census of both camps, 18% of Colomoncagua's male population was between the ages of 15 and 30.⁴⁰ In comparison, this figure stood at 21% in Mesa Grande.⁴¹ As is explored in the next chapter, both camps contributed to the FMLN's war effort but the impact of this on refugee life was, in some ways, more intense in Colomoncagua than in Mesa Grande. This was partly due to the ERP's early involvement in organising refugee crossings to Colomoncagua, along with the fact that, unlikely in Mesa Grande where the FPL, *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación* (Armed forces of Liberation, FAL), and *Resistencia Nacional* (National Resistance, RN) were present, the ERP was the only FMLN faction present in Colomoncagua.

As with their Salvadoran counterparts, but by no means with equivalent violence or death tolls, accounts from Miskito Indian refugees emphasise increasing repression from government forces culminating in a flight across the border to Honduras. In a testimony collected by Werner Marx, a retired Moravian Missionary, a spokesman for the Miskito village of Asang, recounted the events leading to the village's flight to Honduras by telling of an arbitrary arrest in September 1981.⁴² According to the testimony, the Sandinista military tortured the arrested man and were due to take him from the village when 'the people rose up in his defence' securing his release.⁴³ The military began to increase their presence in Asang, placing new restrictions on the populace, preventing them from working on plantations, cutting firewood, and making registers of the villagers' names. The arrival of 100 soldiers 'from Cuba and Russia' marked, according to the spokesperson, a turning point as they began

⁴⁰ 'Refugee Statistics', as found in Honduras 80-88 refugiés Salvatoriens, MSF archives, Paris (hence MSF).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² 'The Asang Story', as contained in 'Reports Gathered by Werner Marx at Mocerón, Honduras, January 1983', BWM.206 Werner Marx Nicaragua, Board of World Mission collection, Moravian Church archives, Bethlehem, PA (hence BWM).

⁴³ Ibid.

to, in his words, ‘openly do wicked things’.⁴⁴ Shovels, axes, guns, crowbars, and other potential weapons were taken from the villagers while, according to Marx’s report, they were also prohibited from attending church. In mid-January the military gathered the town’s inhabitants having instructed them to gather their belongings and warning that they would soon be required to move. According to the testimony, the soldiers then pretended that the village was coming under attack ‘shooting off firearms as if there was a battle going on’. Describing the pandemonium and terror which followed, the testimony tells of soldiers ‘shooting off their guns, shooting right at the feet of the Miskitos’ as they drove them out of the village with parents struggling to find children and ‘half of the town...burning, lighting up everything’. While most obeyed and followed the soldiers’ directions, others crossed the Río Coco into Honduras.⁴⁵

While January 1981 was notable for the number of Miskito refugees arriving in Honduras, others had sought refuge across the Río Coco a year earlier. In particular, the arrest of 33 *Miskito, Sumu, Rama and Sandinista, Asla Takana* (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Working Together, MISURASATA) leaders in February 1981 following their announcement of sweeping autonomy demands had heightened an already tense situation on the Atlantic Coast.⁴⁶ At the same time, government troops claimed they were met with armed resistance when attempting to arrest another ‘separatist’ in the town of Prinzapolka with four Sandinista soldiers and four ‘separatists’ killed.⁴⁷ Mass protests led to the release of most leaders with Steadman Fagoth, by then a key leader in MISURASATA, released in April on the proviso that he cooperate with Managua.⁴⁸ Within a week, however, Fagoth had crossed

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People*, (Americas Watch: 1987), 7 as contained in University of London Senate House Library pamphlet collection; Jarquín, ‘Red Christmases’, 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97.

into Honduras where he began issuing calls to arms through ‘Radio 15 de Septiembre’ and urging others to follow him across the Río Coco.⁴⁹

By the end of May, over 1,500 Miskito Indians, the majority of whom were young men, had crossed into the Honduran department of Gracias a Dios.⁵⁰ From here, Fagoth and his followers began to launch cross-border attacks on Sandinista positions. At least 25 instances of armed conflict were recorded between Sandinista and Miskito troops from September 1981 to January 1982.⁵¹ The most pivotal of these took place in the village of San Carlos in December 1981 where Miskito forces, having crossed from Honduras, ambushed, mutilated, and killed six Sandinista soldiers.⁵² In retaliation, the Sandinista military summarily executed dozens of unarmed Miskitos, the exact number of which is unknown.⁵³ Citing the discovery of an anti-government plot, called ‘Red Christmas’, Managua forcibly relocated forty two villages to settlements in the Nicaraguan interior dubbed *Tasba Pri* (free land in Miskito), with Sandinista troops destroying the forcibly-abandoned houses and livestock.⁵⁴ As in the case of Asang, many inhabitants chose to flee to Honduras instead, resulting, by August 1982, in some 12,000 Miskito refugees in Honduras.⁵⁵

Although most Indian refugees were Miskito, some 3,000 Mayanga refugees were also receiving UNHCR assistance by August 1982.⁵⁶ With a total population of about 10,000, their relationship with Managua had been less conflictive than those of the Miskito population.⁵⁷ For example, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional’s* (Sandinista

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ UNHCR dispatch to UNHCR Geneva (hence: Geneva), 16/5/1981, Fonds 11 Series II, Box 92, Vol 1, UNHCR.

⁵¹ Jarquín, ‘Red Christmas’, 97.

⁵² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin*, 29/11/1983, accessed 20/20/2022, <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/miskitoeng/part2b.htm>

⁵³ Ibid.; Jarquín, ‘Red Christmas’, 98.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁵ *Refugees*, September 1982.

⁵⁶ *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People*, Americas Watch.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

National Liberation Front, FSLN) 1980 – 1981 literacy campaign, much resisted by Miskito leadership as an unwanted state intervention, actually marked the birth of Mayanga as a written language and many former participants recalled this initial revolutionary period with pride.⁵⁸ Despite being cast under the same umbrella of ‘Indian’, a label which Miskito leaders were careful to emphasise, the Miskito-Mayanga relationship had a conflictive history with a sustained Miskito dominance since the sixteenth century.⁵⁹ However, continued efforts by Managua to incorporate resistant Mayanga’s into the revolution through compulsory military recruitment helped breed resentment, especially as the Sandinistas also viewed the population as potential separatists.⁶⁰ A MISURA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama) ambush of Sandinista troops in the summer of 1982 meanwhile triggered the occupation of Musawas, the largest Mayanga settlement. At least two Mayanga were killed during the occupation and 32 arrested.⁶¹ As recounted by the Musawas spokesman to Werner Marx, the Moravian missionary, restrictions on religious freedoms coupled with growing poverty played a role in the Mayanga decision to leave for Honduras.⁶² But it was the fear of what was to come which, more than anything, acted as the deciding factor. With rumours spreading in Musawas that all in the settlement were to be killed by the Sandinista soldiers, the population took to the river in rafts and canoes, journeying for 18 days to the refugee camp at Mocerón.⁶³

Perceived certainty about an impending slaughter was a commonly stated reason why many from the Atlantic Coast took refuge in Honduras. A spokesman from the Miskito town of Raita told Marx how they had witnessed government troops digging a trench.⁶⁴ Rumours

⁵⁸ Nathaniel Morris, ‘Between Two Fires: Mayanga Indians in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1990’, (MSc dissertation: Oxford: University of Oxford: 2011).

⁵⁹ Ibid.; *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People*, Americas Watch, 6.

⁶⁰ Morris, ‘Between Two Fires’.

⁶¹ *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People*, Americas Watch, 1.

⁶² ‘The Musawas Story’, as contained in ‘Reports Gathered by Werner Marx at Mocerón, Honduras, January 1983’, BWM.206 Werner Marx Nicaragua, BWM.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ ‘The Raita Story’ as contained in Werner Marx, ‘What Really Happened: Moravian Refugees in 1983’, BWM.206 Werner Marx Nicaragua, BWM.

spread that ‘into that trench they planned to throw people...they would soak them with gasoline and set them on fire’ and so, under cover of night, the population set out for the Honduran border.⁶⁵ While there is no doubt that the Sandinistas carried out human rights violations on the Atlantic Coast, it was also the case that rumours were rife, intentionally spread by those, such as Fagoth, who wished to bolster their own cause. For example, in July 1981 Fagoth’s followers spread rumours over radio that those who attended a meeting called by Brooklyn Rivera, a Miskito leader who, at this stage, advocated for negotiation with Managua, would be massacred.⁶⁶ Ultimately, representatives from just 15 communities out of a total of 250 attended.⁶⁷ While it is therefore difficult to assess the truthfulness of individual rumours, their powerful impact in terms of spreading fear, justifiably or not, is evident.

Fleeing one’s home, especially in the face of forcible relocation, the destruction of property, and the expectation of mass killings was a traumatic experience even if the scale of actual violence was on a much lesser level than that experienced by those crossing from El Salvador. In both cases anti-government guerrilla forces played a role in the refugees’ flight but, here, too, there were notable differences which would shape the refugee experience over the coming years. Those from El Salvador had fled a conflict zone with the FMLN supporting this evacuation of their civilian population. For the most part, FMLN leaders remained in El Salvador during the war. In the Nicaraguan case, it was guerrilla leaders who had first gone to Honduras, and they had set about encouraging the civilian population to follow. As a result, and as is explored in the following chapter, the Miskito refugees served to legitimise the leadership of those anti-Sandinista Miskito guerrilla leaders – Fagoth at the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Michael Rediske & Robin Schneider, “National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: The conflict between the Sandinista government and the Miskito Indians 1979 to 1982”, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity* K. Ohland & R. Schneider (eds), (IWGIA: Copenhagen: 1982).

⁶⁷ Brooklyn Rivera, “Great Anxiety Prevails in the Villages” in *opcit.*

beginning of the decade – based in Honduras, a dynamic which was not at play in the Salvadoran camps.

The Honduran Government

While calm compared to the turmoil experienced by its neighbours, Honduras was in a state of flux at the start of the 1980s. Constituent Assembly elections in April 1980 heralded the return to civilian rule, albeit a delayed one, with politicians from the two main parties, the Liberals and Nationalists, agreeing to a transitional period ahead of Presidential elections in November 1981 during which General Edgardo Paz Barnica would retain the Presidency. Although left-wing guerrilla groups were active - October 1980 saw the Morazánista Front unsuccessfully attempt to attack the United States (US) and Chilean embassies while, in March 1981, the Chinchonero National Liberation Front hijacked a plane and negotiated the release of 15 prisoners before flying to Cuba – there was no group with capabilities remotely comparable to those in El Salvador or Guatemala.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, Honduran leaders were not immune to Cold War anxieties, particularly given the rapidly developing regional context and it was primarily these anxieties which informed their reaction to the arrival of refugees from El Salvador and Nicaragua. That Honduras would actively support both the Salvadoran military junta and Contra fighters was not wholly evident in 1980. On the Salvadoran side, the ‘Football War’ of 1969 and a long-running border dispute meant that many, including within the military, were negatively disposed to the Salvadoran government. Nor had the Honduran military been particularly supportive of Anastasio Somoza’s regime. Many generals were rather indifferent to his overthrow while others had made significant gains by selling arms to the Sandinistas.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Carolyn Murray, Americas Section, Research Department, UK FCO, ‘Extremist groups in Central America’, September 1980, FCO 99/812 UK National Archive, (hence TNA).

⁶⁹ Richard Lapper, *Honduras: State for Sale*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1985), 76.

Although a concern for domestic stability would certainly have prevented complete neutrality in any regional conflict, two factors shaped the fervour with which Honduras embraced its role as an ally of the Central American Right; the ascendancy of General Gustavo Álvarez and the influence of the Reagan administration.

Having trained at the National Military Academy in Argentina, the School of the Americas in Panama, and in Washington DC under the Office of Public Safety Programme, Álvarez was imbued with a virulent anti-Communism which overcame any Honduran antipathy to the Salvadoran government.⁷⁰ A close friend of General Jorge Rafael Videla, the Argentinian dictator, he was, as Richard Lapper noted, particularly enamoured with the ‘Argentine method’ of dealing with so-called subversives.⁷¹ Appointed head of the *Fuerza de Seguridad Pública* (Public Security Force, FUSEP) in 1980, something which gave him control of the secret police (*Dirección Nacional de Investigación*, National Investigation Directorate, DNI), he relied upon Argentinian advisors to build up a domestic security network.⁷²

Despite the – much-heralded in the US – transition to civilian rule, the armed forces were to retain an over-bearing role on Honduran politics. Generals regarded themselves as vital guardians of the country, considering it legal to intervene in governmental affairs if deemed necessary while, under the constitution, a civilian president was not the commander

⁷⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁷¹ Ibid., 80.

‘Negroponte’s time in Honduras at issue’, NBC News, 21/3/2005, accessed online 18/10/2023: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7251908>.

⁷² Lapper, *State for Sale*, 80; For more on Argentinian involvement in the Central American Cold War see Molly Avery, ‘The Latin Americanist Anticommunist International: Chile, Argentina and Central America, 1977 – 1984’, PhD diss., (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2022); Ariel Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977 – 1984*, (Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies: 1997); Julieta Carla Rostica, ‘The Collaboration of the Argentine Military Dictatorship with the Governments of Guatemala and Honduras in their “Fight against subversion”’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 54 (2022): 431-456. Argentinian involvement in Honduras is, however, an area which requires further research.

of the armed forces.⁷³ Eager to win the military's support, candidates in the November 1981 presidential election sought to ally themselves with influential figures with Roberto Suazó Cordova, the Liberal candidate who would win the election, striking up a close relationship with Álvarez.⁷⁴ That Álvarez, who was shortly thereafter named Head of the Armed Forces, held a distinctive view regarding Honduras' role in Central America was confirmed during a 1982 press conference in Mexico City by Colonel Leonidas Torres Arias, the former head of Honduran Military Intelligence.⁷⁵ Here Arias, who had been seen as an alternative to Álvarez in succeeding Barnica, accused Álvarez of 'fomenting a civil war and an armed conflict' with Nicaragua, alleging that he had been removed from his post as a result of his opposition to Honduras being used as a 'trampoline' in Álvarez's international collaboration with the Salvadoran army and Contra forces.⁷⁶ Notably, some years later, a *New York Times* article quoted Honduran and US officials as confirming that Arias was manoeuvred out of power following his opposition to any Honduran role in support of the Contras along with revelations that he had both sold weapons to the FMLN and the Sandinistas and twice visited Cuba in 1981.⁷⁷ This alone did not evidence leftist inclinations (General Manuel Antonio Noriega, with whom Arias worked in drug-dealing, helped to arrange the Cuban visit) but it certainly stood in contrast to the strong ideological convictions of Álvarez.

Simultaneously, as Álvarez ascended to power, first as head of FUSEP and then head of the armed forces, the Reagan administration took office in the US. Even prior to this, following the fall of Somoza, the Carter administration had begun to strengthen its US – Honduran relations with Assistant Secretary of State Viron Vaky, in September 1979, stressing the geopolitical importance of Honduras and its role in preventing guerrilla

⁷³ Lieutenant Colonel Chavasse, UK Defence Attaché, 'Report on DA's Visit to Honduras 29 October to 5 November 1981', FCO 99/812, TNA.

⁷⁴ Lapper, *State for Sale*, 81.

⁷⁵ C.J. Sharkey, British Ambassador to Honduras, to FCO, 3/9/1982, FCO 99/1354, TNA.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *NYT*, James LeMoyné, 'Military Officers in Honduras Are Linked to the Drug Trade', 12/02/1988.

infiltrations and regional conflicts.⁷⁸ In meetings with Pentagon officials, meanwhile, the Barnica junta was told that it should expect to play the same regional role as the Somoza regime.⁷⁹ Unlike with Somoza, however, a notable expectation of Washington was that this would be accompanied by a return to civilian rule.⁸⁰ Aid, both economic and military, soon flowed from Washington; economic aid for FY 1980 almost doubled to \$53 million while military assistance increased from \$2.3 million to \$3.9 million.⁸¹ By 1984 these figures had risen to \$169 million and \$79 million respectively.⁸² At the helm of the US Embassy in Honduras during this time was John Negroonte, who replaced Jack Binns, a Carter appointee, in November 1981. While the exact scale of Negroonte's involvement in the Contra War is subject to some debate, he was no stranger to Cold War engagements having spent much of the 1960s in postings related to the Vietnam War. Nor, in this context, was Negroonte a stranger to refugee crises having been involved in resettlement programmes for Vietnamese refugees.⁸³ This experience, according to Arthur Gene Dewey, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau for Refugee Programs, left Negroonte with a distinctive understanding as to who was a 'true' refugee, and, in his view, this equated exclusively to those fleeing communism.⁸⁴

Those crossing the border into Honduras at the beginning of the decade were therefore entering a country which was becoming ever more involved in the conflict – increasingly transnationalised as it was – from which they had fled. The consolidation of military power under Álvarez coupled with Argentinian and US influence meant that Honduras rapidly began to cooperate with the Salvadoran military while facilitating and

⁷⁸ Donald E. Shulz & Deborah Sundloff Schulz, *Honduras, the United States, and the Crisis in Central America* (Oxford: Westview Press: 1994), 57.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸³ Shep Lowman, Letter to the Editor in reply to Stephen Kinzer, *New York Book Review*, 18/10/2021, (accessed online 18/09/2023: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2001/10/18/an-exchange-on-john-negroonte/>)

⁸⁴ Arthur E. (Gene) Dewey, author's interview, online, 17/08/2022.

aiding Contra forces in their conflict with the Sandinistas. Added to this, in the Salvadoran case, was the legacy of the 1969 'Football War'. For, while one legacy of the conflict was an enmity toward the Salvadoran military, another was an opposition to large scale Salvadoran immigration. The war had, after all, been sparked by the expulsion of Salvadoran migrants from Honduras, something which had triggered a Salvadoran military invasion when San Salvador sought to prevent the forceful return of jobless and landless peasants.⁸⁵ In this context, the spectre of a wave of Salvadoran refugees crossing back into Honduras was, as described by Philip Sargisson, then the UNHCR's regional representative in Costa Rica, 'tantamount to letting the enemy in'.⁸⁶ Indeed, following Sargisson's mission to Honduras in May 1980 during which he met with the Honduran ministers of the interior, defence, and foreign affairs, he outlined to Geneva, the Tegucigalpa government's fear that, with civil war in El Salvador imminent, Honduras would be 'swamped'.⁸⁷ At this stage, the government's position was that Honduras could, at most, admit the refugees for a short period in heavily guarded transit camps.⁸⁸ At the same time, however, despite Sargisson's protests, the Honduran military was both attempting to impede refugees from entering while forcing some of those who had entered back across the border.⁸⁹

The desire to prevent the Salvadoran conflict from becoming a Honduran problem along with the need to prevent the nascent Honduran guerrilla movement from receiving support from their Salvadoran counterparts led to growing co-operation between the Salvadoran and Honduran militaries. An impetus to this, on the Salvadoran side, was the three-kilometre-wide demilitarised zone on both sides of the Honduran – Salvadoran border, another legacy of the 'Football War'. Frustrated at guerrilla usage of this zone, the

⁸⁵ See William H. Durham, *Scarcity and survival in Central America: ecological origins of the soccer war*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press: 1992).

⁸⁶ UNHCR San José to Geneva, 14/5/1980, UNHCR, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, Vol. 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Salvadoran military sought Honduran assistance and, on 5 May, according to the Honduran press, military leaders from both countries met at the border to work out a way of preventing this.⁹⁰ Nine days later the horrific consequences of this agreement would become clear; as Salvadoran civilians, pursued by the Salvadoran military and ORDEN, attempted to flee across the Río Sumpul they found the border sealed by Honduran troops and, as described in this chapter's introduction, had no way of escaping the ensuing massacre.⁹¹

Encouraged by Washington, where, at this stage, Jimmy Carter was still President, co-operation between the two governments continued apace. In October 1980, a peace treaty ending the hostilities of the 'Football War' was signed, although this still managed to delimit just 60% of the border.⁹² The signing of a peace treaty without a final agreement on the border was not without controversy. Indeed, a member of the Honduran negotiating team resigned, charging the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of acting against the national interest.⁹³ Such qualms regarding co-operation with El Salvador would re-emerge as the decade progressed but, at the start of the 1980s at least, a combination of US aid and Cold War anxieties took precedence.

Despite the government's objection to the presence of Salvadoran refugees the reality of the situation nevertheless demanded a response and, in January 1981, the *Comisión Nacional para los Refugiados* (National Commission for Refugees, CONARE) was formed under the leadership of Colonel Abraham García Turcios.⁹⁴ That same month the government granted refugee status to Salvadorans while also claiming to accept the principle of non-

⁹⁰ Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Cover War in Latin America*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield: 2005), 197; UN Security Council, Annex, *From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, S/25500, 1993, 121.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² CIA, 'The El-Salvador-Honduras Border: Pockets Full of Problems: An Intelligence Assessment', November 1983, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room – CIA (hence CIA).

⁹³ J.B. Weymes, British Embassy Tegucigalpa to FCO, 'Honduras: April – June 1980', 4/7/1980. FCO 99/595, TNA.

⁹⁴ Elvia Elizabeth Gómez Garcia, 'Refugiados Nicaragüenses y desplazados en Honduras en la década de los ochenta', *Historia Contemporánea* 65, (2021): 175.

refoulement.⁹⁵ This did not, however, represent an about-face in the government's response. At this stage there were an estimated 20,000 Salvadoran refugees in the country, many of whom were being assisted by the local Honduran population and by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which were becoming increasingly critical of the Honduran government.⁹⁶ Placing any relief effort under the control of CONARE, and Colonel Turcios, can be seen as an attempt to gain control over the situation, along with the desire to take some sort of action in the face of stinging criticism from the Catholic Church which, as is detailed later, was supportive of the Salvadoran refugees.⁹⁷ That security considerations rather than humanitarian ones remained paramount was reflected in the eventual decision, detailed later in this chapter, to restrict the refugees' freedom of movement and place them in camps under military watch.

Since their arrival, in fact, Salvadoran refugees were vulnerable to abuse at the hands of the Honduran military. Experiences differed by region and at the hands of individual commanders, but aid agency workers filed frequent reports documenting allegations of sexual and physical assault as well as refoulement. As was soon made clear, the government's recognition of the Salvadoran's refugee status did not stop this. On 17 March 1981, thousands of Salvadorans fled toward Honduras, seeking safety in the face of a Salvadoran military sweep. The Río Lempa, which ran along the border, was swollen however, posing a difficulty for strong swimmers let alone those exhausted from days of flight. Again, as with the Sumpul Massacre, and as noted above, the Honduran military sealed the border and those gathered

⁹⁵ Diane Orentlicher & Iain Guest, *Honduras: A Crisis on the Border: A report on Salvadoran refugees in Honduras*, (New York: Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights: 1985), 18; Binns, US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState DC, 29/1/1981, El Salvador: The Making of US Policy, 1977-1984, Digital National Security Archive (hence: DNSA ES).

⁹⁶ Catholic Relief Services to UNHCR, 9/12/1981, MS Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam archives, Bodleian library, Oxford (hence: Oxfam).

⁹⁷ A report from the British Embassy in Honduras noted that, following criticism from the Archbishop of Tegucigalpa the Honduran government had allowed a greater deal of assistance to reach the Salvadoran refugees; J.B. Weymes (British Embassy Tegucigalpa) to FCO, 'Honduras: April – June 1980', 4/7/1980, FCO 99/595, TNA.

were defenceless in the face of the Salvadoran onslaught, targeted both by troops on the ground and by a helicopter above. An estimated 200 people were killed or drowned in the ensuing slaughter with some alleging that Honduran troops too had fired on the refugees.⁹⁸ In what would meanwhile become a familiar refrain, Salvadoran authorities contended that those being pursued were not refugees but guerrillas, a view echoed by Honduran authorities.⁹⁹

In contrast, neither their nationality nor supposed ideological convictions cast those crossing from Nicaragua into the Honduran Mosquitia as a threat. Unlike those from El Salvador, they were free to cross the border and, once in Honduras, they had relative freedom of movement, eventually provided with land to cultivate by the government.¹⁰⁰ Such treatment was conditioned not just by the absence of security concerns but also by geographic realities. Comprising the easternmost part of Honduras, and characterised by its dense rainforests, wetlands, and lagoons, even today no roads link Tegucigalpa to the Mosquitia's coast.¹⁰¹ As the British Ambassador to Honduras described it, with little communication infrastructure in the Mosquitia, it was 'difficult for anyone to know what goes on there'.¹⁰² To all intents and purposes, the Honduran state, at the start of the 1980s, was absent from the region. Moreover, despite the Sandinista victory and the growing preoccupation with Managua's intentions, the Honduran military had no presence in the region with the exception of two small detachments on the border.¹⁰³ Indeed, the arrival of refugees was seen

⁹⁸ *NYT*, 8/6/1981.

⁹⁹ *Washington Post*, 10/5/1981.

¹⁰⁰ Comptroller General of the United States, 'Report to the Congress of the United States: Central American Refugees', 20/7/1984, (accessed online, 18/09/2023: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-84-106.pdf>)

¹⁰¹ Benjamin F. Tillman, *Imprints on Native Lands: The Miskito-Moravian settlement Landscape in Honduras*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press: 2011), 4; UNESCO, 'Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve', accessed online 15/1/2024 (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/196>).

¹⁰² C. Sharkey British Embassy Tegucigalpa to FCO, 6/1/1982, FCO 99/126, TNA.

¹⁰³ H. Chavasse, British Defence Attaché, 'Report on Visit to Honduras 29 October to 5 November 1981', 13/11/1981, FCO 99/812, TNA.

by at least some military and government figures in opportunistic terms, as a way of furthering the region's development.¹⁰⁴

A particular form of 'development' soon followed. The arrival of refugees into the Honduran Mosquitia was soon matched by the arrival of the Honduran military and the militarisation of the region. Although refugees had arrived during 1981 it was not until 1982, in the aftermath of Red Christmas, that they did so in significant numbers. Compared to an estimated 1,238 refugees in the Mosquitia in June 1981, between December 1981 to January 1982 alone, upward of 3,200 new refugees arrived.¹⁰⁵ By this stage, Ronald Reagan had entered the White House, Negroponte had arrived in Tegucigalpa and Álvarez had assumed command of the armed forces. With such changes came a newfound focus on Nicaragua, particularly so in the case of Álvarez. Spurred on by Argentinian advisors, he placed the Honduran military on maximum alert, and was allegedly only dissuaded from invading Nicaragua by US pressure.¹⁰⁶ By August joint US-Honduran military exercises had commenced along the Nicaraguan border, culminating in the establishment of a permanent Honduran military base at Daruan, just six miles from Mocerón, home to the main concentration of refugees in the Mosquitia.¹⁰⁷

Physical proximity was not the only connection between the refugees and this military build-up. Fagoth, who had urged those in Nicaragua to seek refuge in Honduras, received support from the Honduran military as he organised and encouraged Miskito refugees to take up arms against the Sandinistas. Although the military denied that any such support was being provided, it was widely reported that Miskito guerrillas were being trained in Puerto Lempira, the main town in the Honduran Mosquitia. A plane crash in December 1981 did

¹⁰⁴ Comptroller General of the United States, 'Report to the Congress of the United States'.

¹⁰⁵ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 26/6/1981, 100.HON.GEN.A, UNHCR; UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 2/1/1982, 100.HON.NIC.C, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁶ Lapper, *State for Sale*, 105.

¹⁰⁷ Raymond Bonner, *NYT*, 5/8/1982.

nothing to quash such speculation when it was revealed that Fagoth and Major Leonel Luque Jiménez, the Honduran military commander in the region, were both onboard. Also involved in the crash, during which five died and 25, including Fagoth and Luque, survived, were former members of the Somoza Security Office and others connected with the Nicaraguan counterrevolution.¹⁰⁸ That same month, Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 17 authorising the CIA to build a paramilitary army of Nicaraguan exiles.¹⁰⁹

Clearly, then, while the Honduran military viewed the Salvadoran refugees as a security threat, they did not view the refugees in the Mosquitia in the same way. The Honduran Vice President openly acknowledged this, publicly drawing a distinction between the Salvadoran refugees, whom he deemed a threat to El Salvador's internal security, and the Miskito refugees, who were not similarly dangerous to Honduras.¹¹⁰ This does not, however, imply that the reaction to the Miskito refugees was conditioned by a humanitarian response rather than a national security one. Fagoth's close relationship with Luque Jiménez, the Honduran army's liaison with the Contras, meant that the military was co-operating with someone who had wanted the refugees to come to Honduras in the first place.¹¹¹ Álvarez viewed Nicaragua as Honduras' primary national security concern and therefore lent the military's support to the Contra cause. At the time of their arrival, therefore, Miskito refugees, unlike their Salvadoran counterparts, did not face the hostility of the Honduran military. As the interests of refugees and Contra leaders would diverge, however, it was national security, and thereby loyalty to Contra leaders, which would continue to condition the military's actions rather than any humanitarian considerations.

¹⁰⁸ 'Let us Breathe', *NACLA Report on the Americas* 16 (1982): 36; UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 31/12/1981, 100.HON.NIC.C, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁹ William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press: 1998), 249.

¹¹⁰ *Los Refugiados Centroamericanos*, (San José: Universidad para la Paz: 1987), 95.

¹¹¹ School of the Americas Watch, 'Notorious SOA Graduates from Honduras', 3/6/2019, (accessed online, 18/09/2023: <https://soaw.org/notorious-soa-graduates-from-honduras>)

Grassroots Honduran Responses

Refugees from El Salvador initially looked to the Honduran people living along the border for assistance. The majority of early Salvadoran arrivals had familial connections in Honduras, and they utilised these to integrate with the local Honduran population.¹¹² Having endured the initial hardships in their homes followed by the harrowing experience of flight within El Salvador, those who crossed the border arrived with few possessions. Malnourishment, disease, and injury were also widespread, as reported by members of the local Mennonite Church.¹¹³ The border villages into which they arrived were meanwhile ill equipped to cope with the ever-increasing flow of people across the Río Sumpul and Río Lempa. San Marcos, in the department of Ocotopeque, where the Mesa Grande refugee camp would later be established, was a town of just 4,000 inhabitants whose population was overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture.¹¹⁴ In many cases these Honduran villagers were responding to a rapidly developing situation rather than becoming gradually acclimatised to the presence of refugees. In the village of Los Hernandez, for example, some 3,000 refugees arrived over the course of one day in March 1981.¹¹⁵ Although initially scattered along the border region, as numbers increased, concentrations of refugees began to arise, most notably at Colomoncagua, La Virtud, Guarita, and La Estancia.

As refugee numbers increased, churches began to organise community response efforts, often using existing social action or development agencies. Caritas Honduras, part of

¹¹² Guest & Orentlicher, *Honduras: A Crisis on the Border*, 15; UNHCR San José to Geneva, 17/4/1980, UNHCR, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, Vol. 1.

¹¹³ 'Report on Visit to Honduras, June 16-22, 1980', Honduras 1980, MCC.

¹¹⁴ 'Informe De La Comision De Accion Social Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Hondureña', 11/9/1987, Honduras Mennonite Church Social Action Commission, 1982-86, 1980-1984 Honduras Field Files, MCC.

¹¹⁵ Yvonne Dilling, "The Refugee Crisis Within Central America", in *Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugee's Struggle*, Gary MacEoin Ed., (London: Harper & Row: 1985), 85.

Caritas International, a network of Catholic relief and development agencies, had been active in development work since the 1950s and its members now turned to the task of refugee assistance.¹¹⁶ The Diocese of Santa Rosa de Copán, of which La Virtud was a part, soon became the focal point of the Catholic Church's relief effort as did Father Fausto Milla, director of the diocese's Caritas office. The *Comité Evangélico de Desarrollo y Emergencia* (Evangelical Community for National Development and Emergencies, CEDEN), a development agency of the Honduran evangelical churches, had previously assisted Nicaraguan refugees who had come to Honduras in the months prior to the Sandinista's victory and it, too, used this experience as it turned to assist Salvadorans.

At an individual level, many Hondurans were prepared to make enormous sacrifices to provide shelter, food, and clothing to the refugees, often despite their own poverty. Evonne Dilling, a US Quaker volunteer, recalled visiting a 'very small home' which sheltered five Salvadoran families, the small kitchen feeding some 25 people each meal.¹¹⁷ Familial ties, partly a legacy of Salvadoran migration prior to the 1969 war, was one motive for such kindness but so was witnessing the refugees' suffering. Mario Argeñal, a primary school teacher in San Marcos, was so moved by hearing of the Río Sumpul massacre that he took leave to work with CEDEN where he was appointed as coordinator for Guarita.¹¹⁸ Thoughts of that massacre rang large in his mind in October 1980 as he sought to assist a large gathering of refugees seeking to cross the swollen river from El Salvador.¹¹⁹ Tying a rope around his waist he was halfway across the river when a military plane came overhead, causing many refugees to scatter.¹²⁰ Persevering despite his own fear of a possible attack

¹¹⁶ Caritas de Honduras, 'Press Release', 11/12/1981, MS Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

¹¹⁷ Dilling, 'The Refugee Crisis Within Central America', 87.

¹¹⁸ Mario Argeñal, author's interview, Honduras, 2/11/2022.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Argeñal helped hundreds of refugees cross, working from four in the morning until six that evening.¹²¹

As well as prompting some, such as Argeñal, to assist the refugees, the Sumpul massacre also highlighted the fault lines which were emerging within Honduran society over the treatment of refugees. Priests from the diocese of Santa Rosa de Copán, including Milla, soon denounced the massacre, confirming that it had taken place and that the Honduran military had prevented those targeted from reaching safety.¹²² Despite President Paz García's denials and charges that such accusations were slanderous, the diocese issued a communiqué condemning both the massacre and Honduran complicity in it, a condemnation soon repeated by the Honduran Conference of Bishops and the Archdiocese of San Salvador.¹²³ The story was eventually picked up by the international press with Christopher Dickey describing in *The Washington Post* how refugees had been caught between the 'hammer and anvil' of the two militaries.¹²⁴ The hardships inflicted upon the refugees by the Honduran military meant that many of those engaged in refugee relief soon began to undertake more overtly political work. The *Comité de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Centro America* (Committee of Solidarity with the Peoples of Central America, COSPUCA), for example, was formed in November 1980 as a humanitarian solidarity committee with El Salvador, and channelled material aid to refugees while also publishing denunciations regarding the treatment of them.¹²⁵ Again, Church figures were active here with Milla one of the organisation's public figureheads.¹²⁶ In addition to coordinating aid from the national and international community, the organisation's aims also included promoting the security of refugees and ensuring that

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² UN Security Council, Annex, *From Madness to Hope*, 123; John Donaghy, 'Padre Fausto – a priest in service of the poor: their justice and their health, 14/8/2009, accessed online 10/12/2023, <https://hermanojuncito.blogspot.com/2009/08/padre-fausto-priest-in-service-of-poor.html>

¹²³ Ibid.; British Embassy Tegucigalpa to FCO, 1/7/1980, FCO 99/596, TNA.

¹²⁴ *Washington Post*, 6/7/1980.

¹²⁵ Untitled Report, 25/3/1981, MS Oxfam PRG/3/3/8, Oxfam.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

their human rights were respected while also explicitly rejecting the premise that refugees should not be helped due to supposed FMLN connections.¹²⁷ COSUPCA publications detailed the arrival of refugees across the border, the difficulties they faced, and the causes behind their flight.¹²⁸

Criticising the Honduran government and publicising the actions of the Honduran military was not without its dangers and relief workers and activists soon became targets of the DNI and military. 'Fear' wrote George Reimer, of the US-based Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), visiting at the request of the Honduran Mennonite Church, was the ruling emotion along the border.¹²⁹ As recounted by COSUPCA's Nora Miselem to Margaret Randall, those working with refugees were routinely searched, harassed, and followed by the military.¹³⁰ Indeed, COSUPCA was soon forced to close its office in San Marcos. In July 1982, Miselem was subsequently kidnapped, tortured, and raped by paramilitary operatives.¹³¹

Yet, as the military sought to silence activists, the arrival of refugees meant that the Honduran border, previously isolated and remote, soon became host to a range of international visitors who amplified these activists' voices. Initially, many of these visitors were linked, as in the case of Reimer, to churches. Following Reimer's visit, for example, the MCC soon appointed a refugee programme coordinator, Blake Ortman, to Honduras and El Salvador.¹³² Ortman would go on to draw attention to abuses carried out by the Honduran and Salvadoran regimes. Others, including journalists, soon arrived, interested in gaining a perspective on the Salvadoran conflict. One such journalist was Alex Dressler, a

¹²⁷ COSUPCA, 'Boletín Informativo, January 1982', Box 139, File 682, War on Want archives, SOAS, London, (hence: WoW).

¹²⁸ See for example, COSUPCA, 'Denuncia Pública', 9/1/1981, Box 139 File 682, WoW.

¹²⁹ George Reimer, 'Report on Visit to Honduras, June 16-22 1980', Honduras 1980, MCC.

¹³⁰ Margaret Randall, *When I Look into the Mirror and See You: Women, Terror, and Resistance*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 2003), 11-61

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Linda Shelly, MCC, 'History of the Mennonite Refugee Program in Honduras', December 1984, Honduras 1982-1984, MCC.

correspondent with *The San Diego Union*. His interview with Milla was abruptly cut short when Milla's office received a phone call advising that refugees crossing the Río Lempa were being massacred.¹³³ Milla and Dressler quickly made their way to La Virtud where Dressler interviewed survivors and assisted the injured.¹³⁴ Clandestinely meeting with an FMLN guerrilla, Dressler also received photos of the massacre and, within days, he was on ABC News Nightline in the US, recounting the events.¹³⁵ Milla, constantly targeted for harassment, was soon forced into exile in Mexico.¹³⁶

As refugees began to receive international assistance some Hondurans meanwhile became resentful that they were excluded from such assistance despite their own poverty.¹³⁷ In the case of Colomoncagua, these tensions led to the departure of refugees from the town after three months there. While those in villages around Colomoncagua would bring the refugees food, the local townspeople were hostile to the refugees on account of the assistance they were receiving.¹³⁸ Fear, too, likely played a role here. As one refugee recounted, they received food from the woman whose porch they slept on.¹³⁹ By the third day she apologised that she could no longer offer provisions, having been warned by the military not to do so.¹⁴⁰ Dilling, the US Quaker volunteer, meanwhile wrote that it was evident to all that aiding the refugees 'was to invite trouble in harsh form and degree', and that those who refused to do so did so to protect their own comfort, jobs, family, and lives.¹⁴¹

¹³³ Alex Dressler, 'Statement by Alex Dressler on the Río Lempa Massacre', 17/3/2016, accessed online 1/4/2024, <https://unfinishedsentences.org/reports/foia-rio-lempa/statement-by-alex-dressler-on-the-rio-lempa-massacre/>

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Honduras Information Center, 'Honduras Update', Vol. 2, May 1984, Box 34, World Vision Honduras, David Stoll papers, Hoover Institute Library and Archives, Stanford, CA, (hence: Stoll papers),

¹³⁷ Beth Cagan & Steve Cagan, *This Promised Land, El Salvador: The refugee community of Colomoncagua and their return to Morazán*, (London: Rutgers University Press: 1991), 21.

¹³⁸ Guest & Orentlicher, *Honduras: A crisis on the Border*, 17.

¹³⁹ Cagan & Cagan, *This Promised Land, El Salvador*, 21.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Dilling, 'The Refugee Crisis Within Central America', 88.

In the Honduran Mosquitia, familial connections and religion played a similar role in motivating a local response to the arrival of refugees from Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. Also present was a shared indigenous identity, given that most of the Honduran population there, which numbered about 40,000, were Miskito Indians.¹⁴² While the Río Coco delineated the border between Nicaragua and Honduras the indigenous populations understood this as the centre of their territory rather than the edge of it. As described by Brooklyn Rivera, a Nicaraguan Miskito leader, this border was not, prior to 1980, ignored, but people crossed it freely and easily without papers, travelling back and forth.¹⁴³ As with the Salvadorans, during the initial influx of refugees in 1981, many of those from Nicaragua were accommodated either by friends or family but, even at this easy stage, some towns and villages were unable to cope with the quantity of new arrivals with refugees instead setting up temporary accommodation.¹⁴⁴ As refugee flows intensified at the start of 1982, some villages became completely overwhelmed; within the space of a few weeks the population at Mocerón, for example, went from 300 to 6,000.¹⁴⁵

Despite the region's isolation it was not solely local Hondurans who were present to assist even the earliest refugee arrivals. The Board of World Mission, the overseas body of the Moravian Church in North America, had an existing presence in the Mosquitia and its members set about coordinating relief from abroad. However, World Relief Honduras, headed by Donald Hawk, a US evangelical missionary, was the first national relief agency to respond to the refugees' needs. While the role of religious organisations and actors here was thus similar to the arrival of Salvadorans, an important distinction was that CEDEN, COSPUCA, and Caritas were primarily led by Honduran nationals whereas World Relief was led by Hawk and his son. Adding to this more US-centric picture was the involvement of Diana

¹⁴² Ibid., 58.

¹⁴³ Brooklyn Rivera, Interview 1/4/1981, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 127.

¹⁴⁴ UNHCR Tegucigalpa, 29/6/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, Vol. 1, UNHCR.

¹⁴⁵ Florence Egal, 'Refugies Miskitos au Honduras - Projet de Sante', April 1982, Honduras 1982-1984, MSF.

Negroponte. Married to the newly arrived US Ambassador to Honduras, she worked with World Relief both in setting up their assistance programme and in encouraging donations and aid.¹⁴⁶

As refugees arrived, they brought with them warnings regarding the horrors of the Sandinistas while, at the same time, guerrilla leaders began to spread propaganda and fear that Managua was intent on spreading communism across the border and would subject the indigenous population of Honduras to the same conditions as those in Nicaragua.¹⁴⁷ Fagoth and his combatants therefore positioned themselves as saviours of the Honduran Mosquitia, intent on preventing the spread of communism across the Río Coco.¹⁴⁸

Not everyone, however, viewed the combatants and their families in such a light. Many leaders within MASTA (*Moskitia Asla Takanka*, Unity of La Mosquitia), a Honduran indigenous organisation founded in 1976, initially spoke out against cooperating with the Contra-Miskito struggle, viewing the presence of thousands of guerrilla forces and refugees as detrimental to life in the Honduran Mosquitia.¹⁴⁹ Such individuals were soon met with intimidation by the anti-Sandinista combatants.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, although the Nicaraguan Miskito refugee population invoked claims of brotherhood as a means of eliciting aid from the local Honduran population, many Honduran Miskitos emphasised their national identity as a way of separating themselves from the Nicaraguan conflict and rejected MISURA claims that they were also fighting on behalf of the Honduran Mosquitia.¹⁵¹ As one Honduran leader

¹⁴⁶ John Radford, Field Director, Save the Children Fund Honduras, to Col. Hugh Mackay, Director, Overseas Department, Save the Children Fund, 'Nicaraguan Refugees', 4/4/1982, SCF/OP/4/HOD/10, Save the Children archives Cadbury Library, Birmingham (hence: SCF); It is difficult to assess the extent of the Honduran government's proactiveness in responding to refugees in the Mosquitia at this stage.

¹⁴⁷ Isabel Chiriboga, *Espíritus de Vida y Muerte: los Miskitu Hondureños en época de Guerra*, (Honduras: Editorian Guaymuras: 2002), 117.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

clarified, these refugees were deserving of aid not on the basis of a shared identity but because they were displaced people in need of assistance.¹⁵²

For those living in the Mosquitia, the arrival of refugees was accompanied by the arrival of different international actors and organisations into previously isolated areas. Journalists, US military advisors, humanitarian workers, and others now flooded in. As alluded to above, the military build-up in the Mosquitia also heralded, in many ways, the arrival of the Honduran state to the region. Although many local Hondurans were to reap the benefits of increased spending and development projects, they also found themselves facing a similar situation to those living along the Salvadoran border where Cold War ideology and geopolitics, rather than nationality, dictated who was deserving of the Honduran state's protection. Those who protested Salvadoran military incursions as a violation of Honduran sovereignty were now targeted as subversive while, in the Mosquitia, it was anti-Sandinista guerrillas who had the Honduran military's backing, not the Honduran Miskitos who faced hardship and displacement because of their presence.

The UNHCR

The UNHCR's limited presence in Honduras at the start of the 1980s meant that Philip Sargisson, the UNHCR's Regional Representative in Northern Latin America, handled the institution's response to the initial influx of Salvadoran refugees. Based in Costa Rica, Sargisson undertook a mission to Honduras in May 1980 where, following interviews with those who had crossed the border, he confirmed that they were *prima facie* refugees under UNHCR mandate.¹⁵³ Thus, regardless of Tegucigalpa's position toward the Salvadorans now entering the country, they were entitled to UNHCR protection against refoulement and

¹⁵² Ibid., 123.

¹⁵³ *Prima facie* refugees are those whose refugee status has been determined at the group rather than individual level; Sargisson, UNHCR Costa Rica to Geneva, 14/5/1980, 100.HON.SAL [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

treatment in accordance with basic humanitarian principles.¹⁵⁴ Despite the relatively low number of refugees at this stage, estimated at 1,200 in May 1980, the situation was, warned Sargisson, significant, given Honduran efforts to close the border along with the Honduran attitude to Salvadoran refugees in general.¹⁵⁵ Sargisson was particularly horrified by the conditions faced by those at La Estancia where 500 persons, mainly families, were ‘grouped under Honduran military vigilance’. They had not eaten in three days, were sleeping outside under heavy rain, drinking water was inadequate and dirty, and two children had died from chronic gastroenteritis in the week preceding his visit.¹⁵⁶ The ‘only viable solution’, concluded Sargisson, was that Honduras be treated as a transit country only.¹⁵⁷ To this end, Sargisson’s office had approached the governments of Costa Rica and Nicaragua and believed the Costa Rican government was close to accepting the 500 refugees at La Estancia while Managua indicated its willingness to accept up to 50,000, mainly as cotton pickers.¹⁵⁸

Seeking the refugees’ evacuation was not the UNHCR’s only course of action. In meetings with Honduran government ministers, Sargisson impressed upon them his view that the military’s blocking of refugees from entering ran contrary to internationally accepted principles.¹⁵⁹ This, along with refoulement, was of particular concern to the UNHCR and ‘vehement’ protests were made to the government as well as to the Honduran representative in Geneva.¹⁶⁰ Despite the opposition of its officials to government policy, the Honduran government did not view the UNHCR solely in antagonistic terms. Rather, as early as April, the interior minister had indicated that, should the Salvadoran presence in Honduras continue to grow, the government would ask the UNHCR to take responsibility for any assistance

¹⁵⁴ *Determination of Refugee Status*, (Geneva: UNHCR Training Service: 1989), accessed 17/1/2024, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6b35c0.pdf>

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Sargisson to Geneva, 26/5/1980, 100.HON.SAL [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Sargisson, UNHCR Costa Rica to Geneva, 14/5/1980.

¹⁶⁰ Sargisson to Geneva, 17/4/1980, 100.HON.SAL [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

programme.¹⁶¹ A month later, even as the presence of Honduran troops contributed to the slaughter of refugees at the Río Sumpul, government ministers requested that the UNHCR assume responsibility for ‘all aspects of the problem’ while simultaneously claiming that most of the Salvadorans were not really refugees.¹⁶² Such a request, in Sargisson’s view, demonstrated the government’s ‘considerable confidence’ in the UNHCR.¹⁶³

However, the government’s supposed confidence in the UNHCR along with its request for UNHCR assistance did not imply Honduran acceptance of refugee protection principles. Rather, as with the granting of refugee status in January 1981, the government was reacting to a situation beyond its control and was therefore seeking practical assistance. Despite the government’s best efforts, the Salvadoran refugee population was growing rapidly. By July 1980 there were an estimated 2,700 Salvadoran refugees in Honduras, by October this figure would exceed 10,000.¹⁶⁴ In the midst of the growing number of NGOs seeking to assist these refugees it is likely that the UNHCR, with its rhetoric of neutrality and impartiality, was an appealing alternative for the Honduran government, especially given the increasingly vocal criticism it received from some of these NGOs. Meanwhile, as previously detailed, military abuses against the refugee population continued apace.

The UNHCR response, in this context, was to continue dialogue with ministers and military officials while also expanding its presence in Honduras through the appointment of a Chargé de Mission, Charles-Henry Bazoche, a French national, in July 1980. This appointment followed on from a visit by Poul Hartling, the High Commissioner for Refugees, to Honduras, something which was reluctantly accepted by the government on the condition that minimal publicity be given to it.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Sargisson to Geneva, 14/5/1980.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ UNHCR report, ‘UNHCR Activities in Central America on Behalf of Salvadoran Refugees’, 17/2/1981, 100.GEN.SAL., Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁶⁵ Sargisson to Geneva, 26/5/1980.

Indeed, negative publicity regarding the treatment of refugees is something the Honduran government was anxious to avoid, albeit not anxious enough to prompt a wholesale change in its response. From the outset Sargisson had stressed to the country's ministers that refusing to accept the refugees could result in international criticism and he and other UNHCR officials utilised this aversion to criticism as they attempted to influence government policy.¹⁶⁶ The 'skilful use of the press' Sargisson reminded colleagues could be a 'valuable protection device'.¹⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the Sumpul massacre, Sargisson stressed both the moral obligation to confirm events along with the possibility that such a confirmation, along with 'energetic protest', could embarrass the government and deter any repeat events.¹⁶⁸ Honduran leaders were not accustomed to the international criticism and scrutiny which now accompanied them. While UNHCR officials were more circumspect than other aid personnel, they, too, were capable of public statements with Bazoche quoted in the *New York Times* confirming that three refugees handed over to the Salvadoran military by Honduran soldiers had later been found dead.¹⁶⁹

If the Lempa massacre highlighted the limits of what the UNHCR could achieve through dialogue with government and military officials, for those already in Honduras, UNHCR efforts did bear some fruit, particularly in terms of assistance. Following the arrival of Bazoche to Tegucigalpa, the UNHCR, along with the Honduran government, nominated CEDEN as the co-ordinating agency of the UNHCR's assistance programme.¹⁷⁰ The implementation of the programme was to be carried out by Caritas Honduras, World Vision, the Mennonite Church, and MSF.¹⁷¹ Although each agency was already engaged in assistance

¹⁶⁶ Sargisson to Geneva, 14/5/1980.

¹⁶⁷ Sargisson to Geneva, 'Situation Report for Northern Latin America: A Major Refugee Problem in an Increasingly Hot Area', 26/03/1981, 100.GEN.SAL., Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁶⁸ Sargisson to Geneva, 30/6/1980, FCO 99/596, TNA.

¹⁶⁹ 'Green Berets step up Honduras role', *NYT*, 9/8/1981.

¹⁷⁰ UNHCR Report, 'UNHCR Activities in Central America on Behalf of Salvadoran Refugees'.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

activities, this formalisation of the refugee relief effort resulted in improvements in terms of resource efficiency and care. A report by Noemi de Espinoza, CEDEN's Executive Director, in October 1980 detailed, for example, the establishment of central warehouses where food, medicine, and clothing were kept.¹⁷² Efforts were also made to promote activities which could produce income for refugee families such as crafts, cooking, and small-animal raising projects.¹⁷³ Communication between aid personnel was meanwhile improved through the installation of radio equipment in areas of refugee concentration.¹⁷⁴ A visit by Bazoche to the border region in November 1980 confirmed that the conditions witnessed by Sargisson at La Estancia were now a thing of the past.¹⁷⁵ Refoulment, while still an issue, was no longer being practised on a mass scale although whether this was the result, as Sargisson understood it, of UNHCR intervention or whether it was simply the result of Tegucigalpa's recognition of the impossibility of expelling the refugee population is debatable.¹⁷⁶

There was, of course, an inherent tension between the objectives of the UNHCR and those of the Honduran government and military. UNHCR officials viewed the Honduran military, along with their Salvadoran counterparts, as the primary threat to refugee protection while, on the other hand, the Honduran government viewed those which the UNHCR was mandated to protect as a security threat. It was not long before it became clear to the Honduran authorities that requesting a UNHCR presence on the basis of its assistance capabilities also entailed a UNHCR presence on the protection front. A US intelligence source at Colomoncagua, for example, reported in early 1981 that, as refugees were being moved from living in local school buildings to newly established camps, UNHCR

¹⁷² Noemi de Espinoza, Executive Director CEDEN, 'Refugee Program Activities Report: July – October 1980', 110.Hon [a] Programming – Honduran Vol. 1, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Charles-Henry Bazoche, Chargé de Mission, Memorandum, 10/11/1980, 100.HON.GEN [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁷⁶ Sargisson, 'Situation Report for Northern Latin America: A Major Problem in an Increasingly Hot Area'.

representatives were blocking the Honduran military and Organisation of American States (OAS) observers from entering the camps.¹⁷⁷ The regional commander was, according to the source, ‘incensed’ at the situation while he, along with other members of the armed forces’ hierarchy, was becoming increasingly convinced that the refugees’ arrival at Colomoncagua had been planned by the FMLN.¹⁷⁸ For their part, UNHCR representatives at Colomoncagua stated that the camp was under UNHCR authority.¹⁷⁹

Notably, the UNHCR was fully aware that responding on the basis of assistance emboldened its protection capabilities. A cable from Sargisson to Geneva in September 1980 referenced the ‘overall strategy’ that had previously been agreed with headquarters whereby Bazoche had ‘successfully manoeuvred himself’ into a key position with regards to assistance which ‘in turn’ strengthened UNHCR ability to act on protection.¹⁸⁰

Notwithstanding UNHCR claims to authority over the space within camps, enclosing the refugees in such spaces suited the purposes of the Honduran authorities. Placed in camps refugees would be removed from the Honduran population, their activity could be monitored, and they could be cared for by the UNHCR and relief agencies without placing any responsibility on the Honduran government. Although camps were already developing at Colomoncagua and La Virtud, over half of the refugee population was living outside of these, integrated with the local Honduran population.¹⁸¹ While such integration was the preferred solution of both the refugees and relief personnel, the Honduran military and US Embassy were concerned that, in the absence of controls, assistance was being diverted to the FMLN and that guerrillas were using Honduran villages to recuperate.¹⁸² ‘The only solution’ wrote

¹⁷⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff Message Center, US DAO Tegucigalpa to DIA Washington DC, 19/02/1981, DNSA ES.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Sargisson to Muller, UNHCR Geneva, 5/9/1980, 100.HON.SAL [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁸¹ Binns to SecState DC, ‘Visit of State Department Officers on Refugee Affairs’, 17/6/1981, US Department of State Freedom of Information Act, Virtual Reading Room (hence: Dep of State).

¹⁸² Ibid.

Binns, the US Ambassador to Honduras, in a June 1981 memo to Washington, was to ‘put everyone in camps and thus increase controls.’¹⁸³

For its part, the UNHCR was not without its own concerns over the refugees’ proximity to the border. As the Salvadoran conflict intensified and as refugees continued to arrive, the Honduran military’s presence on the border also expanded. An August article in the *New York Times* reported on the arrival of US Special Forces to La Virtud quoting Captain Michael Sheehan, of the US Green Berets, as saying that the refugees gathered there had ‘no human rights’.¹⁸⁴ According to Sheehan, who would go on to become a counterterrorism expert in Washington, the US National Security Council had approved the use of Special Forces units in Honduras to support the military effort against the FMLN and a Special Forces unit was soon to be based at La Virtud.¹⁸⁵ Sheehan’s task, along with those of the other US advisors at La Virtud, was to control the entry of Salvadoran refugees who, according to them, were lending assistance to the FMLN.¹⁸⁶ With such a growing, and refugee-antagonistic, military presence, came new restrictions on refugee work with a November 1981 border mission by Ingemar Cederberg, the UNHCR’s Director of Programmes in Northern Latin America, noting the intimidation, robbing, and detainment of relief staff.¹⁸⁷ Relocation to Mesa Grande, away from the border and close to CEDEN’s regional office, would, in Cederberg’s view, reduce such ‘pressure’ and was to begin as quickly as possible.¹⁸⁸

However, matters quickly spiralled even further beyond the UNHCR’s control. On 14 November Bazoche was called urgently to Guarita where two Honduran soldiers had been

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Raymond Bonner, ‘Green Berets Step Up Honduras Role’, *NYT*, 9/8/1981.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid; ‘Michael Sheehan, Prescient Counterterrorism Expert, Dies at 63’ *NYT*, 2/8/2018,

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ingemar Cederberg, ‘Mission Report: Honduras 9-12 November 1981’, 100.HON.GEN [a]., Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

killed, allegedly by Salvadorans.¹⁸⁹ Refugees, fearing reprisals, were now convinced of the necessity of relocation, something they had previously been resistant to.¹⁹⁰ According to Argeñal, of CEDEN, the military captain threatened to kill the refugees, deaf to Argeñal's protests that they were under the protection of the UNHCR.¹⁹¹ Continuing to La Virtud Bazoche found an equally dire situation: the body of a Caritas worker, Elipidio Cruz, who had been detained by the Honduran military, had been recovered while the plane on which Bazoche was due to leave La Virtud was set aflame, allegedly by a Honduran anti-Communist group.¹⁹² The following day a group of 30 Salvadoran soldiers entered the camp at La Virtud and attempted to kidnap between 20 to 50 refugees.¹⁹³ Also present that day, however, was a large international delegation which included a US Congressional aide, a television crew, staff from international NGO headquarters, and Bianca Jagger, who set off in pursuit of the captured refugees, eventually securing their release.¹⁹⁴

The incident serves to illustrate both the spread of the Salvadoran conflict to Honduras as well as the internationalisation of the Honduran border region. The presence of such a variety of witnesses to the attack on La Virtud highlights what would become an increasingly uncomfortable reality for Tegucigalpa. The refugees brought with them a level of international attention to which neither the Honduran government nor military were accustomed. Newswire services, such as United Press International, the *Washington Post*, and other outlets picked up on the story, undoubtedly driven by the presence of Jagger and others.¹⁹⁵ When interviewed, Jagger emphasised both the presence of the Salvadoran military and the Honduran military's seeming indifference to the refugees' kidnapping.¹⁹⁶ As is

¹⁸⁹ Sargisson to Geneva, 17/11/1981, 100.HON.SAL [b]., Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Mario Argeñal, author's interview, Honduras, 2/11/2022.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 18/11/1981, 100.HON.SAL [b] Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ See, for example, *Washington Post*, 17/11/1981.

¹⁹⁶ United Press International, 19/11/1981.

demonstrated in the following chapters, such international attention could be an effective instrument of refugee protection. For its part, the Honduran government would later try to avoid such attention by – largely unsuccessfully – seeking to limit the presence of international relief staff in the Salvadoran camps.

In the immediate term, the result of the attack was the hasty movement of refugees from San Jose, Guarita, and La Virtud to Mesa Grande, a site which was far from prepared for such an arrival. Publicly, Cederberg, the UNHCR Director of Programmes, sharply criticised the Honduran military for not attempting to block the Salvadoran soldiers from entering La Virtud while denouncing the government's failure to protect the refugees as a violation of its moral and international obligations.¹⁹⁷ Privately however, some officials, including Bazoche, were sceptical as to the government's ability to assist the UNHCR.¹⁹⁸ The attempted kidnapping had meanwhile demonstrated, both to the refugees as well as UNHCR and relief agency staff, that the physical presence of international figures was a better guarantor of protection than any agreements at the governmental level. The outcry over the well-publicised events at La Virtud also provided the UNHCR with the opportunity to further enhance its presence in Honduras. Following a meeting between Bazoche and Sargisson and the Honduran ministers for foreign affairs and interior, Hartling wrote directly to the Honduran President noting that the UNHCR would now strengthen its presence in the border area.¹⁹⁹

The result, then, was that, as Cordova and Reagan took office, as Álvarez consolidated his grip on the military, and as Negroponte arrived in Tegucigalpa, the UNHCR had confirmed its ability to operate in an increasingly militarised and strategically important,

¹⁹⁷ *NYT*, 23/11/1981.

¹⁹⁸ Sargisson to Geneva, 17/11/1981.

¹⁹⁹ UNHCR San José to Geneva, 24/11/1981, 100.HON.SAL [b], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR; High Commissioner for Refugees to President of Honduras, 23/11/1981, 100.HON.SAL [b], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

but contested, border area. UNHCR ‘roving officers’, often, according to the ERP’s Chicas Sánchez and others, acting on information received from the FMLN in El Salvador, would journey to the border to receive those wishing to cross, in this way preventing interception by the Honduran military.²⁰⁰ In something of a cat-and-mouse relationship, roving officers would constantly go to the border with the military following. In cases where information on an imminent arrival had been received, officers would take more care to avoid such company.²⁰¹ At other times, officers would wake the local military commander at early hours of the morning in the hope that they would not wish to accompany them.²⁰²

Waiting on the UNHCR roving officers at the border is something that Manuel Monterrosa, 18 when he arrived at Mesa Grande in 1985, recalls vividly. He, along with 30 to 50 others, spent three days hiding along the border at Guarita, emerging only when they saw UNHCR personnel come into view.²⁰³ Escorted to the reception centre at Guarita, Monterrosa and his companions were then driven to Mesa Grande where a refugee reception committee reunited him with his parents.²⁰⁴ Monterrosa’s experience highlights the inconsistent and contradictory nature of Tegucigalpa’s relationship with the UNHCR. He spent days hiding from the Honduran military only to be received by a UNHCR Roving Officer who had the Honduran government’s permission to operate in the area, in effect having government permission to protect refugees from the Honduran military.

In 1981, the UNHCR’s work in Honduras was dominated by the rapid arrival of Salvadoran refugees and the unfolding of a myriad of protection issues. In contrast, it was not until early 1982, in the aftermath of Red Christmas, that Miskito refugees would begin to

²⁰⁰ Esteban Chicas Sánchez, author’s interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 8/11/2022; Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 92

²⁰¹ Werner Blatter, author’s interview, online, 14/02/2020.

²⁰² Peter Gaetcher, author’s interview, online, 8/2/2021.

²⁰³ Manuel Monterrosa, author’s interview, online, 6/9/2021.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

arrive in earnest and, even then, the Honduran government's view that they did not represent a security threat meant that the UNHCR's protection efforts remained focused on the Salvadoran refugees.

The first visit by UNHCR officials to the Mosquitia – the region to which Miskito refugees arrived – was in May 1981 by Bazoche and Leonardo Franco. Interviews with refugees led Franco to conclude that they had faced persecution on partly ethnic and partly political grounds in Nicaragua, something which appeared to justify their refugee status.²⁰⁵ Despite this, both Bazoche and Franco recommended that the UNHCR adopt a cautious approach to the situation, a recommendation based partly on contacts with Nicaraguan authorities. Here, Managua issued assurances that any refugee who decided to return could do so freely and without problems while representatives from the Moravian Church confirmed the government's 'good intentions' regarding improving tensions on the Atlantic Coast.²⁰⁶ As a result, Bazoche's recommendations to Geneva were that no-long term assistance commitments be made and that voluntary repatriation be promoted through negotiations.²⁰⁷ To this end Franco undertook a fact-finding mission to Nicaragua while the Nicaraguan Ambassador to Honduras expressed his willingness to meet refugee leaders in the UNHCR's presence.²⁰⁸

A subsequent meeting between the High Commissioner and other senior UNHCR figures echoed this cautious approach toward assistance. During the meeting it was decided that the Nicaraguan Miskitos be considered refugees but that no formal communication of this status be given.²⁰⁹ Assistance was to be provided only if no other sources were available

²⁰⁵ UNHCR San José to Geneva, 26/5/1981, 100.HON.GEN [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR; UNHCR Mexico City to Geneva, 25/5/1981, 100.HON.GEN [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.; UNHCR San José to Geneva, 26/5/1981.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ C. Bertrand, Americas Iberia and Oceania Section, UNHCR, 'Note for the File', 15/6/1981, 100.HON.GEN [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

and was to be limited to the ‘essential minimum’ to ensure it did not act as a pull-factor in creating further refugees.²¹⁰ Moreover, it was agreed that all UNHCR efforts be oriented toward voluntary repatriation.²¹¹ Fostering a good relationship with Managua was also of concern to those in Geneva with it resolved that the ‘humanitarian character’ of UNHCR assistance be clearly explained to the Nicaraguan government along with the UNHCR’s endeavours to facilitate an early return of refugees.²¹²

The UNHCR’s approach was shaped by a number of factors. Although the recognition of refugee status implied a recognition of the persecution faced by the Miskito population in Nicaragua, UNHCR officials clearly believed that the situation could quickly be improved. Indeed, despite recommending that refugee status be acknowledged, Bazoche believed that many had come to Honduras out of a sense of solidarity with leaders such as Fagoth.²¹³ Along with avoiding the creation of an additional pull-factor, the decision not to issue a formal confirmation of refugee status can also be seen as an attempt by the UNHCR to navigate an international landscape fraught with political dangers. Issuing such a confirmation would provide fuel to Fagoth’s charges against the Sandinistas and increase support for Contra forces, thereby potentially deepening any conflict. Furthermore, officials were not without their doubts regarding the nature of refugee flows. There were ‘indications’ Bazoche advised Geneva that ‘we are not faced with a normal refugee situation’.²¹⁴ Such indications were based upon interviews with refugees who, when questioned why they did not wish to return to Nicaragua, replied that they were ‘awaiting instructions’.²¹⁵ ‘Somocistas’, wrote Bazoche, had been observed in the region while Fagoth was known to

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² O. Haselman, Chief, Americas, Iberia and Oceania Section, UNHCR, ‘New Influx of Nicaraguans into Honduras’, 9/6/1981, 100.HON.GEN [a], UNHCR.

²¹³ Bazoche to Geneva, 29/6/1981, 100.HON.GEN [a], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

spend time in Miami where ‘contacts of different kinds are easily obtained’.²¹⁶ Adding to Bazoche’s concerns were the exaggerated refugee figures being provided by the Honduran authorities whose estimate of 3,000 refugees was double that of Bazoche’s estimate at the time.²¹⁷ Such concerns notwithstanding, the UNHCR agreed that food assistance be provided through World Relief, albeit for a period of just three months.²¹⁸

UNHCR concern over the nature of the refugees’ activities only increased toward the end of 1981. At this stage, many of those being assisted had moved to Mocerón where a camp was being established. Given the logistical difficulties in providing support across a region as inhospitable as the Mosquitia, the UNHCR viewed this as being the most ‘practical’ means to provide assistance.²¹⁹ In late December, however, World Relief officials reported that the entire population of one camp had departed Mocerón during the night.²²⁰ The 105 men and five women had left with one week’s worth of rations and personal belongings, including axes and machetes.²²¹ The refugees had supposedly left following warning of an upcoming Sandinista attack on the camp, something which Bazoche’s deputy, Arne Lundby, deemed strange given that women and children remained at the camp.²²² Instead, Lunby linked the disappearance to a clash with Sandinista troops at the border, implying that the departed refugees had taken part in it.²²³

The rapid increase in refugee flows in the aftermath of ‘Red Christmas’ forced UNHCR officials to abandon hope that the situation would soon resolve itself through voluntary repatriation. Instead, the UNHCR’s Emergency Unit was dispatched to Honduras, tasked with establishing Mocerón as a camp capable of housing its newly swollen population.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Arne Lunby, UNHCR, ‘Note For the File: Nicaraguan Miskito Refugees’, 11/10/1981, 100.HON.NIC [c], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

²²⁰ Lundby to Geneva, 28/12/1981, 100.HON.NIC [c], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Lundby to Geneva, 31/12/1981, 100.HON.NIC [c], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

²²³ Ibid.

As described by Mark Malloch Brown, the unit's deputy head, the UNHCR's focus here was on the 'logistical nightmare' of the Mosquitia.²²⁴ Shallow harbours prevented supplies from being shipped in while existing airstrips were also problematic.²²⁵ The UNHCR and World Relief, wrote Brown in *Refugees*, the UNHCR's journal, had 'rarely had so much to do for so few people'.²²⁶ The success of the aid programme 'depends on a thread' with rains that 'brutally annihilate' the camp's infrastructure, while rice, shipped along the highly exposed Atlantic Coast had to be carried by refugees to the beach before being trucked over 80 kilometres of mud-clogged roads toward Morocón.²²⁷

Very different dynamics therefore characterised the UNHCR's work with the two refugee groups, with assistance problems dominating in the Mosquitia and protection issues with the Salvadorans. By 1982, as Brown attempted to improve Mocerón, his team leader, Guy Prim, was also in Honduras, working along the Salvadoran border. Charged with overseeing the remaining transfer of Salvadoran refugees from La Virtud to Mesa Grande he later recalled; 'we shall never forget the last night that we spent at La Virtud. We... blocked the camp entrance with all available vehicles... afraid that intruders from the other side of the border [El Salvador] might infiltrate'.²²⁸ In both cases, however, UNHCR officials found themselves working under enormous strain, hampered by either an extremely inhospitable environment or an inhospitable host state. UNHCR Tegucigalpa, previously a sleepy sub-office of UNHCR San Jose had been transformed and was soon upgraded to be placed on a par with Mexico City and San Jose, under the direct command of Geneva.

²²⁴ Mark Malloch Brown, author's interview, online, 2/10/2020.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ *Refugees*, September 1982.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ *Refugees*, September 1982.

Conclusion

Following his posting to the Mosquitia in early 1982, Brown noted the ‘spectacular’ work required to establish a camp at Mocerón while also lamenting that camp’s necessity. A refugee camp, he wrote, ‘should be a solution of last resort’.²²⁹ It was a solution which would dominate in Honduras for over a decade. From the Honduran government’s perspective, the refugee camp was the solution to a national security problem, a means by which the Salvadoran population could be monitored, controlled, and enclosed. Protection from these refugees, rather than protection for them, was the government’s driving concern. In the case of the Mosquitia, the camp was not imposed upon refugees in the same manner but was created out of a seeming logistical necessity. In a region devoid of large-scale settlements and beset by access issues, 8,000 refugees could not easily be assisted elsewhere. Soon it became clear that a large, high-profile, camp also suited those wishing to damage the Sandinista’s international image.

In tracing the reaction of the Honduran state to the arrival of refugees, this chapter highlighted the Cold War’s role in shaping this reaction. Even as the Honduran government employed a Cold War approach to the issue, it requested the help of an institution mandated to protect and assist refugees in a neutral and impartial manner. Regardless of this impartiality and neutrality, the UNHCR’s mandate meant that it was destined to clash with those regimes which participated in, or sought to deny the existence of, refugee abuses. However, it was not the Cold War alone which shaped the Honduran response. A range of actors, from CARITAS to World Relief launched assistance efforts on the basis of humanitarian or religious impulses. In the Salvadoran case, the position of the Honduran government had a radicalising impact on many Honduran relief workers while, in the case of

²²⁹ Ibid.

the Mosquitia, the response of World Relief foreshadowed the interest of the evangelical right in the Miskito refugees.

As will be explored in the following chapters, the manner of the refugees' arrival and their reception in Honduras was to have long-lasting consequences on their experiences. The differing relationship between the ERP and Colomoncagua and the FPL and Mesa Grande meant that there were also notable variations even between Salvadoran camps. That the Honduran acceptance of the Miskito refugees was largely based on an anti-Sandinista militancy would meanwhile become clear when the interests of Contra groups and the refugees diverged, giving rise to a host of protection issues.

Chapter 2: Contested Meanings of Refuge: Shaping Life in Honduran Refugee Camps

The task faced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) emergency team, dispatched to Honduras in March 1982, was immense. As Guy Prim, the team's head, recalled, just as the scale of Mocerón's assistance problems was becoming clear, and just as protection issues intensified along the Salvadoran border, the UNHCR's co-ordinating agency in Honduras, the *Comité Evangélico de Desarrollo y Emergencia* (Evangelical Community for National Development and Emergencies, CEDEN), broke up.¹ During its three-month mission, the emergency team was expected to take over CEDEN's co-ordinating role, continue moving the Salvadoran refugees from the border, resolve the issues at Mocerón, and appoint a new co-ordinating partner.² This last point, in particular, was important to those in Geneva who felt that the UNHCR could better fulfil its protection role when at a distance from refugee assistance. Taking charge of assistance could also leave the institution 'exposed'.³ However, locating a suitable co-ordinating partner proved impossible and, despite the High Commissioner's reservations, the refugee programme was to remain under UNHCR co-ordination.

If, on the surface, humanitarianism appeared as a barrier to the violence of the Cold War, the reality of the Cold War complicated aid and the refuge being offered, quickly engulfing the nascent refugee relief programmes. To be sure, as previously detailed, humanitarian agencies strove to meet the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran refugees' physical needs and, in the Salvadoran case, to protect them from those who wished them harm. However, the humanitarian agencies operating in Honduras came from a variety of

¹ *Refugees*, September 1982.

² *Ibid.*

³ Richard Moseley-Williams (Oxfam), 'Meeting with UNHCR Geneva', 10/3/1982, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam archives, Bodleian library, Oxford (hence Oxfam).

backgrounds; from US-based agencies with links to the evangelical Right, and Honduran-based organisations backed by the Catholic Church, to non-faith-based European groups. As an examination of CEDEN's collapse and UNHCR anxieties regarding its partners in both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugee programmes reveals, the Cold War did not just act as a backdrop for humanitarian action, but shaped how humanitarian actors interpreted their duty.

In responding to CEDEN's collapse and in restructuring the camp at Mocerón, the UNHCR sought to shield the refugees from those motivated by anti-Communism rather than refugee welfare. Yet, it was not only outside actors who sought to impose the Cold War on the spaces constructed and protected by the UNHCR. Though the refugees sought an escape from the violence of El Salvador and Nicaragua, many remained connected to the conflicts from which they had fled and wished to remain active participants in them. The *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) and the Miskito guerrilla, so involved in the refugees' journey to Honduras, did not disappear at the camps' boundaries. As this chapter highlights, in fact, they, and their struggle, were intimately intertwined with everyday life in the camps. By taking a broad lens and examining the perspectives of different humanitarian agencies, and the refugees themselves, this chapter then demonstrates how camps were inescapably arenas of the Cold War and how the management of them operated within that conflict's logic, even while many sought to define them as "neutral" spaces.

The situation faced by those in the Mosquitia and those along the Salvadoran border was, of course, very different. The scale of the violence in El Salvador was far beyond that in Nicaragua, and, as established in Chapter One, the Honduran government viewed those from El Salvador, not Nicaragua, as dangerous. In both instances, however, the Honduran state, with the notable exception of the military, was absent. Although on Honduran territory, the camps were therefore not fully of Honduras. Nor were they places of 'bare life', governed by

humanitarian actors which denied refugees agency. Instead, as with refugee camps in other situations, they mirrored the societies from which the refugees had come, albeit ones in which the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan governments were absent.⁴

Confronting Anti-Communist Assaults on Aid

On 30 June 1981, spokesmen claiming to represent Salvadoran refugees in Honduras alleged that World Vision, a US-based aid agency working in Honduras, was collaborating with the Honduran and Salvadoran militaries in a counter-insurgency campaign directed against them.⁵ That same month, during a trip to the border region, Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) Refugee Coordinator gathered information from refugees and relief workers on World Vision's activities.⁶ Among the most serious accusations, provided by Caritas and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff at Colomoncagua, was that two newly arrived refugees had been handed over to the Honduran military by World Vision's coordinator.⁷ Both refugees were subsequently found dead on the Salvadoran side of the border.⁸ Other charges were that World Vision staff were Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents, that many had connections to the Honduran security forces, that they denied rations to those refugees who were unable to work, and engaged in proselytization.⁹ These allegations were repeated at a July 1981 meeting in Geneva between UNHCR officials and representatives from the World Council of Churches, CRS, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), Oxfam UK, the Lutheran World Federation, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.¹⁰ The

⁴ Adam Ramadan and Kirsten McConnachie have, for example, noted similar dynamics in camps for Palestinian and Karen refugees respectively; Adam Ramadan, 'Spatialising the Refugee Camp', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38 (2013): 65-77; Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order and Legal Pluralism*, (London: Routledge: 2014), 6.

⁵ Frank Viviano, *Guardian*, 26/08/1981, Box 33 'World Vision – Criticism', David Stoll papers, Hoover Institute Library and Archive, Stanford, CA, (hence David Stoll)

⁶ Refugee Coordinator to Honduras Director (Catholic Relief Services), Internal Memo, 'World Vision's Role in Refugee Camp', 25/6/1981, Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 'UNHCR Meeting on Salvadorian Refugees in Honduras', 2/7/1981, Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

matter was soon picked up by the international press with a widely distributed August 1981 article by Frank Viviano of *Pacific News Services* describing World Vision as a ‘CIA Church group’, noting that, during the Vietnam War, the CIA had allegedly obtained information from World Vision field workers.¹¹ By the end of the year World Vision, citing the adverse publicity its work was attracting, withdrew from the Salvadoran refugee programme.¹²

The controversy was not, however, over. In January 1982, at an extraordinary general meeting of CEDEN, aid workers previously linked to World Vision hit back, alleging that CEDEN, for its part, was knowingly giving aid to the FMLN.¹³ A new board of directors, drawn principally from conservative evangelical churches, was installed by church members, and most of CEDEN’s staff involved in refugee work resigned as a result.¹⁴ Reacting both to external pressure and to what it saw as CEDEN’s unwillingness to approach its work ‘in a humanitarian light’ post-January 1982, the UNHCR suspended the transfer of all funds to CEDEN and launched a search for a new co-ordinating partner which, ideally, was to be both non-confessional and non-North American.¹⁵ Finding its preferred choices, the *Comité de Desarrollo y Emergencia* (Development and Emergency Committee: CODE), an organisation founded by CEDEN’s ex-president, and Oxfam UK, blocked by the Honduran military, the UNHCR itself reluctantly assumed operational responsibility for the refugee programme.

Although, as detailed in the previous chapter, many humanitarian actors stood in opposition to the Honduran military, a focus on different agencies blurs a neat oppositional relationship between humanitarian actors and military forces. Staff in some aid agencies, such

¹¹ Frank Viviano, *Guardian*, 26/08/1981.

¹² UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 24/11/1981, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR archives, Geneva, Switzerland, (hence: UNHCR).

¹³ ‘Note on Coordinating agency in Honduras’, 7/02/1982, UNHCR, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ C.W. Long (UK Mission in Geneva) to G.S Cowling (FCO), 26/51/1982, FCO 99/1344, UK National Archives, London, (hence: TNA); C. Bertrand, UNHCR Geneva, ‘Note for the file’, 8/3/1982, 100.HON.Sal [b], UNHCR; Oxfam, ‘Meeting with UNHCR Geneva’, 10/3/1982, MS PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam. J.Jackson (CARE Honduras) to G. Radcliffe (CARE New York), ‘Refugee Program Status Report’, 3/6/1982, Box 328, Refugee Feeding 5, CARE archives New York Public Library, New York, (hence: CARE).

as World Vision, had a much more comfortable relationship with the military than others, most notably Caritas. As alluded to by the UNHCR's preference for a non-North American and non-confessional partner, religious and national backgrounds were important factors in shaping how agencies viewed their role. At the same time, in the context of the global Cold War, perceptions of these identifiers could lead observers to conclusions which obscured a more complicated reality. Against this background, this section, beginning by looking back at the controversies over World Vision and CEDEN in detail, examines the interplay of local and international dynamics impacting the UNHCR's ability to control the direction of the Salvadoran refugee programme in its early years.

As confirmed by an internal World Vision report, many of the most serious charges levelled against the organisation held some truth. Some staff did indeed seek to use their position of power to coerce the overwhelmingly Catholic refugees into attending Protestant religious services, in some cases withholding food from those who refused.¹⁶ Bibles and other religious materials were also widely distributed. And, between April and May 1981, in the Guarita area alone, some 381 evangelical leaflets were distributed, fourteen services were held, and fifteen refugees were converted by a World Vision employee, Rev. Ruperto Gregorio.¹⁷ World Vision, however, strenuously denied any CIA links and, while not denying that the Honduran military had taken two refugees in the presence of World Vision staff, its report disputed that they had been 'turned over' by World Vision.¹⁸ More generally, while Caritas staff were targeted by the Honduran military, World Vision's refugee coordinator, Reverend Mario Fumero, leveraged his existing connections with the Honduran police to

¹⁶ World Vision International, 'A Report on the Refugee Relief Program of World Vision in Honduras', 17/12/1981, CPAX13-37, Pax Christi archives Notre Dame, IA, (hence Pax Christi).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

develop ties with local military leaders, something viewed with concern by refugees given the military's attitude toward them.¹⁹

In seeking to understand such actions, attention must be drawn to World Vision's background as a conservative, evangelical, organisation headquartered in Monrovia California. The stark differences in approach between Caritas and World Vision can then be seen in the context of the clash between Liberation Theology on the left, and the evangelical Christianity on the right from which Ronald Reagan drew support. A report by a team from Pax Christi International, a Catholic peace movement, described World Vision as 'evil' and as a 'trojan horse' of the US and of the 'ultra-conservative Honduran classes'.²⁰ Nor were Catholic agencies alone in opposing World Vision. In addition to non-faith-based agencies such as Oxfam UK and MSF, the World Council of Churches (WCC) lobbied the UNHCR to act against World Vision, denouncing it as a 'fundamentalist' and 'radically' anti-Communist organisation.²¹ Again, this fits into a wider context. A 1975 WCC fact-finding mission painted World Vision as a pawn of the US military in Cambodia, accusing the agency of passing information to the CIA.²² An appeal for help by Stanley Mooneyham, World Vision President, to Eugene Blake, a former WCC president, was met with a reminder that evangelical accusations had long hurt ecumenical organisations.²³ At a broader level, this spoke to the split between Reagan-linked evangelicals and the liberal ecumenical Protestantism of the WCC.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Pax Christi International, 'Human Rights Reports of the Mission', Section 1: Honduras: Salvadorian Refugees, 1981, CPAX 13-37, Pax Christi; Tom Stransky to Bishop Thomas J. Cumbleton, President US Executive Council Pax Christi, 21/2/1981, CPAX 13-37, Pax Christi.

²¹ Refugee Newsletter, OIKOUMENE, 21/1/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, 410.WCC.Hon, UNHCR.

²² David King, *God's Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2019), 111.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God has no Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2018), 8.

A meeting, in February 1982, of 24 ‘Christian leaders’ from 17 countries highlights how events in Honduras acted as a lightning rod for these wider issues which WCC members had regarding World Vision.²⁵ After acknowledging some of World Vision’s positive work, participants spoke of its ‘narrow’ and ‘limited’ concept of Christian mission, the lack, as perceived by them, of ‘local decision-making’, and, while no one doubted the ‘effectiveness’ of World Vision’s fundraising methods, there was great concern that its campaigns were overly ‘sentimental’, ‘tear-jerking’, and ‘exploitative of human misery’.²⁶ Much of the remaining discussion centred around the values conveyed by World Vision through its ‘American standards of efficiency, computerised fund-raising, high-powered advertising and business methods’.²⁷ In other words, as Blake, the former WCC President, summarised it: ‘the American way of life looks to many very much like the World Vision way of life – and to most of the world that is a problem, including many of us in the United States’.²⁸

It was the actions of World Vision staff in Honduras and the concerns of refugees which drove the WCC and others to lobby the UNHCR to intervene. Yet they viewed World Vision’s version of humanitarianism as stemming from the organisation’s links to the US Right. Such a view, foregrounded in the international, understated other, more local, dynamics at play. Rather than being the result ‘top-down’ decision making or, as a spokesperson for the US Protestant Church World Service described it, an ‘imperialist’ approach to aid, World Vision’s problems in Honduras appear to have stemmed from a complete absence of any oversight.²⁹ Staff in Honduras had little to no prior experience in refugee matters and, following the departure of Benjamin Esparaza, World Vision’s

²⁵ Blake to Mooneyham, 5/3/1982, CPAX-13-37, Pax Christi.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.; Viviano, *Guardian* 26/08/1981.

Programme Director for Honduras, Fumero was largely, according to World Vision's internal report, left in charge.³⁰

Born in Cuba, Fumero had moved to Miami in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution where, as a result of a campaign by Billy Graham, he converted from Catholicism, eventually studying at a Pentecostal bible institute in Peru. From 1966 he was based largely in Honduras from where he undertook missionary work throughout Central America.³¹ A vocal anti-Communist, it was through his rehabilitation work with addicts that Fumero knew members of the police from whom he was able to win concessions for World Vision employees. Nor was Fumero the lone conservative working with Salvadoran refugees. While his evangelising programme in Colomoncagua had raised the ire of Maynor Zeron, CEDEN's refugee coordinator, CEDEN was itself a development body of the Honduran evangelical churches. Many pastors were, in fact, concerned that CEDEN's refugee programme and its staff were changing the nature of the organisation and that it was becoming ideologically and spiritually distant from the churches.³² With Fumero's support, pastors circulated a document criticising Zeron's 'leftist tendencies' and, shortly thereafter, Zeron, a Nicaraguan national, was deported.³³ In an effort to reassert control over the organisation, pastors warned Noemi de Espinoza, CEDEN's president, that they could withdraw support if new, non-Christian, staff continued to dominate.³⁴ Shortly afterwards, amid accusations that CEDEN was assisting the FMLN, Espinoza was deposed.

The inter-agency clash over control of the refugee programme can certainly be viewed through the lens of the religious Cold War. It should also, however, be seen as a conflict

³⁰ World Vision International, 'A Report on the Refugee Relief Program of World Vision in Honduras'.

³¹ Mario Fumero bio, as taken from his website contralapostasia.com (accessed 12/1/2024).

³² Stanley Mooneyham (WV International President) to Eugene Stockwell (Associate Gen Secretary National Council of Churches), 13/03/1982, Box 33 'World Vision – Criticism', David Stoll.

³³ World Vision International, 'A Report on the Refugee Relief Program of World Vision in Honduras'.

³⁴ Herman Bontrager 'Honduran Refugee Program', 20/8/1981, Honduras 1981, Box 262, Mennonite Central Committee archives, Akron, PA, (Hence MCC).

driven by a local, Honduran, conservative evangelism which worked through World Vision rather than because of it, continuing even after World Vision's departure. Indeed, a letter received by camp coordinators at Mesa Grande in February 1982 points toward a Honduran anti-Communism intertwined with virulent anti-Catholicism. Signed by 'The Libertarian Squad of Tigers' the letter read: 'we advise all the Salvadorans that if they want to remain there [Mesa Grande], they should remain peaceful and not have contact with those savage beasts [FMLN] because we will make a slaughterhouse of the big and little ones. The coordinators should be religious protestants. We do not want priests trained in Cuba, Moscow, etc. because they will die like dogs...this warning should go to the Catholic Church'.³⁵

Interpreting World Vision's closeness with the Honduran military as deriving simply from its 'Americanness' does not just overlook this non-US-centric anti-Communism, but it also misses out on the changing nature of humanitarian organisations during the 1980s. As acknowledged by its post-facto report, World Vision 'failed to capture the idea of personal identification with victims of political conflict' and unintentionally communicated that it considered 'innocent victims to be those who have been terrorised by the left or are victims of natural disasters'.³⁶ In the future, World Vision recommended, it needed to increase its sensitivity to the 'very significant and negative role of the US government in the internal dynamics' of Latin America.³⁷ Echoing WCC members' complaints, the report also recognised the 'need to eliminate those signals that are perceived as saying "We are a North American organisation, basically supportive of US foreign policy"'.³⁸ Such conclusions are perhaps surprising if World Vision is viewed as a CIA-linked conservative organisation. But,

³⁵ The Libertarian Squad of Tigers to Camp Coordinator Mesa Grande, 14/2/1982, as included in Nelson Weber (MCC), 'Mesa Grande: A Sociological Study of a Refugee Camp', 20/5/1982, Honduras 1982-1984, MCC.

³⁶ World Vision International, 'A Report on the Refugee Relief Program of World Vision in Honduras'.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

whatever its roots, World Vision was, as alluded to by its critics at the WCC, on its way to becoming the largest privately funded development agency in the world.³⁹ Rapid growth, coupled with professionalisation, would limit room for reputationally damaging ideological action.

Regardless of the drivers behind World Vision employees' actions, refugees and other aid workers were rightly concerned over their impact. Examining their efforts to curtail the conservative right highlights the interplay of the international and transnational with the domestic in determining the nature of the Salvadoran refugee programme. Viewed strictly at the domestic level, it would have appeared logical that, given the Honduran military's close relationship with Fumero and its antagonistic relationship with Caritas, Fumero and his ilk could have enjoyed a position of privilege within the programme. As it was, the conservative take-over of CEDEN prompted the UNHCR to suspend its relationship with the agency and search for a new partner. The UNHCR's ability to take action here did not, however, mean that it had free reign to dictate the future of the refugee programme, with the Honduran military preventing it from nominating CODE, a newly formed agency headed by CEDEN's ex-president Espinoza, as its co-ordinating partner. Nor did this solely speak to the competing goals of Tegucigalpa's security agenda and Geneva's humanitarian one, it also demonstrated differences within the Honduran establishment: the Honduran government initially agreed to CODE's nomination only for this agreement to be overturned by the military.⁴⁰

In blocking CODE and promoting Fumero's CEDEN, the Honduran military was articulating what it viewed as acceptable and unacceptable in terms of humanitarian responses to the refugees. In its view, a response based on solidarity and advocacy was a security risk and hinted at possible subversion. As the UNHCR would soon discover, the

³⁹ McAlister, *The Kingdom of God has no Borders*, 63.

⁴⁰ Moseley-Williams, 'Meeting with UNHCR', 10/3/1982.

opposition to such a response was not limited to blocking Honduran agencies or personnel. When the UNHCR attempted to appoint Oxfam UK as the co-ordinating agency, this, too, was blocked.⁴¹ Oxfam, according to the US Ambassador to Honduras, was a leftist, and therefore unsuitable organisation.⁴² Much as those in the WCC drew on their wider, global experiences of World Vision to come to conclusions about that organisation's role in Honduras, so did the US Ambassador concerning Oxfam; his experience with Oxfam in Vietnam having led him to the 'leftist' conclusion.⁴³

An atmosphere of 'crisis' reigned at UNHCR headquarters in the aftermath of the Honduran military's blocking of CODE, according to Oxfam's Richard Moseley Williams.⁴⁴ A priority for the UNHCR was to minimise Tegucigalpa's direct involvement in the running of the Salvadoran refugee programme. Charles-Henry Bazoche, the UNHCR's head in Honduras, had earlier been reluctant to take direct action against World Vision lest their withdrawal prompt the Honduran government to seek a greater role for itself.⁴⁵ At the same time, Geneva was reluctant to assume direct operational responsibility for the Salvadoran refugee programme.⁴⁶ This aversion was based on the view that the institution's role was as a bridge between a coordinating agency and the Honduran authorities, something which could not be performed if the operational team was the sole responsibility of Geneva.⁴⁷ Having failed to identify an agency which was both acceptable to itself and to the Honduran military, the UNHCR was nevertheless left with little choice. In March 1982, it was appointed as the coordinating body by the Honduran government.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Sharkey to FCO London, 22/6/1982, FCO 99/1374, TNA.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Moseley-Williams, 'Meeting with UNHCR Geneva' 10/3/1982.

⁴⁵ UNHCR San José to UNHCR Geneva, 14/7/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.Hon.Gen[e], UNHCR.

⁴⁶ UNHCR Geneva to UNHCR Tegucigalpa, 17/3/1982, 410.OXFAM.GBR.HON, UNHCR; R. Quinlan (CRS), 'Honduras – refugees', 3/2/1982, Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

⁴⁷ R.M. Williams to M. Harris, 'UNHCR plans for the refugee camps in Honduras: Approach to Oxfam', 22/2/1982, Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

⁴⁸ Guy Prim, UNHCR Emergency Team Honduras, to UNHCR Geneva, 1/5/1982, 410.OXFAM.GBR.HON, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

Although Geneva had only reluctantly accepted this solution, all other parties, according to Guy Prim, head of the UNHCR emergency team in Honduras, were satisfied with this new situation.⁴⁹ It was unlikely, he concluded, that any other solution would have been acceptable to the Honduran government while Eugene Douglas, the US coordinator for refugee affairs, expressed his ‘delight’ at the development.⁵⁰ Aid agencies, shaken by CEDEN’s failure were, in Prim’s words, ‘eager’ to be placed directly under the UNHCR umbrella, while refugees were described as being ‘relieved’ that a UN body was more visibly responsible for their welfare.⁵¹

The emergency UNHCR team in Honduras was concerned not only with the Salvadoran refugees but, as detailed in the previous chapter, also dispatched to assist in setting up a relief programme in the Mosquitia. Writing in the first edition of *Refugees*, the UNHCR publication, Mark Malloch Brown, the team’s deputy head, wrote of the ‘spectacular – and very international – effort’ being undertaken.⁵² Along with work by World Relief and the UNHCR, a team from Oxfam UK installed water piping ‘brought from Oxford’, a Swedish disaster unit upgraded roads, and a Hercules, ‘leased with a donation from the Canadian government’, air-lifted over 200 tons of construction material.⁵³ Brown’s heavy emphasis on the international nature of the relief effort masked UNHCR anxieties about being over exposed which, in many ways, reflected some of the same concerns over nationality and religion which had plagued the Salvadoran refugee programme. In leasing the Hercules with Canadian assistance, the UNHCR had, in fact, shunned a US offer to use one

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Refugees*, September 1982.

⁵³ Ibid.

free of charge.⁵⁴ UNHCR officials, described J.K Radford, Save the Children's director in Honduras, were 'horrified' by the 'overburden' of US influence in the Mosquitia.⁵⁵

Before the emergency team's arrival, as detailed above, the Miskito relief effort was headed up by World Relief, with whom Diana Negropte, married to the US Ambassador, worked, along with several Peace Corps volunteers and a doctor with MSF. Anxiety over World Relief centred not just upon Negropte's role nor the fact that it was a US agency, but over its religious and, by extension, its political roots. As Moseley-Williams, Oxfam UK's Coordinator for Latin American and the Caribbean, saw it, World Relief belonged to the 'same Protestant nexus' as World Vision, sharing its 'style' and 'orientation'.⁵⁶ Indeed, World Relief was the humanitarian arm of the National Association for Evangelicals, the organisation to which Reagan delivered a speech equating the Soviet Union with an 'evil empire'. From its founding, the association was sharply opposed to the WCC, its brand of conservative evangelism dubious of the ecumenical Protestant churches.⁵⁷ Given Reagan and the evangelical Right's opposition to the Sandinista regime, UNHCR officials were eager that 'for obvious reasons' World Relief be joined by another agency as the UNHCR's implementing partner.⁵⁸ Again, the UNHCR turned to Oxfam UK in a move to internationalise the project but also as a conciliatory gesture given the failure to appoint Oxfam as coordinator in the Salvadoran case.⁵⁹

However, efforts to involve Oxfam once again failed, this time stemming from an improvement in UNHCR-World Relief relations and Oxfam's eventual reluctance to become involved. Internally critical of the UNHCR's failure to consult with the Honduran Miskito

⁵⁴ JK Radford to Save the Children London, 21/5/1982, SCF/OP/4/HOD/10, Save the Children archive, Cadbury library, Birmingham (hence SCF).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Richard Moseley-Williams to Peter Sollis, 'Re: Honduran Mosquitia refugees', 17/3/1982, Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8 Oxfam.

⁵⁷ Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*, 8.

⁵⁸ Richard Moseley-Williams to Peter Sollis, 'Re: Honduran Mosquitia refugees', 17/3/1982, Oxfam PRG/3/3/3/8 Oxfam.

⁵⁹ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 1/5/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, 410.Oxfam.GBR.Hon, UNHCR.

population, Oxfam instead turned to fund the establishment of the Committee for the Development of the Mosquitia, an organisation aiming to strengthen the social cohesion and self-sufficiency of the local population which could then, ‘on their own terms’, decide whether to assist the refugee population.⁶⁰ For its part, while reports on World Relief’s actual competence in the Mosquitia were certainly mixed, evidence suggests that the agency sided with the UNHCR in decisions relating to links between the refugees and anti-Sandinista guerrillas. Such decisions are detailed in this chapter’s final section.

In sum, from 1982 onward, it was the UNHCR, as requested by the Honduran government, which was responsible for the overall coordination of all refugee programmes in the country.⁶¹ The government did not have, nor did it desire to have, official direct contacts with any of the NGOs involved.⁶² Daily contact with other agencies’ personnel, weekly camp meetings, and monthly inter-agency meetings at the director level all fell under the UNHCR’s purview. Tegucigalpa was not, as a UNHCR report noted, prepared to give even a symbolic contribution to funding the refugee relief effort.⁶³

Life Within the Salvadoran Camps

The UNHCR assumed operational responsibility for the Salvadoran refugee programme in an attempt to ensure the humanitarian character of the Salvadoran refugee camps. From the UNHCR’s perspective, these were spaces in which refugees would receive vital assistance and basic services. In a very literal sense, they were also places of humanitarian protection; in the eyes of the Honduran authorities Salvadoran refugees were only refugees as far as they remained within the limits of the camps. Those outside were assumed to be FMLN

⁶⁰ Oxfam, ‘Minutes of the Field Committee for Latin America’, 27/10/1982, Oxfam PRG/1/5/6, Oxfam.

⁶¹ UNHCR Honduras, ‘Reporting on UNHCR Activities in 1983-1984 and Programming for 1984-1985’, Fonds 11, Series 2, 110.Hon[e] Programming, UNHCR.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

combatants. Such a stance reflected the Honduran government's conceptualisation of the camps as places of containment and confinement. That the Honduran state's only presence in the camps was via the military was further evidence of this securitised view. For their part, the refugees were wholly reliant on the aid agencies for necessities such as food, water, and medicine, a state of dependency imposed upon them by Tegucigalpa's policy of confinement. And yet, while remembered as places of confinement – 'a prison without walls' as refugees often described them – former refugees also recall the camps as places of opportunity, transformation, and activism.⁶⁴ The refugees had fled the violence of war but they had not escaped the war itself, and nor did they all desire to escape it. Instead, *la lucha* informed nearly every aspect of life in the camp both as a guiding idea, but also through the concrete, and often clandestine, ways in which refugees contributed to it. In addition to being places of precarity and opportunity, then, the camps were an extension of the civil war where the refugee community resembled a population mobilised for war.

Reflecting on a childhood and adolescence largely spent in Mesa Grande, Maria Elia echoes the description of the camp as a 'prison without walls' but, she continued, the camp was paradoxically also a place of liberty and freedom.⁶⁵ For Elia, Mesa Grande was both a place of insecurity and a place of opportunity in which she received an education which would never have been possible had her family remained in El Salvador. Indeed, as Molly Todd has also emphasised, education is something former refugees emphasised in their recollections of camp life, and their achievements in this regard are recalled with pride.⁶⁶ The pride is well founded; while roughly 85% of the refugee population was illiterate at the start of the decade this stood at just 15% by the decade's end.⁶⁷ With the assistance of international - mainly Spanish - workers organised by Caritas, those refugees with some level of education

⁶⁴ Author's interviews with former refugees of Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande.

⁶⁵ Maria Elia, author's interview, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 27/10/2022.

⁶⁶ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 167-8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 168.

were organised to teach those who had none. These teachers, or *maestros populares*, drew on the work of Paulo Freire, with education emphasising the daily challenges and reality of refugee life. As John Hammond has described, the free time available to refugees and the relative calm of the refugee camp compared to the war zones in El Salvador meant that the popular education projects in the Salvadoran camps were among the most successful.⁶⁸ As with many aspects of daily life, the education project also had deeper political meaning; it was simultaneously an act of resistance and an act of hope, with refugees understanding that an educated population would be better able to fight for its interests and hopeful that this education could be used to construct a fairer and more just El Salvador upon their return.⁶⁹

Education was not the only transformation experienced by the refugee population during their time in Honduras. Remembering life before Honduras, Buenaventura Hernández, who was 13 when she arrived in Colomoncagua, describes living in a small hamlet where, according to her, people were withdrawn and quiet. In Colomoncagua, they learned to debate, act as a collective, share, and look after one another as a family.⁷⁰

Hernández is not the only person to draw this connection between the refugee camps and the forging of a community. The residents of Ciudad Segundo Montes, a Salvadoran town created by returning refugees from Colomoncagua in 1989, tellingly recall 1980 as the founding year of their community, not 1989.⁷¹ Shared hardships were one factor in fostering this sense of collective identity but so was the fact that, for the first time in their lives, the refugees were living in very close proximity to thousands of other people. With refugees unable to earn a wage, work was done on a collective basis and resources were shared; *‘todo*

⁶⁸ John Hammond, ‘Popular Education as Community Organising in El Salvador’, *Latin American Perspectives* 26 (1999): 71.

⁶⁹ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 166-169.

⁷⁰ Buenaventura Hernández, author’s interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

⁷¹ Public comments during a celebration of the community’s founding, 11/11/2022, Ciudad Segundo Montes, El Salvador.

para todos’ (everything for everyone) in the words of one MSF report.⁷² The lack of a wage economy did not induce idleness; in addition to education, refugees spent their time in the camps’ workshops, in the agricultural areas, or preparing food.⁷³ The workshops, with material provided by Caritas and CRS, produced a range of goods, such as footwear, clothing, and hammocks for refugees, embroidery for international visitors, as well as repairing the vehicles of aid agencies and undertaking carpentry projects to improve camp infrastructure.⁷⁴ While the camps were by no means self-sufficient, refugees also worked in the agricultural sector, which included hens and pigs as well as produce. Others volunteered in health as *guardias de salud* (health guardians). As Lucinda Perez, a former refugee of Colomoncagua recalled, the camps were not a place of relaxation, but places of work.⁷⁵ With no electricity or television, another former refugee explained, there was little else to do.⁷⁶

Linked to this sense of community, was the camps’ strong internal organisation. Both Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua were divided into subcamps with each subcamp having a coordinator who was the authority of that camp. Subcamps were further divided into *colonias* of about 300 people and these, in turn, would have a coordinator along with a committee on which a representative for every ten households would sit.⁷⁷ Meetings would be held at both *colonia* and subcamp levels with the workshops, food distribution, health, and other activities coordinated from here. Assemblies were also held to make collective decisions. According to Roberto Meier, a UNHCR officer, the camps stand out as among the most organised he

⁷² ‘Problemas Internacionales’, March 1984, Honduras 87-98 Salvador Refugees, MSF archives, Paris, (hence: MSF).

⁷³ Adrian Fitzgerald, author’s interview, Ireland, 27/12/2019.

⁷⁴ ‘A report on a visit to the Salvadorian camps of Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande in Honduras, March 13-27, 1983’, 15/4/1983, CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983, American Friends Service Committee archives, Philadelphia, PA, (hence AFSC).

⁷⁵ Lucinda Perez, author’s interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 11/11/2022.

⁷⁶ Roberto, author’s interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

⁷⁷ Prof. Willie, author’s interview, El Salvador, 31/10/2022; For a more detailed overview of this organisation see Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 105.

encountered in his 40 year career. The level of effectiveness achieved by the refugees was, he recalled, ‘absolutely remarkable’.⁷⁸

This organisation was encouraged by aid agencies, in part because it facilitated the coordination of projects and the running of the camp. A stated objective of the UNHCR in the camps was to ‘promote and direct the development of community activities in order to enable the refugees to find, within the community, the solution to their own problems and needs’.⁷⁹ The community within the camps was celebrated as something of a model with international visitors marvelling at their cohesive, democratic, and egalitarian nature. Although the efficient running of the camps was the product of the refugee community this was not, however, its sustaining force. Rather, a shared sense of purpose both unified the refugees and acted as an anchor around which to organise life. This purpose was contributing to the struggle to create a fairer and more just El Salvador. As noted, education was seen in this light. But so too were other aspects of camp life: in the embroidery workshops refugees embroidered cloth with appeals for international support and appeals for peace. They also told their own stories of exile through embroidery, stitching images of atrocities they had endured. This was therapeutic but also a way by which refugees could transmit messages to international audiences.⁸⁰

All refugees in Honduras had, to varying degrees, suffered because of the Salvadoran military’s campaign of terror but, before arriving in Honduras, not all had engaged with the politics behind their suffering. For these refugees, their time in Honduras was deeply politicising, with education and workshops providing them with the means to analyse the situation at home. Religion played a role in this, with mass a central social occasion in the camps. Priests, generally from North America and Europe, were also heavily influenced by

⁷⁸ Roberto Meier, author’s interview, online, 20/04/2021.

⁷⁹ UNHCR Honduras, ‘Reporting on UNHCR Activities in 1983-1984 and Programming for 1984-1985’, Fonds 11, Series 2, 110.Hon[e] Programming, UNHCR.

⁸⁰ Teresa Cruz, author’s interviews, El Salvador, November 2022.

Liberation Theology. Reading biblical stories and comparing them to the refugees' own experience was something which, remembers Anastasia Chicas Argueta, helped emphasise the need to organise and struggle.⁸¹ Looking at children's artwork from the camps also illustrates the degree to which *la lucha* and the Salvadoran conflict permeated every aspect of camp life. Drawings bring to bear the collective trauma experienced by the refugees in their home country; showing people with hands in the air being shot by soldiers, animals and houses being destroyed, and bombs falling. Others depict specific massacres such as the refugees' crossing the Río Lempa in March 1981. *Pedimos Paz* (we ask for peace) is frequently written across drawings while those showing life within the camps invariably illustrate the Honduran military's presence around the camps.

While parents and the community worked hard to create a safe space for their children – Roberto, who was four when he arrived at Colomoncagua, recalls his childhood there with great fondness – children were not blind to the realities of life around them.⁸² Indeed, life within the camps was politicising for them also. When Honduran soldiers patrolled the camps, refugees would frequently follow or shadow them, seeking security in the collective. Children would participate in this, as they would in protests and rallies organised to demand better conditions or support from the UNHCR. The humanitarian space of the refugee camp therefore provided them, and all refugees, with the protection, albeit an inadequate one, to demand rights and to confront soldiers seen as analogous to those who had burned their homes, something which only furthered the drive to organise. While this was true for the general camp population, it was particularly true for those who spent some of their most formative years in the camps, growing from children to young adults. Along with the FMLN's recruitment campaign, of which more below, those who spent a significant period of

⁸¹ Anastasia Chicas Argueta, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

⁸² Roberto, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

their youth in the camps recall participating in bible study and groups for theatre, music, and art.⁸³

Figure 2: *A Refugee Child's Depiction of Life in the Camps*



Source: Adrian Gomes, Refugee Drawing, 1980-1994 Honduras Field Files, MCC.

The refugees' organisation also contributed to *la lucha* in more direct, material ways which were strenuously denied at the time. As highlighted, refugees quickly understood that their status as international refugees brought with it certain protections. Those who wished to

⁸³ Julio, author's interview, online, 30/09/2021.

deny or limit these protections did so on the basis that the Salvadoran refugees were not truly or solely refugees. In a 1984 interview, for example, General Gustavo Álvarez, head of the Honduran armed forces, told *La Prensa* that the camps aided the Marxist Salvadoran guerrillas who were an enemy of the Honduran system.⁸⁴ Refugees were therefore aware that the camps' protected status could be maintained only so far as such accusations could be denied. Despite the refugees' strong support for the FMLN then, drawings and embroidery from the camps called for peace rather than victory.⁸⁵

Yet, despite this strategic denial, the camps were linked to the FMLN, and they did, as Álvarez claimed, aid the Salvadoran guerrillas. Those former refugees who speak openly about this now recall the absolute secrecy with which this was handled at the time. Indeed, few former refugees interviewed broached the subject unprompted although, when asked, they recalled their contributions to *la lucha* with pride. The camps' internal structure reflected the FMLN's wider *dobles cara* strategy in which grass-roots organisations would show a 'legitimate' face to the government and public but maintain a clandestine, revolutionary face. Behind the refugees' public-facing committees, which interacted with visitors, aid organisations, and the UNHCR, sat a clandestine organisation where key decisions were made.⁸⁶ In the case of Colomoncagua, it was the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP) which directed this clandestine committee while in Mesa Grande, power was shared between the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL), the *Resistencia Nacional* (National Resistance, RN), and the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación* (Armed forces of Liberation, FAL).⁸⁷

⁸⁴ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 15/2/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 6, V.1, UNHCR.

⁸⁵ For more on this portrayal of political 'innocence' see Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 132-133.

⁸⁶ Prof. Willie, author's interview, El Salvador, 31/10/2022.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

In addition to keeping refugees connected to El Salvador and providing information on the conflict, a key function of these committees was coordinating assistance from the camps to the FMLN. Food and medicine, for which the refugees were organised to demand more from the UNHCR, along with clothes, footwear, and fatigues fabricated in the camp workshops, were carried in backpacks across the border.⁸⁸ In Colomoncagua at least, such fabrication took place during the night, with groups of refugees working clandestinely to fulfil requests stemming from El Salvador.⁸⁹ Leaving the camp and crossing the border was dangerous work and those caught were killed. Aged fifteen, Hernández made her first such trip between Colomoncagua and El Salvador.⁹⁰ This was in addition to her other work on behalf of *la lucha*. Specifically, she attended political classes where she learned about the conflict, developed political consciousness, and was taught to type and paint fabrics.⁹¹ These skills were then used to write letters to solidarity groups and to issue complaints to the UNHCR, the Honduran government, and others.⁹² While Hernández remained in Colomoncagua, others were recruited to join the FMLN in El Salvador. Jocelyn Viterna has noted that Colomoncagua had an extensive recruitment network, one which explicitly included young women.⁹³ In Mesa Grande too, FMLN recruiters regularly organised meetings with young people, encouraging them to return to El Salvador and fight.⁹⁴

The dangers of such clandestine work were vividly on display in April 1984 when the Honduran military shot and killed four Salvadorans near Colomoncagua. According to the military, they encountered an armed group of Salvadoran guerrillas, three of whom managed to withdraw and seek refuge in San Antonio, the smaller camp in the vicinity of

⁸⁸ Santos Yolanda Garcia, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 9/11/2022.

⁸⁹ Alejandro Ortiz, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 11/11/2022.

⁹⁰ Buenaventura Hernández, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The micro-process of mobilisation in El Salvador*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013), 253.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

Colomoncagua.⁹⁵ UNHCR-provided blankets, hammocks, and food, as well as letters from refugees to those in El Salvador, were recovered at the scene.⁹⁶

Although many refugees in both Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua therefore took great risks to further *la lucha*, there were important differences between the two camps. As detailed in the previous chapter, refugees from Chalatenango and Cabañas, who made up the majority of Mesa Grande's population, crossed the Honduran border in a relatively more spontaneous fashion than those from Morazán. The move from Guarita and La Virtud to Mesa Grande was also disruptive of what organisation the refugees there had and rather than relocating to Mesa Grande, many opted to return to El Salvador. Unlike Colomoncagua, where the ERP was the only FMLN faction present, the FPL and RN and, to a lesser degree, the FAL, all had a presence in Mesa Grande thus making the camp less cohesive. Such differences had several impacts. A 1983 UNHCR report noted that Colomoncagua had 'more solid organisational structures' than Mesa Grande where 'serious problems in social organisation' existed.⁹⁷ A lack of leadership and conflict between 'groups of refugees' necessitated more direct involvement of social workers in an 'attempt to guide the refugee population'.⁹⁸ In contrast, social workers did not need to become as involved in the organisation of Colomoncagua, instead focusing on promoting activities for the elderly and children.⁹⁹ These differences also shaped daily life within the camps. In Colomoncagua, cooking and food preparation was done communally while in Mesa Grande, this was done by individual family units.¹⁰⁰ As a result, women, for it was women who did such tasks in both

⁹⁵ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'Shooting incident San Antonio Sunday 22 April', 23/4/1984, 0.10.HON.[b], UNHCR.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ UNHCR Honduras, 'Reporting on UNHCR Activities in 1983-1984 and Programming for 1984-1985'.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Solange Muller, 'Honduras: Active participation of women in camp activities', in *Refugees*, May 1984.

camps, had more time to participate in camp activities in Colomoncagua, whereas in Mesa Grande they spent most of the time preparing meals.¹⁰¹

This division of labour along traditional gender lines extended beyond cooking, with women responsible for carrying water and fuel, childcare, and other domestic labour. Writing in *Refugees*, the UNHCR publication, Kyra Nuñez, a Mexican journalist, was highly critical of such arrangements.¹⁰² Decrying the lack of women-specific programmes being offered at Mesa Grande, Nuñez lamented that ‘repeated pregnancies’ and ‘endless work’, along with a gendered view on leadership abilities, prevented women from becoming involved in the management of camp activities.¹⁰³ Writing in reply, Solange Muller, a former UNHCR Protection Officer in Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua, offered a less critical view.¹⁰⁴ It was the refugee committees, in which women participated, she wrote, which decided to prioritise other programmes over a special programme for women.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, although family planning methods were available in the camp health centres, refugee committees rejected a proposed family planning project, something Muller attributed to the number of family members the refugees had lost in the conflict.¹⁰⁶ By this interpretation, even childbirth was viewed through the lens of *la lucha*, with mothers taking pride in ‘their gift of children to the new society they hope to return to’.¹⁰⁷ Muller also cautioned that it was important to view women’s participation in activities and leadership roles, which did exist, in the context of societal norms in El Salvador.¹⁰⁸ Seen through this lens, one could see the slow process of change occurring, although Muller did acknowledge that in Colomoncagua women took on more leadership positions.¹⁰⁹ Even so, an MSF report noted that, in Colomoncagua, men took

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Kyra Nuñez, ‘Honduras: Women face uphill struggle’, in *Refugees*, January 1984.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Muller, *Refugees*, May 1984.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

charge of those tasks which required the most physical effort while many women took on new roles in education, health, and nutrition.¹¹⁰ An additional factor in the differences between the two camps, beyond that of community cohesiveness and the sharing of cooking responsibilities, was the relatively greater number of women in Colomoncagua; 70% of those aged between 20-60 were women while, in Mesa Grande, this stood at 54%.¹¹¹ The ERP's control over who could go to Colomoncagua, described in the previous chapter, therefore indirectly contributed to the creation of camp conditions where gender roles were more equitable.

More equitable does not, of course, imply that gender relations were completely rewritten. Domestic violence remained an issue, with women forming a committee to monitor camp activity at night and which other women could approach if they experienced abuse.¹¹² While the formation of such a committee can be seen as an example of women's activism within the camp, it is also indicative of the problems which existed. Acknowledging these problems, Elia, who spent her childhood in Mesa Grande, also recalls the solidarity which developed between women as they grappled with them, offering an example whereby the women's committee imprisoned one man for domestic violence.¹¹³ Largely absent from refugee recollections, interviews with UNHCR officers also point to the existence of sexual violence.¹¹⁴ This was not readily identifiable to relief staff; its prevalence only became clear when undertaking pre-repatriation interviews. Although some of the reported instances were dealt with by Honduran authorities, on other occasions the local police displayed a complete lack of interest. In one incident during which a husband attempted to kill his wife and a man he suspected her of having a relationship with, the husband was detained by a refugee

¹¹⁰ 'Problemas Internacionales', March 1984, MSF, Honduras 87-98 Salvador Refugees

¹¹¹ Statistics as of May 1985, as contained in Honduras 80-88 refugiés Salvadориens, MSF.

¹¹² Maria Elia, author's interview, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 27/10/2022.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Courtney Mireille O'Connor, author's interview, online, 6/7/2023.

committee before Anders Johnson, the UNHCR officer present, was alerted.¹¹⁵ The Honduran police would only hold the man for three nights, by which time the only solution left for Johnson was to transfer him to Colomoncagua.¹¹⁶

The above example illustrates that, outside of national security, the Honduran state had little desire to police the camps. For its part, the UNHCR was lacking in mechanisms by which to do so, with Werner Blatter, the UNHCR representative in Honduras, reminding a 1984 Honduran press conference that ‘we [UNHCR] are not policemen’.¹¹⁷ As Kirsten McConnachie has highlighted, such a lack of governance imposed from the outside does not necessarily lead to chaos. Instead, it created the ‘construction of social order from within’.¹¹⁸ This was certainly the case in the Salvadoran camps, where disputes were often dealt with internally, escaping the notice of relief staff. For the relief workers, this was something of a known unknown. The incidents reported to the UNHCR were, acknowledged a UNHCR protection report, ‘only the tip of the iceberg’.¹¹⁹ Interviews with former refugees, particularly those of Colomoncagua, shed light on some of the ways in which refugee committees sought to maintain order within the camp. The withholding of food, the assignment of unpleasant duties, and, at times, the forcible expulsion of particularly uncooperative refugees to El Salvador, were among the coercive measures employed by refugee leadership.¹²⁰ Marta Lidia Hernandez, an FMLN combatant who went to Colomoncagua in 1982 after becoming pregnant, is quick to recall how her food rations were withheld for a month due to her refusal to work in the communal kitchen, a task she refused

¹¹⁵ Anders Johnson, author’s interview, online, 15/07/2020.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, ‘telecon Dacunha/Blatter’, 16/2/1984, 0.10.HON.[a], UNHCR.

¹¹⁸ Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order and Legal Pluralism* (London: Routledge: 2014): 13.

¹¹⁹ Waldo Villalpando, UNHCR representative in Honduras, ‘Report on UNHCR Protection Activities 1987 – Honduras’, 19/2/1988, 600.HON.G, UNHCR.

¹²⁰ Various author interviews with former refugees of Colomoncagua, conducted November 2022, Morazán, El Salvador.

citing a sore leg.¹²¹ The moral dubiousness of such instances notwithstanding, they should not be taken as representing a failure on the part of UNHCR officials. As previously discussed, it was UNHCR policy to encourage the refugee community to resolve their own problems. Indeed, at the beginning of the decade, Mesa Grande's lack of strong leadership was seen by relief staff as problematic.

Community is, however, as Dan Bulley has described it, an uncontrollable and 'slippery' concept.¹²² Attempts to govern through the instrumentalisation of community can find themselves disrupted by that same community. The Salvadoran camps certainly fit this description. Internal structures of coercion and punishment were not only geared toward the resolution of interpersonal disputes or the smooth running of the camp, but could also be used to ensure cooperation with the camps' more clandestine functions. Lucinda Perez, for example, did not initially want to be sent on missions back and forth across the border as she was concerned about the welfare of her children should she be caught, but was told that that was why there were people in the camp whose role was to mind children.¹²³ According to others, the recruitment of teenagers into the FMLN had, at times, a coercive element to it. Parents who were opposed to their children joining the guerrilla and being sent to El Salvador were told that it was not optional.¹²⁴ Frequently this opposition was not along ideological lines, but rather was because a parent's older children were already fighting in El Salvador and they did not wish to lose all their children in the conflict.¹²⁵ Again, such recollections were primarily offered by former refugees of Colomoncagua rather than Mesa Grande.

¹²¹ Marta Lidia Hernandez, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 8/11/2022.

¹²² Dan Bulley, 'Inside the Tent: Community and governance in refugee camps', *Security Dialogue*, 45 (2014): 64

¹²³ Perez, author interview; This echoes the dynamic, described by Emily Snyder, in revolutionary Cuba, where 'love for serving the revolution' and travelling abroad to do so, trumped, according to government policy and media, the desire to remain with one's family, Emily Snyder, 'Internationlising the Revolutionary Family: Love and Politics in Cuba and Nicaragua, 1979 – 1990', *Radical History Review* 136 (2020): 50-74.

¹²⁴ Roberto, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Roberto, for example, recalled how his older brother returned to El Salvador shortly after arriving in Colomoncagua, wishing to join his sister in the guerrilla.¹²⁶

From the refugees' viewpoint then, the camps could have been seen as more Salvadoran than Honduran. Children born in the camps were registered by the UNHCR with the nearest Salvadoran consulate, not with the Honduran government.¹²⁷ The Honduran state, during the first half of the decade at least, had no role in the camps' education system, nor did it provide services such as health or policing. The Salvadoran conflict, and the refugees' role in it, informed many important aspects of life, helping to forge a deep sense of community. However, it was the fact that the refugees were in Honduras and were therefore refugees that they had a degree of protection which enabled them to construct this community and contribute to the war effort in the ways they could.

Life in the Mosquitia

By all accounts, conditions in the refugee camp at Mocerón were dire. Once a small village of 90 dwellings along the edge of the Río Mocerón, amidst forests of redwoods and mahogany, Mocerón was transformed by the arrival of refugees, its population increasing from 300 to over 10,000 by the end of 1982.¹²⁸ Within the camp, which was situated across from the village, refugees constructed their housing with walls of wood or bamboo and roofs of leaves.¹²⁹ The refugees' rapid arrival in January 1982 in the aftermath of 'Red Christmas' soon overwhelmed the camp infrastructure that did exist, contributing to poor living conditions with sanitary problems rife.¹³⁰ The region's rainy season, which began in May,

¹²⁶ Roberto, author's interview.

¹²⁷ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 149.

¹²⁸ J.K. Radford (Field Director SCF Honduras) to SCF London, 'Nicaraguan Refuges', 4/4/1982, SCF/OP/HOD/10, SCF; Report on Mission to Honduras', 1/7/1983, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

¹²⁹ Carl Kendall, 'Trip Report: Mocerón Miskito Refugee Camp', 15/4/1982, SCF/OP/4/HOD/13, SCF.

¹³⁰ Arne Lundby to UNHCR Geneva, 'Nicaraguan Miskito Refugees – Dispersal Plan', 22/7/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.3, UNHCR.

altered the 'idyllic spot' into a 'kind of hell', a 'nightmarish bog' in the description of Mark Malloch Brown, a member of the UNHCR emergency assistance team charged with constructing the camp.¹³¹ Organised according to the former villages from which they had fled, refugees here were, like their Salvadoran counterparts, reliant on aid agencies to meet their needs. Working under World Relief (not to be confused with World Vision), the UNHCR's coordinating partner, was MSF and Save the Children UK, while Oxfam UK, prioritising Honduran Mosquitia development, undertook work related to water provision.

Compared to the Salvadoran enclosed in camps, the Honduran government, partly eager to develop a region virtually unreached by the Honduran state, was willing to provide refugees in the Mosquitia with land on which to settle and farm. As Florence Egal, an MSF doctor who was transferred from La Virtud to Mocerón, described it, 'for once, there seemed to be a satisfactory and rapidly viable alternative to the classic refugee camp'.¹³² However, whereas reports on Colomoncagua or Mesa Grande detailed the ingenuity and work ethic of the refugees there, the opposite was true for Mocerón. Malloch Brown, writing on the refugees seeming preference for remaining at Mocerón rather than settling elsewhere in the Honduran Mosquitia, described the 'travesty of dependency-induced-reasoning' whereby, the 'delusional' refugees continued to 'to sink almost visibly deeper into the mud' with 'few...prepared to help themselves'.¹³³ A May 1982 report by Save the Children's Field Director in Honduras, John Radford, was no less damning and derisory. 'The refugees are rather spoilt say most' he wrote, 'they are [the] laziest people in Central America say nearly everyone'.¹³⁴ In fact, refugees were opposed to UNHCR proposals that the camp be dismantled and that they settle in smaller settlements along the region's rivers, a closer

¹³¹ *Refugees*, September 1982.

¹³² Florence Egal, 'Hope Imposed at Mocerón: Refugees Dispersed into Small Communities', *Refugees*, June 1983.

¹³³ *Refugees*, September 1982.

¹³⁴ Radford to Save the Children London, 'Mocerón', 21/5/1982, SCF/OP/4/HOD, SCF.

approximation to traditional life in Nicaragua. Cooperation with such plans was minimal and was, in fact, vigorously opposed by camp leaders.

Examining such opposition, which went beyond ‘dependency-induced-reasoning’ highlights how the refugees remained, like those from El Salvador, deeply influenced by the course of the Nicaraguan conflict. As with Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua’s connections to the FMLN, Mocerón was a source of supplies and recruits for Miskito guerrilla forces, while also being a place in which insurgent’s families could live. Egal recalls how, despite the overgenerous ration allowance, refugees complained that they were receiving insufficient food.¹³⁵ Initially sceptical, Egal was surprised to discover that refugees were, in fact, exhibiting signs of malnutrition.¹³⁶ Food, at this stage, was distributed to representatives of each former village and Egal, and many others, surmised that this was being diverted to guerrilla forces, whose main military camp was located at nearby Rus Rus.¹³⁷

Although the FMLN and Miskito guerrillas tapped refugee camps as sources of aid, there were notable differences in their relationship to their respective camps, some of which can be explained by the different nature of the Contra War to the Salvadoran Civil War. In the Salvadoran case, the war was fought within El Salvador, while, in the Nicaraguan case, the Contra forces were largely based outside of Nicaragua, in Honduras and Costa Rica. A September 1982 CIA report estimated that, of the 2,000-3,000 Contra guerrillas based in Honduras, upwards of 1,000 were Miskito Indians under the leadership of Steadman Fagoth.¹³⁸ The remainder were mostly former Somoza National Guard members, known as the 15 September Legion, as well as a small number belonging to the Nicaraguan Democratic

¹³⁵ Florence Egal, author’s interview, online, 27/10/2023.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.; Radford to Save the Children London, ‘Mocerón’, 21/5/1982.

¹³⁸ ‘Overview of Anti-Sandinista Paramilitary Groups’, 10/9/1982, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room (hence CIA).

Union.¹³⁹ A further 400 or so were based in Costa Rica.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, for anti-Sandinista Miskito leaders, the refugee population in Honduras represented a key source of legitimacy, both in terms of demonstrating the righteousness of their grievances with Managua and also in terms of solidifying their positions as leaders in a movement rife with rivalries.

Whereas Fagoth had gone to Honduras in April 1981 calling on others to follow him, Brooklyn Rivera, another Miskito leader who had also been imprisoned by the Sandinistas, adopted a more conciliatory approach with Managua. In fact, in June 1981, during which UNHCR officials were hopeful that the refugees would soon return to Nicaragua, Rivera travelled from Nicaragua to Honduras in an attempt to encourage repatriation.¹⁴¹

Unsuccessful, Rivera returned to Nicaragua where he was offered a post within the Sandinista administration.¹⁴² Rejecting this offer, and fearful for his life, Rivera returned to Honduras, this time as a refugee.¹⁴³ Within Mocoacán the refugee population was split between those who favoured Rivera and those who favoured Fagoth, who, amidst trips to Miami, DC, and farther afield, was often seen at the camp. In February 1982, shortly after the influx of refugees to Mocoacán in the Red Christmas's aftermath, Rivera, along with a number of his allies, was ordered to leave the camp by Colonel Leonel Luque Jiménez, the Honduran military commander in the region.¹⁴⁴ A May 1982 report prepared for Arthur 'Gene' Dewey, US deputy assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Refuge Programs, noted that those camp leaders who favoured a 'softer line' regarding the Sandinistas had been removed and that the camp's leadership was now aligned to Fagoth.¹⁴⁵ Refugees who had settled outside of

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Bazoche (UNHCR Honduras) to UNHCR Geneva, 29/6/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.HON.GEN[a], UNHCR.

¹⁴² A. Lundby, 'Note for the file', 22/10/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, 100.HON.NIC[c], UNHCR.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ US Embassy Nicaragua, 'Miskito Leadership', 18/3/1982, Digital National Security Archive: Nicaragua: the making of US policy, 1978-1990 (hence DNSA Nicaragua).

¹⁴⁵ 'UNHCR Miskito Relief Efforts: Findings and recommendations of US survey teams', 15/5/1982, as found in Carton 7:52, BANC MSS 2004/222z, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, CA (hence Ortiz papers).

Mocorón were threatened by followers of Fagoth who sought to relocate them to the camp.¹⁴⁶ Within the camp, meanwhile, the six-person refugee commission, later renamed the *Consejo de Ancianos*, was involved in the forcible recruitment of refugees to MISURA, the Contra force headed up by Fagoth. The *Consejo de Ancianos* was also World Relief and the UNHCR's interlocutor with the refugee population. As one former MISURA combatant described it, 'in Nicaragua the Contras did not have the capacity to capture young men for the fight...but when you're in Honduras, you're in the hands of MISURA and you had no choice but to go and fight'.¹⁴⁷

Resistance toward the UNHCR's dispersal plan, which materialised through strikes and the refusal to participate in planning, was also based on the propaganda value derived from a 'highly visible' camp.¹⁴⁸ To encourage them to engage more positively with the idea of resettlement, in July 1982, the refugees were informed by the UNHCR and World Relief that, by January 1983, the camp's water supply and health system, along with food assistance, would be discontinued.¹⁴⁹ Refugees were reminded, too, that they were in a position of privilege, being able to avoid a protracted camp situation.¹⁵⁰

Privately, UNHCR officials held the view that those at Mocorón were amongst the most kindly treated refugees globally. Some 20 settlements in areas along the Río Patuca, the Río Mocorón and Río Warunta were identified by the UNHCR and Honduran authorities, with each settlement at least 50 kilometres from the border, as per the UNHCR's Handbook for Emergencies.¹⁵¹ Here, refugees would be able to grow their food while their proximity to the river meant that they would be able to travel by canoe. Faced with the 'total immobility'

¹⁴⁶ UNHCR Costa Rica to Geneva, 22/6/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.3, UNHCR.

¹⁴⁷ Americas Watch, *Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An endangered people*, September 1987.

¹⁴⁸ *Refugees*, April 1985.

¹⁴⁹ Lundby, Arne to UNHCR Geneva, 'Nicaraguan Miskito Refugees - Dispersal Plan', 22/7/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.3, UNHCR.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Refugees*, May 1983.

of those at Mocerón in January 1983, UNHCR officials announced that men would receive food aid only on the site of their future village and, that two weeks later, the same would apply to their families.¹⁵² Following discussions with refugee leaders, the camp dispersed, with refugees travelling by canoe, truck, and even helicopter to their new settlements.¹⁵³

Through its dispersal policy, the UNHCR therefore sought to improve the refugees' living conditions and boost their self-sufficiency, while also reducing MISURA's hold over the refugee population. In addition to this, it is clear that many relief officials were, as an Oxfam UK representative described himself, 'excited' about the non-camp programme.¹⁵⁴ Reflecting on her time in Honduras, Egal recalls the 'boring' medical work of the Salvadoran camps compared to the challenges in setting up a health system in the Mosquitia.¹⁵⁵ It was, remembers David Befus, an accountancy consultant who replaced Tom Hawk as World Relief's director in Honduras, akin to running a new country, shipping in water buffalo, constructing roads, and developing trading initiatives between the new settlements.¹⁵⁶ An article in *Refugees*, the UNHCR publication, describing the dispersal project was titled 'Hope Imposed at Mocerón' while another remarked that this 'unique' programme constituted 'something of a model in the speed with which the transition from care and maintenance to self-sufficiency is being achieved'.¹⁵⁷

For the refugees, life within the new settlements did offer a closer approximation to life in Nicaragua than Mocerón had. Most assistance activities now took place at the community level, with refugees responsible for education, health, and agriculture, with the assistance of technical staff.¹⁵⁸ Unlike in the Salvadoran camps, health and education workers

¹⁵² *Refugees*, June 1983.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 1/6/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, 410.Oxfam.GBR.HON, UNHCR.

¹⁵⁵ Florence Egal, author's interview, online, 27/10/2023.

¹⁵⁶ David Befus, author's interview, online, 6/4/2020.

¹⁵⁷ *Refugees*, June 1983; *Refugees*, May 1983.

¹⁵⁸ Florence Egal, 'Refugies Miskitos au Honduras – Projet de Sante', April 1983, Honduras 1982-1984, MSF.

were formally compensated by the community, through the provisions of crops, for example. Communities were also expected to eventually self-finance the necessary medicines for a village pharmacy. For each four or five refugee villages, a regional centre was established where technical staff from relief agencies staffed a simple laboratory, a consultation centre, and a rudimentary hospital.¹⁵⁹ A report by Egal in April 1983 noted that it was becoming difficult to distinguish between issues of refugee relief and issues of development.¹⁶⁰ This distinction was important because development did not fall under the UNHCR's mandate, and Geneva was of the view that development agencies should step in to allow it to withdraw from assistance.¹⁶¹ Already, by the end of 1983, some 45% of refugees in the Mosquitia had obtained self-sufficiency in terms of basic grains, while refugees had also constructed their new houses and 90% of the planned health centres, warehouses, and churches.¹⁶²

Such developments and achievements did not, however, mean that the refugees had been separated from the dynamics of the Contra War. Forced recruitment to MISURA, carried out by the *Consejo de Ancianos*, the UNHCR and World Relief's interlocutor with the refugee community, continued apace. By 1983, when the UNHCR terminated its relationship with the *Consejo*, a 'climate of fear', in the UNHCR's description, existed between the refugees and their leaders.¹⁶³ Details of instances of forced recruitment, collected by World Relief staff, tell of refugees being abducted and threatened into joining MISURA's ranks.¹⁶⁴ In one case, Geraldina Muller, who was seven months pregnant, was repeatedly threatened by MISURA members who sought to take her to a MISURA border camp.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Bridget Wooding (Oxfam) to Moseley-Williams, 'Debriefing of O Haselman and C Bertrand following their mission to Honduras and Mexico in June 1983', 3/8/1983, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

¹⁶² UNHCR Honduras, 'Reporting on UNHCR Activities in 1983-1984 and Programming for 1984-1985', Fonds 11, Series 2, 110.Hon[e] Programming, UNHCR.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Armenia Oliveira to Alfredo del Río Court (UNHCR), 'Reclutamiento forzoso entre refugiados Miskitos end La Mosquitia Hondureña', September 1983, Honduras 1982-1984, MSF.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.; The above report does not say what ultimately happened to Geraldina Muller.

While all were vulnerable to forced recruitment, race also played a role in shaping MISURA–refugee relations. Following the dispersal from Mocerón, the Mayanga refugee population moved to Tapalwas, which was located just fifteen kilometres from the Nicaraguan border and close to a MISURA camp.¹⁶⁶ By 1984, as a result of unfair treatment which included the assignment of the most dangerous combat roles, many Mayanga combatants had begun to question their role within MISURA and began to rejoin their families at Tapalwas.¹⁶⁷ As one combatant, quoted in an Americas Watch report, recalled, on missions ‘the Miskito stayed behind, while the Sumus [Mayanga] had to walk first. If we encountered the enemy the Sumus [Mayanga] fell first, it was not just’.¹⁶⁸ MISURA troops then arrived at Tapalwas both to capture the deserters and to recruit new soldiers from the refugee population. The refugees’ response was both for the young men to hide outside of the settlement and also to request the assistance of World Relief to relocate some of the community elsewhere. The first group of 41 refugees to depart to the newly chosen settlement along the Río Patuca faced threats by MISURA commandants.¹⁶⁹ In the second move, two refugee leaders and Donald Strome, a World Relief coordinator who would file a report on what happened, were physically detained and threatened.¹⁷⁰ Taken to the headquarters of the *Consejo de Ancianos*, the refugees were tied up and interrogated for over eight hours. Eventually, and with the assistance of the Honduran military, those who wished to relocate from Tapalwas did so.¹⁷¹ However, the incident, along with another in late 1984 when a UNHCR officer was threatened, serves to underscore the openness with which

¹⁶⁶ Americas Watch, *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People*.

¹⁶⁷ Isabel Chiriboga, *Espíritus de Vida y Muerte*, 142; Americas Watch, *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras*.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Donald Strome, ‘Monthly Report: April’, 24/4/1984, BWM 203 World Relief International, Moravian Church archives, Bethlehem, PA, USA (hence BWM).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Americas Watch, *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People*; Donald Strome, the World Relief worker, was involved in writing this Americas Watch report.

MISURA operated in the region.¹⁷² As Peter Gaetcher, a UNHCR Protection Officer reassigned from the Salvadoran border to the Mosquitia in 1985, described it, MISURA under Fagoth ‘subordinated everything to loyalty to the cause’, viewing the refugee communities as a ‘logistical base’ and the refugees as a ‘military reserve’.¹⁷³ Fagoth’s opponents, continued Gaetcher’s report, were disappeared, kidnapped, tortured and killed.¹⁷⁴

The Cold War had helped lead the Honduran authorities to the conclusion that the Salvadoran refugees were a national security threat and that they should therefore be confined and monitored. In contrast, those in the Mosquitia were not seen as such and were therefore able to move away from dependency and toward self-sufficiency. Yet, clearly, this unusual privilege afforded to Nicaraguan Indian refugees did not mean they lacked protection issues. Although the ERP appears to have occasionally used coercion when recruiting from Salvadoran refugee camps, the level of violence and intimidation from MISURA was more extensive. So too was the openness with which MISURA could operate. Although Geneva was, to some extent, aware of the situation, once the Emergency Team departed in 1982, just one UNHCR officer remained responsible for the 17,000-20,000 refugees in the Mosquitia.¹⁷⁵ The perceived lack of protection issues in the face of Tegucigalpa’s openness to the refugees, along with the hope that assistance work could soon be transferred to development agencies, undoubtedly contributed to such a lack of attention. Upon his arrival in the Mosquitia, Gaetcher discovered that Geneva had a complete lack of ‘basic information’ regarding the region’s protection problems.¹⁷⁶ World Relief’s expatriate staff, none of whom attempted to learn Miskito, meanwhile viewed the area as their ‘personal fiefdom’, treating Honduran staff

¹⁷² Peter Gaetcher, *End of Assignment Report: Analysis of Miskito Indian Refugee Situation, La Mosquitia, Honduras, February – December 1985*, Private collection.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

as second-class employees and engaging in ‘overtly fraudulent’ practices.¹⁷⁷ Those in settlements along the Patuca River, wrote Gaetcher, were forced by the local national police sergeant to carry out unpaid labour on his behalf.¹⁷⁸ Later, refugees would tell of violence committed against them, including rape, by soldiers of the Honduran Fifth Battalion stationed in the region.¹⁷⁹

Honduran antipathy toward the Sandinista regime did not only mean that MISURA could operate with impunity, but it also meant that the Honduran military actively supported MISURA. The organisation’s combatants engaged in campaigns of forced recruitment frequently claimed that they had the support of the Honduran military, while accounts by those targeted for recruitment frequently mention that Honduran soldiers were active participants. It was the Honduran Colonel, Luque Jiménez, and the Fifth Battalion that forcibly removed Rivera from Mocerón, thereby strengthening Fagoth’s position.¹⁸⁰ All this was occurring at a time of massive military build-up in the Mosquitia, a region previously isolated from Tegucigalpa. In July 1982, with the assistance of the US Air Force, over 900 Honduran troops arrived at the new military base near Mocerón.¹⁸¹ ‘Big Pine I’, a joint US-Honduran military exercise, described by the *Washington Post* as ‘unprecedented’ in scale, resulted in 4,000 Honduran and 1,600 US troops conducting manoeuvres just 10 miles from the Nicaraguan border with the Mocerón Task Force at its centre.¹⁸² ‘Big Pine II’, which began several months later, was bigger still, involving some 12,000 US troops.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Margaret Wilde, ‘A Hobson’s Choice for Miskito Refugees’, as found in BWM 215 Moravian Testimonies 1985-1986, BWM.

¹⁸⁰ US Embassy Nicaragua, ‘Miskito Leadership’, 18/3/1982, DNSA Nicaragua.

¹⁸¹ *NYT*, 5/8/1982.

¹⁸² *Washington Post*, 17/10/1982.

¹⁸³ Capt. Beau Downey (Joint Task Force-Bravo, Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras), ‘A History of Joint Task Force-Bravo’, February 2020, accessed online 10/4/2022, <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil/Portals/14/A%20History%20of%20JTF-Bravo.pdf?ver=2020-02-18-172646-790>; the report also states that ‘It is difficult to overstate the size of the impact’ of Big Pine II.

Fagoth, unlike Rivera, was allied with the wider Contra alliance within Honduras, something which helped earn him Colonel Luque's backing. Several months after his expulsion Rivera wrote to Jeane Kirkpatrick, US Ambassador to the United Nations, alleging that the Fifth Battalion had imprisoned those Miskito leaders who refused to cooperate with Fagoth.¹⁸⁴ The Honduran military had, Rivera continued, disarmed those Miskito fighters who had separated from Fagoth and they were now forced to hide in refugee camps.¹⁸⁵ Now based in Costa Rica and allied with Edén Pastora's *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, ARDE), Rivera positioned himself as championing the true Miskito cause, describing Fagoth as controlled by Tegucigalpa and Washington.¹⁸⁶

The political loyalties of those in the Mosquitia were then closely policed by the Honduran military not as threats but as assets to be controlled. These refugees were, as the UNHCR described it, unusually privileged in that they were granted freedom of movement and land to settle. But, as a later UNHCR report conceded, 'it was difficult to realise...that there were problems of protection at all in the Mosquitia, as the government had a friendly attitude towards the refugees'.¹⁸⁷ Although aware of instances of forced recruitment, Geneva was somewhat blinded by the Cold War logic which dictated that the refugees and their associated guerrilla groups were ideological allies of Tegucigalpa, something which overlooked the vulnerability of the refugees' position vis-à-vis insurgent forces. How to prevent forced recruitment when the Honduran military was, at best, seemingly indifferent to it, was a question the UNHCR would continue to grapple with during the decade.

¹⁸⁴ B. Rivera & A. Wiggins, to J. Kirkpatrick, 9/8/1983, Folder 54, Carton 1, Bernard Nietschmann papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, CA, (hence Nietschmann papers).

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ R.L. Owen, British Embassy San José, to FCO, 'MISURASATA', 4/11/1983, FCO 99/1645, TNA; Based in Costa Rica, ARDE was less linked to former National Guard members than other Contra forces.

¹⁸⁷ A. Mengotti (UNHCR) to W. Villalpando (UNHCR), 'Situation Report on Protection in the Mosquitia', 8/8/1986, Fonds 11, Series 3, 600.HON.D, UNHCR.

Conclusion

In first examining the implosion of CEDEN and then looking at everyday life within Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugee camps and settlements, this chapter has shown how a multitude of overlapping forces shaped the refugee experience in 1980s Honduras.

Tegucigalpa's interest in the refugees was largely limited to the military and security sphere, something which severely limited the Salvadoran refugees' freedoms. The UNHCR, meanwhile, sought to turn these camps and settlements into places of humanitarian action. As demonstrated by CEDEN's issues, however, humanitarian action was much contested.

Whether it be Fumero, the Cuban evangelist, those in Colomoncagua using the bible to understand the injustices at home, or supporters of Rivera in Mocerón now under Fagoth's influence, the Cold War shaped actions and perceptions. Within the humanitarian spaces of the camps, the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts themselves also continued to play out.

The freedoms afforded to the Miskito refugees by Tegucigalpa and the confinement of the Salvadoran refugees meant that the refugees' lives reflected the Cold War in other, unexpected, ways. Unable to approach self-sufficiency and unable to participate in the wage economy, life within the Salvadoran camps was communal and participatory with resources shared. In the Mosquitia, relief soon blurred with development, with refugees trading their produce, health workers formally compensated, and refugees able to approximate their lives in Nicaragua. These differences were not of the refugees' making, they emerged out of necessity from Tegucigalpa's Cold War-induced reasoning, and yet they spoke to the type of societal changes that both the FMLN and the anti-Sandinista forces claimed to champion. A more equitable society and access to education were among the FMLN's demands, resistance to the erosion of individual economic opportunity and the imposition of a Ladino culture were among MISURA and MISURASATA's rallying calls.

That the Salvadoran camps were an asset to the FMLN, and that the dispersal of those at Mocerón had weakened the Miskito refugees' propaganda value, did not sit well with those in Washington, Tegucigalpa, San Salvador or, indeed, Miami. The next chapter focuses on this, looking at attempts to sever the Salvadoran camps from the FMLN and at attempts to prevent the Miskito refugees from becoming integrated into Honduran society. In doing so, it highlights both the refugees' agency but also the strategic importance of humanitarian language during the Cold War of the 1980s.

Chapter 3: Contested Relocations: Moving Refugees from the Border

‘Some refugee stories have happy ends’.¹ So opened an article in the September 1982 edition of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) magazine, *Refugees*. The refugees in question were those 400 Salvadoran refugees whom the High Commissioner, Poul Hartling, first encountered at La Estancia, Honduras. Disturbed by the refugees’ living conditions, Hartling had sought a solution, leading to the group being relocated to Panama.² There, they were given land on Panama’s Atlantic Coast. Within the year they had constructed 70 thatched-roofed houses and reclaimed 150 hectares of land from the jungle, sowing corn, rice, coffee, oranges, and pineapples, among other crops.³ General Omar Torrijos Herrera, Panamanian head of state, paid several visits to the settlement, Ciudad Romero, sitting with the refugees and discussing their future and livestock.⁴ Importantly, thanks to the refugees’ crops, food assistance was phased out.⁵

For those in Geneva, Ciudad Romero represented a model of refugee assistance. Where repatriation, the UNHCR’s preferred solution, was not possible, this integration and self-sufficiency was the next best thing. As Hartling, in that same issue of *Refugees*, outlined, there was little dignity to life in a camp.⁶ Instead, the ‘land solution’ model gave refugees the chance to live normally until they decided ‘of their own free will whether they wish to go back to their own country’.⁷

This chapter looks at UNHCR attempts to implement the ‘land solution’ in Honduras. The January 1983 dispersal of the Miskito camp at Mocorón, detailed in the previous chapter,

¹ ‘Ciudad Romero: New life in the jungle’, *Refugees*, September 1982.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ ‘Interview: Poul Hartling: Helping refugees to achieve some degree of self-sufficiency’, *Refugees*, September 1982.

⁷ Ibid.

was the first step in this implementation. The perceived success of this strategy in the Mosquitia gave fresh impetus to UNHCR officials, who had long sought to move the Salvadoran refugees from the border to small settlements. Indeed, Mesa Grande, to where those Salvadoran refugees at Guarita and La Virtud had been hastily moved, was originally conceived as an agricultural settlement for 2,000 refugees, not as a large camp.⁸

As well as being guided by the logic that self-sufficient settlements were preferable to camps for both budgetary and welfare reasons, the UNHCR also sought to ensure that these settlements be located at least 50 kilometres from international borders. This stipulation was in line with the institution's *Handbook for Emergencies*, the UNHCR's reference tool and guide for responding to refugee situations.⁹ Keeping camps away from international borders would, the logic went, help prevent camps from becoming embroiled in conflict.

For different reasons, however, neither those in the Mosquitia nor those from El Salvador would be able to emulate the success of Panama's Ciudad Romero. UNHCR attempts to move the Salvadoran refugees soon coalesced with attempts, driven by Washington and San Salvador, to move the camps from the border and thus sever their connections to the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN). The refugees, wishing neither to be moved farther from El Salvador nor severed from the FMLN, resisted this move. Examining the success and forms of this resistance highlights the refugees' ability to shape not just the internal space of the camp, but also the actions of states and aid agencies. In this regard, they drew on the support of a range of national, transnational, and international organisations. In the Nicaraguan refugees' case, the apparent success of the self-sufficiency programme was soon disrupted by those who wished to see the refugees remain as *refugees*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This would be repeatedly referenced in talks with refugees and aid agency personnel; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Handbook for Emergencies*, (Geneva: UNHCR: 1982).

Despite their clear military goals, Washington and San Salvador's attempts to move the Salvadoran refugees, and the refugees' resistance to this move, were framed in humanitarian terms. Meanwhile, those, namely anti-Sandinista actors, who sought to stunt the Miskito refugees' moves toward self-sufficiency did so with the understanding that maintaining a refugee population would better serve the anti-Sandinista cause. This chapter then uses the issue of relocating both refugee populations from their respective border regions to examine the politicisation and problematic nature of the concept of 'humanitarianism', showing how, by the mid-1980s, it was deeply contested, with Cold War-linked military goals increasingly justified in its name. This, of course, was not unique to Honduras, with refugee camps along the Thailand-Cambodia and Afghanistan-Pakistan borders during this period sparking concern about the proliferation of 'refugee-warriors'.¹⁰ In this case, Tegucigalpa's changing stance toward both self-sufficiency projects meanwhile demonstrates the tension between Honduran national interest and its Cold War positioning.

Motives Driving the Salvadoran Relocation Debate

It was UNHCR officials who first recommended moving the Salvadoran refugees from the Honduran border when Charles Bazoche, then UNHCR Chargé de Mission, made several démarches to the Honduran Minister of the Interior during 1981. As discussed in Chapter One, the attacks on refugees at La Virtud by Salvadoran paramilitary forces underlined, for the UNHCR, the protection difficulties that came from such proximity to the border. The relocation of refugees from Guarita, La Virtud, and elsewhere, to Mesa Grande, undertaken in a hasty and ill-prepared fashion, was soon presented by UNHCR officials as a temporary measure. Writing in *Refugees*, Poul Hartling, the High Commissioner for Refugees, described

¹⁰ See, for example, Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, (London: Cornell University Press: 2002).

Mesa Grande as a transit camp.¹¹ Just 2,000 refugees would soon remain there, outlined Hartling, whereas the rest were to move to small farms on which they could produce the 'bare necessities for the everyday life of a family'.¹²

The Honduran government and military, having confined the refugees to closed camps, had little interest in resettling them further inland on farms from which they could mingle with the local Honduran population. The legacy of the 1969 Honduran-Salvadoran war, in which Tegucigalpa's attempt to expel Salvadoran immigrants triggered an attack by Salvadoran forces, was one factor influencing the Honduran position. Mindful of these events, Honduran authorities were adamant that the Salvadoran refugees would not become permanent residents and were therefore initially eager that they be confined to the border region to emphasise the temporary nature of their presence.¹³ Nationality aside, the refugees were seen as subversive and so were to be contained rather than integrated.

Balanced against this desire to keep the refugees on the societal and territorial fringes of Honduras, was the conviction that the camps aided the FMLN's war effort. As previously noted, military officials had, from the outset, speculated that refugee influxes were organised by the FMLN and that the camps acted as safe havens for the families of combatants.¹⁴ It was frequently the same units of the Honduran army which were responsible both for anti-FMLN border operations and for ensuring the security of the refugee camps.¹⁵ The Salvadoran side of the country's border with Honduras was an area of strength for the FMLN, so much so that a Honduran intelligence assessment commented that the guerrillas practically controlled the

¹¹ *Refugees*, September 1982.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to Sec State, 'Visit of State Department Officers on Refugee Affairs', 17/6/1981, UNHCR archives Geneva, Switzerland, (hence: UNHCR).

¹⁴ USCINCSO Quarry Heights to DIA Washington, 5/2/1982, available at Central Intelligence Agency's Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/home>, (hence CIA); USDAO Tegucigalpa to JCS, 'HO-ES Border Refugee Problems', 19/2/1981, accessed online at Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), El-Salvador: the making of US policy, 1977-1984 (hence ESUS).

¹⁵ USCINCSO Quarry Heights to DIA Washington, 5/2/1982, CIA; USDAO Tegucigalpa to JCS, 'HO-ES Border Refugee Problems', 12/2/1981, DNSA, ESUS.

Salvadoran border region.¹⁶ No agreement had ever clearly delimited the entire Honduran-Salvadoran border and the 1980 peace treaty delimited just 60% of it.¹⁷ The confused legal status of the remaining disputed pockets, known as *bolsones*, and treaty limits on military forces within them, were a boon to the Salvadoran guerrillas and, by early 1980 the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP) and the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL) had established camps within them.¹⁸ By 1982, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assessment noted that the FMLN's most secure camps were all located along the border.¹⁹

In the context of waging war on the FMLN, then, the proximity of Salvadoran refugee camps to the border was problematic. A 1981 report from the US's El Salvador Military Assistance Team claimed that the camps offered both a safe haven to FMLN guerrillas as well as supplies of food and medicine.²⁰ Salvadoran military officials meanwhile claimed that as many as 1,200 refugees from La Virtud had crossed back into El Salvador to carry out attacks.²¹ While US officials were less convinced that the FMLN used the camps as staging bases from which to launch attacks, they were concerned that the FMLN was using the camps for supplies, for resting spots, and, as the war continued, as sources of recruitment.²² Badly injured guerrillas were also thought to be sent to the camps while an FPL source highlighted the role of Mesa Grande as a transit point for foreign doctors, upon whom FMLN hospitals were heavily reliant, to enter El Salvador.²³

¹⁶ Unknown to DIA Washington, 'A Good Honduran INF BN on HO-ES Border', 5/2/1982, CIA.

¹⁷ CIA, 'The El-Salvador-Honduras Border: Pockets Full of Problems', November 1983, CIA.

¹⁸ Deborah Schulz & Donald Schulz, *The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1994), 58

¹⁹ CIA, 'The Military Situation in El Salvador', Memorandum for Director Central Intelligence, 24/3/1982, CIA.

²⁰ 'Report of the El Salvador Military Assistance Team', November 1981, DNSA, ESUS.

²¹ USDAO Tegucigalpa to DIA Washington, 'HO-ES Border', 5/6/1981, DNSA, ESUS.

²² US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState, 'FMLN uses of Colomoncagua/Mesa Grande', October 1987, DNSA, El Salvador: war peace and human rights, 1980-1994.

²³ Directorate of Intelligence, 'El Salvador: Guerrilla Capabilities and Prospects', October 1984, CIA.

While Washington did not view the refugee camps as being indispensable to the FMLN's war effort, it is clear their role was viewed as important. As such, as early as January 1981 a cable from the United States (US) Embassy in Honduras noted that relocating the camps from the border was a significant security consideration.²⁴ From then on, communications from the Embassy, the State Department, and others, continuously noted the strategic importance of moving the camps. Such a move would also have the benefit of reducing the presence of international workers along the frontier, thereby reducing scrutiny on cross-border military operations. Indeed, discussions among US officials highlighted how moving refugees would allow for the possibility of creating a 'cordon sanitaire' aerial free fire zone on the border in addition to increasing the Honduran and Salvadoran military presence.²⁵ San Salvador shared Washington's concern over the refugee camps and, at least as early as 1981, the Salvadoran High Command began urging the Honduran government to relocate them away from the border region.²⁶

From an anti-Communist, National Security Doctrine, perspective, it was in the Honduran interest to relocate the refugees given that both Washington and San Salvador viewed this as strategically important. And, by September 1981, the Honduran government accepted, in principle at least, that the Salvadoran refugees be relocated.²⁷ This change in policy coincided with comments by the Salvadoran Defence Minister which emphasised the importance of moving the camps.²⁸ Even then, Honduran officials adopted markedly different positions on the issue. During the summer of 1982, Edgardo Paz Barnica, the Honduran Foreign Minister, publicly called on the UNHCR to remove the Salvadoran refugees from

²⁴ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState, 'GOH Grants Formal Refugee Status to Displaced Salvadorans', 28/1/1981, DNSA, ESUS.

²⁵ SecState Washington to US Embassy San Salvador, Tegucigalpa, 'Regional Interdiction of Clandestine Infiltration', 31/7/1981, accessed online at University of Washington Center for Human Right, El Salvador FOIA Documents (hence UWCHR); SecState, 'Assessment of Salvadoran Situation', 30/6/1981, UWCHR.

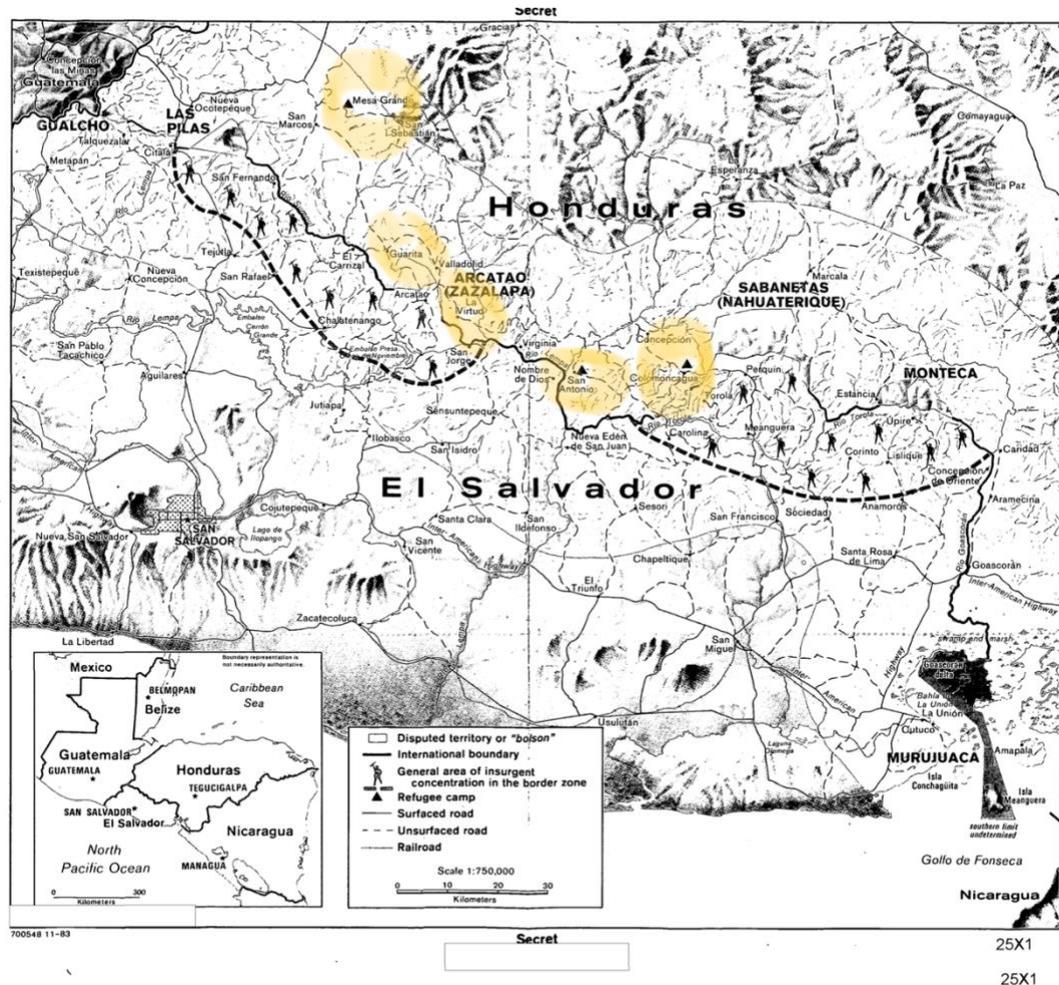
²⁶ 'Report of the El Salvador Military Assistance Team', November 1981.

²⁷ Sargisson, Philip to UNHCR Geneva, 11/9/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, V.1, UNHCR.

²⁸ Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs', 17/12/1981, 10; Haselman, O., 'Note for the File', 6/7/1981, Fonds II, Series 2, Box 92, V.1, UNHCR.

Honduras altogether, something which contradicted the statement by Colonel Abraham García Turcios, the national refugee coordinator, that the government, armed forces, and National Commission for Refugees were soon to discuss the relocation issue.²⁹

Figure 3 Detailed Map of Honduran-Salvadoran Border



Source: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), ‘The El-Salvador-Honduras Border: Pockets Full of Problems: An Intelligence Assessment’, November 1983, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room – CIA; Author’s highlight of Salvadoran refugee camps.

While it is difficult to quantify the importance of the camps to the FMLN, it is notable that, following the failure of the FMLN’s 1981 Final Offensive, the FMLN suffered a drop-off in financing while aggressive Salvadoran military operations hampered the acquisition of

²⁹ C. Geiser (MCC Honduras) to MCC Pennsylvania, ‘Border Update and Project Report’, 16/8/1982, Honduras 1982, Mennonite Central Committee archive, Akron, Pennsylvania (hence MCC).

basic supplies.³⁰ A February 1985 CIA report noted that these factors had forced the FMLN to resort to theft from stores and pharmacies, while also engaging in extortion and kidnapping to raise funds.³¹ Intercepts of FMLN communications meanwhile pointed toward guerrilla dissatisfaction with a lack of basic supplies such as food, clothing, and medicine.³² In this context, even in the absence of details regarding the quantity of supplies coming from Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande, it is clear that maintaining any and all supply routes would have been important to FMLN commanders. In terms of those refugees clandestinely assisting the guerrilla, they certainly remember their contributions as important. While one can, of course, recall one's own actions as more significant than the reality, those travelling back and forth across the border risked their lives each time they did so which, in itself, points to the value of these missions. To move the camps, therefore, would have undermined such missions and was one reason many refugees opposed the move. *La lucha* was, as described in the previous chapter, a central aspect of life within the camps, and the idea that refugees would be prevented from materially contributing to its success was, for many, undoubtedly a distressing one.

However, the refugees also had other reasons for opposing relocation. One of these was an active desire to be in the border region. Some of this was psychological; the refugees never saw their stay in Honduras as anything but temporary and from their border encampments they could still look across to their homeland.³³ An additional element was the refugees' fear that, should camps be located deep within Honduras then future refugees could be intercepted by Honduran forces before being granted the protection of the UNHCR. Being in the border region also allowed the refugees to document the course of the war, keeping tallies of bombings across the border and of helicopters delivering troops to the regions they

³⁰ Directorate of Intelligence, 'El Salvador: Mounting Guerrilla Financial Problems', 11/2/1985, CIA.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Directorate of Intelligence, 'El Salvador: Guerrilla Capabilities and Prospects', October 1984, CIA.

³³ Adrian Fitzgerald, author's interview, Ireland, 27/12/2019.

had left behind.³⁴ In this way, the refugees saw themselves, as Molly Todd has described it, as protectors of the border region.³⁵ Many refugees had familial connections with the Hondurans living along the border and they were concerned, too, over their welfare. A letter from the recently relocated refugees at Mesa Grande for example thanked these Hondurans for their ‘noble generosity’ before going on to deplore the fact that many had since been killed or persecuted for aiding them.³⁶ The refugees were acutely aware that, as refugees, their presence along the border entailed the presence of international humanitarian actors and that this, in turn, moderated what activity occurred in the region.

A lack of faith in the UNHCR’s promises that relocation would improve security and quality of life also drove refugee opposition. A major factor in shaping this scepticism was the experience of those transferred from La Virtud and La Guarita to Mesa Grande in 1982. Among a population heavily skewed toward older people and children, the move took a physical toll with the refugees packed into wagons for seven hours as they crossed over roads strewn with rocks and fissures in the baking heat and dust.³⁷ A number of refugees died on the transfer and the move happened at such a pace that tents were not yet erected at Mesa Grande resulting in many having to spend their first nights in the open in a region which, given its elevation, was much cooler than that which they had come from.³⁸ Meanwhile, there were problems with the water supply and poor sanitary conditions which led to an outbreak of ringworm.³⁹ Although conditions in Mesa Grande did improve, the experience weighed heavily on those involved and was communicated to those who remained along the border.

³⁴ Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2010), 154 & 157.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The Refugees at Mesa Grande, 27/1/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 818, WCC, UNHCR.

³⁷ Camus, Geneviève, World Council of Churches, ‘Report on Visit to Honduras’, 21/1/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 818, WCC, UNHCR.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Camus, ‘Report on Visit to Honduras’, 21/1/1982.

Arguments by UNHCR representatives that relocating inland would improve living conditions were therefore received poorly.

The refugees' opposition to relocation was therefore multi-layered. For those involved in clandestine work, and for camp leadership, maintaining the camp as a resource for the FMLN was undoubtedly paramount. Existing alongside this, however, was a long list of other "legitimate" reasons, something which demonstrated the fallacy of Washington and Tegucigalpa's claim that relocation would sift the 'real' refugees from guerrillas. In opposing relocation, refugees were careful to maintain that their objections were based solely on issues of welfare and security and, as is explored in the following section, they portrayed relocation as an unhumanitarian move motivated by military interests. The questioning of the UNHCR's motives on such grounds echoes Nando Sigona's observation regarding the 'disruptive potential' of refugees appropriating the language of humanitarian organisations and directing their claims for rights against these organisations.⁴⁰ It is only by understanding the motives of those in Colomocagua and Mesa Grande in their entirety, including those motives kept hidden at the time, that the depths of this 'disruptive potential' become clear.

A mixture of motives also drove Washington, San Salvador, and the UNHCR. UNHCR staff primarily viewed the issue through the prism of refugee security and welfare, therefore seeing relocation as a humanitarian issue. As described by Philip Chicola of the US State Department's Refugee Program, Washington meanwhile saw the camps' location on the border as 'antagonistic' to US foreign policy.⁴¹ Responding to Chicola, Oldrich Haselman of the UNHCR emphasised that, irrespective of the US Government's 'special concern', he believed relocation should occur on purely humanitarian grounds.⁴² Whether driven by US foreign policy interests or 'humanitarian grounds', both Chicola and Haselman agreed that

⁴⁰ Nando Sigona, 'The Politics of Refugee Voice: Representations, Narratives, and Memories', in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugees and Forced Migration Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2016), 370.

⁴¹ Franco, L., 'Note for the File', 8/9/1981, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, V.1, UNHCR.

⁴² Ibid.

the camps should be moved. As will be seen this, from the refugees' perspective, meant that little separated the UNHCR and Washington when it came to relocation, particularly given that the US Embassy repeatedly claimed it was motivated by humanitarian norms. For the refugees and their supporters, such statements, which melded relocation, humanitarianism, and US strategic interests together, made any claims to be acting on 'purely humanitarian grounds' rather implausible. Nevertheless, the differing motives of the UNHCR and Washington did matter, soon resulting in a divergence of priorities and policies.

Opposing Relocation of the Salvadoran Camps

In opposing relocation, Salvadoran refugees were both organised and, at least publicly, unified. It was primarily to the UNHCR that refugees directed their anger and protest. Utilising their status as refugees they appealed to the UNHCR in Geneva, sending petitions to Poul Hartling, the High Commissioner, and organising international solidarity days through their connections with aid workers and human rights organisations. When a reply was not forthcoming to one such letter, the refugees at Mesa Grande wrote again asking if 'petitions are not justifiable for us refugees'.⁴³ The letter went on to remind Hartling that it was the UNHCR which relocated them to Mesa Grande and that, rather than pressurising them to relocate once again, the UNHCR should fulfil its obligations of 'providing the widest possible protections'.⁴⁴ An attached letter from the refugees of Colomocagua was signed by nearly the entirety of the camp's 6,000 refugees.⁴⁵ Within Honduras, meanwhile, to the frustration of UNHCR representatives, the refugees refused to send a delegation to visit proposed relocation sites.⁴⁶

⁴³ Camps of Mesa Grande to Poul Hartling, 1/9/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.5, UNHCR.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 7/5/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 6, V.2, UNHCR.

The refugees did not restrict themselves to emphasising the negative impacts of relocation. Instead, they also questioned the humanitarian justifications put forward by the UNHCR therefore challenging the agency's role as the decider of what was humanitarian and what was not. By seeking to invalidate the UNHCR's humanitarian rationale the refugees sought to portray the issue as a political one, linking it to US Cold War policy in the region. A March 1982 pamphlet for example condemned the 'collaboration' of the UNHCR with the Honduran government in its attempt to 'carry out a military policy of forced relocation under pressure from the US government'.⁴⁷ A 1984 campaign meanwhile stated that, under the guise of humanitarian concern, the US government sought relocation to facilitate direct military intervention in El Salvador.⁴⁸ In many ways, the refugees' claims mirrored those of Washington and Tegucigalpa; while US and Honduran officials attempted to portray resistance to relocation as being led by the FMLN, the refugees attempted to de-legitimise the humanitarian rhetoric behind relocation and instead reveal it as a policy driven by Washington's Cold War concerns.

Much to the frustration of the UNHCR, the refugees' stance was overwhelmingly supported by aid agency staff in Honduras. Initially, aid agencies had supported the UNHCR's view that the camps be relocated but this quickly changed as aid workers saw the depth of refugee opposition to the move. As Yvonne Dilling noted, she had no opinion on relocation but, as the refugees were opposed then she, along with the Caritas staff, felt the refugees should be supported.⁴⁹ Attacks on aid workers by Honduran forces not only strengthened such solidarity but led many workers to share the refugees' belief that relocation would not solve protection issues.

⁴⁷ 'A Call to Action on Behalf of the Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras', 26/3/1982, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam archives, Bodleian Library, Oxford (hence: Oxfam).

⁴⁸ 'Salvadoran Refugees In Honduras Call to a Day of Solidarity', 20/5/1984, SCF/OP/4/ELS/4, Save the Children UK archive, Cadbury Library, Birmingham, (hence: SCF).

⁴⁹ Yvonne Dilling, *In Search of Refuge*, (Pennsylvania: Herald Press: 1984), 218.

The practical implications of this conceptualisation of humanitarianism's role as being one of solidarity with refugees was evident in October 1982 during meetings between UNHCR and NGO representatives in Geneva. Described by Kathleen Ptolemy, of Canada's Inter-Church Committee for Refugees, as an 'outstanding affirmation of the refugees' need and right to be heard', over 37 NGO representatives and nine UNHCR officials exchanged views on how best to resolve protection problems in Honduras.⁵⁰ Aid agencies, armed with refugee statements and petitions, gave voice to refugee views and concerns, thereby speaking, in Ptolemy's description, 'with and for the powerless'.⁵¹ A major point of divergence was over the question of relocation with Richard Smyser, the newly (US) appointed Deputy High Commissioner, unable to state how proposed rural agricultural settlements would be better than existing camp protection systems.⁵² Following discussions, and in response to the concerns raised by agencies, the High Commissioner established a task force, chaired by Smyser, to deal with Central American concerns, and agreed that a special mission would travel to Honduras to reach a clear agreement with the Honduran government over issues of refugee protection.⁵³

The task force's special mission did not, however, reconcile the UNHCR's perspective on relocation with those of its aid partners. Rather, UNHCR pressure for relocation continued following Smyser's visit to Honduras, something which led refugees and aid workers to note that he was a Reagan administration appointee.⁵⁴ The UNHCR's apparent drive for relocation was also seen in the light of other developments stemming from the task force's special mission which further strained the UNHCR-NGO relationship. In

⁵⁰ Inter-Church Committee for Refugees, 'Update on the inter-church committee for refugees report to the UNHCR on Honduras protection and coordination of material assistance concerns', 23/11/1982, Honduras 87-89 Salvadoran Refugees, MSF archives, Paris, (hence: MSF).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ 'Update: UNHCR Policy in Honduras: Visit: March 13-27', 1983, CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Reports 1983, American Friends Service Committee archives, Philadelphia, PA (hence AFSC).

particular, the UNHCR instituted a closer screening of relief personnel, intervening to prevent the hiring or rehiring of certain workers.⁵⁵ This was tied to UNHCR moves to reduce the number of international volunteers in the camps, a response to charges by the Honduran military that participants in a volunteer scheme operated by the World Council of Churches lacked neutrality.⁵⁶ Even more alarming to many aid workers and observers were apparent UNHCR moves to strengthen its relationship with the Honduran military. This alarm was evident in a 1983 American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) report which described how Tony Burke, the new UNHCR protection officer in Colomoncagua, praised the Honduran military's cooperativeness following a seminar on protection with military personnel.⁵⁷ Upon arriving in Colomoncagua, Burke advised personnel to be totally apolitical, something seen by many as a warning that he 'knows what has been going on', and requested that workers speak to refugees regarding relocation in a positive light.⁵⁸

With relocation linked to US military aims in El Salvador, such moves by the UNHCR were viewed by refugees and many aid workers as a UNHCR capitulation to Washington. Undoubtedly, the UNHCR did face political pressure, but other factors also existed. Burke, for example, was fully aware that he would be helpless in the event of a Salvadoran military attack on Colomoncagua, and so relocation was seen as a way to prevent this.⁵⁹ Increased cooperation with the military should meanwhile be seen in the context of the UNHCR's rather troubled relationship with the armed forces. Although the Honduran government accepted the UNHCR's jurisdiction in refugee affairs, there remained a high degree of mistrust. In early 1983, Honduran forces expressed their suspicions – taken

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ In particular, the Honduran military objected to the fact that the implementation of the WCC's scheme was carried out by CODE, the organisation which, as described in Chapter 2, the military had blocked from working in the camps; Catherine Bertrand (UNHCR Americas Section), 'Note for the File: UNHCR / WCC volunteer scheme along Honduran border', 27/5/1983, 410.WCC.HON, UNHCR.

⁵⁷ 'Update: UNHCR Policy in Honduras: Visit: March 13-27', 1983, CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Reports 1983, AFSC.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

seriously by US counterparts – that UNHCR staff were using the UNHCR radio network along the Honduran border to support the FMLN.⁶⁰ Other accusations were less concrete, stemming from the logic that the refugees were subversives and that their protectors were therefore similarly inclined. *La Prensa*, a Honduran daily, offered an example of this perspective, accusing the UNHCR of harbouring guerrillas, and suggesting that its staff had links with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation.⁶¹ As recalled by Werner Blatter, the UNHCR’s representative in Honduras, it was essential to improve the UNHCR’s relationship with the military and he introduced a system of regular meetings with local military officials in order to do so.⁶²

Cooperation with the military, or at least the illusion of cooperation, was therefore seen by Blatter and other UNHCR officials as a way of increasing refugee protection. From the second half of 1983, UNHCR officials subsequently also began to respond to Honduran complaints over refugee activity by promising to investigate them.⁶³ Investigations, according to a UNHCR programming report, were carried out ‘with the aim of protecting refugees’, to prove that accusations were unfounded.⁶⁴ In one such instance, immigration authorities presented the UNHCR with a list of 64 refugees from Colomoncagua whom they accused of being involved with the FMLN.⁶⁵ Requesting that an immigration officer jointly investigate this claim with UNHCR protection officers, the UNHCR’s investigation concluded that the charges had to be disregarded due to an absence of evidence.⁶⁶ In another case, military authorities accused medical staff in Colomoncagua of concealing the presence of wounded refugees from them.⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, this was a reference to injured FMLN combatants

⁶⁰ SecState Washington DC, ‘Honduras: Suspected UN Agency-Insurgent Complicity’, DNSA ES.

⁶¹ Jeremy Adelman, ‘The Insecurity of El Salvadoran Refugees’, *Refuge* 3 (1983), 4.

⁶² Werner Blatter, author’s interview, online, 14/2/2020.

⁶³ UNHCR Honduras, ‘Reporting on UNHCR Activities in 1983-1984 and Programming for 1984-1985’, Fonds 11, Series 2, 110.Hon[e] Programming, UNHCR.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

receiving treatment as refugees. The UNHCR's response was to reframe the issue as being one of a refugee's right to receive medical treatment and to assert its policy that a wounded refugee had the same right to treatment as any other refugee, something which was accepted by Honduran authorities.⁶⁸

The decision to investigate Honduran accusations regarding the 64 Colomoncagua refugees triggered a protest by relief workers with a letter signed *los internacionales* of Caritas, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Concern, and the Mennonite Church, accusing the UNHCR of creating a climate of fear in the camps.⁶⁹ Rather than defend the refugees' human rights, the UNHCR had, the letter claimed, carried out an in-depth investigation without first demanding reliable evidence from the military.⁷⁰ When confronted with this accusation Sergio Ducas, the UNHCR's protection officer for Honduras, allegedly responded that human rights were the responsibility of other UN agencies and that the UNHCR was focused on the maintenance of the refugee camps.⁷¹ This juxtaposition of human rights with refugee protection was understandably condemned by the letter writers but, while Ducas' response was likely made in the heat of the moment, it does speak to the approach adopted by the UNHCR in relation to protection. In instances where refugees within the camps appeared to be in danger, UNHCR officials intervened as vigorously as non-UNHCR staff, and there is nothing to suggest that the UNHCR was less concerned for refugee welfare than other agencies. But the UNHCR's pragmatic approach to protection, whereby officials attempted to defuse Honduran concerns as much as possible, clearly clashed with those who sought a more forthright defence of refugee rights.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Internacionales de Caritas, la Iglesia Menonite, MSF, Concern, 15/11/1983, CA 3534, LAC Refugee Camps Reports, AFSC.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Another letter, also in November 1983, and also signed (anonymously) by the internationals of Colomoncagua, outlined the signatories' decision to support the refugees in their opposition to any relocation.⁷² The nine reasons given were identical to those given by the refugees themselves and included a rejection that relocation would allow for greater self-sufficiency or freedom of movement, and the fear that conflict could erupt between the refugees and Honduran campesinos in any new site.⁷³

While many aid organisations objected to relocation on an institutional basis – the MCC for example also wrote to the UNHCR opposing relocation – there was occasionally tension between agency headquarters and staff in Honduras. The most notable example of this was MSF, whose president, Rony Brauman, requested that MSF field staff convince the refugees to accept relocation.⁷⁴ Surprised, the MSF team refused. They viewed relocation as detrimental to refugee welfare and, in any case, denounced attempts to sway refugee opinion as a violation of MSF's own policy of neutrality.⁷⁵ Shortly after, a new MSF doctor was posted to Colomoncagua and expressly instructed by Brauman to convince the refugees to relocate while Dr. Vincent Jeannerod, who opposed relocation, was replaced as coordinator.⁷⁶ Such actions by MSF won the approval of the UNHCR's Honduran representative Werner Blatter who, when bemoaning the actions of some staff, praised the professional attitude of MSF.⁷⁷ The UNHCR was not immune from such internal divisions with Solange Muller, a former UNHCR protection officer, writing to Hartling – with her father, Robert Muller, later the UN Assistant Secretary General, copied – to express her unhappiness with the agency's

⁷² Signed by 'The internationals who work in UNHCR refugee project in San Antonio and Colomoncagua', 11/11/1983, CA 35341, LAC Refugee Camps Reports, AFSC.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ 'Problemas Internacionales', March 1984, Honduras 87-98 Salvador Refugees, MSF.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.; Vincent Jeannerod, as quoted in Laurence Binet, *Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras*, (MSF Speaking Out Case Study: 2013), accessed online 10/4/2022, <https://www.msf.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/MSF%20Speaking%20Out%20Honduras%201988.pdf>

⁷⁷ Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 30/4/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.8, UNHCR.

perceived failure to engage with refugees over the relocation issue.⁷⁸ In his reply, Hartling emphasised that humanitarians must distance themselves from refugee ‘militancy’, no matter ‘how much some of us may privately share their views’ before expressing regret that some ‘well-meaning individuals’ had stepped beyond their purely humanitarian role.⁷⁹ Such exchanges highlight the tension between those who prioritised maintaining a veneer of neutrality and impartiality and those who believed that humanitarians had a duty to act as advocates for the refugees.

It is apparent however that some actors did go beyond refugee advocacy. While some observers initially speculated that aid workers were being duped by refugees into supporting an FMLN ploy, others began to worry that it was the aid workers who were radicalising the refugees.⁸⁰ Citing the example of an international worker calling for refugees to resist relocation, Blatter wrote to Geneva expressing concern that agency directors had lost control over personnel on the ground.⁸¹ Indeed, according to Blatter, the majority of agency staff had adopted an ‘absolutely intransigent’ position against relocation with some actively working against it and encouraging refugees to view the UNHCR as the enemy.⁸² Such was the strength of Blatter’s concern that he concluded that relief agencies would be co-responsible for any outbreak of violence over the issue.⁸³ Blatter was not alone in this view. Honduran military authorities were certain that some international staff were politically involved while the discovery of letters from FMLN guerrillas addressed to agency staff, raised, according to Negroponte, ‘serious questions’ over the motives of those opposing relocation.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Muller, Solange to Hartling, Poul, 2/3/1984, Fonds 2, Series 2, Box 94, V.7, UNHCR.

⁷⁹ Hartling to Muller, S., 8/5/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.2, UNHCR.

⁸⁰ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, ‘Re telecon British Embassy’, 25/1/1984, Fond 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.7, UNHCR.

⁸¹ Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 30/4/1984.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to Sec State, ‘Salvadoran Insurgents Killed Near Refugee Camps’, 28/2/1984, DNSA, ESUS.

By implying that all those who opposed relocation were linked to the FMLN, Negropte sought to dismiss and invalidate their objections. However, while this was disingenuous, as all were not linked to the FMLN, some were. The case of Elisenda Portabella, or Blanca, illustrates the extent to which some aid workers became entwined with *la lucha*. A Spanish doctor with MSF, Portabella arrived at Mesa Grande in April 1983.⁸⁵ Shortly thereafter, in June, she left for El Salvador, to work as a medic with the FMLN.⁸⁶ Ill, she crossed back into Honduras in June 1984 with a guerrilla column, aiming to reach Mesa Grande to seek treatment but was intercepted by a Honduran military patrol and was killed.⁸⁷ The speed with which Portabella arrived in Mesa Grande and left for El Salvador suggests a commitment to the FMLN's cause which predated her work with MSF. Certainly, Brauman is of the view that some internationals used the camps as a means to reach El Salvador.⁸⁸ Allegations, unsubstantiated, were made by Tegucigalpa that she had been a member of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), the Basque separatist group. Brauman meanwhile alleges that individuals linked to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were also present in the refugee camps.⁸⁹ It is perhaps unsurprising that politically engaged and radical individuals would be drawn to the refugee camps. Reflecting on this, Roberto Meier, the UNHCR officer, himself Argentinian, believed that the legacy of the Francisco Franco regime in Spain contributed to the revolutionary fervour of some Spanish NGO workers.⁹⁰

The UNHCR's press release in the wake of Portabella's killing emphasised that she had been an MSF volunteer, rather than an employee and that she had never worked directly

⁸⁵ Statement by UNHCR Tegucigalpa, as quoted in UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 13/6/1984, 0.10.HON [c], Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

⁸⁶ Genaro, Javier, Gato, *Dos pueblos a los que amar, un mundo por el que luchar*, 33, accessed online 22/1/2024, <https://trabajadoresyrevolucion.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/urria-2013.pdf>

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Rony Brauman, author's interview, online, 22/12/2022.

⁸⁹ Rony Brauman, as quoted in Binet, *Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras*, (MSF Speaking Out Case Study), 12.

⁹⁰ Roberto Meier, author's interview, online, 20/4/2021.

for the UNHCR.⁹¹ It went on to deplore that the ‘sad incident, which is outside the sphere of the refugee programme, could be interpreted in detriment to the refugees’ or to the detriment of relief and UNHCR staff ‘who adhere to the strictly humanitarian and apolitical mandate that the international community has conferred’ on them.⁹² The press release, ill-received by the Spanish government, was an attempt by UNHCR officials to limit the fallout from the event, with Honduran officials quick to claim that it demonstrated that the refugees and guerrilla were one and the same and that the camps needed to be moved as a matter of priority.⁹³ As indicated by this statement, and as indicated by Hartling’s response to Muller, the former UNHCR Protection Officer, the accepted position was that aid workers should operate outside of politics, thereby safeguarding their access to refugees.⁹⁴

But, even for those who did not arrive (as Portabella likely did) to the camps with fully formed political convictions, experiences in Honduras were inevitably politicising. It is notable, for example, that Muller’s vigorous anti-relocation letter to the High Commissioner came just a number of months after an altercation between her and the Honduran military. A Protection Officer at Mesa Grande, she was temporarily posted to El Tesoro, a small camp for Guatemalan refugees in June 1983.⁹⁵ On the morning of 16 June, she awakened to find the camp surrounded by some 50 Honduran and Guatemalan soldiers who seized 16 refugees. Muller pursued the soldiers, even as her husband was pulled from her jeep. Reaching the military outpost to where the refugees had been taken she waited – still in her pyjamas – attempting to ensure they were not taken over the border.⁹⁶ Although the refugees were eventually released to the UNHCR and resettled in Bolivia, Muller spent the next number of

⁹¹ Statement by UNHCR Tegucigalpa, as quoted in UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 13/6/1984.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.; UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 14/6/1984, 0.10.HON.C, UNHCR.

⁹⁴ Hartling to Muller, S., 8/5/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.2, UNHCR.

⁹⁵ Solange Muller, author’s interview, online, 28/3/2020.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

days assisting their devastated families and attempting to gather news.⁹⁷ This is not to suggest that Muller's later advocacy on behalf of the Salvadoran refugees stemmed solely from the events in El Tesoro. Instead, it demonstrates how the conditions the Honduran military created often pushed relief workers to stand in solidarity with the refugees.

Overlapping with this, religion was a driver of solidarity. Religion, as noted previously, was a central aspect of life in the camps and many of the aid organisations working directly with the refugees were Christian-based ones, promoting a shared sense of identity. Some were influenced by Liberation Theology and also viewed the Salvadoran conflict and the oppression of Honduran border communities as a war on Christian-based communities.⁹⁸ As one World Council of Churches publication simply stated, 'the refugees are God's agents.'⁹⁹ By virtue of their church links, faith-based NGOs were able to promote the refugees' opposition to relocation on a global scale. Groups such as the Quakers, the World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Relief helped organise visits to the camps by delegates and political representatives and churches also distributed pamphlets among their congregations within Europe and North America. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for example coordinated a visit to Colomoncagua by a delegation from the Archbishop of San Salvador.¹⁰⁰ Having met with refugee leaders the CRS director cut short the delegation's meeting with UNHCR representatives as they were justifying the basis for relocation.¹⁰¹ The official position taken by the Archbishop and the Salvadoran Church was in opposition to relocation and they viewed relocation as being driven by political-military concerns.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ S. Pagliuca, 'The Refugees in Transition: a report for the AFSC', 19/7/1983, Latin Amer – CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983, AFSC.

⁹⁸ Solange Muller, author's interview, online, 28/3/2020.

⁹⁹ Kathleen Ptolemy (coordinator, Inter-Church Committee for Refugees), 'Update on the Inter-Church Committee for Refugees Report to the UNHCR on Honduras Protection and Coordination of Material Assistance Concerns', 23/11/1982, Honduras 87-89 Salvadoran Refugees, MSF.

¹⁰⁰ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 'Re visit Honduras delegation from archbishop San Salvador', 24/6/1984, Series 11, Fonds 2, Box 646, UNHCR.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Within Honduras, the Diocese of Santa Rosa de Copán similarly described relocation as inhumane and unethical, while the Honduran Council of Bishops called for a true dialogue with refugees.¹⁰³ The US Catholic Conference meanwhile publicly wrote to the Honduran Ambassador in Washington expressing concerns over relocation while the Archbishop of Sao Paulo also issued an objection.¹⁰⁴ More broadly, across Europe and North America, individual churches and congregations wrote to national governments and the UNHCR to oppose the forced relocation of refugees.

In addition to humanitarian workers and Church groups, Salvadoran refugees could also count on the support of a wide umbrella of organisations including human rights groups, solidarity groups and refugee support organisations in Honduras, North America, and Europe. Within such groups work on behalf of Salvadoran refugees was frequently an extension of existing campaigns against US policy in Central America and the relocation of the refugees was consistently linked with Washington's supposed intention to regionalise the Salvadoran conflict. As with the refugees, these groups both emphasised the humanitarian perils of relocation while also accusing the UNHCR of 'shamefully' enabling US Cold War policy.¹⁰⁵ The *Centro de Documentación de Honduras* (Documentation Centre of Honduras, CEDOH), for example, highlighted the link between Smyser, the Deputy High Commissioner, and the Reagan administration.¹⁰⁶ In West Germany, the issue was picked up by the Green Party representative Gabriele Gottwald, a vocal critic of US policy in Nicaragua, while the United Kingdom (UK) MP Jeremy Corbyn wrote to the UNHCR protesting the relocation policy and

¹⁰³ Untitled, 31/1/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93 V.5, UNHCR; 'A Call to Action on Behalf of Salvador of the Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras', 26/3/1982, Oxfam PRG3/3/3/8, Oxfam; US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState, 15/2/1982, DNSA, ESUS.

¹⁰⁴ Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 22/5/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 6, V.2, UNHCR; UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 19/7/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.8, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁵ For example, El Salvador Committee for Human Rights, 'El Salvador: A Nation of Refugees', 1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, V.3, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁶ *CEDOH (Documentation Centre of Honduras)*, Special Issue 10, April 1984, DNSA ESUS

tying it to the militarisation of the border region by ‘American-trained Honduran Armed Forces’.¹⁰⁷

Opposition by politicians frequently highlighted the importance of humanitarian workers in giving publicity to the refugees’ plight. The US Congressman Bob Edgar, a Methodist minister, read from a report by Mary Day Kent who had visited the refugee camps with the Friends Peace Committee.¹⁰⁸ The issue was not just an opportunity to highlight the moral bankruptcy of Washington’s Central American policies but also a means by which to reflect domestic politics.¹⁰⁹ Within Honduras for example both CEDOH and PUNTO used the issue to critique Washington's excessive influence in the country as well as linking the proposed purchase of land for refugees to existing issues of land reform.¹¹⁰ In the UK, meanwhile, with the government having faced a backlash following accusations that it had ‘vigorously’ supported an international loan to El Salvador, there was concern among government advisors that the Refugee Council’s Lord Chitnis could raise the relocation issue in Parliament with it noted that Ministers should be informed of this ‘simmering problem’.¹¹¹

The refugees’ calls for support, disseminated by Church groups, human rights organisations, and campaign groups were well received by members of the public. The UNHCR archives hold numerous examples of letters sent from across Europe, the US, and Canada, criticising the agency for attempting to relocate the refugees. Many of the letters are copies of samples distributed by campaign groups and, in addition to the letters of individuals, a diverse range of organisations including the Electricity Supply Board Officers

¹⁰⁷ Rep in Federal Republic of Germany to High Commissioner, ‘Relocation of Camps’, 7/5/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.8, UNHCR; Corbyn, Jeremy, to UNHCR, 6/1/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.7, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Congressional Record - Extensions of Remarks’, 28/4/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.1, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁹ CEDOH, ‘Relocation of Refugees in Honduras’, April 1984, DNSA ESUS.

¹¹⁰ PUNTO, ‘Reubicación de refugiados: maniobra militar’, December 1981, File 683, Box 139, War on Want archives, SOAS Library, London, (hence: WoW).

¹¹¹ Ministry of Overseas Development, ‘Daily Mirror: EL Salvador Article’, 27/8/1981, OD28/452, the UK National Archives, London, (hence TNA); Makes to Lady Young, ‘Honduras: Refugee Problems’, 12/12/1985, FCO99/2182, TNA.

Association of Ireland, the Belgian Communist Party, and the Association of Clerical, Technical & Supervisory Staffs in the UK, wrote to the UNHCR in Geneva and to their national governments. Indeed, the refugees' internationalisation of their campaign, aided by allies in the humanitarian sector, is noteworthy for its reach and mobilization of different groups. It also bore a number of results. It increased the pressure on the UNHCR, Tegucigalpa and Washington, which were all aware of the wide attention now being given to the issue. Some, such as Gottwald, questioned national funding for the UNHCR while, at the governmental level, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied to a UNHCR request for additional assistance by seeking reassurances that any relocation would be conducted on a voluntary basis.¹¹²

As Liisa Malkki has highlighted, while refugees often view themselves and their situation as inherently political, humanitarian actors and other observers frequently view the figure of the refugee as one divorced from politics, seeing political activism and refugee status as being mutually exclusive.¹¹³ Unlike Malkki's experience in Tanzania however, it is clear that a large swathe of humanitarian actors and public opinion was prepared to see the Salvadorans in Honduras as both politicised actors and as refugees. Although humanitarian concerns undoubtedly played a role, it is equally likely that this solidarity was also based on existing political convictions and the growing opposition, especially in Europe, toward US policy in Central America. Many, for example, equated opposition to relocation with opposition to the regionalisation of the Salvadoran war. In such a way, the presence of camps along the border became, as the UK Ambassador to Honduras Bryan White noted, a 'living symbol of the anti-government struggle in El Salvador'.¹¹⁴ This of course was not true for everyone and there are instances where, upon receiving information on the UNHCR's

¹¹² Ministry for Foreign Affairs Stockholm to UNHCR, 6/4/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, V.2, UNHCR.

¹¹³ Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricisation', *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1996).

¹¹⁴ White to FCO, 6/9/1985, TNA, FCO 99/2182, TNA.

rationale for relocation, individuals replied supportively to Geneva noting that they had been misled by campaign groups.¹¹⁵ In general, however, international humanitarian actors provided refugees with a means to access a global audience to which they could voice their opposition to relocation. The wider framework of the Cold War meanwhile meant that this audience, which was opposed to the Cold War's expansion, was receptive to the refugees' message and was prepared to support it as a symbol of their own convictions.

The Failure to Relocate the Salvadoran Camps

In August 1984, the Honduran Congress voted to approve the relocation of Salvadoran refugees to Olanchito in Yoro province. Within a month, however, this plan was dropped, with the UNHCR informed that it ran contrary to the national interest.¹¹⁶ Although the issue of relocation would repeatedly re-emerge in the years to follow, this was the closest it came to happening. Examining why the 1984 proposal failed therefore speaks to the overall difficulty faced by those seeking to move the refugees of Colomoncagua from the border. Some of this failure can be attributed to the refugees themselves. Their opposition increased pressure on the UNHCR and this, coupled with lessons learned from the Mesa Grande relocation, led the UNHCR to seek guarantees from Tegucigalpa regarding refugee welfare. In turn, these demands caused internal difficulties within Honduras and delayed relocation planning such that, when a plan did emerge, Honduran opposition had mounted sufficiently to collapse it. Such opposition was both linked to the UNHCR's newly imposed demands as well as broader issues including growing nationalism within Honduran politics.

By January 1984, the UNHCR's participation in any relocation programme was made conditional on the Honduran government providing written agreement that relocation would

¹¹⁵ Faulkner M., to Bertrand. C. (UNHCR), 30/9/1982, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.5, UNHCR.

¹¹⁶ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 16/8/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 7, V.4, UNHCR; Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 5/9/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 7, V.4, UNHCR.

improve refugee welfare through increased freedom of movement and self-sufficiency provisions.¹¹⁷ These demands contributed to delays in the relocation process. Self-sufficiency for example necessitated the purchasing of large areas of suitable land which produced both political and practical problems. At a political level, once suitable sites were identified, local Hondurans frequently opposed any plans to relocate refugees to their districts. This was driven by both a general antipathy to the presence of Salvadoran refugees, a legacy of the 1969 conflict, and a more specific objection that, because of the large areas of land being purchased, this would delay the local implementation of land reform laws.¹¹⁸ As a result, multiple sites had to be identified while time was also spent in sending UNHCR representatives to negotiate with local leaders. At a more practical level, the Honduran state was not prepared to make such an area of land freely available to the refugees, but the UNHCR mandate also did not allow for the agency to purchase land directly. This issue also took on political dimensions as, upon being appointed as the intermediary agency which would take ownership of the site identified in Olanchito, the Honduran Red Cross began seeking details as to who currently owned the land and how it would eventually be redistributed to Honduran campesinos.¹¹⁹ At the same time, in the face of the campaign against relocation, the Norwegian and Danish Refugee Councils announced in June 1984 that they were no longer prepared to contribute funding toward the land purchase.¹²⁰

Those in the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa were frustrated by the delays caused by the UNHCR's demands. In January 1984, Negroponte called on the State Department to make a demarche on Geneva to formally protest the delays while the State Department concurred with Negroponte that the issue of relocation should be de-linked from refugee quality of

¹¹⁷ Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 11/6/1984, Box 6, V.3, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹¹⁸ Jackson to Wooding, Oxfam memo, 14/10/1983, Folder 2, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

¹¹⁹ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 23/6/1984, Box 6, V.3, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹²⁰ Thackwell, Press Statement, 7/5/1984, , Folder 2, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam; Wooding to Eade, 5/6/1984, Folder 2, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

life.¹²¹ In line with this, the Embassy began to push for the refugees to be relocated to Mesa Grande and, when a suitable site was found, be moved again. In a meeting between Blatter, the UNHCR representative in Honduras, and Negropte, however, Blatter let it be known that the UNHCR would oppose any relocation attempt which would negatively affect the refugees.¹²² While the position of the UNHCR can be seen as both a response to the pressures of the refugees' campaign and as a desire to fulfil its protection mandate, others were more sceptical of its motives. Matters were not helped by Hartling when, reacting to the official approval given by Honduras to relocate the refugees to Olanchito, he commented that 'what could be viewed as positive news is fraught with difficulties...in the humanitarian field nothing is ever clear-cut...there is no totally right or totally wrong solution'.¹²³ Negropte demanded that a demarche be made to the UNHCR over this apparent equivocation and also noted that Hartling had seemingly dismissed the concern of UNHCR Honduras staff that aid workers were utilising the refugees to 'oppose US Central American policies'.¹²⁴ There was some speculation that the agency was deliberately delaying relocation with the State Department describing it as 'disquieting' that, by March 1984, the UNHCR had made no moves to acquire the proposed site in Yoro while an Oxfam memo noted that the UNHCR's plan was so full of inconsistencies that perhaps it was never intended to go beyond the planning stage, instead acting as a barrier toward any unilateral Honduran move.¹²⁵

Such a view was not unique to those outside the UNHCR. Reflecting on his own work Denis Van Dam, hired by Geneva to design the proposed new refugee settlements, believes

¹²¹ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState, 'Colomoncagua Refugee Camp', 25/4/1984, DNSA ESUS; SecState to US Embassy Tegucigalpa, 'Colomoncagua Refugee Camp', 28/4/1984, DNSA ESUS.

¹²² Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 17/7/1984, Box 6, V.3, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹²³ Poul Hartling, 'Statement to the Informal Meeting of Permanent Representatives in Geneva of States Members of the Executive Committee', 24/1/1984, accessed online 20/3/2022,

<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/statement-mr-poul-hartling-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees-informal-2>

¹²⁴ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState, 'Request for Demarche', 27/1/1984, DNSA ESUS.

¹²⁵ Wooding to Jackson, 20/10/1983, Folder 2, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

that many in the UNHCR did not think the plan would ever go ahead.¹²⁶ According to him, many UNHCR officials were, in fact, privately opposed to the idea but were unable to openly oppose it.¹²⁷ He cited his own hiring as evidence of this; a relatively inexperienced 27-year-old.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, Van Dam proceeded to draw up plans, engaging with the local Honduran population and rural organisations. Few, he remembers, were satisfied with the idea of refugees arriving in their midst, even when offered secondary benefits.¹²⁹ The one exception was the landowners on whose land the new settlements would be located.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, in June 1984, the Honduran refugee commission reached an agreement with the UNHCR laying out the improved conditions refugees would be granted upon their transfer to Olanchito.¹³¹ The subsequent reversal of the Honduran decision, led by the Honduran National Security Council, was driven both by the opposition of groups within Olanchito and by wider changes in Honduran politics during 1984. In July, when Honduras was still officially in favour of relocation, Noemi Espinoza of the Honduran refugee agency *Comité de Desarrollo y Emergencia* (Development and Emergency Committee, CODE) claimed to the UNHCR that Honduran authorities were studying all possible alternatives to relocation. According to Espinoza, an adviser to the governmental ad hoc committee on which the President was a member, lobbying peasant trade unions had played a major role in changing the government's attitude.¹³² The trade union at Standard Fruit in Olanchito for example opposed the move, claiming that refugees would depress wages while others such as the National Peasant Union (UNG), the National Association of Honduran Peasants (ANACH), and the United Front of Honduran Peasants (FUNACAMH) voiced concern that

¹²⁶ Denis Van Dam, author's interview, online, 18/3/2021.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 11/6/1984, , Box 6, V.3, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR; UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 4/8/1984, Box 7, V.4, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹³² Bertrand, 'Note for the File', 1/8/1984, Box 646, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

land long demanded by Honduran peasants was now being turned over to Salvadoran refugees.¹³³ Such objections were raised during the Congressional debate on relocation by the Olanchito representative Dilma Quezada de Martinez who argued that no more than 5,000 refugees should be transferred, that they be located at least ten kilometres from both the city and from the Standard Fruit plantation, that the price of the land being sold be investigated, and that the land eventually be transferred to peasant associations.¹³⁴ By August, *El Tiempo* ran an editorial opposing relocation on the basis that moving the refugees inland represented a national security risk.¹³⁵ Domestic concerns common to many refugee situations, such as refugees' impact on local employment and resources, therefore melded with the view, articulated by the government itself, that these refugees were particularly threatening, to act as a barrier to relocating the refugees.

The decision against relocation was not solely a reaction to these grassroots objections, however. In March 1984 General Álvarez, one of the most vocal Honduran voices in favour of relocation and a strong ally of the US Embassy, was ousted. This ouster was the culmination of several issues. Álvarez had alienated a large portion of the armed forces through his increasingly authoritarian behaviour, his naked political ambitions, and fears that his mounting consolidation of power could result in a purge¹³⁶. At the same time, Álvarez seemed intent on provoking a war with Nicaragua while he had recently declared himself prepared to send troops into El Salvador. While the new military command was still sympathetic to the Reagan administration it was more minded to independent, nationalist driven, action. Commissions were formed to examine Honduran military cooperation with the US and to review policies toward the Contra, but a particular point of contention was

¹³³ Eade to Wooding, 'Meeting with Drew McKinley', 20/6/1984, Folder 2, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam; Unknown, Oxfam, 14t/10/1983, Folder 2, PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

¹³⁴ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 4/8/1984, Box 7, V.4, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹³⁵ MCC Honduras Quarterly Report, 7/9/1984, A Young Church Awakens to Crisis – Hon., MCC.

¹³⁶ Schulz & Schulz, *The US, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America*, 100-102.

cooperation with the Salvadoran military, especially the training of Salvadoran troops in the US-staffed Regional Military Training Centre. Elements within the new command found it particularly galling that more Salvadoran troops, against whom they had fought just over a decade previously, were now being trained in this centre than Honduran forces.¹³⁷ Added to this was the fact that Costa Rica, a neutral country, received the same amount of US economic aid per capita as Honduras at a time when Tegucigalpa was struggling to finance land reform programmes.¹³⁸

The questioning of Honduran assistance to El Salvador was not solely based on memories of the recent past. Talks between the two countries on their border dispute were making little progress, leading Paz Barnica, the Honduran Foreign Minister, to publicly denounce San Salvador's lack of 'political will' in this respect.¹³⁹ While open criticism of Washington or action taken in the name of anti-Communism was not tolerated under Álvarez, this reluctance to unduly assist the Salvadoran military with little reward was not completely new. In one instance, a joint Honduran-Salvadoran operation against an FMLN base in the Naguaterique *bolson*, one of the disputed Honduran-Salvadoran border pockets, was called off due to Salvadoran fears that Honduran troops would claim the *bolson* as Honduran territory.¹⁴⁰ A US Department of Defense memorandum on FMLN supply routes meanwhile noted the disinterest of Honduran commanders along the border in preventing cross-border smuggling.¹⁴¹ Similarly, and interestingly, according to Rony Brauman, then President of MSF France, the Honduran military did not always seek to prevent the passing of materials from Colomoncagua into El Salvador.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Flynn, Patricia, CENSA Strategic Report, EP 320 PAM/5/30, Institute of Latin American Studies Pamphlet Collection, Senate House Library, London.

¹³⁸ Untitled, Canadian Embassy Guatemala, 20/7/1984, FCO 99/1941, TNA.

¹³⁹ British Embassy Tegucigalpa to FCO, 6/8/1984, FCO 99/1941, TNA.

¹⁴⁰ USCINCSO Quarry Heights to DIA Washington, 5/2/1982, CIA.

¹⁴¹ Department of Defense, 'El Salvador: Overland Infiltration', 10/9/1985, DNSA ES.

¹⁴² Rony Brauman, author's interview, online, 22/12/2022.

The planned relocation to Olanchito collapsed despite intense US pressure to move the refugees. During a meeting with Blatter in July 1984, Negropte ‘clearly stated’ that the refugees had to be moved from Colomoncagua ‘at any cost and as soon as possible’.¹⁴³ Anticipating that the Honduran government might reverse its decision on Olanchito, Negropte argued that the UNHCR should accept an intermediary solution such as moving the refugees to a ‘closed holding centre’ farther from the border.¹⁴⁴ Negropte was himself under pressure from Washington to resolve the matter. Edwin Corr, US Ambassador to El Salvador, claimed that Colomoncagua was seriously hindering the Salvadoran military’s war on the FMLN and demanded that the camp be moved.¹⁴⁵ In an incident which speaks both to the seriousness with which relocation was viewed in Washington, and the pressure faced by the UNHCR, Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, threatened Hartling that US funding of the UNHCR would be cut unless the camp was moved.¹⁴⁶

Frustrated at the lack of progress, Arthur ‘Gene’ Dewey, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Refuge Programs, commissioned Robert Gersony, a State Department consultant, to go to Honduras in 1985 and arrange for the camp to be moved. A Vietnam War veteran, Gersony worked for the State Department, the UN, and other agencies over the course of his career, interviewing over 8,000 refugees, displaced people, and humanitarian workers in war zones across the world, producing intelligence reports for policymakers.¹⁴⁷ However, rather than moving Colomoncagua, Gersony’s trip to Honduras led him to recommend that the camp be left in situ. While he agreed that the ERP used the camp for supplies and recruitment, Gersony, having spoken with the CIA station chief and

¹⁴³ Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 17/7/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, 0.10.HON [c], UNHCR.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Kaplan, *The Good American: The epic life of Bob Gersony, the U.S. Government’s Greatest Humanitarian*, (New York: Random House: 2021), 156.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 157.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xvi.

UNHCR and NGO staff, and having visited Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande, concluded that Corr's most extreme claims – including that Colomoncagua operated as an explosives factory – were incorrect.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, it was clear to him that the Honduran government did not wish to move the camp and, even if their hand was forced, the refugees would resist any relocation attempt. Any resulting massacre that resulted from trying to force them would also, he argued, be blamed on the Reagan administration.¹⁴⁹

Ultimately, the refugees remained on the border until they returned to El Salvador at the end of the decade. It was the refugees' resistance, coupled with their skilful engagement of an international audience, which led Gersony to conclude that moving the refugees would necessitate force, triggering an international outcry. This, along with Gersony's assurances that Colomoncagua's contribution to the FMLN's war effort was being overstated by those in San Salvador, altered the calculus for those in Washington pushing for a relocation.

Even so, remaining on the border was something of a pyrrhic victory for the refugees. Among one of Gersony's recommendations was that the Honduran military tighten its cordon around the camps, thus allaying fear over their links to El Salvador.¹⁵⁰ Some months previously Blatter, in discussions with Negroponte, had warned that tighter military control should not be seen as a possible solution. In addition to the 'severe psychological' tole that this would extract on the refugees, he stressed the inherent dangers involved in increasing the presence of poorly educated soldiers who lacked any sort of effective supervision.¹⁵¹

Events in August 1985 in Colomoncagua had proved such warnings correct and highlighted the ultimate vulnerability of the refugee population, even when they remained within the camp's confines. There, a woman holding a baby attempted to intervene on behalf

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 161.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁵⁰ Kaplan, *The Good American*, 163.

¹⁵¹ W. Blatter (UNHCR Tegucigalpa) to Geneva, 17/7/1984, 0.10.HON.C, UNHCR.

of her neighbour who was being harassed by Honduran troops.¹⁵² Kicked by soldiers, the woman fell, as did the two-month-old baby. The soldiers continued to beat the refugees, and, despite the efforts of an MSF doctor, the baby died. Nor was Gloria the only victim. Santos Saen Vijil, in his sixties, was also killed in the attack while an estimated 50 more were injured and two women raped.¹⁵³ In the aftermath of the attack, the Honduran government, with the backing of the US Embassy, insisted that its troops had come under fire while searching for subversives in the camp.¹⁵⁴ Refusing to accept this characterisation, and in a break from its normal restraint, the UNHCR published its staff's version of events, which contrasted sharply with those of the Honduran Government.¹⁵⁵ With its staff described as 'bitterly angry' by the British Ambassador to Honduras, the UNHCR's Robert Muller took up the issue with the ambassadors of the UK, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain, while, at the European Community (EC) level it was decided that a *démarche* be made to the Honduran Government protesting this violation of UNHCR protection.¹⁵⁶ Despite the UNHCR's earlier attempts, relations with Tegucigalpa had therefore reached a new low by Autumn 1985 to such an extent that, in a demand rebuffed by the High Commissioner, the Honduran Foreign Minister sought the expulsion of Waldo Villalpando, the UNHCR representative in Honduras, from the country.¹⁵⁷

The 1985 attack certainly proved true the refugees' claim that it was the Honduran military rather than the camps' proximity to the border which represented the biggest threat

¹⁵² Mennonite Central Committee news service, 'Honduran Soldiers Attack Salvadoran Refugees in Camp', 13/9/1985, A young church awakens to crisis – Hon. – ES, MCC.

¹⁵³ Ibid.; Susan Johnson (Oxfam Canada) to Jock Wingfield (Save the Children), 'ELS refs in Hon', 9/9/1985, SCF/OP/4/HOD/18, SCF.

¹⁵⁴ British Embassy Honduras to FCO, 30/8/1985, FCO 99/2182, TNA; Bryan White (Tegucigalpa) to FCO, 4/9/1985, FCO 99/2182, TNA.

White (Tegucigalpa) to FCO, 6/9/1985, FCO 99/2182, TNA.

¹⁵⁵ Sollis, 'Debriefing on trip to investigate the incident at Colomocagua', 13/9/1985, LA85, Box 70, British Refugee Council archives, University of East London, London, (hence: BRC).

¹⁵⁶ British Embassy Honduras to FCO, 30/8/1985, FCO 99/2182, TNA; White to FCO, 5/9/1985, FCO 99/2182, TNA; Text of Joint Demarche, 1/10/1985, FCO 99/2182, TNA.

¹⁵⁷ W. Villalpando (UNHCR Honduras) to Geneva, 'Copies of letters – former Minister Foreign Affairs and present Minister Foreign Affairs', 18/7/1988, 0.10.HON.D, UNHCR.

to their wellbeing. It also highlights the stark limits of what the UNHCR could achieve through attempts to improve relations with the Honduran military. In terms of refugee self-sufficiency, it was also clear that there was no way that this could be achieved given the positions of each party involved. Furthermore, by the time of the attack, the UNHCR's self-sufficiency project for Miskito refugees was in serious difficulty. Strategic demands of those involved in the Contra War meant that this project, which was also predicated on ensuring that refugees remained at a distance from the border, clashed with the realities of Cold War Honduras.

Self-sufficiency in the Mosquitia

The feeling in Geneva, as expressed in the April 1985 edition of *Refugees*, was one of vindication regarding the UNHCR's bold decision to disperse the refugees gathered at Mocarón. 'Welcome evidence' of the potential of this 'ambitious programme' for Miskito refugees was the 1984 rice harvest, whose abundance necessitated the building of extra warehouses.¹⁵⁸ Under the *Papabis* system - fair exchange in Miskito - the UNHCR / World Relief programme opened trading posts in refugee settlements where refugees could exchange such agricultural surplus for other products, such as soap, salt, and blankets, which were currently provided as relief items.¹⁵⁹ Agricultural produce sold to the co-operative could also be repurchased by refugees at non-speculative rates should their own reserves run low.¹⁶⁰ As explicitly acknowledged in *Refugees*, assistance for refugees in the Mosquitia appeared on the verge of transitioning from emergency relief to longer-term development.

There are clear parallels between the self-sustaining, agriculturally based, Miskito communities described in *Refugees* and the UNHCR-proposed small-scale settlements for

¹⁵⁸ *Refugees*, April 1985

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Salvadoran refugees. Indeed, UNHCR thinking in relation to the relocation of Salvadoran refugees drew on the supposed success of its work in the Mosquitia. From this perspective, relief and development work in the Mosquitia faced few barriers; the Honduran state was largely absent from the region, while the unpopulated nature of the Mosquitia meant that, unlike the Salvadoran case, there was little local opposition to the refugees' presence or, at any rate, what opposition there was outweighed by Tegucigalpa's facilitative attitude. Within this blank canvas, international aid agencies could, as described by World Relief officials, transform the Nicaraguan Miskito Indians from refugees into self-supporting residents.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, such transformation was to occur in a way that preserved the Miskito culture.

Not everyone, of course, supported this envisaged transformation. A report by Florence Egal, undertaken to formulate recommendations to the UNHCR and World Relief regarding the development of Miskito and Mayanga communities in the Mosquitia, noted that the anti-Sandinista guerrilla was a serious barrier to the 'development process'.¹⁶² The guerrilla, outlined Egal, drew on the resources of refugee communities while its objective was to return these communities to Nicaragua, not to become integrated into Honduras.¹⁶³ Since many of the refugee village coordinators and pastors were committed to the guerrilla cause, community participation, recommended Egal, should be sought in multiple ways and not reduced to meeting with refugee leadership.¹⁶⁴ Another barrier identified by Egal was that agricultural work alone was not capable of sustaining total self-sufficiency. Thus, other income-generating activities had to be developed.¹⁶⁵ With long-term development sitting outside of the UNHCR's mandate, and with World Relief heavily associated with refugee-

¹⁶¹ Shirley Mayer (World Relief International) to Director of Personnel, Board of World Mission, 14/12/1984, BWM 203 Werner Marx, Moravian Church Board of World Mission archives, Bethlehem, PA, (hence: BWM).

¹⁶² Florence Egal & Kevin McKemy, 'Consultancy Report for World Relief Honduras, UNHCR / World Relief Programme', October 1984, BWM 203, World Relief International, BWM.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

centric relief and development, Egal recommended that a new organisation be formed, one which would centre development projects around ‘stable Honduran communities’.¹⁶⁶ In line with these recommendations, an independent development organisation, MOPAWI (Agencia Para el Desarrollo de la Mosquitia), was founded in February 1985 at the initiative of World Relief.

Social promoters, known as animators, were placed by MOPAWI in participating communities, with animators then expected to help inhabitants determine their development needs and priorities and to plan and coordinate programmes and seek resources.¹⁶⁷ At this early stage, funding came through a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) grant via World Relief although MOPAWI by-laws stipulated that no more than 30% of its budget should come from any single source.¹⁶⁸ One of MOPAWI’s earliest projects was an expansion of the Papabis system, establishing new trading posts and extending the range of goods bought and sold.¹⁶⁹ As such, a market was provided for producers where none had previously existed while Papabis was also increasingly staffed by Miskito personnel rather than non-Honduran staff, thus providing professional development opportunities.¹⁷⁰ Aiding in the development of small-scale industries was the provision of loans, known as Papapro and partly funded by the Moravian Church, to community projects. Using such loans, one community formed a boat cooperative, using financing to purchase a small freighter.¹⁷¹ In another example, a small brown-sugar factory was founded while, at Mocerón, a sewing centre was formed to produce uniforms for secondary school students on scholarships.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Dick Erstad, AFSC Staff Report, ‘Trip Report on Honduran Mosquitia’, 3/6/1985, BWM 204 World Relief International, BWM.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Trimestral Report – MOPAWI’, January – March 1985, BWM 770 MOPAWI, BWM.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Dwight Harriman, Project Coordinator’s Report, July 1984, BWM 203 World Relief International, BWM.

¹⁷² Ibid.; ‘Trimestral Report – MOPAWI’, January – March 1985.

The recruitment of the most able-bodied refugees into the ranks of MISURA and the non-cooperation of those refugees opposed to self-sufficiency were not the only obstacles to the transition from relief to development. In line with the UNHCR's Handbook for Emergencies, neither the UNHCR nor World Relief operated within 50 kilometres of the Nicaraguan border. From an early stage, some 5,000 refugees had remained within this region, outside the purview of the UNHCR's assistance programme. In August 1984 this non-UNHCR relief programme was strengthened with the US Congressional allocation of \$7.5 million in emergency assistance to the Mosquitia under the stipulation that it not be channelled through any UN agency.¹⁷³ Several US-based, openly anti-Sandinista aid agencies, such as Friends of the Americas (FOA), already operated here, providing some measure of basic supplies to refugees. Seeking to boost support for those at the border, Washington promised to pay World Relief to buy rice from those who settled there, an offer which was refused on the basis that working at such proximity to the border was to work in Contra territory.¹⁷⁴ Just as the UNHCR began to reduce rations, then, and as officials communicated to refugee settlements that assistance would be gradually phased out, non-UNHCR-sanctioned emergency relief was increased elsewhere.

The motives of FOA and Washington are explored in the following chapter but, in summary, it was in the interest of both that the refugees remain as *refugees* – and thereby remain damaging to Managua – rather than becoming self-sufficient. The impact on the UNHCR programme was stark, with refugees leaving UNHCR settlements for the border region where aid was more readily available. By October 1985, only half of the estimated 22,000 refugees in the Mosquitia remained in UNHCR-sanctioned sites.¹⁷⁵ The refugees'

¹⁷³ Blatter W., 'Note for the File: Visit to Honduras by Ambassador E.H. Douglas', 1/10/1984, Box 14, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR.

¹⁷⁴ *NYT*, 19/04/1985; Deborah to Peter, 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia 15th - 18th October 1985', 24/10/1985, PRH/5/3/3/2 Nicaragua, Oxfam.

¹⁷⁵ *Refugees*, October 1985.

rationale was, to some degree, understandable. On a visit to the Mosquitia, Ted Wilde, from the Moravian Church's Board of World Mission, described how refugees in UNHCR settlements were unhappy at the cutback in rations, difficulty in selling rice crops, the lack of distribution of free clothes, and the initiation of a commercial system in which there was now a charge on goods.¹⁷⁶

For its part, UNHCR officials saw the \$7.5 million 'frontier programme' as creating an artificial emergency along the border.¹⁷⁷ As a 1985 report prepared for members of the US Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus concluded, the 'relief effort for the Miskito Indians living on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border has had the effect of maintaining the MISURA "contra" army.'¹⁷⁸ Luise Druke, acting UNHCR representative in Tegucigalpa from May 1985 to June 1986, meanwhile noted that relief efforts were 'transformed' into counterrevolutionary activities through the support of the Honduran military and the influence of the US Embassy.¹⁷⁹ Even some within USAID, charged with administering the allocated \$7.5 million, had misgivings about investing such an amount in such a small area.¹⁸⁰ The agency was already involved in repairing and upgrading roads in the region, justified partly on the basis that this would improve humanitarian relief activities, something which included the repairing of a bridge and airfield at Rus Rus.¹⁸¹ This should be seen against a wider context of US infrastructure expenditure in Honduras and the construction of

¹⁷⁶ Report on Visit of Ted Wilde to Honduras, November 29 – December 18, 1984, BWM 161 Ted Wilde Visits to Honduras, BWM.

¹⁷⁷ *NYT*, 19/04/1985; Deborah to Peter, 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia 15th - 18th October 1985', 24/10/1985, PRH/5/3/3/2 Nicaragua, Oxfam.

¹⁷⁸ Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, Report: 'Who are the Contras? An Analysis of the Makeup of the Military Leadership of the Rebel Forces, and of the Nature of the Private American Groups Providing them Financial and Material Support', 18/04/1985, 2.

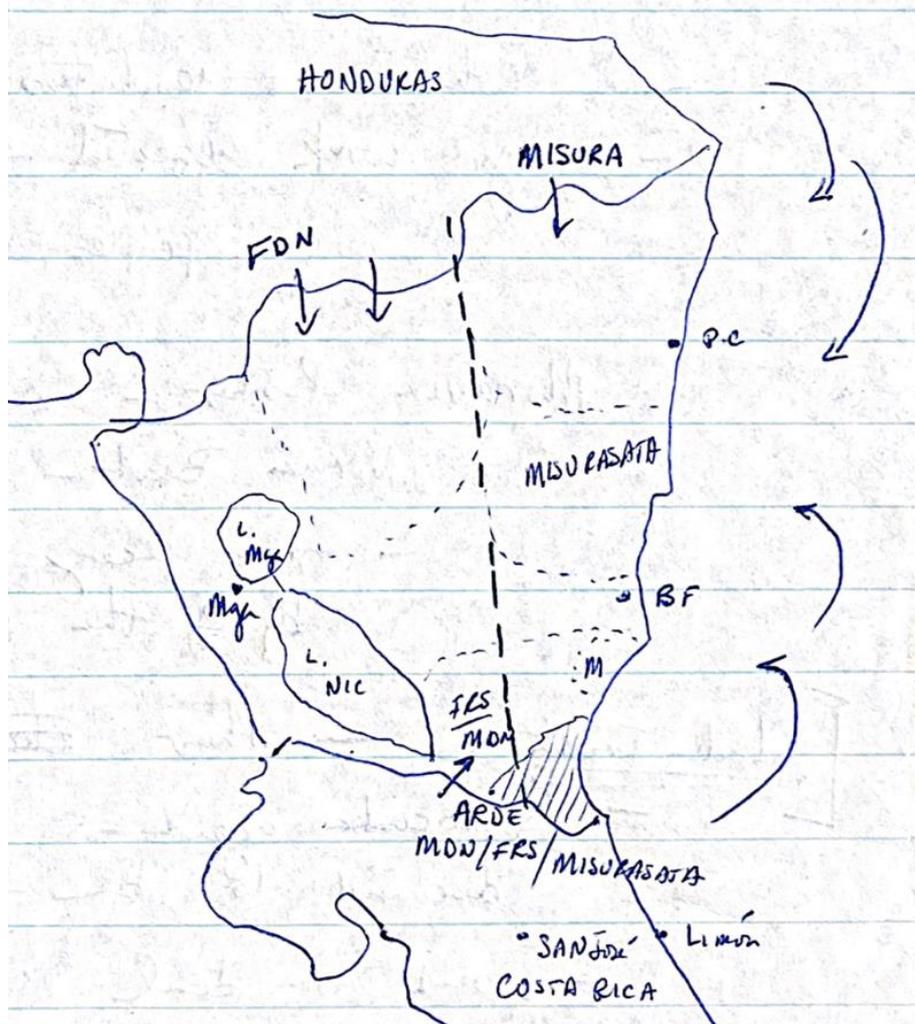
¹⁷⁹ Luise Druke, *Preventive Action for Refugee Producing Situations*, (Paris: Peter Lang, 1993), 113.

¹⁸⁰ *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 'Franchising Aggression', July/August 1986, 33.

¹⁸¹ 'Project Agreement between the US Government acting through the Agency for International Development and Ministry of Communications, Public Works and Transportation Honduras', 26/02/1985, USAID Development Experience Clearing House, accessed 9/4/2023, <https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/home/Default.aspx>

facilities during the military training exercises Big Pine I and II, described by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) as a ‘significant departure from past practices’.¹⁸²

Figure 4 *Map of Proposed Attacks on Nicaragua*



Source: Bernard Nietschmann (Miskito Advisor), undated, Folder 6, Carton 2, Bernard Nietschmann Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, CA; For more on Nietschmann see Chapter Four.

In tandem with this US-led shift, were changes in Tegucigalpa and Managua in relation to the Contra War, both of which limited the viability of the UNHCR’s Mosquitia vision. As noted, Álvarez was ousted, in part because he lacked sufficient restraint in regard to Nicaragua. In the wake of his removal, Tegucigalpa moved to improve relations with

¹⁸² US GAO Response to Questions, 14/11/1983, DNSA, Nicaragua.

Managua, re-establishing diplomatic relations at the Ambassadorial level, and even, in July 1984, sending a delegation to Nicaragua for the anniversary celebrations of the Sandinista victory.¹⁸³ Álvarez's absence was not the only driving force here. Rather, uncertainty regarding US policy toward Nicaragua, partly stemming from the 1984 US presidential election, also led Tegucigalpa to adopt a more cautious approach.¹⁸⁴

One outcome of this was the expulsion, in January 1985, of Steadman Fagoth from Honduras. Fagoth, who subsequently moved to Miami, was arrested and deported following a Tegucigalpa news conference during which he threatened to execute 23 Sandinista soldiers unless the MISURA troops holding them were not permitted to escape an attempt to encircle them.¹⁸⁵ Such a bombastic statement on Honduran territory went beyond what the Honduran government was prepared to tolerate. Despite the open Contra presence in Honduras, General López, Commander of the Honduran Armed Forces, and Paz Barnica, the Foreign Minister, were careful to acknowledge it only vaguely, seeking to control the limit of Honduran involvement in the Contra War, particularly given increasing US Congressional scrutiny of the conflict.¹⁸⁶

Having initially seen the presence of refugees in the Mosquitia as a boon to the region's development, Honduran officials were also, by 1985, concerned that the Nicaraguan Miskito struggle could ignite similar demands for autonomy from the Honduran Miskito population. Indeed, MISURA leaders frequently justified their presence in Honduras to Honduran Miskitos by claiming that the war presented an opportunity through which Miskito territory, currently divided between Honduras and Nicaragua, could be united.¹⁸⁷ Although

¹⁸³ Elizabeth Sketchley, British Embassy Tegucigalpa, to FCO, 'Honduras: Round Up', 6/8/1984, FCO 99/1941, TNA.

¹⁸⁴ Sharkey, British Ambassador to Honduras, to FCO, 12/10/1984, FCO 99/1941, TNA.

¹⁸⁵ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState DC, 'Expulsion of anti-Sandinista leader Steadman Fagoth', 8/1/1985, DNSA, Nicaragua.

¹⁸⁶ Sketchley, to FCO, 'Honduras: Round Up', 6/8/1984.

¹⁸⁷ Isabel Chiriboga, *Espíritus de Vida y Muerte: los Miskitu Hondureños en época de Guerra*, (Honduras: Editorian Guaymuras: 2002), 124.

such rhetoric was for internal Miskito consumption it did not escape the notice of the Honduran military and contributed to Fagoth's expulsion.¹⁸⁸

On the Nicaraguan side, Managua sought the return of refugees from Honduras, hoping both to improve its human rights image and to settle one front in the Contra War. To this end, in October 1984, the government began talks with Brooklyn Rivera, of MISURASATA, with a second round of talks taking place in Bogota in December 1984.¹⁸⁹ That January, Daniel Ortega announced a general amnesty, promising that counterrevolutionaries could return from Honduras and Costa Rica without facing consequences. The Honduran government, having just expelled Fagoth, described the law as a positive measure.¹⁹⁰

Fagoth's expulsion did not signal a wholesale change in Tegucigalpa's Contra policy, and nor did it directly impact the viability of the UNHCR's self-sufficiency programme. Yet, Honduran concerns over the long-term impact of tolerating those from Nicaragua who espoused a Miskito nationalism, coupled with the view that refugees could begin to return to Nicaragua did change the context in which the UNHCR was operating. Certainly, David Befus, head of World Relief in Honduras, recalls that repatriation rather than resettlement quickly became the UNHCR's focus.¹⁹¹ Perhaps related to the shifting Honduran attitude toward the Nicaraguan Miskito presence, was the Honduran Forestry Commission's 1985 decision to prevent refugees from felling forest for agricultural use. This acted as a significant barrier to achieving self-sufficiency, with refugees forced to use increasingly infertile lands.¹⁹² It also prevented the clearing of land for new settlements, meaning that newly arrived refugees were confined to small camps, completely dependent on relief supplies.¹⁹³ A

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Evangelicals for Social Action, Newsletter, 15/1/1985, BWM 257 Human Rights Organisations, BWM.

¹⁹⁰ British Embassy Tegucigalpa to FCO, 'Nicaragua / Honduras: The Contras', 24/1/1985, FCO 99/2175, TNA.

¹⁹¹ David Befus, author's interview, online, 6/4/2020.

¹⁹² *Refugees*, October 1985.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

letter from the Forestry Commission's chief to the Honduran President outlining the rationale behind the ban noted that, during 1983, refugees had uprooted 2,600 acres of woodland and a further 5,000 in 1984.¹⁹⁴ Along with this environmental impact, the letter also spoke of the Honduran Miskito population's frustration, made to 'feel like aliens in their homeland'. Furthermore, it painted the refugees as a national security risk, armed as they were with hatchets and machetes.¹⁹⁵ As the letter noted, 'for reasons of public knowledge' – the Contra War – the Commission was unable to enforce felling bans in the border region something which, in turn, increased the attractiveness of the region to refugees.¹⁹⁶

Conclusion

Honduras then, was not Panama. Neither the Salvadoran nor Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras would achieve self-sufficiency during the 1980s. With an eye to the Rivera-Sandinista peace talks, UNHCR officials held out hope that repatriation could soon resolve the Miskito refugee situation. They were less hopeful, however, regarding the Salvadoran refugees. Unable to win concessions such as freedom of movement, Geneva now feared a protracted crisis, akin to that of the Palestinians. The task facing the UNHCR was not helped by other observations contained in Gersony's report on the Salvadoran camps. Although he quietened fears regarding their importance to the war in El Salvador, he was horrified by the UNHCR's lack of governance over camp life. His report's recommendations, along with the fallout from Fagoth's expulsion from the Mosquitia, meant that, as explored in Chapter Five, the UNHCR would find itself having to navigate an increasingly complex and tense environment in Honduras.

¹⁹⁴ As included in cable from UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 17/4/1984, Fonds 11, Series 2, 0.10.HON [b], UNHCR.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

The Salvadoran and Miskito refugees failed to become self-sufficient for very different reasons. In both cases, however, UNHCR plans for self-sufficiency clashed with the strategic ambitions of those involved in the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts. In this way, it shows the limits of what the UNHCR was able to achieve. At the same time, both cases show the growing importance and role of “humanitarian” language in the 1980s Cold War. Humanitarianism, clearly, was a heavily contested concept, with self-described humanitarian actors differing in how they interpreted their mandate. Moreover, whatever one’s interpretation, the end result was deeply political.

Beyond this, both the Salvadoran refugees and those who wished to move them, used humanitarian terms to justify and legitimise positions which had clear strategic motives. In the Mosquitia, meanwhile, the ‘frontier programme’ along the Nicaraguan border was designed to ensure that the Miskito refugees did not become self-sufficient, on the understanding that refugees in need of humanitarian assistance were more politically damaging to Managua.

This chapter has also highlighted the role of domestic considerations in shaping Tegucigalpa’s policy toward Honduras’ refugee populations. Certainly, as detailed previously, the Cold War impacted how Honduras received and managed these populations but, as detailed here, perceived Honduran national interest occasionally trumped Cold War considerations. Regardless of the importance given by the Salvadoran military or the US Embassy in El Salvador to moving the Salvadoran camps from the border, this was politically difficult domestically for the Honduran government and, in any case, was deemed contrary to Honduras’ own internal security situation.

From Friends of the Americas, the US NGO working along the Nicaraguan border, to those in Europe writing letters opposing Colomoncagua’s relocation, the two refugee groups attracted intense international interest which impacted refugee life in Honduras. The

following chapter examines the dynamics underpinning this interest, showing how refugees in Honduras fed into and shaped discourses over the Central American conflicts within the United States.

Chapter 4: A Moral Salve: Cold War Refugee Politics in the United States

‘Are United Nations camps cheating refugees in Honduras?’ So questioned a 1984 publication by the United States (US) based Heritage Foundation which went on to outline how Miskito Indian refugees from Nicaragua were being mistreated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Honduras while refugee camps for Salvadorans were permitted to function ‘as bases for leftist Salvadoran rebels and terrorists’.¹ Just two months previously, meanwhile, Salvadoran refugees in Honduras had issued a call for a ‘day of solidarity’ to help oppose UNHCR plans for their camps which, they claimed, were driven by US Cold War interests.² Interested parties were invited to write to organisations in Montreal and London or to the Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research and Education Foundation (SHARE) in Washington, DC, to order an ‘organising packet’ which included suggestions for action, a history of the camps and cassette tapes of poems and songs.³ Clearly then, within the US, there existed organisations with very contrasting interpretations of how humanitarian organisations were treating refugees in Honduras. This chapter focuses on the interest refugees in Honduras generated within the US and how this interest fed into existing political discourses, confirming, and helping (or not) to shape ideas about Central American conflicts while taking on meanings which reflected the concerns of these new domestic audiences.

Interest in refugees in Honduras was by no means confined to the US. Petitions and letters on the refugees’ behalf were written by activists across Europe, North America, and

¹ Juliana Geran, *Are United Nations Camps Cheating Refugees in Honduras?*, Heritage Foundation, 23/7/1984, (accessed online 1/6/2021: <https://www.heritage.org/americas/report/are-united-nations-camps-cheating-refugees-honduras>)

² ‘Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras Call to a Day of Solidarity’, 20/5/1984, SCF/OP/4/ELS/4, Save the Children UK archive, Cadbury Library, Birmingham, (hence: SCF).

³ Ibid.

elsewhere, while aid workers from across the globe worked in relief agencies in Honduras. The situation in the US, however, was different. Unlike other countries, the US was highly involved in both the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran conflicts while it was heavily influential in Honduras. Domestic US political splits also manifested themselves in terms of concern for one refugee population or the other. Those opposed to Ronald Reagan's Central American policies championed the cause of the Salvadoran refugees, while several individuals and organisations who campaigned on behalf of the Miskito refugees overlapped with the web of US based pro-Contra support groups detailed by Kyle Burke.⁴

This is not to say that activism on behalf of either refugee group never stemmed from humanistic urgings. But the refugee issue *was* highly politicised, and this chapter sets out the impact of this politicisation. That the Reagan administration used Miskito refugees to help justify the Contra War had a polarising effect splitting, for example, concern from Indigenous rights movements. Refugee leaders were, in both cases, highly aware of the interest in them and they sought to utilise, shape, and encourage it for their own ends.

From anti-Communists to *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) supporters, and groups in between, the existence of refugees served as evidence of the morality of a particular political stance. The motives of all actors were not, of course, equal and this chapter also serves to highlight the importance of these motives – the cynical, exploitative, nature of the Reagan administration's interest in Nicaraguan refugees had a very different dynamic to that of indigenous rights advocates and Salvadoran solidarity activists.

Cold Warriors and Nicaraguan Refugees

⁴ Burke has shown how US conservatives established an international network of state officials, mercenaries, and guerrillas as they aided those fighting communist-linked governments and groups. Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2018).

The Reagan administration's involvement with Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras was driven by the propaganda value they seemingly offered in Washington's confrontation with Managua. The White House and the Office of Public Diplomacy sought to draw attention to these refugees as a way of highlighting the Sandinistas' deficiencies while the existence of Miskito refugees offered proof that the Sandinistas' opponents were not solely ex-Somocistas. Several interconnected, right-wing, and openly pro-Contra private aid agencies shared a similar anti-Sandinista driven interest in these refugees and were, in many cases, closely linked with the White House. These agencies, for whom anti-Communism was frequently akin to humanitarianism, were also intertwined with figures, such as Major General John Singlaub, from within the Contras' private arms network. For the administration and these groups, the refugees represented a means to dampen US domestic opposition to the Contra War, a tactic which fitted in with wider efforts to blur the line between humanitarian aid and Contra aid.

The Increasing attention drawn by the Reagan administration to the plight of Nicaraguan refugees during the mid-1980s should also be seen in the context of growing domestic hostility toward Reagan's Nicaragua policy. With Speaker of the House of Representatives, Thomas P. 'Tip' O'Neill, taking a lead, Congress began to restrict the scale and scope of support for the Contras, passing the first Boland amendment in 1982. Articles by the likes of *Newsweek*, meanwhile, drew public attention to the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) role in supporting the Contras while other reports sparked increased scrutiny on the nature of the Contras and their links with supporters of the overthrown dictator Anastasio Somoza.⁵

Against this background, the White House instructed the State Department to devise a public relations campaign to reframe the Contra issue and 'relieve' restrictions on Central

⁵ See for example *Newsweek*, 30/10/1982.

American policy.⁶ The Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean under Otto Reich played a leading role in this, working to destroy positive images of the Nicaraguan government by organising speaking tours, placing opinion pieces in national newspapers, and selectively leaking classified information.⁷ Linking the issue of refugees with the Contras allowed the Reagan administration to present the Contras as fighting on behalf of these refugees, thus shifting the narrative from the Contras' Somoza links. For example, one State Department publication, *In Their Own Words: Testimony of Nicaraguan Exiles*, collected accounts from ten Nicaraguans, ranging from Alberto Gamez Ortega, a former Vice Minister of Justice in the revolution's early years, to Silvio Herrera, a Miskito Indian, to demonstrate the cross-societal opposition to the government.⁸ Herrera, a Moravian preacher, described how he, along with his wife and five children, crossed into Honduras following news of massacres by Sandinista troops.⁹ Alongside images of children in refugee camps was the testimony of three other Honduran based refugees each illustrating, according to the publication, how the very people the Sandinista revolution was supposed to help had now been forced to flee for their lives.¹⁰

Among the experts and luminaries quoted in a similar State Department publication, *Dispossessed: The Miskito Indians in Sandinista Nicaragua*, were two notable individuals, Bernard Nietschmann, a University of California Berkeley academic, and Elie Wiesel, the author and holocaust survivor. Wiesel visited Mocarón in 1984, speaking with refugees and subsequently writing of the Miskito's plight in the *Los Angeles Times*.¹¹ In an illustration of Washington's eagerness to leverage humanitarian concern for Miskito refugees to generate

⁶ Reagan, Ronald, 'Central America: Public Affairs/Legislative Action Plan' (Memo), 12/07/1983, accessed online at the Digital National Security Archives (hence DNSA), Nicaragua: the making of US policy, 1978-1990 (hence Nicaragua).

⁷ Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, (Toronto: Between the Lines: 1988), 245 – 246.

⁸ US Department of State, Nicaraguan Humanitarian Affairs Office, *In Their Own Words: Testimony of Nicaraguan Exiles*, January 1987, DNSA, Nicaragua.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13

¹¹ *Los Angeles Times*, (hence: *LA Times*)5/2/1986.

political support for the Contra cause, the visit was facilitated by the US Embassy in Honduras and the State Department.¹² During his trip, Wiesel spoke with the *Consejo de Ancianos*, the refugee leadership organisation which, as detailed in Chapter Two, the UNHCR and World Relief had cut off contact following its abuse of refugees.¹³ While Wiesel was not aware of this context, the refugee officer from the US Embassy present undoubtedly was. Moreover, Wiesel was one of four members of a research group whose output, written by Michael Ledeen, was published in 1984 titled, 'Central America: The Future of the Democratic Revolution'.¹⁴ Described by the CIA's Office of African and Latin American Analysis as containing 'many substantive errors', the report, thousands of copies of which were distributed to newspapers, universities, and church groups, was published by the Gulf and Caribbean Foundation.¹⁵ The foundation was among a string of organisations run by the Contra fund-raiser Carl 'Spitz' Channell, and was named in a National Security Council (NSC) memorandum as an operations centre handling the schedules of Contra leaders.¹⁶ By November 1984 meanwhile, Ledeen, the report's author, was an NSC consultant deeply involved in the Iran-Contra affair.¹⁷

This is not to dismiss the plight of the Miskito refugees, nor to invalidate all who championed their cause. Rather, it shows how the refugees' story – and indeed exaggerated versions of their story – was part of a wider Contra strategy. The Nicaraguan Refugee Fund (NRF), founded in 1984, echoes this marshalling of refugee concerns for propaganda purposes. Although presented as a non-profit humanitarian organisation, members of the

¹² US Embassy Tegucigalpa, 'Visit of Ellie Weisel: The Plight of the Miskito Refugees', 12/1/1984, DNSA Nicaragua.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael Ledeen, 'Central America: The Future of the Democratic Revolution', (Gulf and Caribbean Foundation: 1984), CIA FOIA Reading Room, (hence: CIA)

¹⁵ John Helgerson (Director, Directorate of Intelligence, Office of African and Latin American Analysis) to Robert Gates (Deputy Director for Intelligence), 1/5/1984, CIA; Eugene Douglas (Ambassador at Large) to William Casey (Director, CIA), 24/4/1984, CIA

¹⁶ National Security Council, Memorandum, to Robert McFarlane, 'Coordinating Our Nicaraguan Resistance Strategy, 15/3/1985, DNSA, Iran-Contra collection (hence: IC)

¹⁷ 'Michael Ledeen', DNSA Glossary Records, DNSA: US Policy and Iran, 1978-2015.

Reagan administration's NSC, including Oliver North and Walter Raymond, a former CIA propaganda expert, were deeply involved in the fund's creation¹⁸ Also involved was the Nicaraguan Development Council, the Contras' Washington based arm.¹⁹ Indeed, a memo by North and Raymond excitedly noted the fund's potential to 'heighten the concern in the United States about Nicaraguan refugees' and cause 'people to raise basic questions about the type of political system that causes refugees in the first place'.²⁰ Coming as a proposed Contra military aid package appeared likely to be rejected, Reagan's speech at the fund's inaugural dinner in April 1985 emphasised the tendency of totalitarian states to generate refugees.²¹ Reminding his audience that Nicaraguan refugees were not 'simply people caught in the middle of a war' but, rather, were 'fleeing for their lives', Reagan described how Miskito Indians were forced to 'flee the land they lived on for over a thousand years'.²² Using this framing, the upcoming Contra aid package was presented as a means to halt such horrors, and a vote against this aid was a vote against peace.

That the NRF had more to do with anti-Sandinista propaganda than refugee relief was illustrated by the results of the dinner which netted just \$1,000 in aid but paid out over one hundred thousand dollars to consultants.²³ Miner and Fraser Public Affairs Inc, which received the largest portion of this, later worked to facilitate the passage of Contra funding through Congress while the firm had, under somewhat murky circumstances, approached Oliver North in relation to securing funding from the Sultan of Brunei on behalf of Central

¹⁸ Raymond, Walter & North, Oliver, to McFarlane, Robert, *Nicaraguan Refugees* (Memo), 8/01/1985, JGR/Nicaragua, Box 34, accessed online at Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (hence: Reagan Library); Nicaraguan Refugee Fund flier, as contained in Ibid.

¹⁹ *LA Times*, 16/12/1986; Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, 246; *AP News*, 1/3/1987.

²⁰ Raymond & North to McFarlane, *Nicaraguan Refugees*, 8/1/1985.

²¹ Reagan, Ronald, Address to the Nicaraguan Refugee Fund Dinner, 15/4/1985, DNSA, IC; *Los Angeles Times*, 16/12/1986; *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 'Franchising Aggression', July/August 1986, 32.

²² Reagan, Address to the Nicaraguan Refugee Fund Dinner

²³ Ibid.; *LA Times*, 16/12/1986; *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 'Franchising Aggression', July/August 1986, 32.

American refugees.²⁴ The Sultan later attempted to donate \$10 million to the Contra cause. The fund's organisers did not just use refugees as notional props to provide cover for their ulterior motives, they used them as literal props too, with several Nicaraguan children flown from Honduran refugee camps to Washington for the occasion. Maritsa Herrera, a refugee with a festering bullet wound, endured five days of press conferences and the NRF dinner before receiving medical attention.²⁵ Subsequent refusals by the NRF to pay for her hospital treatment resulted in the bill being turned over to a collection agency.²⁶

The NRF dinner also offers a view into the links between pro-Contra aid agencies and the Reagan administration. During the dinner Reagan presented the fund's inaugural Humanitarian Award to Friends of the Americas (FOA), that organisation claiming to be the only agency providing significant aid to Miskito refugees along the Honduran border.²⁷ FOA was not entirely independent, however; it had been founded by the NRF's co-chair, Woodie Jenkins, who counted North as a close friend.²⁸ Jenkins highlighted the strategic importance of refugee aid, commenting that 'soldiers will not fight if their families are dying of disease or starvation'.²⁹ Pitting FOA against established humanitarian bodies, Jenkins alleged that 'traditional relief organisations' did not want to help these 'innocent victims of Communism'.³⁰ In contrast to their description of FOA's relief operation as 'amateurish', UNHCR representatives spoke of FOA's 'efficient' propaganda campaign which falsely claimed that the UNHCR forced Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras to repatriate and that hundreds were dying weekly along the border.³¹ This campaign proved successful, helping

²⁴ Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair: Appendix B, Depositions. (1987). United States: U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, 839.

²⁵ *Associated Press News*, 1/3/1987 (accessed through Factiva).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Reagan, Ronald, Address to the Nicaraguan Refugee Fund Dinner, 15/4/1985.

²⁸ *AP News*, 10/01/1987.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Macy T., to Perkins N., 25/11/1985, DNSA, IC.

³¹ Blatter W., 'Note for the File: Visit to Honduras by Ambassador E.H. Douglas', 1/10/1984, Box 14, Fonds 11, Series 2, UNHCR archives, Geneva, Switzerland, (hence: UNHCR).

pass the August 1984 bill which allocated \$7.5 million in assistance for the Mosquitia region with the stipulation that it not be channelled through any UN agency.³²

Highlighting the plight of Nicaraguan refugees was also designed to improve financing for the Contra War against a backdrop of Congressional funding restrictions. In addition to using refugees as an issue to push back against restrictions, the administration used refugees to circumvent them. In an effort to make up for funding shortfalls, for example, the administration utilised Department of Defence aircraft to transport supplies to refugees in Honduras on behalf of private aid groups.³³ These refugees were the families of Contra guerrillas who would otherwise have relied on support financed by the already limited Congressional allowance.³⁴ By 1985, North opened up the possibility that ‘humanitarian’ aid be used not just to support Contra families but also the Contras themselves.³⁵ To overcome Congressional opposition, the administration should, suggested North, limit itself to providing the Contras with non-lethal material and rely on third countries to provide advice, training, management assistance, and intelligence albeit under the coordination of the US.³⁶ Such non-lethal material was recast as humanitarian assistance and, in June 1985, Congress approved \$27 million in humanitarian aid.³⁷ Notably, in opinion polling carried out in 11 southern states, 30% of voters favoured providing humanitarian aid to the Contras while 19% favoured providing military aid.³⁸

Private aid organisations were also involved in providing material relief to Contra forces under the guise of humanitarianism. While FOA maintained it aided only non-

³² Ibid.

³³ Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, US Congress, ‘US Policy in Central America: Against the Law?’, 11/9/1984.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ North, Oliver, to McFarlane, Robert, ‘Nicaragua Options’ (Memo), 15/1/1985, DNSA, Nicaragua.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.; Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua*, 267.

³⁸ William Hamilton to Congressman Coehlo, Memo: Survey of Southern Voters on U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua in Eleven Southern States’, 4/6/1985, File 4, Box 38, Thomas P. O’Neill papers, Boston College (hence O’Neill papers).

combatants, others such as the Dooley Foundation were less circumspect. Founded by Dr. Verne Chaney, the organisation provided medical assistance and supplies to Contra 'freedom fighters' and their families in Honduras and Costa Rica. A proposal to increase aid to refugees in Honduras noted that 'the refugees are as much a part of the Nicaraguan Resistance as are the Contras. Although they are not fighting with weapons, they have done so with their feet'.³⁹ Chaney himself had carried out a medical survey of Contra forces at the request of Singlaub who was involved in private military ventures in support of the Contras.

Such connections highlight the overlaps between the 'humanitarian' network which emerged to support Nicaraguan refugees and Contra families and the other, paramilitary oriented, organisations detailed by Burke.⁴⁰ Civilian Military Assistance (CMA), for example, sent military trainers to Contra camps and, in conjunction with the CIA, also smuggled weapons.⁴¹ At the same time, other CMA shipments were labelled as 'Assistance for Refugees' while its supplies were stored and shipped by the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Affairs Office (NHAO).⁴² Similarly, Miskito guerrilla leader Steadman Fagoth, claimed that his troops had received food supplies from FOA while Contra fundraisers also ran campaigns emphasising the flight of refugees from Nicaragua.⁴³ These overlaps evidence how, in the minds of some on the Right, anti-Communist ideals sat comfortably with a militarised, highly partisan interpretation of humanitarianism.

Such anti-Communist led humanitarianism was not unique to Central America; indeed, it was the global nature of the Cold War which, in the minds of some, illuminated the link between humanitarianism and anti-Communism. For example, Robert Owen, involved

³⁹ Dooley Foundation, 'Project Proposal: Humanitarian Aid Program for the Nicaraguan Resistance Forces in Honduras, Costa Rica', 1/12/1987, DNSA, Nicaragua.

⁴⁰ Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴² From US Embassy Managua to Sec State, 'Nicaraguan Press on American Citizens Fighting with Contras', 3/08/1985, DNSA, Nicaragua; US GAO to Sen. John Kerry, 14/03/1986, DNSA, IC.

⁴³ Kemper, Vicki, 'In the Name of Relief', *Sojourners*, Oct 1985; National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty, Advertisement, 27/02/1986, DNSA, IC.

both in Contra arms supply activity and in administering aid through the NHAO, had spent the early 1980s working in the US programme for Cambodian refugees in Thailand. Giving testimony during the Iran-Contra hearings, he cited this as a pivotal experience in illustrating what he described as the evils of tyranny.⁴⁴ During the 1960s, meanwhile, Chaney, a Korean War veteran, had worked with refugees in Southeast Asia alongside Tom Dooley, after whom the Dooley Foundation was named.⁴⁵ Here, the nearly one million Catholic refugees fleeing North Vietnam highlighted the righteousness of the anti-Communist cause.⁴⁶ For Dooley, who worked alongside the CIA, anti-Communism and humanitarianism were deeply intertwined and tackling Communism was akin to tackling the root of these refugees' suffering.⁴⁷

Although humanitarianism has always been, and remains, a contested concept, there are limits to how all-encompassing it can be.⁴⁸ Purposefully providing food, combat boots, parachutes, and other 'non-lethal' assistance to active combatants falls far outside accepted definitions of humanitarianism. Yet, under the umbrella of the NHAO this is what happened.⁴⁹ While Nicaraguan refugees therefore acted as a moral salve, boosting the righteousness of those involved in the Contra War, they were, along with humanitarianism itself, instrumentalised by those seeking to shore up support for the Reagan administration's Nicaragua policies.⁵⁰ This interpretation of humanitarianism was therefore a convenient one –

⁴⁴ Testimony of Robert C McFarlane, Gaston J. Sigur, and Robert W. Owen', Joint Hearings of Select Committees on the Iran-Contra Investigation, 1987, 416.

⁴⁵ Obituary for Dr. Verne E. Chaney, Thompson Memorial Home, access online 5/3/2021 at <https://www.thompsonmemorial.net/index.php/obituaries/549-dr-verne-e-chaney>

⁴⁶ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, (London: Cornell University Press: 2011), 148.

⁴⁷ James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley: 1927-1961*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 2011), 39 – 54.

⁴⁸ For more on the tensions between different interpretations of humanitarianism see Barnett, Michael, *Empire of Humanity*.

⁴⁹ Testimony of Robert C McFarlane, Gaston J. Sigur, and Robert W. Owen, Joint Hearings of Select Committees on the Iran-Contra Investigation, 1987, 397.

⁵⁰ As is touched upon in the last section, the White House was not alone in instrumentalising refugees – Miskito leaders and guerrilla groups also sought to use them for their own ends.

one which served to confirm existing viewpoints and provide cover for distinctly un-humanitarian actions.

Indigenous Rights Activists and Refugees in Honduras

While Cold War objectives drew the White House toward Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras, this was not true of all groups. US based Indigenous rights groups had an obvious interest in the Sandinistas' conflict with Indigenous populations, and this also lent itself to a concern for those seeking refuge in Honduras. While organisations such as Cultural Survival, the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), and the American Indian Movement (AIM) had links with Miskito leaders including those, such as Brooklyn Rivera, engaged in armed struggle against the Sandinistas, they were not natural bedfellows of the Reagan administration. Indeed, Sandinista members such as Carlos Fonseca had previously been supportive of American Indian struggles while many indigenous activists had initial enthusiasm for the revolution.⁵¹ Rather than a Cold War preoccupation, in fact, these organisations often saw discrimination against indigenous groups as something which sat outside the Left-Right spectrum and, instead of drawing on the language of anti-Communism, they drew on the language of anti-racism and the growing Fourth World movement, which emphasised Indigenous nations without sovereign states. However, the instrumentalisation of the Miskito issue by Washington led to rifts within the indigenous rights movement. These splits echoed the debates and divisions within Miskito organisations which, as the decade progressed, continued to splinter with leaders such as Rivera less intertwined with the wider

⁵¹ Jonathan Crossen, (2014), *Decolonisation, Indigenous Internationalism, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples*, PhD Thesis, University of Waterloo, 240.

Contra cause than Steadman Fagoth.⁵² Such leaders meanwhile saw refugees in Honduras as important sources of support.

The diverging paths of brothers Russell and Bill Means highlight how the linkages between Washington, the Contras, and Miskito groups made it difficult for indigenous activists to escape the dynamic of the Cold War, even while this was not their primary concern. While Russell Means, an Oglala Lakota activist and leader of AIM, declared that he supported neither the ‘racist policies of the US’ nor the ‘racist policies of Nicaragua’ he would later be expelled from AIM after publicly proclaiming his intention to recruit American Indian warriors to fight against the Sandinistas.⁵³ Although he often clashed with the Reagan administration he was not opposed to association with Reagan-aligned groups, promoting the US Information Agency funded movie *Nicaragua Was Our Home* with the Unification Church.⁵⁴ Bill Means, meanwhile, came to the conclusion that the CIA, Somoza’s National Guard, and Honduras were using the Miskito people as pawns.⁵⁵ Such differences are indicative of wider divisions within indigenous organisations.⁵⁶ While these divisions were largely related to the extent to which the armed Miskito insurgency was a righteous struggle, or a CIA led one, they also filtered through to discourses over refugees and the nature of their presence in Honduras.

⁵² Splinters fell along both personality and ideological lines. Throughout the decade Fagoth and his MISURA group were more closely aligned to the FDN and Washington than Rivera and MISURASATA. While Fagoth maintained a stronghold in Honduras, Rivera was largely based in Costa Rica and co-operated with Edén Pastora and ARDE. In 1985, with the heavy involvement of the US, there was an attempt to sideline Fagoth through the creation of KISAN (Kus Indian Sut Asla Nicaragua ra); For an overview of the different groups involved in the Contra War see Verónica Rueda Estrada, *Recompas, recontras, revueltos y rearmados: Posguerra y conflictos por la tierra en Nicaragua 1990 – 2008*, (Mexico: Instituto Mora, 2015), 66 - 82

⁵³ Crossen, *Decolonisation, Indigenous Internationalism, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples*, 243

⁵⁴ James Jenkins, ‘The Indian Wing: Nicaraguan Indians, Native American Activists, and US Foreign Policy, 1979-1990’, in *Beyond the Eagle’s Shadow: New Histories of Latin America’s Cold War*, ed. Garrard, Lawrence, Moreno, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 189

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ See Crossen, *Decolonisation, Indigenous Internationalism, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples* and Jenkins, ‘The Indian Wing’.

Given the close relationship between certain Indigenous rights groups and Rivera's armed guerrilla group, *Miskito, Sumu, Rama and Sandinista, Asla Takana* (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Working Together, MISURASATA), it is hardly surprising that they approached the situation of Miskito refugees in a political way. After all, these were activist organisations and made no pretence to cast themselves as humanitarian aid groups. From their perspective, emphasising the plight of refugees to undermine the moral authority of the Sandinista government and further support for the Miskito cause was a means by which to address the reasons for the refugees' flight from Nicaragua in the first place. To this end, in 1985, the Indian Youth Council launched *Pana Pana*, a newsletter and fundraising effort for humanitarian aid. But, as Jenkins has highlighted, the funds raised were in fact used solely to finance the newsletter in which stories were specifically designed to undermine the links between Miskito resistance and the Contras.⁵⁷ Meanwhile James Anaya, a lawyer with the Youth Council, worked alongside Senator Edward Kennedy to ensure that Rivera's MISURASATA benefited from Congress' 1986 'humanitarian' aid bill.⁵⁸ While Rivera gave public assurances that the aid would be used for humanitarian purposes, at least 80% was used for military expenditure.⁵⁹ Interestingly, some discourses around the treatment of refugees in Honduras did echo the utterances of those linked with the White House. For example, Bernard Nietschmann, a University of California Berkeley academic, singled out the UNHCR for criticism in his 1989 publication, *The Unknown War*. Here, he alleged that not only was the UNHCR failing to provide adequate food, medicine, shelter, or clothing to Miskito refugees but also falsely claimed that the organisation was forcing refugees to

⁵⁷ Jenkins, 'The Indian Wing', 190.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

repatriate before quoting refugee representatives as expressing a preference for returning to Nicaragua rather than be ‘abused by the UNHCR’ in Honduras.⁶⁰

Tracing Nietschmann’s involvement in the Miskito cause highlights the at times murky divisions which existed between those with a genuine commitment to Indigenous rights and those focused on overthrowing the Sandinistas in the name of anti-Communism. A geographer, Nietschmann’s interest in the Miskito nation predated the Sandinista Revolution, having published on the subsistence ecology of the Miskito Indians in 1973.⁶¹ As the eighties wore on, however, Nietschmann found himself increasingly involved in the Miskito struggle, becoming an advisor to Rivera, and vocally denouncing the Sandinistas. During a 1984 appearance on the Christian Broadcasting Network, Nietschmann described how Managua deliberately targeted Miskito babies by putting broken glass in government distributed milk bottles.⁶² *The Unknown War* meanwhile outlined the ‘fundamentally incompatible’ nature of communism and indigenous nations.⁶³ While coming from a principled commitment to Indigenous rights, Nietschmann’s critique of the Sandinistas was increasingly in line with that of the White House. Although he had publicly criticised the Reagan administration’s hypocrisy over its apparent commitment to Indigenous rights in Nicaragua, there is evidence that Nietschmann worked alongside the Office of Public Diplomacy. A 1985 action plan for the White House’s ‘Educational Campaign’ to boost support for Contra funding included a request that Nietschmann draft or update papers on Sandinista suppression of Miskito Indians and that these then be distributed.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Bernard Nietschmann, *The Unknown War: The Miskito Nation, Nicaragua, and the United States*, (New York: Freedom House, 1998), 44.

⁶¹ Bernard Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water: the Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua*, (New York: Seminar Press, 1973).

⁶² Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, (London: South End Press, 1989), 17.

⁶³ Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 52.

⁶⁴ *Public Diplomacy Action Plan: Support for the White House Educational Campaign*, 12/3/1985, DNSA, IC; *Chronological Event Checklist*, 20/3/1985, DNSA, IC.

A prior involvement in Indigenous activism did not always lead to a sympathetic view of the Miskito armed struggle, however. One of the most prominent sceptics of those such as Nietschmann was Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who had been active in AIM and the IITC since the seventies. Ortiz's position regarding Miskito-Sandinista relations stemmed from over a hundred visits to Nicaragua and Honduras during the 1980s including, as she highlighted during a testy exchange in *The Nation*, visits at the invitation of the UNHCR.⁶⁵ Her constant questioning regarding the sources of funding for Miskito guerrillas and her charges that the CIA was manipulating Miskito claims and aspirations was a source of extreme annoyance to supporters of Miskito guerrillas. The resulting split was bitter and acrimonious with one letter from Ortiz to the Indian Law Resource Centre (ILRC) accusing the organisation of being 'in lock-step with the Reagan doctrine'.⁶⁶ Notably, rather than convince her of the Sandinistas' failings, Ortiz's own visits to Honduran refugee camps provided her with fuel to criticise MISURA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama), describing Miskito leader and CIA ally Steadman Fagoth's rule of 'intimidation and even terror' over the refugees who were subjected to forced recruitment, clandestine prisons, and executions.⁶⁷ Nor was Ortiz's role solely that of an observer. She herself actively encouraged refugees to repatriate and transported letters between refugees and their families in Nicaragua to inform those in Honduras of the changing conditions at home and to provide evidence to those in Nicaragua that their relatives were in Honduras and were not victims of Sandinista massacres.⁶⁸

From Nietschmann to Ortiz, and Otto Reich to Woodie Jenkins, it is clear that a variety of messages, understandings, and uses could be drawn from the experiences of

⁶⁵ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *The Nation*, 11/1/1986, 2.

⁶⁶ Dunbar-Ortiz to Tim Coulter (ILRC), 11/11/1986, accessed online at the Chief George Manuel Memorial Indigenous Library (hence George Manuel).

⁶⁷ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 210.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 228; Deborah (Oxfam) to Peter Sollis (Oxfam) - 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia', 24/10/1985, Nicaragua, PRG/5/3/3/2, Oxfam archives, Bodleian library, Oxford, (hence: Oxfam).

Miskito refugees in Honduras. To some, images of refugees along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border confirmed what they had learnt in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, that Communist states were destined to fail their people and produced inhumanity and suffering.⁶⁹ For others these images were proof that states, no matter which side of the Cold War they straddled, had little regard for the welfare of their indigenous population.

Critics of the Reagan administration also drew parallels with Southeast Asia, only here they pointed to the manipulation of indigenous populations, such as the Hmong people, by Washington.⁷⁰ Undoubtedly, there were, as later acknowledged by former Sandinista figures, serious human rights concerns along the Atlantic Coast.⁷¹ Yet, the polarised nature of the US domestic sphere meant that, when these concerns were lifted up and amplified by the Reagan administration to bolster its own agenda, there was little room for nuance and it was difficult to avoid being labelled as either a tool of Washington or Managua. Illustrative of this is the accusation by Ortiz directed at the ILRC of it being a ‘whore’ for the White House.⁷²

Leading the ILRC’s work on Nicaragua was Armstrong Wiggins, a Miskito Indian and confidante of Rivera, who was himself a refugee from the Atlantic Coast. While Wiggins at times publicly clashed with the Reagan administration, they both shared an animosity toward Managua and this coalescing of interests led to meetings between Oliver North and Wiggins regarding the Miskito situation.⁷³ At the same time, Rivera had, of course, been removed from Honduras at the behest of those waging the Contra War. Claims to leadership of a refugee population, and the authority derived from such claims, were therefore made against the backdrop of Washington’s attempts to ensure that refugees, and the wider Miskito struggle, continued to serve strategic Cold War objectives.

⁶⁹ See for example *US News & World Report*, ‘Rising Tide of Refugees Escaping Marxism’, 24/9/1984.

⁷⁰ Philippe Bourgois, ‘The Miskito of Nicaragua: Politicised Ethnicity’, *Anthropology Today* 2, no.2 (1986), 4-9.

⁷¹ See for example, Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁷² Ortiz to Coulter (ILRC), 11/11/1986, George Manuel Library.

⁷³ *New York Times*, 5/7/1986; See for example, Oliver North’s Schedule, 30/5/1985, DNSA, IC.

US Activists and Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras

As with those in the Mosquitia, the experiences of Salvadorans in Honduran refugee camps entered into the US domestic political arena. In this instance, however, solidarity activists used these experiences to oppose and highlight the impact of US policy on the people of El Salvador. Concern for these refugees fitted naturally with the interests of those already involved in solidarity and anti-war groupings with the refugees becoming sources of testimony regarding the inhumanity of the Salvadoran regime. For others not already involved in such movements an initial interest in the refugees as *refugees* could have a politicising effect particularly when faced with this testimony. Reacting to this, the Reagan administration, all too aware from its own Nicaraguan strategy as to the propaganda power of refugees, targeted the refugee credentials of Salvadorans in Honduras, raising questions regarding their links to the FMLN and the links of those campaigning on their behalf. Far from being the sole preserve of humanitarian relief organisations then, opinions and discourses in the US over Salvadorans in Honduras reflected the domestic divisions over the wider Salvadoran conflict and US involvement in it.

Although a multitude of injustices stemming from the Salvadoran Civil War could have been, and indeed were, used by those seeking to turn public opinion against the conflict, refugees fulfilled a specific role. Unlike those in the US, Salvadoran refugees in Honduras were mostly women, children, and elderly people. Images of families in the poor conditions of La Virtud refugee camps on the Honduran border, such as those used by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) in its 1981 pamphlet “El Salvador: No Refuge,” seemingly highlighted the innocence or pureness of the victims of San Salvador’s repression.⁷⁴ The pamphlet, for example, opened with the photo of a partially clothed child in

⁷⁴ Rachel De La Cruz, ‘No Asylum for the Innocent: Gendered Representations of Salvadoran Refugees in the 1980s’, in *The American Behavioral Scientist* 61, no.10 (September 2017): 1112.

a refugee camp, while testimony included that of Rosa Acosta who described witnessing the killing of her mother and two nephews.⁷⁵ Readers were then offered a means of giving assistance to these victims through appeals to write to senators and public representatives.⁷⁶ Although images of vulnerable refugees is a common trope and frequently used by humanitarian groups, this example highlights how activist groups, such as CISPES, also drew attention to the fate of those in Honduras with the aim of spurring political action. Seemingly apolitical depictions of refugees therefore served deeply political ends.

As the more militant section of the Salvadoran solidarity apparatus, CISPES was not, however, focused on refugees. A large part of that work fell to the SHARE foundation, an organisation closer to the religious sector than was CISPES. In addition to its ‘Going Home’ campaign which assisted and supported the repatriation of refugees from Honduras, SHARE also publicised the difficult living conditions in Honduran camps while organising delegations to visit and witness them.⁷⁷ As Hector Perla has described it, SHARE fit within a broader strategy whereby Central American activists shared information on human rights abuses to build US domestic pressure to shift Reagan’s support for the Salvadoran regime.⁷⁸ While publicly focused on the ‘softer’ issue of refugees, SHARE was still closely tied to CISPES. A 1981 CISPES memo outlined how individuals could donate to SHARE if they felt uneasy about donating to CISPES even though SHARE’s initial board of directors included CISPES’s national coordinator Heidi Tarver.⁷⁹ In a mirror image of the links between right-wing think tanks and anti-Communist oriented humanitarian groups, Isabel Letelier of the Institute for Policy Studies and Larry Birns of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs – both left-

⁷⁵ Ibid, 1110.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 1112.

⁷⁷ Jose Artiga, author’s interview, online, 24/9/2020.

⁷⁸ Héctor Perla Jr, ‘Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement’, in *Latin American Research Review* 43 (2008), 142.

⁷⁹ Michael J. Waller, *Financing Terrorism in El Salvador: The Secret Support Network for the FMLN*, (Washington DC: 1987).

wing organisations – were also on the board.⁸⁰ A study of SHARE by the Reagan-linked Council for Inter-American Security (CIS), meanwhile, placed it within a ‘gaggle of “humanitarian” groups’ taking advantage of ‘genuinely pacifist church organisations’ to raise funds for the FMLN.⁸¹

Such an assessment was – unsurprisingly given the highly partisan source –lacking in nuance. That the attention SHARE drew to Salvadoran refugees was damaging to the reputation of the Salvadoran military was reflective of a reality, rather than evidence of a cynical ploy. As in the case of Nicaraguan refugees, learning of the hardships faced by those forced to cross into Honduras could have a politicising impact on individuals. In explaining the ‘explosive growth’ of CISPES during the beginning of the 1980s, for example, Van Gosse noted both the FMLN’s ability to instil revolutionary hope and the imagery of families being gunned down as they sought to cross the Río Sumpul into Honduras in search of refuge.⁸² It is unsurprising that those reading reports in national newspapers of this massacre, at the time described by *The Washington Post* as the biggest in recent Salvadoran history, would question the actions of the Salvadoran military.⁸³ Solidarity activists understood that witnessing human suffering could cause individuals to question the political causes of such suffering and, to this end, they organised visits to refugee camps in Honduras, exposing delegations to the impact of the Salvadoran conflict. As noted by Congressman Gerry Studds (D-MA) following his own visit, ‘sometimes it takes the relative simplicity of the descriptions of human tragedy...to inject both common sense and humanity into the policy of our own country’.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Van Gosse, ‘The North American Front: Central American Solidarity in the Reagan Era’, in *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s*, ed. Davis M. & Sprinker M. (London: Verso, 1988), 23; Media coverage was by no means contained to the US - see for example *Der Spiegel*, 12/3/1982.

⁸³ *The Washington Post*, 6/6/1980.

⁸⁴ *Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session, December 17, 1981. (1982). United States: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Questioning the premise of the CIS report, that any FMLN-links meant that organisations such as SHARE were ‘taking advantage’ of Church groups and others, is not to conclude that these connections did not exist. Certainly, anthropologist Ralph Sprenkels lists SHARE as one of the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí’s* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL) political-military organisations.⁸⁵ This FPL background explains why SHARE’s campaigns, including ‘Going Home’, focused solely on Mesa Grande rather than all those in Honduras. Following SHARE’s success, and in the aftermath of the first repatriation from Mesa Grande, Voices on the Border was formed in the US in 1987 to build support for those in Colomoncagua who, for reasons discussed in the final chapter, did not wish to repatriate at that time.⁸⁶ Although founded by US activists, this was done at the request of the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People’s Revolutionary Army, ERP) and Voices would continue to coordinate its activity with ERP members in the US, while also having a contact in Tegucigalpa to directly coordinate with Colomoncagua.⁸⁷ Similarly, Steve Cagan, an activist photographer, was asked by ERP members in the US to go to Colomoncagua in order to draw attention to the plight of its inhabitants.⁸⁸

Even while those in the White House founded humanitarian organisations to assist the Contras, those on the Right maintained that any NGO connected to the FMLN was illegitimate. As a result, solidarity movements strenuously denied any FMLN links, but acknowledging their existence allows us to see how Salvadorans were instrumental in organising and directing (at least some) of the US based solidarity activity rather than simply passive recipients of it. Tracing the involvement of Elizabeth Shephard in refugee-advocacy highlights both how concern for refugees easily morphed into political action, and how this action was as much Salvadoran as US-formed. With a background in public health, Shephard

⁸⁵ Ralph Sprenkels, *Revolution & Accommodation: Post-Insurgency in El Salvador*, (Haveka bv: 2014), 482.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Shephard, author’s interview, online, 16/09/2022.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Steve Cagan, author’s interview, online, 24/08/2022.

was, in 1984, on the verge of going with the Peace Corps to Paraguay when, at the last minute, she opted to join her friend who was working with the NGO Concern, in Colomoncagua.⁸⁹ Describing herself as ‘pretty politically innocent’, Shephard arrived in the wake of the refugees’ successful campaign against relocation and was impressed with their organisation and drive.⁹⁰ Returning to the US after a year in Honduras, it was in the wake of the August 1985 attack on Colomoncagua that she felt compelled to act, first contacting her Congressional Representative Pat Schroeder, and then joining SHARE.⁹¹ Following splits in SHARE, a result, Shephard says, of internal FMLN divisions, she left, going on to become one of the early members of Voices on the Border, organising delegations to visit Colomoncagua and campaigning within the US.⁹²

Shephard was not ‘taken advantage’ of by the ERP. Witnessing life in Colomoncagua and then seeing that life attacked by the Honduran military drove her, in her view, to help in whatever way she could. SHARE also offers a view into the role of Salvadorans in fostering US-based activism. Among one of SHARE’s key figures was Jose Artiga Escobar, a Salvadoran who fled to the US in 1980 following an attempt on his life by government death squads.⁹³ Prior to his involvement in SHARE, he helped form CISPES and played a leading role in the Sanctuary Movement. At the same time, SHARE was also a product of its US-context, not solely that of El Salvador. Eileen Purcell, whom Artiga married in 1983, was SHARE’s Executive Director.⁹⁴ Involved in the Catholic Social Services of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, her work speaks to the role of religion in shaping advocacy. Her work with SHARE was also – outside of her relationship to Artiga – personal. Campaigns promoting the

⁸⁹ Shephard, author’s interview.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Jose Artiga, author’s interview, online, 24/9/2020.

⁹⁴ Caroline Sheaffer, ‘Jose Artiga – Part 2’, Afflicted with Hope blog, 14/6/2015, accessed online 5/1/2023, <https://www.embracingelsalvador.org/jose-artiga-part-2/>

refugees' right to return home to their places of origin had obvious parallels with the case of Mitsuye Endo, an American woman of Japanese descent who was interned in 1941 following US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order in the wake of the Pearl Harbour attack.⁹⁵ Offered to leave the internment camp on the condition that she never return home to the US West Coast, Endo refused. Her lawyer at the time was James Purcell, Eileen Purcell's father.⁹⁶ Travelling with SHARE or Voices delegations to visit the refugee camps could be personal in other ways too. The story of refugees seeking to return home spoke to Jewish participants, while Artiga recalls how travelling to Mesa Grande and speaking with bereaved mothers was a deeply emotional experience for one US couple whose child had recently been murdered.⁹⁷ Activism was therefore both of El Salvador and of the US, undertaken for reasons spoke to one's personal history while simultaneously appealing to seemingly universal ideals of morality and humanity.

In addition to third-party organisations and outside individuals, Congressional representatives and staffers also undertook fact finding missions to refugee camps, and subsequently raised related issues in Congress. During one such trip in 1981 for example the Democratic Congressional members Barbara Mikulski, Robert Edgar, and Studds collected testimony from refugees regarding the atrocities committed by the Salvadoran military. All three were vocal opponents of military aid to El Salvador and, with their planned trip to that country cancelled due to safety concerns, this was therefore an opportunity to gather information on the conduct of Washington's ally.⁹⁸ At a subsequent press conference, Mikulski played recordings of refugee testimony in which a woman spoke of troops cutting an unborn child from the body of her pregnant friend.⁹⁹ This testimony, along with others,

⁹⁵ Ibid.; Artiga, author's interview.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ *Washington Post*, 5/4/1981.

⁹⁹ *United Press International*, 19/1/1981 (accessed through Factiva).

were submitted by Studds to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs with recommendations that military training, sales, and assistance to El Salvador be suspended given the military's 'systematic campaign of terrorism'.¹⁰⁰ The testimony of other refugees was no less harrowing; one woman spoke of the rape of children and again described how soldiers 'would slit the stomach of a pregnant woman and take the child out, as if they were taking eggs out of an iguana'.¹⁰¹ Of the five refugees whose testimony was submitted to the House, three claimed to have witnessed such an act and the Democratic delegation to Honduras ensured that the experiences of these refugees was used to explicitly challenge the State Department's narrative of the human rights situation in El Salvador.

This role of testimony as a means of drawing attention to human rights abuses echoes that described by both Patrick Kelly and Steve Stern in relation to Latin Americans and solidarity activists during the 1970s.¹⁰² In attempting to block economic and military aid to the Chilean regime, for example, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) cited the testimony of two students who witnessed the execution of up to 500 people in Santiago's National Stadium.¹⁰³ Yet, as noted by Kelly, testimony was occasionally 'filtered' by campaigners to create the image of a 'de-politicised victim'.¹⁰⁴ According to Jack Binns, then US Ambassador to Honduras, a similar dynamic was at play in 1980s Central America with the Congressional delegation's translator, provided by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee which also sponsored the trip, failing to translate parts of the testimony which pointed to the refugees' strong guerrilla links.¹⁰⁵ The ambassador also cast doubt on the

¹⁰⁰ Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1982: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Patrick Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Steve Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973 – 1988*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰³ Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds*, 96.

¹⁰⁴ Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies*, 30.

¹⁰⁵ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState DC, CODEL Studds, 20/1/1981, DNSA, El Salvador.

veracity of the testimony, claiming that stories of soldiers ‘pulling embryos from the womb’ were universally heard but seldom authenticated.¹⁰⁶ The delegation, however, had little time for the ambassador’s reservations and, in the face of such aspersions, they were not solely projecting the refugee voice to a domestic audience but, by acting as intermediaries, they also lent authenticity to testimony.

Unsurprisingly, the US Embassy’s reservations over testimony were completely dependent upon the refugee group in question. Binns’s successor, John Negroponte, would go on to suggest to Reich that Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras be systematically debriefed as this represented a ‘unique opportunity’ to gather information on Nicaragua ‘for intelligence and especially public affairs purposes’.¹⁰⁷ Refugee testimony and their ‘truth’ was therefore firmly emmeshed in the wider political conflict over events in Central America.

Employing testimony to challenge US policy was in keeping with the refugees’ aims. As one US visitor with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) commented, a clear message from the refugees was that ‘the fighting would stop if the US would end its military aid’.¹⁰⁸ Coming away with the taped testimony of ten recently arrived refugees, this visitor noted that the refugees saw the war as stemming from poverty and injustice, not a communist threat.¹⁰⁹ In addition to testimony, written petitions and refugee letters also distributed through international visitors. These frequently denounced the ‘imperialist’ motives of the US in Central America, warning international supporters of plans to further militarise the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; See also Jocelyn Viterna, ‘Radical or Righteous? Using Gender to Shape Public Perceptions of Political Violence’ in *Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on Radicalisation and the Escalation of Political Conflict*, ed. Bosi L, Demetriou C, Malthaner S, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014); While not doubting the veracity of individual testimony Viterna assesses that the frequency of such stories in accounts of the war is quite high compared to the likely frequency of the act.

¹⁰⁷ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to S/LDP Ambassador Reich and others, ‘Systematic Debriefing of Nicaraguan Refugees’, 30/4/1985, DNSA: The Negroponte File.

¹⁰⁸ Karen Mulloy, ‘AFSC Visitors to Honduras’, 15/8/1983, CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983, Latin America – CA 35341, American Friends Service Committee archives, Philadelphia, PA, (hence: AFSC).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Honduran-Salvadoran border to prepare for a wholesale invasion, and thus a regional war.¹¹⁰ A letter addressed to Pope John Paul II meanwhile called on the Vatican to ‘intercede in the armed intervention’ of the US government in Central America.¹¹¹ It is, of course, difficult to assess the impact of individual calls to action, but the citing of refugee testimony by members of Congress as they opposed the Reagan administration’s Salvadoran policies does suggest that successes were to be had.¹¹²

On another level, the role of humanitarian workers within the camps in facilitating this flow of information demonstrates again how the humanitarian system could be employed to counter Washington’s Cold War policies. In one instance Solange Muller, a former UNHCR protection officer, sent copies of refugee letters and testimony tapes to the AFSC, expressing the hope that the organisation could put them to use in the US.¹¹³ Others worked for organisations, such as the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), which were active in refugee relief and political campaigning. A 1982 MCC open letter to churches declared that only the US could force the Salvadoran government to ‘come to the bargaining table’.¹¹⁴ The attached study guide, which the MCC asked readers to promote at Sunday school, house-church, Bible study, high school, and college classes, noted that ‘guerrilla warfare is a response to the violence of the system’.¹¹⁵ Internal MCC documents meanwhile recommended that North American churches do everything possible to challenge the ‘structures that impede the process of development and justice in Central America’.¹¹⁶ The

¹¹⁰ Letter signed ‘Los Refugiados Salvadoreños En Honduras’, 7/11/1983, CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983, Latin America – CA 35341, AFSC.

¹¹¹ Letter from refugees at Mesa Grande to Pope John Paul II, 17/1/1983, CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983, Latin America – CA 35341, AFSC.

¹¹² The matter was raised by Studts, Milkuski, and others, including the ACLU, while the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs also held hearings on Salvadoran refugees in Honduras.

¹¹³ Solange Muller to Tony (AFSC), 1/2/1983, CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983, Latin America – CA 35341, AFSC.

¹¹⁴ Gerald Schlabach & Herman Bontrager, ‘Letter to the Churches’, 20/7/1982, The face of change in CA and MCC study resource, MCC archives, Akron, Pennsylvania (hence: MCC).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Linda Shelly & Grace Weber, *The Development of “Word and Deed” Ministry in the History of the Honduran Mennonite Church*, August 1985, Honduras Mennonite Church History 1982, AFSC.

activism of humanitarian workers, described in the preceding chapter, was thus by no means confined to Honduras.

That a variety of actors used refugee testimony and reports from refugee camps to challenge US foreign policy was not to the liking of the Reagan administration, which often viewed activity in support of these refugees with suspicion. For example, the previously quoted CIS report on SHARE and other organisations was titled *Financing Terrorism in El Salvador: The Secret Support Network for the FMLN* and, when noting her work on behalf of SHARE, described Bianca Jagger as an ‘agent of Managua’.¹¹⁷ The report’s author, Michael J. Waller, had previously been contracted by the Office of Public Diplomacy to write on El Salvador and Nicaragua with his work described as ‘central to accomplishing’ the Office’s mission and his reports distributed to ‘leadership groups’ and ‘priority audiences’.¹¹⁸ Statements by various Congressmen on CISPES were at times based on reports by Waller who would go on to become a psychological operations instructor at Fort Bragg’s JFK Special Warfare Centre.¹¹⁹ The Heritage Foundation, another Reagan-linked think tank, also took aim at the concern expressed for Salvadorans in Honduras, bemoaning the apparent preferential treatment given by humanitarian agencies to these refugees over those from Nicaragua.¹²⁰ Bitterness over such alleged double standards by ‘left-wing’ organisations toward refugees was a common theme among those who shared Reagan’s view of the Central American conflicts. Waller’s report, for example, noted that, while SHARE had spoken out on behalf of Guatemalan refugees, they had ‘no interest in the plight of refugees from Nicaragua’.¹²¹ The Office of Public Diplomacy’s own contrasting approach to the two

¹¹⁷ Waller, *Financing Terrorism in El Salvador*.

¹¹⁸ ‘External Study - Michael Waller [Contract Purchase Order]’, Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, 3/8/1984, DNSA, IC.

¹¹⁹ US Embassy San Salvador to Sec State DC, 4/12/1986, accessed online through Department of State Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.

¹²⁰ Geran, *Are United Nations Camps Cheating Refugees in Honduras?*, Heritage Foundation, 23/7/1984.

¹²¹ Waller, *Financing Terrorism in El Salvador*.

refugee groups is meanwhile highlighted by the contracting of a former US Air Force attaché to produce two very different reports on each population; one titled ‘Nicaraguan Refugees: Why Did they Flee?’, the other titled ‘Guerrilla Organisations in Salvadoran Refugee Camps’.¹²² While Salvadoran refugees, therefore, evoked feelings of solidarity among those horrified by the Salvadoran conflict, the political implications of this created a pushback by those eager to shore up support for San Salvador.

Impacts in Honduras

What, then, was the impact on refugees, of this intensely political US interest in them? The politicising of the refugee issue within the US should not be understood as a politicising of the refugees themselves. As illustrated in previous chapters, both refugee groups in Honduras were aware of the symbolism of their presence there, and the implications it had for their home governments. Yet, the interest of different US groups in these refugees did impact events in Honduras. Whereas within the domestic US sphere some similarities can be drawn between the Left and the Right in terms of their use of different refugee groups as evidence of the righteousness of a foreign policy stance, their actual impact on the refugee experience was vastly different. In part this was due to an asymmetry in terms of power, with the Reagan administration much more able to shape affairs in Honduras compared with Salvadoran solidarity groups. However, these still played an important role in drawing attention to the refugees’ plight and amplifying the refugees’ voice. Moreover, there was a notable difference in the alignment of interest between the different refugee groups and their, at times self-proclaimed, US champions. In particular, the paramount concern of the Reagan administration was with overthrowing the Sandinistas while many Miskito leaders, such as

¹²² ‘Purchase order for Services of Stephen C. Johnson’, Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, 13/9/1985, DNSA, IC.

Brooklyn Rivera, were more concerned with Miskito-Sandinista relations than a wholesale Contra victory. As will be detailed here, this difference in goals meant that the White House, and those Miskito leaders allied to it, often sought to use the Miskito refugees in ways which benefitted the overall Contra cause rather than the Miskito one.

Both Salvadoran and Miskito refugee leaders were eager to tap into existing US discourses and thus utilise sympathetic audiences for their cause. As noted in the previous chapter, in resisting relocation Salvadoran refugees effectively rallied an international alliance of supporters to lobby the UNHCR and politicians on their behalf. Refugee leaders also played a key role in shaping how international visitors experienced the camps, with Public Relations Committees determining which visitors could speak with refugees, and which refugees they could speak to.¹²³ As detailed by Molly Todd, refugees ‘staged’ themselves in ways designed to make best strategic use of these visitors. This included emphasising their victimhood, both ‘as campesinos in El Salvador and as refugees in Honduras’.¹²⁴ While refugees certainly had a range of genuine hardships to recount to visitors, victimhood was thus strategically employed.¹²⁵ In one particularly blatant example recounted in a 1988 UNHCR memo, supposedly bedridden patients had earlier been seen walking toward their beds before being shown to visitors.¹²⁶ At other times, the control exercised by refugee leadership over visitor-refugee interactions appeared troublesome to some. Patricia Weiss Fagen, a UNHCR Public Information Officer, noted, for example, that refugees in Colomoncagua could only speak to visitors in the presence of leadership and that UNHCR officials found it difficult to speak to refugees privately.¹²⁷ The internal dynamics of power within the refugee camps are discussed in the following chapter, but how the refugees

¹²³ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 128-29.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 129

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ UNHCR Honduras to MSF Paris, 8/9/1988, as reproduced in Binet, *Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras*, (MSF Speaking Out Case Study).

¹²⁷ Patricia Weiss Fagen, UNHCR, to Prof. Jack Hammond, 21/3/1989, 507.HON A, UNHCR.

fed into discourses regarding Washington's Salvadoran policy influenced the behaviour of refugee leaders as they sought to utilise this attention for their own ends.

While, as hinted at by Fagen, this led to some unsavoury dynamics within the Salvadoran camps, the situation in the Mosquitia was much more pronounced. In seeking to understand this, some context in terms of the overall Contra War during 1985 is necessary. Criticising the Sandinista's treatment of Nicaragua's Indigenous populations was not the only means by which Washington sought to improve the image of the Contra cause. In June 1985, at the urging of US officials ahead of a Contra aid vote, the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) was formed.¹²⁸ As an umbrella organisation, it united Adolfo Calero and the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Democratic Force: FDN), under the military command Enrique Bermudez, a former Somoza-era National Guard, with Alfonso Robelo and Arturo Cruz, two figures not associated with Somoza.¹²⁹ As Robert Owen later recalled, UNO was a US government creation designed to boost Congressional support. In reality, UNO, which lasted just two years, was dominated by Bermudez.¹³⁰ Notably, a 1986 UNO document titled 'The Challenge of our Diplomacy: The Search for Legitimacy' meanwhile proposed that, in the struggle for 'cultural hegemony', missions to Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras should be organised to win the public over to the anti-Sandinista cause.¹³¹ This strategy, the document continued, had been successfully deployed by the FMLN and efforts should be made to replicate it.¹³²

¹²⁸ 'United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO)', DNSA Glossary Records, DNSA Nicaragua.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Secretaria de Relaciones Internacionales, UNO, 'El Desafío de Nuestra Diplomacia: La Búsqueda de la Legitimidad, document de trabajo', October 1986, Folder 1, Box 14, Resistencia Nicaragua records, Box 14, Folder 1, Hoover Institute library and archives, Stanford, CA.

¹³² Ibid.

Just as Washington and the FDN were attempting to rehabilitate the Contra cause by emphasising the wide-based opposition to the Sandinistas, Managua's relations with those on the Atlantic Coast appeared on the verge of improving. As outlined in Chapter One, the Sandinista government had, in early 1982, forcibly 42 relocated villages from along the Río Coco to settlements known as *Tasba Pri* some 60 kilometres inland.¹³³ By the end of 1985 however, some 14,000 people had returned to their villages from *Tasba Pri* in a move initially sparked by government efforts and then morphing into a spontaneous, government-assisted, movement.¹³⁴ This 'return to the river' was facilitated and made possible by a meeting between MISURA's Commander Eduardo Pantin and Sub-Comandante José Gonzales, regional chief of the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior.¹³⁵ During this May 1985 meeting a provisional cease-fire was agreed for the area under Pantin's control so that those in *Tasba Pri* could return.¹³⁶ This agreement occurred in the context of proposals by Managua regarding regional autonomy, of which more in the final chapter. In late 1984 meanwhile, Brooklyn Rivera entered into peace talks with Managua although these talks broke down by May 1985.¹³⁷ While it soon became clear that Pantin did not have the backing of MISURA's high command – and, indeed, in June he was killed – the cease-fire continued to hold.¹³⁸

It was against this backdrop that an assembly of 700 Miskito leaders was held in Rus Rus, Honduras in August 1985 following pressure from both the Miskito refugees and guerrilla members.¹³⁹ Despite the broad wishes of those Miskitos in Honduras, neither Rivera

¹³³ Mateo Jarquín, 'Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981 – 1982', *Cold War History* 18, no.1 (2017): 99.

¹³⁴ Margaret D. Wilde, 'A Missionary Church in Ethnic and Political Conflict: The Case of the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast', talk at Cornell College, 21/2/1989, BWM 424 Margaret D. Wilde, Moravian Church Board of World Mission archives, Bethlehem, PA, (hence BWM).

¹³⁵ R.L. Owen (British Embassy Costa Rica) to FCO, 'Atlantic Coast: Return of Indigenous Communities', 9/7/1985, FCO 99/2156, UK National Archives, London, (hence: TNA).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Central American Historical Institute, 'Peace Process Advances on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast Autonomy Law Signed, Cease-Fire Holds', 14/9/1987, Central America 1987, Box 7, Martin Diskin papers, MIT library special collections, Boston MA, (hence: Diskin papers).

nor Fagoth were permitted to attend, with Fagoth blocked by the Honduran military. The assembly, clearly stage-managed according to a Reuters correspondent who was present, resulted in the formation of a new armed group, the *Kos Indianka Aslasa Nicaragua* (Nicaragua Coast Indian Union, KISAN).¹⁴⁰ Among the rules imposed by the assembly were that KISAN never negotiate an understanding with the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN), that it establish contacts with the FDN and *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, ARDE) and that it join with UNO.¹⁴¹ By October, KISAN, now the sole Miskito guerrilla force in Honduras given Fagoth's expulsion, had been incorporated into UNO.¹⁴² Rivera, meanwhile, criticised KISAN as an FDN creation in the guise of an organisation founded by Miskito refugees in Honduras.¹⁴³ This was an accurate assessment, and notably Robert Owen had held a meeting with senior FDN members and Wycliffe Diego, duly elected KISAN's head, to discuss the assembly in the weeks before it.¹⁴⁴ KISAN's formation then was an attempt to further distance the Contra's image from that of Somoza's National Guard and give the impression that the FDN was but one component in the movement. As the FDN's Public Relations Director had noted to *Soldier of Fortune* in August 1984, the Miskitos were 'politically important and they have good press. They have an ear in Europe and many sympathisers'.¹⁴⁵

Washington's goal of improving the Contra's image, driven largely by domestic considerations, led to KISAN's creation and now KISAN, needing to prove the validity of its cause in the face of Managua's Atlantic Coast autonomy overtures, sought to tap into US, and

¹⁴⁰ B.O. White (British Embassy Honduras) to FCO, 'Honduras: Nicaraguan Miskitos: Creation of KISAN', 9/9/1985, FCO 99/2156, TNA.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² UNO, 'Comunicado', October 1985, DNSA Nicaragua.

¹⁴³ Brooklyn Rivera, Press Statement, 8/10/1985, MISURASATA, BWM 214, BWM.

¹⁴⁴ Roberto Owen to Oliver North, 'Indian Situation', 7/8/1985, DNSA Iran-Contra.

¹⁴⁵ *Soldier of Fortune*, (August 1984), 78.

international, concern for refugees. Among KISAN's first military operations was the destruction of the Río Sisin bridge in Nicaragua, something which prevented food and reconstruction material from being transported to those Miskitos who had returned to the Río Coco.¹⁴⁶ Then, in March 1986, rumours reached UNHCR officials that some 15,000 Miskito refugees would arrive in Honduras from Nicaragua.¹⁴⁷ Within several weeks, some 8,500 refugees did indeed cross the Río Coco something which evidenced, according to Elliot Abrams, US Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, that the Sandinista 'campaign of terror against the indigenous population' continued.¹⁴⁸

Others, however, were less convinced. Noting that the refugee influx occurred just before a critical US Congressional vote on Contra funding, Americas Watch concluded that the influx was 'stage-managed' and that refugees had been 'coached'. UNHCR officials present to receive the refugees were of a similar mind.¹⁴⁹ As Luise Drüke, then acting UNHCR representative in Tegucigalpa, later concluded, this forcible relocation of thousands of people within the space of a week was undertaken 'solely to create a stir in international public opinion, in gross violation of common article three of the Geneva Convention'.¹⁵⁰ That many of these refugees soon began to return to Nicaragua helped bolster the already-existent doubts of many observers.

In the 'signal flare strategy' described by Perla, activists in Central America shared details of their plight with those in the US, hoping that they, in turn, would lobby to alter the Reagan administration's policies. In the case of Salvadoran, but particularly Miskito, refugees

¹⁴⁶ Central American Historical Institute, 'Peace Process Advances on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast; Peter Gaechter, 'End of Assignment Report: Analysis of Miskito Indian refugee situation, La Mosquitia, Honduras, February – December 1985', Private Collection.

¹⁴⁷ Carlos Ferré (UNHCR), 'End of Assignment Report', 30/5/1986, 600.HON.C, UNHCR.

¹⁴⁸ Luise Drüke, *Preventive Action for Refugee Producing Situations*. (Paris: Peter Lang: 1993), 118; 'Prepared Statement of Elliott Abrams before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs Committee on Foreign Affairs US House of Representatives', 8/4/1986, File 5, Box 38, O'Neill papers.

¹⁴⁹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6/4/1986; *IPS*, 14/4/1986.

¹⁵⁰ Drüke, *Preventative Action for Refugee Producing Situations*, 119

in Honduras, this became something of a feedback loop.¹⁵¹ Aware of the success of the signal flare strategy, Salvadoran refugee leaders refined and controlled the testimony which emerged from the refugee camps. Miskito leaders meanwhile took to engineering refugee flows, partly in the hope of impacting a US Congressional vote.

Conclusion

The ease with which discourses over refugees in Honduras entered domestic US debates speaks to the nature of the 1980s with concerns for these refugees fitting easily with existing debates over Cold War interventionism, human rights, and domestic anti-war activism. Different domestic groupings used refugees as a means to challenge opponents' views and actions toward the Central American conflicts even if they were simultaneously moved by the plight of the refugees themselves.

The Reagan administration's use of the Miskito refugee issue to help bolster the increasingly unpopular Contra War highlights the knotty entanglement of refugee relief with support for armed insurgencies. Within this, the supposed 'apoliticism' of refugees and humanitarian assistance became a means by which to make political ends meet. Beyond such cynical manoeuvring, this chapter has also shown how, for many, the urge to 'do something' to assist certain refugee groups was often inseparable from one's political convictions and personal history.

Finally, as noted in this chapter's last section, those in Honduras were aware of the dynamics winning them support in the US and elsewhere. For this, and other reasons, refugee leaders sought to govern the refugee population in particular ways, seeking to construct an international image which would bolster their cause. The implications of this are explored in the following chapter.

¹⁵¹ Perla, 'Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá', 142

Chapter 5: The Contested Governance of Refugee Camps (1985 – 1989)

From the outset, the high degree of refugee organisation in Colomoncagua had attracted repeated praise from many relief workers and visitors. As described in Chapter Two, the rhythm of life within the confines of Colomoncagua, and indeed Mesa Grande, was largely dictated by the refugees themselves, within the strict parameters laid out by the Honduran military. However, from the second half of the 1980s, and following the refugees' successful campaign against relocation, a number of actors sought to challenge this refugee self-governance. With no seeming end in sight to the Salvadoran conflict, the Honduran government, alarmed by the strong condemnation it had faced from aid workers within the camps in the aftermath of the 1985 attack on Colomoncagua, also moved to assert control over refugee relief. At the same time, others, most notably United States (US) policymakers, viewed the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional's* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) tight control over the camps as problematic, and urged the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to impose its authority. For its part, the UNHCR was also concerned about camp governance, with its Deputy Representative in Tegucigalpa privately remarking, in 1988, to an official in the British Embassy that the agency had 'effectively lost control of Colomoncagua'.¹ Nor was this unique to the Salvadoran camps in Honduras. In 1986, an internal UNHCR report concluded that 'no sound work with [Miskito] refugees is now possible, due to the proliferation of armed movements and the anarchy that plagues them'.²

¹ P. Seymour (British Embassy Costa Rica) to FCO, 'El Salvador: Interview with Col. Vargas, Head of Operations', 30/9/1988, FCO 99/2895, the UK National Archives, London, (hence: TNA).

² Arturo Mengotti, 'Situation Report on Protection in the Mosquitia', 8/8/1986, 600.HON [D], UNHCR archives, Geneva, Switzerland, (hence: UNHCR).

As Kirsten McConnachie, writing in relation to refugee camps in Thailand, has noted, sovereignty within refugee camps is neither the sole domain of the host state, the UNHCR, nor refugee leaders.³ Instead, the climate is one of ‘contested sovereignties’ with each authority having different motivations and interests in governing.⁴ In both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan cases, an important motive for refugee camp leaders was contributing to the struggle against the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan governments respectively. For its part, the UNHCR’s principal concern was with the delivery of assistance and, in the Salvadoran case, protecting against threats to refugee welfare which, during the first half of the 1980s, were seen as originating from outside the camps rather than from within.

In applying the lens of contested sovereignties to the refugee situation in Honduras, this chapter examines the means by which the Honduran government, the UNHCR, refugee leaders, and others, attempted to govern refugee life in the second half of the 1980s. In this regard, a number of factors differentiated the second half of the 1980s from the first. As will be discussed, from 1986 onward, the Honduran government, previously disinterested in refugee relief, sought to take control of the relief programme for Salvadoran refugees. Connected to this was the fallout from Robert Gersony’s 1985 report. As detailed in Chapter Three, Gersony, the US State Department Contractor, had recommended against moving Colomoncagua. But he was also highly critical of the UNHCR’s hands-off approach to camp governance. Finally, as time wore on, it became apparent to some aid workers, and others, that the high degree of organisation in the Salvadoran camps left little room for dissent. As a result, some aid workers clashed with refugee leaders, claiming that the camps’ system of governance was incompatible with individual refugee rights.

³ Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order, and Legal Pluralism* (London: Routledge: 2014), 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

That internal refuge divisions, which are described in this chapter's first section, existed, is hardly surprising. More interesting are the diverging reactions of different aid agencies to these divisions and the reasons behind this. While some were prepared to accept the refugees' sovereignty over the camps, others were not. Examining the 'contested sovereignties' of the Salvadoran camps then brings to light both refugees' agency, but also the different – and often clashing – interpretations of humanitarian governance held by aid workers. As this chapter explores, these different interpretations were both products of their Cold War environment and products of claims to universal human rights.

Sovereignty over the Honduran Mosquitia was also heavily contested. Here, however, humanitarian actors did not clash with the refugees but clashed directly with Cold War geopolitics. With armed anti-Sandinista groups openly operating within refugee settlements, their grip over refugee life was much more overt than that of the FMLN. Although this had been the case since the refugees' arrival, changes in the Contra War during the second half of the decade led to the 'anarchy' spoken of in the UNHCR's 1986 report. As described in the previous chapter, both Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera, the two most important anti-Sandinista Miskito leaders, had been excluded from the formation of the *Kos Indianka Aslasa Nicaragua* (Nicaragua Coast Indian Union, KISAN) in August 1985. KISAN was also more closely linked to the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Democratic Force: FDN) than MISURA had been, unified as it was with that organisation under the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) umbrella.⁵ As a result, KISAN had less legitimacy and it struggled to govern refugee life in the Mosquitia. By examining refugee governance within the Mosquitia, this chapter then shows how KISAN's links to the wider Contra cause split them from the wider Miskito refugee population they claimed to represent.

⁵ 'United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO)', DNSA Glossary Records, DNSA Nicaragua.

Self-Governance in Salvadoran Refugee Camps

On 2 June 1988, as a UNHCR jeep was exiting San Antonio, the Salvadoran refugee camp in the vicinity of Colomoncagua, a refugee ran to the jeep, desperate to be taken from the camp.⁶ That same refugee had, a number of weeks prior, approached UNHCR officials, seeking to repatriate to El Salvador.⁷ When two UNHCR officers had arrived to take him, and 24 others who wished to return, from the camp, however, they had found themselves surrounded by a large group of refugees who, holding knives and machetes, separated the officers from the would-be repatriates.⁸ In the ensuing chaos, added to by the fact that this occurred during the night, all but two of the would-be repatriates had managed to slip out of the camp.⁹ In the following days, UNHCR officers attempted to secure the release of the two remaining refugees. Refugee camp leaders would, however, only allow officers supervised visits with the two and both, one of whom appeared beaten and drugged, withdrew their requests to leave the camp.¹⁰

It was one of these two refugees who finally left the camp in the UNHCR's jeep on 2 June. Interviewed by UNHCR staff, he claimed to have been beaten, that four other refugees had been tasked with guarding him, and that he had been forced to take diazepam, used as a tranquiliser.¹¹ Fearful of being poisoned or otherwise killed, he had not eaten and barely slept in the intervening period.¹² Moreover, many refugees, he claimed, wished to return to El Salvador but were afraid to openly admit this for fear of reprisals which included the denial of assistance.¹³

⁶ As noted in the introduction to this thesis, San Antonio was a camp of about 1,500 refugees located near Colomoncagua; UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'San Antonio incident', 2/6/1988, 610.HON.SALE, UNHCR.

⁷ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, 26/05/1988, 600.HON H, UNHCR.

⁸ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'San Antonio incident', 2/6/1988.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Individual repatriation was, for reasons which will be discussed, a particularly emotive and divisive issue within the Salvadoran (and Nicaraguan) camps. But the episode also speaks to a wider story of how power was exercised within the camps and how the camps were governed. As detailed in Chapter Two, the Salvadoran camps were highly organised, run via a hierarchy of refugee committees and participatory democracy. This was both encouraged by UNHCR officials and praised by a range of observers, celebrated for the ways in which refugees were able to shape life within the camps. In contrast, the report produced by Robert Gersony, the US State Department Contractor initially sent to Colomoncagua to relocate the camp, was highly critical of the camps' organisational structures. The camp, Gersony recalled, 'was like a gulag', run by a dictatorial camp committee.¹⁴ Learning from some non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff that this committee had recently apparently executed two refugees, Gersony urged US and UNHCR officials to intervene and correct the intolerable human rights situation within the camps.¹⁵

That Gersony's findings contrasted so sharply with those of other visitors to Colomoncagua has much to tell us about the observers themselves. Firstly, however, it is worth interrogating the nature of the camp committees. Although Gersony's position as a State Department functionary undoubtedly contributed to the refugees' unwillingness to speak with him – 'people averted their eyes and walked away from me', he recalled – it should not lead to the assumption that his report or concerns were wildly inaccurate.¹⁶ As detailed in Chapter Three, Gersony had built his career on the effective interviewing of refugees. His findings frequently challenged Washington orthodoxy, while he also occasionally worked for the UNHCR. Although UNHCR officials disagreed with some of Gersony's findings, it is notable that one such disagreement was over the number of refugees

¹⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Good American: The Epic Life of Bob Gersony, the U.S. Government's Greatest Humanitarian* (New York: Random House: 2021): 161.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

who had been executed by the camp committees, not whether any refugees had been executed at all.¹⁷ Patricia Weiss Fagen, a UNHCR Public Information Officer who would go on to write a sympathetic account of the Salvadoran refugees, meanwhile acknowledged that there was a ‘worrisome problem’ with regard to the internal control of the camps and that in none of them were refugees free to talk to outsiders except in the presence of refugee leadership.¹⁸ Moreover, former refugees of Colomoncagua recall the coercive methods employed by refugee leadership. Notably, some accounts echo the allegation of executions.¹⁹

One can conclude, as Gersony did, that such occurrences should not be tolerated without concluding that the relationship between the committees and the wider camp population was one of pure domination. That the committees utilised coercion and discipline does not mean that they solely relied on these to maintain their leadership position, nor that they were viewed as illegitimate by the wider refugee population. Rather, both can be seen as part of an internal system of refugee self-governance which, as with any system of governance, had its own priorities, limitations, and objectives. At the most basic level, these goals included the smooth running of camp operations, the resolution of disputes, improving camp infrastructure and life, and ensuring the safety of residents. At a more strategic level, it is clear from their actions that maintaining community cohesion and the presentation of a united ‘refugee’ front was also a priority for the committees, thereby increasing their bargaining power with the UNHCR and others. So, too, was ensuring that the refugee population remained mobilised both to contribute to *la lucha* and in any confrontation with the UNHCR or Honduran military.

¹⁷ W. Villalpando to UNHCR HQ, ‘Question of the double standard for Salvadoran and Nic. Refugees: Meeting with Mr. Robert Gersony and US Emb Chargé d’Affairs’, 30/10/1986, 600.HON E, UNHCR.

¹⁸ Patricia Weiss Fagen to Prof. Jack Hammond, Hunter College, 21/3/1989, 507.HON A, UNHCR.

¹⁹ Lucio Vásquez (Chiyo), Sebastián Escalón Fontan, *Siete Gorriones*, (San Salvador: Museo de La Palabra y la Imagen, 2011), 245-46.

That the camp committees were seen as a legitimate authority by the majority of refugees is evident both from the recollections of former refugees as well as in practice. Refugees, for example, actively participated and cooperated in the structures of daily life partly coordinated by the committees. There were multiple sources of the leadership's legitimacy. The participatory nature of the organisational structure was certainly one. Refugees viewed this as *their* organisation, a collective one.²⁰ Importantly, the committees were also the interlocutor between the refugees and the UNHCR. As with debates over the relocation of the camps, in disputes over food, safety and rights, it was with the camp committees that UNHCR officers negotiated, therefore conferring legitimacy upon them.²¹ Such negotiations not only illustrated the UNHCR's apparent acceptance of the committees but also demonstrated to the refugees that the committees were advocating on their behalf, therefore becoming representative of the refugee population.²²

In addition to these practices from which the committees drew legitimacy, there were also ideological and political dimensions to their authority. As previously described, the camps were, in many ways, more akin to places in El Salvador than Honduras and refugees did not view themselves as being separated from the Salvadoran conflict. Within the refugees' home regions, the FMLN was frequently accepted as the legitimate authority. In Northern Morazán, for example, where the vast majority of Colomoncagua's residents were from, the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP) functioned as a

²⁰ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 225.

²¹ A UNHCR report in June 1988, for example, recognised that one way of reducing the committees' authority was to 'design a new organisational work strategy' whereby UNHCR officials would have greater levels of access and communication with those outside of the committee structure; UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 're rojas/pastor mission to Colomoncagua', 1/06/1988, 600.HON.H, UNHCR.

²² A report by Alfredo del Río Court, UNHCR Senior Legal Adviser, in October 1988 noted the propensity of refugee leaders to 'search for "victories" over particular issue as a means of community mobilisation'. Regardless of whether del Río Court was correct in assessing the leadership's motives, disputes clearly had a mobilising impact. Alfredo del Río Court, 'Note for file: Subject: Meeting with the ICVA Sub-Committee on Central America, 12/10/1988, 600.HON.H, UNHCR.

quasi-state.²³ The role of Colomoncagua's ERP-linked leadership was therefore something of an extension of this dynamic and the committees' FMLN links increased their legitimacy. The idea that the camps were contributing to *la lucha* was also something which the committees could wield to maintain cohesion. Those who refused to cooperate or who were critical of the leadership were cast as *contraria*, portrayed as standing against the FMLN and the work of the wider population.²⁴

As the decade progressed, tensions within the camps and unhappiness with camp leadership nevertheless grew. Time was an important factor here; refugees had arrived highly traumatised and were now confined in an enclosed camp for years with no apparent end in sight. But the course of the war in El Salvador was also impactful. In October 1987, some 4,000 refugees from Mesa Grande collectively repatriated.²⁵ This both left Mesa Grande without some of its most capable leaders and opened divisions in Colomoncagua between those who similarly wished to return to El Salvador and those who wished to wait.²⁶ While, as is discussed in the following chapter, the 1987 repatriation fitted with the FMLN's moves to strategically repopulate certain areas, the ERP, and Colomoncagua's leaders, opposed repatriation from Colomoncagua. Leaders were concerned that the return of all refugees would be exploited by the Salvadoran government as evidence of democratisation.²⁷ Furthermore, there was a degree of tension within the FMLN regarding the timing and pace of peace negotiations.²⁸ Refugee leaders thus, as in the example at the opening of this section,

²³ Leigh Binford, 'Hegemony in the Interior of the Salvadoran Revolution: The ERP in Northern Morazán', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4 No. 1 (1998): 2-45.

²⁴ Author interviews with former refugees of Colomoncagua, Morazán, November 2022.

²⁵ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 192.

²⁶ A UNHCR report on Mesa Grande noted that the 'most experienced and moderate' leaders had left in October 1987, leaving 'younger, inexperienced and more aggressive' leaders in charge. Waldo Villalpando (UNHCR Tegucigalpa) to Geneva, 're Mesa Grande situation', 25/2/1988, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

²⁷ Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia República de El Salvador, 'Documentos Subversivos: Plan Fuego', 'Reunion del Secretariado del Comité Central del Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos, realizada en Junio de 1988, en Morazan', File 8, Box 6, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution Library and Archives (hence DS).

²⁸ Alberto Martín Álvarez & Michael E. Allison, 'Unity and Disunity in the FMLN', *Latin American Politics and Society* 54 (2012): 97.

prevented individual repatriation, enlisting the support of the wider population by presenting repatriation as a betrayal of the collective and casting those who did so as *contraría*. That those wishing to leave had to do so under cover of darkness for fear of reprisals only heightened the image of them as traitors.²⁹ At a more practical level, the ability of individual refugees to leave the camp threatened the power of the refugee committees and it was therefore in the committees' interests to increase community opposition to such an act.

That the refugee camps' internal system of governance was linked to the FMLN was not, in and of itself, particularly problematic for UNHCR officers. FMLN links were necessarily clandestine and never overt. Indeed, during an incident in March 1989 when the families of expelled *contraría* refugees challenged members of Mesa Grande's leadership and implied that they were not registered refugees, a UNHCR report noted that this was the first time such an accusation had been openly voiced.³⁰ UNHCR officials were, however, aware of such connections and Werner Blatter, the institution's representative in Honduras, remarked to a British Government official in April 1984 that the FMLN tightly controlled the camps.³¹ As internal UNHCR correspondence frequently noted, the UNHCR had no policing powers or abilities in Honduras. The interest of the Honduran security services in the camps was meanwhile limited to matters of national security, not policing. Moreover, the Honduran military was understandably seen as a source of protection problems, and thus the UNHCR was ill-inclined to seek its participation in the running of the camps.³² Nor did Geneva view it as the UNHCR's role to 'control' the camps, this being the responsibility of the national

²⁹ Roberto, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

³⁰ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 7/3/1989, 600.HON.H, UNHCR.

³¹ J Watt (Mexico and Central America Department, MCAD) to Eldon, 'Honduras Internal', 17/4/1984, FCO 99/1941, TNA.

³² In one incident in June 1988, for example, when a UNHCR officer was confronted by a group of 1,000 refugees demanding that he hand over the keys to a food warehouse, the officer was explicitly instructed over radio by the UNHCR office in Tegucigalpa not to seek help from the Honduran military. UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'hunger strike', 23/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR.

government.³³ Within this governance vacuum then, refugee self-governance was to be welcomed.

In the aftermath of Gersony's visit to Honduras, the UNHCR did, however, come under pressure to institute changes. That the FMLN had such a tight grip on refugee life was, for those in Washington, intolerable, and they saw it as a failure on the UNHCR's part. Armed with Gersony's report, Dewey pressed Poul Hartling, the High Commissioner, to halt the 'insurgent justice system devoid of the most basic human rights guarantees central to UNHCR's own protection mandate'.³⁴ Travelling to Geneva to meet with Hartling, Dewey recalled wondering whether the UNHCR team in Honduras was particularly 'radicalised' or if events stemmed from the institution's 'liberal and progressive' tendencies which lent support to 'anti-US resistance movements'.³⁵ During the tense meeting it became clear that Hartling 'was not sympathetic' to Dewey's position but, as Dewey recalled, 'we [the US] provided the money' and this leverage was employed to deliver the message that 'things have to change'.³⁶ It is clear here that Dewey saw himself acting in a humanitarian capacity. Indeed, Dewey was troubled that Negroonte, the US Ambassador to Honduras, had not alerted him to the issues within the Salvadoran camps. To Dewey, this signalled that Negroonte was blinded by the Cold War and that his humanitarian impulse toward refugees was reserved only for those fleeing communist regimes, as during his earlier posting to Vietnam.³⁷ From Dewey's perspective, both Negroonte and the UNHCR were ideologically blinded to the refugees' true needs.

Gersony's report and the subsequent changes instituted by the UNHCR marked a break with earlier efforts to police the Salvadoran refugees. Previously, Washington's concern

³³ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 24/3/1986, 600.HON.B, UNHCR.

³⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Good American: The Epic Life of Bob Gersony, the US Government's Greatest Humanitarian*, (New York: Random House: 2020), 164.

³⁵ Arthur E. (Gene) Dewey, author's interview, online, 17/8/2022.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

was with the camps' utility to the FMLN and so moving them from the border was seen as a solution. By 1986, the issue was within, with the refugees' own systems of governance, initially celebrated for its efficacy, deemed to be detrimental to the refugees' interests. However, such a view overlooked the fact that the refugee committees' power stemmed, in part, from the community's need to protect itself from the threat of the Honduran military. This soon became clear as the Honduran government sought to take on a greater governance role within the camps.

The Honduran Government and Salvadoran Refugee Camps

During a January 1986 meeting between Luise Druke of the UNHCR and Leo Valladares of the Honduran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Valladares had signalled the government's desire to have more control over the Salvadoran refugee programme.³⁸ Several factors prompted this. The role of international aid workers both in supporting the refugees during the relocation dispute, and in drawing international attention to abuses committed by the Honduran military, undoubtedly contributed to the government's wish to reduce the non-Honduran presence within the camps. Having failed to sever the camps' FMLN links by moving them from the border, the government also sought to better monitor activity within the camps. Linked to this was the continued mistrust of the UNHCR. Publicly, the Honduran president, José Azcona del Hoya, who came into office in 1986, noted his concern regarding the lack of Honduran control within the camps.³⁹ Control, and thus the assertion of Honduran sovereignty over the camps, was henceforth to be achieved through the stationing of a member of the government's refugee agency, the *Comisión Nacional para los Refugiados* (National Commission for Refugees, CONARE), in each camp, with that person responsible

³⁸ F. Vélez (Americas Section, UNHCR), Note for the file, 24/1/1986, 600.HON.A, UNHCR.

³⁹ Sandra Pentland & Denis Racicot, 'Salvadorean Refugees in Honduras', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 5 (1986): 4.

for supervising the work of relief agencies and providing information to authorities on camp activity.⁴⁰ By June 1987, the Honduran government and the UNHCR had subsequently signed a memorandum of understanding, outlining the government's increased responsibilities and authority over the Salvadoran programme.⁴¹

It is clear from the content of the CONARE-UNHCR memorandum that the Honduran government sought not just to control the refugees' activity but also that of the aid agencies. Under the memorandum, CONARE delegates would, among other things, 'verify the production activities' of refugees, maintain a camp census, and monitor the entry and exit of UNHCR and relief officials from the camps.⁴² Furthermore, CONARE would have a veto over which staff were permitted to work in the camps. Relief workers and refugees were alarmed at this development on several grounds, but it was the proposed presence of CONARE delegates in the camps which refugees most objected to.⁴³ Having endured seven years of harassment from the Honduran military, the stationing of Honduran officials, many of whom were ex-military, in the camps was seen as a means of tightening military control over camp life. At the same time, Colonel Abraham García Turcios, head of CONARE, made known his desire to reduce the number of international workers in the camps and so this development was seen as a step toward replacing those workers.⁴⁴ That CONARE delegates would also have a duty in terms of refugee protection was also seen as worrisome rather than reassuring; as outlined in an update to international supporters, many feared that this could undermine the UNHCR's authority over protection matters.⁴⁵ Finally, given that the memorandum had been signed without consulting refugees or relief agencies, there was a

⁴⁰ F. Vélez (Americas Section, UNHCR), Note for the file, 22/1/1986, 600.HON.A, UNHCR.

⁴¹ 'Situation Summary, 1987 Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras', 15/2/1988, EP 320 PAM/3/33, Senate House Library Pamphlet Collection.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

view that CONARE's influence over the shape of the assistance programme would come at the exclusion of refugee and NGO voices.

At a debriefing of NGOs in Geneva on the situation, Robert Muller, head of the UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, urged NGO representatives to view the Honduran approach in the context of other refugee situations.⁴⁶ The lack of Honduran presence inside the camps was an unusual situation, something which the Honduran authorities now wished to correct and, provided that that presence was of a civilian rather than military nature, NGOs, cautioned Muller, should not oppose it purely on principle.⁴⁷ Given the rather negative history of the Honduran government's interventions in the Salvadoran camps, it is, of course, questionable whether a proactive criticism of increased Honduran control over the camps could be characterised as NGO intransigence.

The refugees' rejection of a Honduran presence within the camps, and the difficulties faced by CONARE in seeking to impose that presence, became clear in the months following the signing of the memorandum. During a visit to Colomoncagua with his ten-year-old son, CONARE head, Turcios, was confronted by a refugee protest in which camp roads were blocked to prevent his exit.⁴⁸ Refugees held banners aloft, one of which asked 'we refugees want peace, we have committed no crime, why are we being repressed'.⁴⁹ According to Turcios, refugees threw stones, forcing him to fire his pistol as a means of escaping. Refugee representatives, meanwhile, in conversation with UNHCR officers, expressed regret at the protest but denied that stones were thrown and insisted instead that they had wanted to speak with Turcios about the role of the proposed CONARE delegates.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Jenifer Waugh, Liaison Unit with NGOs (UNHCR), 'Note for the Record', 26/5/1986, 400.HON, UNHCR.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Male to Geneva, 'Re: Visit general coordinator CONARE to Colomoncagua', 27/11/1987, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

While Turcios was largely unharmed, the event is noteworthy in illustrating how the Honduran government's most senior refugee official was unable to freely move about the Salvadoran refugee camps. Turcios had refused to be accompanied by a UNHCR officer something which, while legitimate, was noted as inadvisable by Waldo Villalpando, the UNHCR representative in Honduras.⁵¹ In Villalpando's (probably accurate) understanding, only in the presence of a UNHCR official would Turcios' presence have been tolerated by the refugees. The reaction of the Minister of Foreign Affairs certainly suggests that Tegucigalpa viewed the incident as an affront to Honduran sovereignty over Colomoncagua. Initially demanding that all relief agencies within the camp be replaced by Honduran agencies, the minister then cabled the High Commissioner stating that the government would take measures to ensure that respect was given to its officials and to prevent the politicisation of refugee camps on its 'sovereign territory'.⁵² Those foreigners, the cable continued, who had been welcomed with Honduran hospitality would now need to be removed to another country.⁵³ Notwithstanding such threats of expulsion, some three months later, in February 1988, a similar incident unfolded, this time in Mesa Grande. Arriving for a scheduled meeting with refugee leaders, Turcios, along with a delegation from the US Embassy, were confronted by some 2,000 refugees.⁵⁴ Again, attempts to increase the Honduran presence within the camps were the object of refugee protests with slogans including 'CONARE delegates out', along with along with 'End to the aggression of the US Government against the people of El Salvador'.⁵⁵ Efforts on the part of UNHCR officials to restore calm proved fruitless and the

⁵¹ Villalpando to Geneva, 'Re: Incident 23 Nov 1987 visit gencoor CONARE to Colomoncagua', 29/11/1987, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁵² Villalpando to Geneva, 'Re: Incident 23 Nov 1987 visit gencoor CONARE to Colomoncagua', 29/11/1987, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 11/2/1988, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

delegation was forced to leave, with Turcios warning that the camp would face consequences.⁵⁶

The consequences in question included forbidding refugees from moving between sub-camps, and to fields used to grow vegetables which sat outside of camp boundaries.⁵⁷ In a reflection of Turcios' anger toward aid workers, whom he saw as supporting and helping to drive the refugees' actions, NGO staff were now only permitted to enter the camps between six in the morning and six in the evening.⁵⁸ In the aftermath of the Colomoncagua incident, the access of even Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) medical staff and UNHCR officers was restricted, with all personnel required to leave the camp by ten at night.⁵⁹ This directly conflicted with UNHCR policy which, as a reaction to Gersony's report, was seeking to increase its presence within the camps. With refugees having asserted their authority over who could enter the camp by forcing Turcios to leave, the Honduran government now sought to reassert its ability to police movement within the camp.

These new restrictions, introduced in retaliation to the refugees' protests, fit with broader moves to increase Honduran military governance over the camps. There had always been a strong military presence around the camps but, post-1986, this increased, as had been recommended by Gersony. Given that the camps could not be cut off from El Salvador by moving them, tightening the cordon which surrounded them was the alternative means of preventing supplies from being moved across the border. While regular armed forces were officially in charge of camp patrols and security, Honduran Special Forces were also stationed nearby and they occasionally entered the camps, behaving aggressively toward

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'Re situation in Western Honduras', 09/2/1989, 600.HON H, UNHCR.

⁵⁸ Serge Male UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'Re meeting in Marcala X Batalion', 21/1/1988, 010.HON Vol.4 [D], UNHCR.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

refugees and relief workers.⁶⁰ Alarmingly, UNHCR officers noted that special forces troops often ignored the authority of the regular armed forces' commanders, despite nominally being under their control.⁶¹ Writing of the fear being created by military actions, Villalpando gave an illustrative example in which 15 soldiers entered Colomoncagua in a 'Rambo-like manner', aggressively pointing their rifles at refugees, all because they wished to identify the body of a deceased elderly refugee for whom burial had been requested.⁶²

From the perspective of Villalpando and other UNHCR officials, such actions were not only objectionable in terms of refugee welfare but were also counterproductive with respect to changing the refugees' own internal system of governance. Meeting with Everett Briggs, the US Ambassador to Honduras, Villalpando warned that, while the protests against Turcios were regrettable, they were to be expected given the 'negative' and 'reclusive' atmosphere created by the armed forces' 'excessive pressures' on the camp population.⁶³ Indeed, the Honduran military's attitude toward the refugees complicated the UNHCR's own attempts to assert control over the distribution of aid within the camps. In June 1988, for example, when a UNHCR officer was confronted by a group of 1,000 refugees demanding that he turn over keys to the food warehouse, the officer was explicitly instructed over the radio by UNHCR Tegucigalpa not to seek assistance from the Honduran military.⁶⁴ In other instances, UNHCR officials downplayed their own concerns over refugee leadership when meeting with Honduran and US officials. As had been the case from the outset, the Honduran military was seen by the UNHCR as a threat to refugee protection rather than an ally, while the tightening of military control over the camps only served to reinforce refugee leadership's power rather than weaken it.

⁶⁰ Blatter UNHCR San Jose to Geneva, 1/08/1988, 010.HON Vol.4 [D], UNHCR; Villalpando UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 19/05/1986, 600.HON C, UNHCR.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Villalpando, 'Report on UNHCR Protection Activities 1987 – Honduras', 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁶³ Villalpando to Geneva, 'Re; Mesa Grande situation', 25/2/1988, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁶⁴ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 're hunger strike', 23/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL.B, UNHCR.

From the perspective of many refugees, however, UNHCR efforts to better control aid distribution, and the increasingly repressive atmosphere instituted by the Honduran military, were seen as evidence that both were trying to worsen camp conditions to force repatriation to El Salvador.⁶⁵ While the UNHCR consistently maintained its position that repatriation should only be done voluntarily, Honduran statements, such as those stating that the refugees should leave, certainly gave credence to this perspective. Nor was Tegucigalpa's desire to see the refugees leave interpreted as a matter of domestic Honduran politics. Rather, as an eight-page public letter from Colomoncagua outlined, this was yet another attempt by Tegucigalpa to clear the Honduran border to assist the Salvadoran military.⁶⁶ Addressed to a wide range of international actors, including the 'entire national and international solidarity movement', 'humanitarian organisations, ecumenical movements...friendly governments', and 'the workers of the world', the letter accused the UNHCR of adhering to the mandate of the US Pentagon, seeking to clear the border and thus 'contributing directly to favouring genocide against the Salvadoran people'.⁶⁷ The refugees would not return, the letter stated, until there was peace in El Salvador.⁶⁸ Not stated in the letter, but an important consideration for refugee and FMLN leaders, was the fear that San Salvador sought to provoke a repatriation so that the absence of any refugee population in Honduras would bolster President José Duarte's image as a democratic reformer.⁶⁹

As is more fully discussed in the following section, and as is clear from the above quotation, the refugees certainly resisted UNHCR efforts to interfere with the refugees' own governance of the camps. At the same time, the UNHCR's presence in the camps was never,

⁶⁵ Salvadoran Refugee Community of Colomoncagua Honduras, 14/6/1988, (author translation), 11.HON.SAL Vol 3 [C], UNHCR.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ 'Reunion del Secretariado del Comité Central del Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos, realizada en Junio de 1988, en Morazan', File 8, Box 6, David Spencer Collection, Hoover.

unlike that of CONARE and the Honduran government, seen as illegitimate. In fact, while rejecting the right of CONARE to have delegates stationed within the camps, the refugees called on the UNHCR to reinforce its own presence.⁷⁰ And, although the 1988 letter claimed that the UNHCR was acting in concert with the Pentagon, it closed by stating the refugees' confidence in the UNHCR as a 'UN agency which safeguards the rights of refugees...and corrects the situation that officials swamped by North American politics have caused'.⁷¹ Thus the Honduran state's right to a say in the governance of the camps was rejected outright, while the UNHCR was welcomed as an ally and its presence accepted as legitimate, with clashes between the refugees and the UNHCR presented, if perhaps not fully understood, as stemming from wayward actions taken by UNHCR personnel in contravention of the institution's mandate.

Despite UNHCR attempts to mediate and calm the situation, tensions continued to mount throughout 1988. Villalpando, and other UNHCR representatives, held hours-long public meetings with those in Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande, explaining the role of the proposed CONARE delegates, and reaffirming the UNHCR's commitment to continue in its protection and assistance role.⁷² The frequent Honduran military patrols through the camps were followed by hundreds of refugees in silence, accompanied by overly stretched and 'tired' UNHCR officers.⁷³ By mid-1988, the incompatibility of Tegucigalpa's ambitions to increase its military presence and increase its assistance role was made tragically clear, as were the limits of the UNHCR's protection abilities. In April, a refugee in Colomoncagua

⁷⁰ Salvadoran Refugee Community of Colomoncagua Honduras, 14/6/1988, (author translation), Fonds 11, Series, 3, 11.HON.SAL Vol 3 [C], UNHCR.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Villalpando to Geneva, 'Re: Mesa Grande situation', 25/2/1988, 600.HON G, UNHCR; Villalpando to Geneva, 'Re: Situation Colomoncagua', 2/3/1988, 600.HON G, UNHCR.

⁷³ Ibid.

was killed by the Honduran military and another was seriously injured in Mesa Grande in June. Then, in July, the Honduran military killed another refugee, this time in Mesa Grande.⁷⁴

Decrying, in the name of refugee protection, the refugees' own structures of governance while simultaneously recommending that the Honduran military – which had repeatedly proven itself antithetical to refugee welfare – at least partly replace these structures, was clearly problematic. Assuming that refugee welfare was simply a cover for Washington's desire to combat the FMLN would help explain this contradiction. In this scenario, tighter military control of the camp and an increased Honduran presence within were designed purely to weaken an ideological enemy. Washington, however, was not alone. As the next section details, some non-UNHCR humanitarian workers shared Washington and Gersony's concerns, opposing the refugees' collective rule on the basis of deeply held humanitarian convictions. Others, however, saw such opposition as an unwelcome and ideologically motivated infringement on the refugees' collective agency.

Human Rights vs. Solidarity in the Salvadoran Refugee Camps

In the summer of 1988, a press release was issued in the name of the Salvadoran refugee community in Honduras, drawing the attention of national and international solidarity organisations, humanitarian organisations, and national governments, to the 'totally deficient' standard of care being provided by MSF to refugees in the camps of Mesa Grande, Colomoncagua, and San Antonio.⁷⁵ A later MSF end-of-mission report noted that MSF had, at all times, complied with international standards as regularly assured by the UNHCR's medical assessor.⁷⁶ The report went on to lament the 'over-medicalised' nature of Central

⁷⁴ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 28/07/1988, 010.HON Vol 4 D, UNHCR.

⁷⁵ As attached in letter from Dr. Magdi Ibrahim (MSF), 26/7/1988, Honduras 1988 deuxième rattachement massif, MSF archives, Paris (hence MSF).

⁷⁶ Magdi Ibrahim, 'Rapport De Mission: Pays: Honduras', Dec. 1988, Honduras 1988 deuxième rattachement massif, MSF.

American society where patients seldom left a doctor's office without receiving some sort of medicine.⁷⁷ Looking at what, on the surface, could appear as a dispute centred around cultural differences and technical standards, soon reveals an ideological dimension with linkages to the Cold War while also raising questions as to who has the right to determine events within the internal space of the refugee camp.

Although MSF had been providing health care to Salvadoran refugees since 1980, difficulties between the refugee population and the organisation had evolved gradually, particularly once MSF replaced Caritas as the medical assistance coordinator.⁷⁸ From then onward, MSF staff frequently clashed with the camp committees, over access to medicine and health standards.⁷⁹ In addition, and unlike other NGOs, MSF's leadership team had not supported the refugees in the relocation dispute. MSF's refusal to back the refugees in this regard, including the removal of an MSF coordinator who did, damaged relations and highlighted that MSF did not view its role in terms of offering unwavering solidarity.⁸⁰ By August 1988, relations between MSF and the refugees had deteriorated to such a degree that refugees had denounced MSF in newspaper advertisements and blocked MSF staff from entering the camps.⁸¹

That refugees prevented MSF from accessing the camps and that MSF was eventually forced to withdraw, echoes the ousting of Turcios from Colomocagua. Certainly, Molly Todd points to the episode as evidence of the refugees' 'insistence on being agents rather than objects'.⁸² As described by Todd, MSF was viewed as threatening because it sought to limit the refugees' involvement in nutrition programmes, therefore removing them from 'an

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibrahim, 'Rapport De Mission: Pays: Honduras'.

⁷⁹ Beth Cagen, Steve Cagen, *This Promised Land, El Salvador*; (London: Rutgers University Press: 1991), 70
Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 125; For more on the refugees' internal organisation see Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement*.

⁸⁰ Binet, *Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras*, (MSF Speaking Out Case Study, 13.

⁸¹ Ibrahim, 'Rapport De Mission: Pays: Honduras'.

⁸² Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 126.

important community function'.⁸³ The refugees here were not passive victims and, through denunciations, protests, and eventually hunger strikes, were able to bring about a change in the agencies which served them.

Indeed, the MSF dispute is a remarkable demonstration of the Salvadoran refugees' agency. Probing the multi-layered reasons behind the dispute and questioning why MSF, and not other agencies, had such a fractious relationship with the refugees is also worthwhile. For one, it reveals that MSF's role within the camps was different to that of other NGOs. A doctor-patient relationship can, in the best of settings, be a tense and hierarchical one. As early as 1982 an MCC report noted that refugees resented MSF's focus on preventative care, and were of the view that not enough medicine was being dispensed.⁸⁴ The Salvadoran refugees were not unique in this respect, a Moravian Church report on the Miskito refugee camps in 1987 made an identical observation.⁸⁵ Rony Brauman, then MSF President, recalled his outrage at the medical situation within the camps where 'corticoids, cardio-actives and powerful antibiotics' were dispensed by refugees with just two weeks of training.⁸⁶ Subsequent restrictions on the dispensing of these medicines were resented by refugee leadership. Moreover, MSF staff were typically posted to Honduras for much shorter periods than their counterparts in other agencies, some of whom spent years in the camps. A May 1988 letter to MSF headquarters from UNHCR Honduras was critical of this, noting that a six-month period was insufficient to adapt to the cultural conditions of the camps, particularly among staff with an inadequate level of Spanish.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ 'Mesa Grande: A Sociological Study of a Refugee Camp', 20/5/1982, Honduras 1982-1984, Mennonite Central Committee archives, Akron, PA (hence: MCC).

⁸⁵ Ted Wilde (Executive Director, Moravian Church Board of World Mission) to Bas Vanderzalm (World Relief), 9/11/1987, BWM 204 World Relief International, Moravian Church Board of World Mission archives, Bethlehem Pennsylvania (hence: BWM).

⁸⁶ Binet, *Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras*, (MSF Speaking Out Case Study), 19.

⁸⁷ Waldo Villapando (UNHCR) to F. Charon (MSF), 11/5/1988, Honduras 87-90, retrospective 87, courriers 88, exiles 89, MSF.

If MSF's methods did not sit well with refugee leaders, the reverse was also true. A 1986 MSF report, describing the sanitary and logistical situation in the camps, noted the major difficulties created by the 'hierarchical' nature of the refugees' committee system.⁸⁸ Every problem, according to the report, had to go through a committee before a resolution could be approved. While, for other observers, the refugees' committees represented an egalitarian and democratic way to run the camps, the report's authors were frustrated at how committee members would block projects deemed detrimental to their personal interests. The refugees' ownership of camp projects was also presented as problematic; the two MSF sanitation officers were only able to act as advisors, not managers of the sanitation programme. Factionalism also prevented some refugees with relevant skills from being appointed to projects. MSF, according to anthropologist Peter Redfield, possesses an 'ambulance ethos', responding to 'present states of crisis rather than future goals'.⁸⁹ This, at least to some degree, helps explain MSF's frustrations with the refugees' internal system of governance which was perceived as both cumbersome and inept. Indeed, the section of the 1986 report titled 'the refugees' opens with the line 'nobody says it, everybody thinks it...it's Caritas' fault'.⁹⁰ Thus Caritas' approach to assistance, which, drawing from its linkages to Liberation Theology, was more developmentally focused, clashed with MSF's emergency focus.

That a medical organisation would restrict the dispensing of certain medicines and that a community could subsequently resent these restrictions is easily understood. In the context of 1980s Central America, as we have already seen, this battle of wills quickly took on ideological dimensions. Brauman, recalling his July 1988 trip to Colomocagua to meet

⁸⁸ Pierre de Rancourt, Thierry Iafate (MSF), 'Honduras Janvier-Juin 1986: Rapport sur la situation sanitaire et logistique', Honduras 84-86 infos, MSF.

⁸⁹ Peter Redfield, "Doctors Without Borders and the Global Emergency", *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology* L. Manderson, E. Cartwright, A. Hardon (eds.), (London: Routledge: 2016), 359.

⁹⁰ Pierre de Rancourt, Thierry Iafate (MSF), 'Honduras Janvier-Juin 1986: Rapport sur la situation sanitaire et logistique'.

with the refugee committees, described how, over the course of two days, the refugees: ‘kept up constant pressure. Some 20 committee representatives, largely women, led the crowd. You had the impression they were a bunch of Maoists from the late ‘60s. They were saying, “We reject bourgeois academic knowledge”. I was accused of promoting it by limiting the doctors’ right to prescribe drugs. They were saying that here the people wanted all power, including power to provide medical treatment...I was exhilarated...I recognised the negotiating methods that Moscow and the communists used’.⁹¹ By Brauman’s telling, both he and the refugee leadership saw one another as ideological foes, the Cold War thus replicated within the confines of Colomocagua.

Brauman, and other MSF staff, objected not just to how the refugee leadership interacted with them, or how the camp hierarchy impeded assistance programmes, but also to the committees’ methods of governance. As with Gersony, some MSF staff believed the camp committees governed in a dictatorial fashion, echoing allegations that five refugees had been executed following a disagreement.⁹² Unlike ‘other’ aid organisations, MSF could not continue to cooperate with what Brauman referred to as being the ‘Khmer Rouge style’ committees and, in July 1988, MSF’s board voted to withdraw from the camps.⁹³ Brauman’s frequent Khmer Rouge analogy is instructive. MSF’s experience in Cambodia and Ethiopia had had a profound effect on the organisation, with leaders, including Brauman, coming away with the belief that they had been blind to the excesses of the Left.⁹⁴ Indeed, Brauman approached the situation in Honduras as a self-described anti-Communist, believing himself adept at spotting communists.⁹⁵ As Eleanor Davey has detailed, the 1980s saw *tiers-mondisme* come under attack in France with MSF launching Liberté Sans Frontières (LSF) in

⁹¹ Binet, *Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras*, (MSF Speaking Out Case Study), 23.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*, 234.

⁹⁵ Rony Brauman, author’s interview, online, 22/12/2022.

1984. Strongly anti-totalitarian and anti-Communist, LSF aimed to challenge the third worldist orientation of aid workers and its orientation attracted the support of some sections of the French far-right.⁹⁶

MSF's recent history goes some way in explaining why its leaders had such a different perspective on the Salvadoran camps than other aid agencies. The extent of these differences was laid bare during an International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) meeting in which the UNHCR requested that ICVA members, which included CRS and Caritas but not MSF, support MSF on the basis that the refugees' rejection of the organisation set a bad precedent.⁹⁷ Here, an agency representative stated that there were no grounds to doubt the rationality of the refugees' decisions.⁹⁸ Refugees, according to the Church World Service representative, should participate in deciding who was contracted to provide services to them.⁹⁹ The UNHCR representative had little time for this 'utopic' idea.¹⁰⁰

Championing refugee agency and respecting, in the words of one CRS representative, the 'internal structures of the camp' were not, however, always one and the same.¹⁰¹ In fact, the camps' internal structures occasionally sought to strip individual refugees of agency, particularly when it came to individual repatriation. While the UNHCR understood it as an 'essential right' for a refugee to be able to decide when to repatriate, the refugee committees, as outlined earlier, understood such a decision as an act of betrayal.¹⁰² As the UNHCR sought to facilitate individual voluntary repatriation, conflict with the refugee leadership arose. In one incident, in May 1988, a refugee who wished to repatriate was separated from UNHCR officers by a crowd of refugees and badly beaten before, as described in a UNHCR report,

⁹⁶ Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*, 215–17, 222.

⁹⁷ Alfredo del Río, UNHCR Senior Legal Adviser, Note for the File, *Meeting with the ICVA Sub-Committee on Central America and Mexico*, 12/10/1988, 600.HON H, UNHCR.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ J. Telford (UNHCR), Report on CRS Seminar in Tela, 6/12/1988, 507 HON A, UNHCR.

¹⁰² UNHCR Honduras, 'UNHCR to the Colomoncagua refugee community', 25/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [c], UNHCR.

being ‘taken hostage’.¹⁰³ Particularly notable was the UNHCR accusation that, as its officers sought to protect themselves and the repatriates from a crowd armed with sticks and machetes, four international staff from Caritas and CRS present made no effort to intervene.¹⁰⁴

A similar unwillingness to act against the refugees’ collective position was evident in a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker’s dispatch in which they described how relief workers intervened to prevent a refugee accused of murder from being killed. The MCC worker wrote: ‘I realised that we had taken an action against the stated wishes of the refugees...we had up to now been able to stay neutral and let the UNHCR take the heat for going against their will. Now we had sided with the UNHCR’.¹⁰⁵ That this relief worker felt a sense of unease from opposing the refugee population (and where inaction risked condoning the extrajudicial killing of another refugee) highlights the degree to which, for some, a supposed humanitarian role could blend into one of near unquestioning solidarity.

Much as MSF’s position was ideologically and historically informed then, so too was that of other agencies. As Blake Ortman, of the MCC, recalled, the Salvadoran government was a ‘terrorist government’, and so an attitude prevailed which rejected any criticism of one’s ‘own’ side.¹⁰⁶ In his view, then, shared support for the FMLN’s struggle could therefore mean that some aid workers (overly) identified with the refugee leadership and thus were not distant enough to be critical, with humanitarian assistance seen here, as Kevin O’Sullivan has described it, as a ‘weapon in a global anti-imperialist campaign’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, 26/05/1988, 600.HON H, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ MCC, ‘Vigil For Life: Mesa Grande Refugee Camp, Honduras’, 11/7/1988, Refugees – Personal Testimonies 1988, MCC.

¹⁰⁶ Blake Ortman, author’s interview, online, 09/03/2021.

¹⁰⁷ Kevin O’Sullivan, ‘Civil War in El Salvador and the Origins of Rights-Based Humanitarianism’, *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021): 256.

Importantly, although UNHCR officials supported MSF, their interpretations of events did differ from Brauman's. An ideological commitment to Marxism was, in Brauman's view, at the heart of the committees' behaviour. From his perspective, it was therefore unsurprising that they displayed dictatorial tendencies. However, not everyone agreed. Damasco Feci, Head of the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, saw this as a 'one-sided interpretation' which failed to understand the impact of Honduran policy which meant that the refugees were 'obliged to live under unusual and coercive standards with no alternative solution in sight'.¹⁰⁸ It was the reality of life within the camps rather than an ideological predisposition toward authoritarianism which, for Feci at least, explained events.

That such divisions took place in the context of the late 1980s is notable. A humanitarianism which prioritised individual refugee rights versus humanitarianism as an expression of solidarity chimes with the growth, at this stage, of human rights as a lens by which to view the world. Certainly, it speaks to Samuel Moyn's description by which 'westerners left the dream of revolution behind' and concentrated instead on an 'internationalism revolving around individual rights'.¹⁰⁹ Yet, the position of MSF and that of agencies such as CRS were both products of the Cold War; one fell into Cold War binaries, seeing the FMLN as analogous to the Khmer Rouge, while the other saw public criticism of the refugee leadership as implicitly giving support to the Salvadoran Right and its backers. The conflict over camp governance, then, represented a theatre of the Cold War, with agency workers protagonists of an ideological battle that was at once local and global.

¹⁰⁸ D. Feci (UNHCR, Head, Desk Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean) to L. Lima (UNHCR, Head of Sub-Office in San Marco), 'Report on Western Honduras for period July-August 1988', 6/10/1988, 100.HON.SAL [d], UNHCR.

¹⁰⁹ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, (Boston: Harvard University Press: 2010), 4 & 8.

The UNHCR and the Salvadoran Refugees

The UNHCR may have differed from MSF in its reading of events, but it still clashed with the refugee population over the running of the camps. Unlike MSF, however, refugee leaders could not demand that the UNHCR be replaced with another agency. Indeed, even while denouncing the UNHCR's actions, refugee statements implicitly recognised the UNHCR's authority by appealing to their rights as refugees and demanding that the UNHCR act to protect them. That the refugees' conflict with the UNHCR heightened just as the Honduran military was asserting its own power over the camps produced a complex interplay whereby refugee leadership was both at its most confrontational with UNHCR officers and also at its most reliant on them to ensure camp safety. Likewise, UNHCR officers found themselves attempting to claim authority at a time when they were too fearful to call on the Honduran military for assistance.

As with the MSF dispute, matters came to a head in the Summer of 1988 when refugees across the camps launched an 'indefinite' hunger strike against 'hunger and repression'.¹¹⁰ The strike targeted the changes instituted by MSF but also changes in food rations implemented in November 1987 on the basis of a joint World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR assessment. The hunger strike proved a focal point by which refugees could also vocalise their dissatisfaction with the UNHCR, and thus attempt, as had been done over relocation, to rally wider international support to their cause. Refugee statements claimed that changes implemented by the UNHCR were designed to force them to return to El Salvador and that the institution had 'abandoned its role 'of providing protection and security to refugees' and had aligned itself with the US State Department.¹¹¹ The previously mentioned June 1988 letter issued from Colomoncagua, addressed to 'the entire National and

¹¹⁰ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, 20/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR.

¹¹¹ La comunidad refugiada Salvadoreña en Colomoncagua, Honduras, 14/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR.

International Solidarity Movement, to humanitarian organisations, ecumenical movements of Churches, non-governmental organisations, to friendly governments, to the workers of the whole world' accused the institution of adhering to the mandate of the 'North American Pentagon' contributing directly to the 'genocide against the Salvadoran people'.¹¹² At a more local level, the names of individual officers with whom the committees had the strongest differences, were published in Honduran newspapers and in *Radio Venceremos*, something which caused great concern among UNHCR staff.¹¹³

In response, the UNHCR issued communications to the refugee population, explaining the dietary changes while emphasising that there was no attempt on its part to force repatriation.¹¹⁴ Aware that the difficulties with refugee leadership over individual repatriation had likely contributed to the strike, the UNHCR emphasised that individual repatriation was a non-negotiable right of every refugee.¹¹⁵ The UNHCR, the letter continued, had always stood with the refugee population, even defending them at risk to their own lives during the 1985 attack on Colomoncagua.¹¹⁶ While emphasising that medical care, health, and mortality rates were all of a better standard than that of the Honduran population, and superior to international refugee norms, the UNHCR conceded that a technical mission be sent to Honduras to examine the complaints.¹¹⁷

Internally, meanwhile, Villalpando wrote to Geneva stating that there were 'enough reasons to consider' that refugee statements were being prepared 'by third parties and that Salvadoran insurgents were at least partially responsible'.¹¹⁸ Noting that, with the exception of food, refugee demands lacked concertedness, some UNHCR staff in Honduras viewed the

¹¹² Salvadoran Refugee Community of Colomoncagua Honduras, 14/6/1988, 11.HON.SAL Vol 3 [C], UNHCR.

¹¹³ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 124; Leila Lima (UNHCR Honduras) to Geneva, 'Report Sept. / October Report of Western Honduras'. 9/11/1988, 2.025.HON, UNHCR.

¹¹⁴ UNHCR Honduras, 'UNHCR to the Colomoncagua refugee community', 25/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [c], UNHCR.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ UNHCR Tegucigalpa, 15/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR.

hunger strike as a means by which refugee leadership in Mesa Grande was trying to rebuild ‘adhesion and solidarity’ amongst a population increasingly indifferent to community and political matters.¹¹⁹ The refugee leadership, in the view of Leila Lima, head of the UNHCR Sub Office in San Marcos, believed that the UNHCR would reluctantly but inevitably accept any request.¹²⁰

With this in mind, the UNHCR was determined that refugee demands be met on technical terms rather than appearing to be ‘subordinate’ to pressure.¹²¹ In June 1988, Angela Berry-Koch, then the UNHCR’s sole nutritionist, arrived at Mesa Grande to assess the situation before going to Colomoncagua and San Antonio where, by this stage, there were now 120 and 31 refugees on hunger strike respectively.¹²² With a career spanning refugee situations in 44 countries, it is notable that Berry-Koch remembers the Salvadoran hunger strike as nearly unique in its high degree of organisation and sophistication.¹²³ Speaking with refugees, she learned that, previously, excess food had secretly been traded with the Honduran population in return for spices but that, with the new rations, this was no longer possible.¹²⁴ Although the UNHCR could not increase food rations, as this was the WFP’s remit, a spice allowance was introduced and, over the course of meetings which lasted 50 hours in Colomoncagua, the refugees won various concessions including an increase in maize, the repair and construction of stoves where needed, the provision of one bath soap piece per person per month, and the production and distribution of one more piece of underwear per person.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, 19/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [b], UNHCR.

¹²⁰ D. Feci (UNHCR, Head, Desk Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean) to L. Lima (UNHCR, Head of Sub-Office in San Marco), ‘Report on Western Honduras for period July-August 1988’, 6/10/1988, 100.HON.SAL [d], UNHCR.

¹²¹ UNHCR Honduras, ‘UNHCR to the Colomoncagua refugee community’.

¹²² UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, ‘re technical mission in Western area’, 2/7/1988, 100.HON/SAL [c], UNHCR.

¹²³ Angela Berry-Koch, author’s interview, online, 23/03/2021.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, ‘re technical mission in Colomoncagua’, 07/07/1988, 100.HON.SAL [c], UNHCR.

Notably, according to Berry-Koch's interpretation, the WFP had, under pressure from Washington, cut back food in an effort to encourage repatriation.¹²⁶ She recalled being shocked when, upon meeting the head of the US Refugee Programmes Bureau several years after the hunger strike, he joked that she consistently opposed US refugee policy and referenced her negotiations with the Salvadoran refugees. In contrast, a former UNHCR Protection Officer in Mesa Grande, John Telford, has no such recollection, noting that issues of logistics had long plagued WFP deliveries at this time.¹²⁷ Interpretations and memories can differ over time and between individuals, but, whichever is right, what is significant is that, even among UNHCR staff, routine non-political issues could potentially be misinterpreted as being linked to the Cold War.

The diverging interpretations of Berry-Koch and Telford also point to the fact that, as with those in MSF and CRS, UNHCR staff brought with them their own politically informed worldview. While, to this day, Brauman remains highly critical of refugee camp leaders, UNHCR officials are much less willing to offer criticism. But, at the time, they, unlike those from CRS, did clash with the refugee committees. Engaging in dialogue with refugee leaders and with the refugee community as a whole, as in the case of the hunger strike, was one approach adopted by the UNHCR as it responded to refugee demands. The appeal, here, to technical standards should be seen as a parallel approach to that described in Chapter Three, whereby UNHCR officials favoured carefully considered cooperation with the Honduran military as a means of governing military actions. The advice of Leonardo Franco, head of the UNHCR's Americas Section, to Leila Lima, UNHCR head at Mesa Grande, sums up this approach: it was only by adhering to the UNHCR's apolitical mandate, cautioned Franco, that

¹²⁶ Berry-Koch, author's interview.

¹²⁷ John Telford, author interview, online, 1/04/2021.

Lima would be able to achieve the desired political results.¹²⁸ ‘You must’, Lima remembers him stressing, ‘submerge yourself in the pool without getting wet’.

Despite Lima’s own concern, that refugee leaders believed the UNHCR, fearful of the Honduran military, would eventually concede to every refugee demand, officials were able to challenge elements of the camps’ governance.¹²⁹ Ensuring that those refugees who clashed with refugee leaders could leave the camp was one way of reducing the committees’ power. In one instance, in 1988, this resulted in some 20 refugees from Mesa Grande being housed in the UNHCR’s own accommodation. Eventually, they, and others, were resettled by the UNHCR to third countries.¹³⁰

A more forceful exertion of UNHCR authority was seen in San Antonio camp in April 1989. Whereas, by this stage, UNHCR officials had reached an agreement with Colomoncagua’s leaders that refugees be allowed to leave the camp when they so wished, this was not the case in San Antonio. Instead, a number of refugees had managed to secretly leave San Antonio but their family members were unable to do so.¹³¹ As UNHCR representatives negotiated to secure the release of these family members, refugee leaders insisted on the community’s right to take action against those they deemed ‘corrupt’ or ‘anti-social’.¹³² After midnight, the negotiations were broken up when several hundred refugees surrounded the meeting room chanting ‘no to UNHCR blackmail’ and ‘death to antisocial [refugees]’.¹³³ According to the UNHCR report on the incident, officers were subjected to a ‘level of aggressiveness seldom experienced before’. Meanwhile, the relatives of those refugees who had left the camp were brought to the rally and forced to declare by megaphone

¹²⁸ Leila Lima, author’s interview, online, 8/08/2023.

¹²⁹ D. Feci (UNHCR, Head, Desk Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean) to L. Lima (UNHCR, Head of Sub-Office in San Marco), ‘Report on Western Honduras for period July-August 1988’, 6/10/1988, 100.HON.SAL [d], UNHCR.

¹³⁰ UNHCR San José to UNHCR HQ, ‘resettlement from Honduras’, 08/08/1988, 100.HON.SAL [d], UNHCR.

¹³¹ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, ‘re situation San Antonio’, 8/4/1989, 600.HON.H, UNHCR.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

that they had voluntarily decided to remain in the camp and chosen not to follow their 'corrupt' husbands.¹³⁴

The UNHCR response to the incident was to withdraw its night-time presence from San Antonio, warning that it could withdraw from the camp altogether. The following month, senior UNHCR officials visiting San Antonio were astonished to find that camp leaders had organised a welcoming committee to receive them, with officials given small gifts.¹³⁵ During discussions which lasted six hours, it was agreed that the camp population respect the right of individual refugees to repatriate and that the UNHCR restore its full-time presence in the camp.¹³⁶

The episode speaks to refugee camp leaders' complex relationship with the UNHCR. While rejecting the UNHCR's right to govern the camp, they also sought a continuous UNHCR presence in an attempt to govern the actions of the Honduran military. In reaching an agreement with San Antonio's leadership, UNHCR officials credited their withdrawal from the camp but also the intervention of Salvadoran church leaders and Colomoncagua's leadership which was concerned that events in San Antonio could reflect negatively on all camps.¹³⁷ Intriguingly, the UNHCR's use of outside actors as a mediating force appears to have extended to engaging with FMLN leaders. In June 1988, for example, UNHCR Tegucigalpa met with the Honduran Minister of Defence and suggested that a dialogue be opened with the FMLN regarding the camps.¹³⁸ The Minister, stating his 'strong confidence' in the UNHCR's abilities signalled his approval, suggesting eventual Honduran participation in any dialogue.¹³⁹ While subsequent memos do not reveal the outcomes of any such dialogue the Minister's favourable reaction speaks to the Honduran government's evolving

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 17/5/1989, 600.HON.H, UNHCR.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 16/6/1988, 100.HON.SAL.B, UNHCR.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

relationship with the UNHCR, a result, as is explored in the following chapter, of the changing regional dynamics regarding peace.

Conflicts over camp governance were never truly resolved and, as will be seen in the following chapter, the idea of ‘contested sovereignties’ extended even to the closure of the camps and the return of refugees to El Salvador. The previously mentioned UNHCR dialogue with the FMLN, meanwhile, was not an anomaly. As discussed in the following section, UNHCR officials, seeking to limit the infringement of refugee rights in the Mosquitia, sought to pressure Contra leaders and their allies.

Governance in the Mosquitia

Prepared for the attention of Damasco Feci, Head of the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, a 1986 report from Arturo Mengotti, a UNHCR Programme Officer in the Mosquitia, made for grim reading. Praised internally for its rethinking of the refugee situation, the report detailed a dire situation in which no ‘sound’ work with refugees was possible and ‘anarchy’ reigned.¹⁴⁰ Forced recruitment by guerrilla groups, the abduction of refugees, and threats against UNHCR staff and property in the Mosquitia were among some of the issues outlined by Mengotti. His recommendations were stark: Geneva should officially caution the Honduran government that the UNHCR could be forced to withdraw from its protection and assistance activities in the region.

Although, as detailed in previous chapters, protection problems had always existed in the Mosquitia, the situation in the second half of the decade differed in a number of ways. Firstly, refugees were less inclined than ever to join the ranks of anti-Sandinista guerrillas, particularly given the absence of Fagoth and Rivera from KISAN’s leadership. Adding to this, was the (accurate) impression that KISAN was more closely linked to the wider Contra

¹⁴⁰ Arturo Mengotti, ‘Situation Report on Protection in the Mosquitia’, 8/8/1986, 600.HON [D], UNHCR.

cause, an impression bolstered by the FDN's arrival to the Mosquitia. Changing conditions in Nicaragua also played a role. Concessions by Managua toward the Miskito population both reduced the motives for armed struggle and increased the likelihood that peace would come through a negotiated settlement. As is explored in more detail in the next chapter, amnesty decrees, coupled with a change in government policy allowing communities to return to the regions from which they had been forcibly removed at the start of the decade, improved Miskito – Sandinista relations. Indeed, some of those who had left government settlements to return to their old villages had then been forced into Honduras by KISAN. As such, refugees began to repatriate; while there were 57 repatriations during 1984, there were 540 during the first ten months of 1985.¹⁴¹

As general refugee support for armed conflict decreased, however, the overall Contra strategy shifted to place a greater emphasis on the Atlantic Coast.¹⁴² With scepticism mounting over the ability of the Contras on the Western front, the hope was that those in the Mosquitia would capture land in Nicaragua and declare a provisional government through which the US could then channel support.¹⁴³ US Congressional approval of a \$100 million aid package to Contra forces in October 1986 meanwhile meant that different Contra leaders sought to boost the size of their forces so that they would receive a greater slice of this aid. The result then, was a scramble for recruits which, in the case of KISAN, whose leaders hoped to double its number of fighters, had to be taken from an increasingly unwilling refugee population.¹⁴⁴ Amid appeals based on supposed religious and ethnic imperatives, refugee coordinators and pastors were told by KISAN to supply contingents of fighters or

¹⁴¹ Deborah (Oxfam), Internal report, 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia, 15th – 18th October 1985', Nicaragua, PRG/5/3/3/2, Oxfam archives, Bodleian library, Oxford, (hence: Oxfam).

¹⁴² James le Moyne, *NYT*, 10/7/1986; Martin Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles" in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Walker, Thomas (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Mengotti, 'Situation Report on Protection in the Mosquitia', 8/8/1986.

else face punishment.¹⁴⁵ Other refugee coordinators accepted watches, radios, tape recorders, and cash in exchange for providing lists of young men to KISAN.¹⁴⁶ In other cases, KISAN operatives threatened to harm women and children should the men not join their ranks.¹⁴⁷ All were warned not to approach UNHCR officials regarding this recruitment. During the summer of 1986, an estimated 450 refugees were recruited in this way.¹⁴⁸

Forced recruitment was not the only violation of refugee rights practised by KISAN. Supporters of Rivera were targeted, with the UNHCR documenting one case in which a refugee was kidnapped and kept for two months in an underground cell by KISAN.¹⁴⁹ In a parallel with events in the Salvadoran camps, KISAN leadership saw repatriation as a betrayal of their cause. Intimidation against those who chose to repatriate was widespread. In some cases, for example, the plane used by the UNHCR to fly repatriates to Nicaragua was even targeted militarily by KISAN.¹⁵⁰ Somewhat ironically, for many refugees, it was KISAN's forcible recruitment drives which meant that life in Nicaragua was more appealing than that in Honduras. Within KISAN's vision of the Mosquitia region, the refugees there were answerable to them and so attempts by UNHCR to promote refugee rights and the right to voluntarily repatriate were openly resisted. Mengotti, and other UNHCR personnel, were, for example, threatened by KISAN guerrillas, accused of aiding the Sandinista government as a result of their facilitation of repatriation.¹⁵¹ A KISAN member was meanwhile permanently

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Götz Frhr. v. Houwald to Bernard Nietschmann, 10/10/1987, Folder 47, Carton 1, BANC MSS 2010, Bernard Nietschmann papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California (hence: Nietschmann papers).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'protection situation Mosquitia', 23/8/1986, 600.HON.D, UNHCR

¹⁴⁹ James Anaya (Staff Attorney, National Indian Youth Council), 'The CIA with the Honduran Army in the Mosquitia: Taking the freedom out of the fight in the name of accountability, report on a visit to the Honduran Mosquitia April, 1987', Folder 1, James Anaya transcript, Hoover institute archives, Stanford (hence: Anaya papers); Teresa Tirado (UNHCR Protection Officer), 'Protection problems from January to September 1986', 600.HON.E, UNHCR.

¹⁵⁰ UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 23/8/1986, 600.HON.D, UNHCR.

¹⁵¹ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 9/05/1986, 600.HON [C], UNHCR.

stationed at the entrance of the UNHCR offices at Mocerón, intimidating both relief officials and refugees.¹⁵²

Responding to these pressures, in 1986 100 refugee co-ordinators and refugee leaders published a letter addressed to President Reagan detailing the ‘forced recruitment and torture’ that refugees were subjected to by KISAN.¹⁵³ The letter directly linked the deterioration in refugee quality of life to the expulsion of Fagoth and Rivera, accusing KISAN of being a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and FDN creation which ‘far from being receptive to our interests...has pursued a systematic imprisonment [sc], in Honduran territory of all refugees who express sympathy for Fagoth and Rivera’.¹⁵⁴ The letter called on Reagan to allow for an open assembly of the 256 indigenous community representatives so that ‘KISAN ends its terror regime’.¹⁵⁵ Recognising the importance of a refugee presence in Honduras to the anti-Sandinista cause, the letter threatened that, should such an assembly not occur, refugees would return to Nicaragua, deeming it better ‘to face persecution by natural enemies than in foreign soil by one’s own people, for a few dollars more’.¹⁵⁶

In seeking to respond to this situation, the UNHCR had limited options. There was considerable frustration among staff that, in the Mosquitia, the institution was effectively having to fill the vacuum left by the absence of the Honduran state. Not only did the Honduran military fail to protect the refugees, but it also actively supported KISAN. Colonel Mario ‘El Tigre’ Amaya, a key player in the ousting of General Álvarez, and head of the Fifth Battalion responsible for the Mosquitia, viewed the UNHCR as a leftist organisation, remarking that staff mischaracterised the visits of KISAN fighters to their families as incidents

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Waldo Villalpando (UNHCR Tegucigalpa) to Geneva, 20/8/1986, 600.HON.D, UNHCR.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

of forced recruitment.¹⁵⁷ At times, Fifth Battalion troops blocked refugees from repatriating and arrested those who wished to do so.

Ironically, such support for KISAN occurred in the context of growing Honduran frustration with the wider Contra movement. As a result, Contra forces outside of the Mosquitia faced pressure to move their forces into Nicaragua while the Honduran president, José Azcona Hoya, announced that senior Contra leaders would no longer be allowed to hold public meetings in Honduras.¹⁵⁸ Such actions were motivated not just by a desire to reassert Honduran sovereignty but also by fears that, once Reagan was no longer in office, Honduras could be left to handle the Contras alone.¹⁵⁹ How this resulted in assisting KISAN to the detriment of refugee welfare was elucidated by Colonel Erick Sánchez, then commander of the Fifth Battalion, to James Anaya, of the US-based National Indian Youth Council, during a fact-finding mission by Anaya to the Mosquitia. For Sánchez, the *raison-d'être* for the Nicaraguan Miskito presence in Honduras was to fight the Sandinistas, and those who 'hung out' in towns or refugee camps rather than take up arms were subject to arrest.¹⁶⁰ From Sánchez's perspective, the Miskito Contra groups were disorganised and riven with rivalries and, if they were to have any hope of success, needed Honduran coercion to force unity.¹⁶¹

If the Honduran military was therefore an unreliable partner for the UNHCR, the US was similarly implicated. Anaya's report detailed his multiple encounters with CIA operatives and described how an 'oppressive CIA-Honduran military apparatus had usurped decision-making about political and military affairs'.¹⁶² Under this apparatus, refugees, particularly those living outside of UNHCR settlements, from which they had been lured by anti-

¹⁵⁷ Judith Colburn, 'On the Miskito Coast: Dreams of deliverance, days of compromise', Folder 35, Carton 7, BANC MSS 2004/2222z, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley (hence Ortiz papers).

¹⁵⁸ *Washington Post*, 20/2/1987; *Washington Post*, 6/6/1987.

¹⁵⁹ Ian Hughes, British Embassy Tegucigalpa, to FCO, 'The Honduran Armed Forces and the Contras: A Sea Change that Reflects Deeper Currents', 12/6/1987, FCO 99/2650, TNA.

¹⁶⁰ Anaya, 'The CIA with the Honduran army in the Mosquitia...'

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

Communist aid groups, faced restrictions of movement, with one refugee telling Anaya that they felt like prisoners.¹⁶³ Although Anaya was linked to Rivera and therefore had an interest in portraying KISAN as being unrepresentative of the ‘true’ Miskito cause, his claims chime with other accounts of the situation. Washington, meanwhile, was riven with divisions regarding the Miskito Contra, something which complicated matters for those in the UNHCR seeking to effect change. KISAN had the backing of the CIA, which strove for a unified Contra force.¹⁶⁴ The US State Department, on the other hand, considered the CIA’s Contra policy a failure and instead backed Rivera, hoping that a Miskito force outside of the wider Contra movement could rally greater support.¹⁶⁵ In one of the more dramatic illustrations of this clash, when Elliott Abrams, then Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, authorised Rivera to visit refugees in Honduras, Rivera’s helicopter was diverted by the Honduran military and he was flown instead to a KISAN base.¹⁶⁶ A State Department official bemoaned CIA interference and lamented the lack of State Department presence in the Mosquitia.¹⁶⁷

The case of Tapalwas, a refugee settlement of mainly Mayanga Indians, helps illustrate both the conditions faced by refugees and the ways in which the UNHCR sought to assist them. In January 1986 the UNHCR was informed by leaders at Tapalwas that armed men had entered the settlement and threatened those who had opposed repatriation.¹⁶⁸ In light of this, refugee leaders requested KISAN’s assistance and 100 soldiers were subsequently dispatched to Tapalwas to protect the settlement.¹⁶⁹ Upon arriving in Tapalwas, however, Vladamiro Huaroc, a UNHCR Protection Officer, concluded that the story was a fabrication,

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ *Wall Street Journal*, 2/3/1987.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.; *Wall Street Journal*, 13/10/1986.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Druke (UNHCR Tegucigalpa) to Geneva, 28/1/1986, 600.HON.A, UNHCR.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

staged to justify KISAN's presence in Tapalwas and to discredit the UNHCR.¹⁷⁰ Five months later, those in Tapalwas did face danger, although it was the Contra rather than the Sandinistas which represented the threat, kidnapping 24 refugees.¹⁷¹ The complexities and anarchy of the situation were made clear when KISAN's Chief of Staff condemned the kidnapping as an outrageous interference carried out by the FDN.¹⁷² Despite blaming the FDN for the kidnapping, KISAN's own behaviour in Tapalwas included the threatening of UNHCR officers and aid personnel, causing the withdrawal of aid organisations from the settlement.¹⁷³

Unable to safely station protection officers there, Villalpando sought, and received, permission from Geneva to withdraw the UNHCR from Tapalwas while urging headquarters to seek the diplomatic support of sympathetic governments.¹⁷⁴ In Honduras, meanwhile, Villalpando met with members of the US, UK, French, and Spanish embassies.¹⁷⁵ Following 'numerous' contacts with Honduran civilian and military authorities, Villalpando was able to interview 12 of the kidnapped refugees, the Honduran military having 'found' them.¹⁷⁶ Eight of the kidnapes had earlier escaped. Following their interviews, the majority voiced their desire to continue fighting with only two opting to travel to Tegucigalpa under UNHCR protection.¹⁷⁷ Once in Tegucigalpa, the two refugees indicated that the group had been threatened and told they would be punished should they not continue fighting.¹⁷⁸ While Villalpando, through contacts with Honduran and US officials, was therefore able to pressure

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ F. Galindo-Vélez (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean), Note for the file, 6/10/1986, 600.HON.E, UNHCR.

¹⁷² UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 28/5/1986, 600.HON.C, UNHCR.

¹⁷³ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to Geneva, 'protection situation Mosquitia', 23/8/1986, 600.HON.D, UNHCR.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ F. Galindo-Vélez (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean), Note for the file, 6/10/1986, 600.HON.E, UNHCR.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

the FDN and bring about the refugees' release, the UNHCR was unable to sufficiently win the confidence of those kidnappees who recognised that they were in Contra territory.

More successful was Villalpando's warning that the UNHCR was on the verge of withdrawing from Tapalwas. In response, KISAN's political coordinator promised that troops would be withdrawn from the settlement.¹⁷⁹ A State Department consultant – most likely Robert Gersony – promised to help reinforce the UNHCR's mandate and principles, expressing his own concern at the protection issues.¹⁸⁰ Newspaper articles regarding the kidnapping in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, among other outlets, also increased pressure on Contra leaders and their allies.¹⁸¹ An article from United Press International, a news agency, quoted Villalpando as saying that Contra forces had forcibly recruited refugees in Tapalwas and elsewhere.¹⁸² Both Americas Watch and Amnesty International also reported on the issue. A wider, highly critical, Americas Watch report on KISAN activity in the Mosquitia counted a number of former aid workers as sources.¹⁸³ Such public criticisms of KISAN's human rights record came at a delicate juncture, with Washington long eager to pitch the Contras as a force for good against the repressive Sandinista regime.

UNHCR officials were, of course, aware of this dynamic. Indeed, in recommending to Geneva that the Honduran government be warned that the UNHCR could withdraw from the Mosquitia, Mengotti sought to capitalise upon it. Refugees, Mengotti noted, were an asset to Washington when denouncing Sandinista abuses.¹⁸⁴ According to Mengotti, senior officials within the State Department, including Gersony, saw the UNHCR's presence as important, helping to signal when abuses did occur, thus assisting in the moderation of Contra actions.

¹⁷⁹ Waldo Villalpando (UNHCR Tegucigalpa) to Geneva, 're: protection situation Mosquitia', 11/11/1986, 600.HON.E, UNHCR.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.; The assumption that the unnamed State Dept. consultant in Villalpando's dispatch is Gersony is based on an article in *The Guardian* which named Gersony as visiting the Mosquitia around this time. *The Guardian*, 28/10/1986.

¹⁸¹ *NYT*, 10/7/1986; *Washington Post*, 24/8/1986.

¹⁸² United Press International, 20/10/1986.

¹⁸³ Americas Watch, *Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An endangered people*, September 1987.

¹⁸⁴ Mengotti, 'Situation Report on Protection in the Mosquitia', 8/8/1986.

For other officials less concerned with maintaining a 'clean' Contra image, the threat of a UNHCR withdrawal was still unwelcome, raising as it did the spectre that the welfare of 15,000 refugees would be left to the Honduran government. No other agency such as USAID or World Relief offered, in Mengotti's view, the same 'advantages of respectability and apolitical impartiality for the public opinion' as the UNHCR.¹⁸⁵

These events point to a number of broader points in terms of the governance of refugee life in the Mosquitia. As with the Salvadoran camps, UNHCR officers were unable to physically protect refugees. In the Salvadoran case, this stemmed from a reluctance to call on assistance from the Honduran military while, in the Mosquitia, this came from the Honduran military's unwillingness to intervene. The situations were nevertheless different; officers occasionally faced angry crowds of Salvadoran refugees whereas in the Mosquitia they were confronted and threatened by armed combatants. Yet, in both cases, UNHCR officials were aware that it was the institution's presence which was its greatest asset and that a threat of withdrawal (as in San Antonio) could be used to moderate the behaviour of other actors. Dispatches from UNHCR officers point to another reality of life in the Mosquitia; it was Washington rather than Tegucigalpa which was the authority here. The Honduran state had limited control over the region and, even had the Honduran military decided to confront KISAN it was not clear that they would be able to do so.¹⁸⁶

Washington, however, was not a monolith. As noted, there were divisions between the CIA and the US State Department over the handling of the Contra War. A remarkable November 1986 letter from George Schultz, then US Secretary of State, to Rivera clearly articulated these divisions. The CIA, according to Schultz, was 'five years behind even the Sandinistas' in their approach to the 'Indian struggle'.¹⁸⁷ 'Count on being abandoned. Plan on

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ George Schultz to Brooklyn Rivera & Armstrong Wiggins, 8/11/1986, Folder 4: Miskito Indians CIA Ver Ver, Carton 11, Nietschmann papers.

being abandoned' cautioned Schultz, reminding Rivera that in the CIA's 40 years of operations, it had abandoned Indigenous movements as soon as it became politically or strategically expedient to do so.¹⁸⁸ KISAN's military ineffectiveness and its waning support amongst the Miskito population strengthened the State Department's hand as it successfully demanded, according to a 1987 *New York Times* report, the replacement of the CIA operatives handling the Miskito issue.¹⁸⁹ Shortly thereafter a new Miskito anti-Sandinista guerrilla group was formed; *Yapti Tasba Masrika nani* (Descendants of Mother Earth, YATAMA). Replacing KISAN, YATAMA united Fagoth, Rivera and Diego, KISAN's former chief, and attempted to engage the Miskito population by separating itself from the FDN and the CIA. While, as is detailed in the following chapter, its leaders remained opposed to repatriation they did not seek to forcibly prevent it.

Conclusion

What, then, drove governance of refugee camps in Honduras? The answer, as is clear from this chapter, depends on which perspective one adopts. Linked to this were the different visions of the camps' purpose. Various, they were, among other things, places of containment, of resistance, of recruitment, of propaganda value, of humanitarian assistance, and of refuge. Alongside these different conceptualisations of the camps' role were the 'contested sovereignties' of the camps with authority uneasily and uncertainly divided between refugees, guerrilla groups, the Honduran government, the UNHCR, and aid agencies.

However, examining this interplay of institutions and refugees – refugeedom in Honduras in other words – does more than highlight the complexity of camp governance. As noted by

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ *NYT*, 7/6/1987.

Adam Ramadan, camps are an ‘arena’ in which the ‘geopolitical and the everyday are intertwined’.¹⁹⁰ To study the refugee camp is, in his description, to ‘study *everyday* geopolitics’. Adopting this approach, this chapter has argued that camps in Honduras were places in which the Cold War’s ‘politicisation of everyday life’ can be observed.¹⁹¹ They also reveal the Cold War’s impact on shaping different interpretations of humanitarianism, with human rights, expressions of solidarity, and humanitarian norms at times competing with one another. Beyond the specificity of the Cold War, the details in this chapter also speak to broader structures of violence and power that are contested within, and in relation to, camps. The violence of the refugees’ home countries was transplanted to the camps, while the duration of both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts had a corrosive effect on governance, cohesion, and morale.

This chapter has also complicated the idea of refugee agency. As Kirsten McConnachie has described, when refugee leaders clash with aid agencies, two criticisms are made. One is that leaders are not ‘legitimate community representatives’, and the other is that they are not ‘legitimate governance actors’ but, rather, proxies for guerrilla groups.¹⁹² Such commonplace dismissals of refugee leadership should be borne in mind when analysing events in Honduras. Nonetheless, refugee agency was evidently multi-layered and was not equally shared. The Honduran government’s different policies towards those on the Salvadoran border and those in the Mosquitia impacted the internal camp dynamics of the two refugee groups. But even between the Salvadoran camps, it is clear that individual refugees in Mesa Grande had greater freedom than those in Colomoncagua. The collective and highly organised nature of the

¹⁹⁰ Adam Ramadan, ‘Spatialising the Refugee Camp’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 238 (2013): 75.

¹⁹¹ As noted in this thesis’ introduction, Greg Grandin and Gilbert Joseph have described how the Cold War in Latin America led to the ‘internationalisation and politicisation of everyday life’. Gilbert Joseph, “What We Now Know”, *In From the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War* Gilbert Joseph, Daniela Spenser, Emily Rosenberg (eds), (North Carolina: Duke University Press: 2008), 4.

¹⁹² McConnachie, *Governing Refugees*, 82.

Salvadoran 'refugee community' therefore, somewhat paradoxically, increased the refugees' agency while disrupting individual agency.

In this respect, a key issue among both Salvadoran and Miskito refugees was the right to individually repatriate. As is explored in the following chapter, collective repatriation was also a contested area, once again mixing geopolitics, humanitarianism, and everyday life.

Chapter 6: Repatriation and Peace

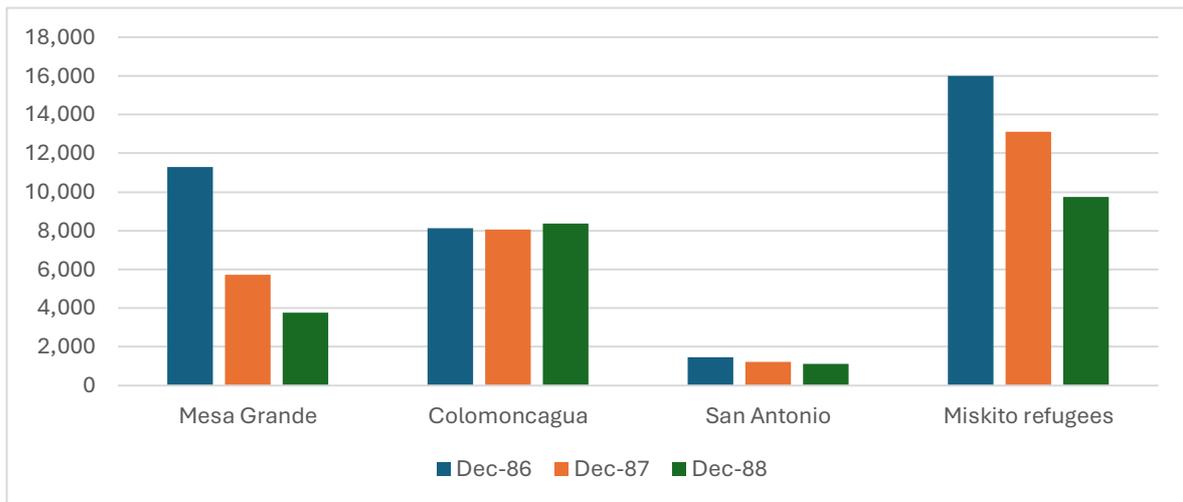
During the 1988 Salvadoran refugee hunger strike, described in the previous chapter, a six-page statement was issued by the ‘refugee community of Colomoncagua’. Denouncing the refugees’ mistreatment at the hands of certain United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff and the Honduran military, the statement closed with the line ‘NO TO REPATRIATION!’¹ Amongst the statement’s specific allegations was that the UNHCR and the Honduran government were attempting to force the refugees to repatriate. Less than a year previously, meanwhile, in September 1987, refugees at Mesa Grande had publicly condemned the Salvadoran government’s efforts to prevent them from repatriating and denounced the UNHCR as complicit in this.²

These stark differences between Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande were not limited to refugee statements. As is evident in the chart below, Mesa Grande’s refugees began to repatriate in 1987 while the return from Colomoncagua did not begin until the very end of 1989. As this chapter demonstrates, these differences cannot be understood without analysing the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional’s* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) role in the repatriation process. Much as many of the Salvadoran refugees contributed to *la lucha* from Honduras, so, too, did they assist the FMLN’s struggle by the manner and timing of their return home.

¹ La Comunidad Refugiada Salvadoreña en Colomoncagua, Honduras, 14/06/1988, 100.HON.SAL [b], archives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva (hence UNHCR).

² Comunidad Salvadoreña Refugiados en Mesa Grande Honduras, ‘La Repatriacion y el Retorno a Nuestras Tierras es Nuestro Derecho’, *El Mundo* (El Salvador), 25/09/1987, Fonds 11, Series 3, 610.HON.SAL.C, UNHCR.

Figure 5 *Refugee Camp Population by Year*



Source: Comisión Nacional de Refugiados (CONARE) & UNHCR, ‘Diagnostico de la Situacion de los Refugiados en Honduras’, 0.10.HON.D, UNHCR.

The coincidental timing of the repatriation of Miskito refugees from the Mosquitia, which began in earnest in 1987, however, points to factors beyond the FMLN’s influence. The changed regional context was important here, with peace negotiations and declarations increasingly referencing not just the right of refugees to return, but also recognising repatriation as a vital element of regional peace and stability. In this, the UNHCR was often highlighted as the international body charged with facilitating repatriation. Meanwhile, the Honduran government, which had treated both refugee populations in such different ways, was eager to see both populations return.

As is detailed in this chapter’s first section, repatriation was linked to both regional peace processes as well as changes in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The second section focuses on the refugees in Mesa Grande and then Colomoncagua, centring their perspectives and detailing how they remember and explain repatriation, as well as the government’s response. Section three meanwhile looks at repatriation from the Mosquitia highlighting how, while the FMLN was able to harness repatriation movements to strengthen its position, Contra leaders were not. In both cases, repatriation was something which all parties, including the refugees

and the Honduran, Salvadoran, and Nicaraguan governments, sought to utilise to win a peace favourable to them. How refugeedom came to a close therefore had consequences not just for the refugees, but also for the shape of the peace that emerged from over a decade of conflict and for the region as a whole.

Regional Developments and Linking Repatriation to Peace

The wider regional context was hugely important in setting the scene for repatriation from Honduras. The agreement on “Procedures for the establishment of a firm and lasting peace in Central America”, or Esquipulas II, as it was commonly known after the city in Guatemala where it was agreed, spoke directly to the issue of repatriation. Signed by the Presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in August 1987, section eight of the agreement committed the Central American government to ‘attend, as a matter of urgency, to the flows of refugees and displaced persons caused by the crisis in the region’ and to ‘facilitate their repatriation, resettlement or relocation provided that this is voluntary’.³ The agreement went on to name the UNHCR as an institution via which assistance would be sought from the international community for these refugees. This would later serve as an impetus for the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA), a 1989-1995 process to support displaced people throughout the region.⁴ Under the steer of the UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme, CIREFCA brought together the Central American governments, Mexico, international donors, and NGOs, with some \$420 million spent on CIREFCA projects between 1989 and mid-1994.⁵ Through Esquipulas II and

³ “Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America (Esquipulas II),” 7/8/1987, *United Nations Peacemaker Online*, <https://peacemaker.un.org/centralamerica-esquipulasII87>

⁴ Megan Bradley, ‘Forced Migration in Central America and the Caribbean: Cooperation and Challenges’, *Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014): 672

⁵ *Ibid.*; *Refugees*, 9 (1995)

CIREFCA, governments were making explicit the connections between refugee repatriation and peace.

As Molly Todd has highlighted, the Salvadoran refugees in Mesa Grande nevertheless began to plan for repatriation independently of, and before, Esquipulas II.⁶ While ‘political considerations’ were ‘perhaps foremost in many refugees’ decisions’ to return, those organising the repatriations were careful to use apolitical language, portraying themselves as ‘poor people, peasants’ who were ‘on no one’s side’.⁷ Although regional developments did not instigate the initial repatriation movements, they did therefore serve as a useful framework and tool for those who faced government opposition to their return, lending legitimacy to their cause. Both Esquipulas II, and later CIREFCA, were also repeatedly referenced by the Honduran government as it became increasingly eager to see its refugee population leave. In a speech to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in October 1988, the Honduran Foreign Minister stated that the ‘people and government of Honduras cannot continue to bear the burden’ of tens of thousands of refugees.⁸ Commending the UNHCR on its work, the minister called for the refugees’ departure to protect the country’s economic and social development and ecological balance.⁹ The speech also called for the establishment of an international UN force along Honduras’ Nicaraguan and Salvadoran borders.¹⁰ The full implications of the shifting Honduran attitude vis-à-vis the different refugee populations are discussed later, but, undoubtedly sensing that peace would eventually come, the government’s desire to rid the country of refugees would soon trump any Cold War

⁶ Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2010), 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 195 & 209.

⁸ ‘Exposicion del Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores de la Republica de Honduras, abogado Carlos Lopez Contreras, ante la asamblea general de las naciones unidas cuadragésimo tercer periodo de sesiones’, 4/10/1988, 0.10.HON.D, UNHCR.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

considerations. As the British Ambassador to Honduras had noted a year earlier, there was growing public concern over the 'weighty burden' the refugees placed on the country.¹¹

Within this changing regional dynamic were changes in the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts. Although those refugees who crossed back into El Salvador in 1987 were returning to the war from which they had fled, it was a changed conflict. Following his election in May 1984, José Napoleón Duarte, aware that an outright military victory over the FMLN was unlikely, turned to winning 'hearts and minds'.¹² While military operations continued, these were now combined with an emphasis on 'democratisation' with San Salvador eager to shore up international support. A drop in human rights abuses, and the return of electoral politics, signalled something of a political opening, albeit in a society still dominated by the military.¹³ Alongside this were strategic repopulations, whereby civilians deemed to be FMLN supporters would be removed from an area and replaced with those deemed sympathetic to the government.¹⁴ Operation Phoenix and Operation Ricardo Chavez Carreno launched in January and March 1986 involved the military moving civilians from the Guazapa Volcano area and northern Chalatenango to internal displacement camps in San Salvador.¹⁵ At the same time, the government's 'United for Reconstruction' programme saw the repopulation of areas under military supervision with returned residents expected to form civil defence units to ward off guerrilla advances.¹⁶

Concerned that Duarte could build a social support base, and aware that they were also unlikely to win a quick military victory, FMLN leaders also turned to winning the 'war

¹¹ British Embassy Tegucigalpa to FCO, 'Honduran Roundup: August', 25/08/1987, FCO 99/2644, UK National Archives, London, (hence: TNA).

¹² Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 196.

¹³ Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1995): 185.

¹⁴ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 212.

¹⁵ *LA Times*, 11/4/1986.

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, 28/7/1986.

of legitimacy'.¹⁷ The focus on a decisive military victory had resulted in the neglecting of the conflict's political dimension and, as the FMLN reverted from a 'warring style' to more traditional guerrilla warfare, it placed a renewed emphasis on engaging the *masas*.¹⁸ As an FMLN publication described it, the new strategy was 'to integrate and mobilise the masses...to struggle for their day-to-day needs, to educate and raise their consciousness and to lay the basis for their participation in the war'.¹⁹ Taking advantage of the new political opening, the FMLN's '*poder de doble cara*' strategy sought to achieve this mobilisation through the construction of a civil-political front composed of student groups, unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), human rights groups, and others.²⁰ Claiming their legitimacy as civil society organisations, these groups would secretly cooperate with the FMLN which was successfully able to tap into the widespread social unrest.²¹

One such organisation was the *Comité Cristiano Pro-Desplazados de El Salvador* (Christian Committee of the Displaced, CRIPDES), formed in 1984 to assist refugees and internally displaced people and linked, clandestinely, to the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL).²² While, exhausted and war-weary, internally displaced people began to return to depopulated areas from the middle of the decade, mass, organised repopulations began in 1986 with the announcement by 126 residents of Calle Real refugee camp in San Salvador that they were returning to the town of San José las Flores, Chalatenango.²³ Coordinated by CRIPDES, the residents were

¹⁷ Courtney E. Prisk (ed), *The Comandante Speaks: Memoirs of an El Salvadoran Guerrilla Leader*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1991), 76.

¹⁸ El Salvador: Government and Insurgent Prospects, Feb 1989, Special National Intelligence Estimate, DNSA: El Salvador 1980 – 1994; Alberto Martín Álvarez, *From Revolutionary War to Democratic Revolution: The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador*, (Berlin: Berghof Conflict Research: 2010), 20.

¹⁹ As quoted in Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers: 1996), 133.

²⁰ Ralph Sprenkels, *Revolution & Accommodation: Post-Insurgency in El Salvador*, (Haveka bv: 2014), 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador*, 191

²² Sprenkels, *Revolution & Accommodation*, 113

²³ Juan Fernando Ascoli, *Tiempo de Guerra y Tiempo de Paz: Organización y lucha de las comunidades del no-orienté del Chalatenango (1974-1994)*, (Oxfam UK financed, undated).

accompanied by religious figures, including many from the United States (US), and they began their journey with a press conference at San Salvador's Cathedral.²⁴ As a US intelligence report assessed the situation, this repopulation placed the government in a 'no-win situation'.²⁵ If the government allowed the march to continue to its destination then an 'obviously FPL-sponsored repopulation effort' would succeed. If the military chose to prevent this, however, the FMLN would garner political ammunition on both the domestic and international stage.²⁶

The return to San José las Flores highlights both the dilemma faced by the government in this and subsequent repopulation efforts, and the importance for returnees of winning national and international attention. Hosting a press conference at San Salvador's cathedral and inviting religious figures from abroad illustrated that organisers were well aware of this dynamic. But, the repopulation also spoke to the relationship between those families 'doing' the repopulation and any wider strategy. Unlike many others, the returnee families had not spent years in the Calle Real camp. Rather, four months previously, they had occupied a church in a town next to San José las Flores, Dulce Nombre de Maria.²⁷ Knowing that they would be captured by the military, Stephanie M. Huez has found, they were intent on returning with international attention so that they, and others, could emerge from hiding and settle.²⁸ The FPL organised and encouraged the returnees to occupy the church. In one celebratory illustrated depiction of the events drawn at the time, María Chichilco, FPL commander in Chalatenango, is shown as rallying the gathered crowd saying 'You will go on foot, but you will return by buses and trucks to San José las Flores'.²⁹ As Chichilco later told

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ CAJIT Special Advisory, 'Salvadoran Insurgent Manipulation of Repopulation and Repatriation Projects'.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Stephanie M. Huez, 'Remembering the Return from Exodus: An Analysis of a Salvadoran Community's Local History Reenactment', *Journal of Latino / Latin American Studies* 11 (2021): 59.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ascoli, *Tiempo de Guerra*, 89.

Huezo, ‘we [the FMLN] conducted a consciousness-raising campaign to end *guindas*...then with the people of Chalate we took the church *Nombre de María*’.³⁰

Repopulation, therefore, was linked not only to peace but also to the FMLN’s strategy to both win the war and to ensure their political strength in a post-war society. As Ralph Sprenkels has highlighted, repopulations served to bolster land claims made by the FMLN during peace negotiations.³¹ Comments by Joaquín Villalobos, of the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People’s Revolutionary Army, ERP) meanwhile nodded toward the construction of a voting base for future elections.³²

Just as the mass return of refugees from Honduras to El Salvador was preceded by the earlier planned return of internally displaced people, so too was the large-scale return of refugees to Nicaragua. As outlined in Chapter Four, by the end of 1985 some 14,000 people had returned to their villages along the Río Coco from *Tasba Pri*, the Sandinista settlement to where they had earlier been relocated.³³ Much as the (earlier described) Duarte government’s political opening was a response to growing international criticism of the regime’s human rights record, so, too, was Managua’s policy of allowing a ‘return to the river’. Notably, permission to leave *Tasba Pri* for the Río Coco came shortly after an address by Ronald Reagan to the Nicaragua Refugee Fund in which he lamented the ‘incarceration’ of Indians at *Tasba Pri* before urging support in halting the spread of the Sandinista ‘poison’ throughout the ‘free’ hemisphere.³⁴ Shoring up support, particularly from Western Europe, was important

³⁰ María Chichilco as quoted in Huezo, ‘Remembering the Return from Exodus’, 65.

³¹ Sprenkels, *Revolution & Accommodation*, 214.

³² Elisabeth Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003), 177-76.

³³ Margaret D. Wilde, ‘A Missionary Church in Ethnic and Political Conflict: The Case of the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast’, talk at Cornell College, 21/2/1989, Margaret D. Wilde, BWM 424, Moravian Church Board of World Mission archives Bethlehem PA, (hence BWM)

³⁴ Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at a Fund-Raising Dinner for the Nicaragua Refugee Fund’, 15/04/1985, accessed online 4/8/2023 (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-fund-raising-dinner-for-the-nicaragua-refugee-fund>).

to Managua, particularly in the aftermath of the 1983 US invasion of Grenada which highlighted Washington's preparedness to resort to direct intervention to meet its Cold War goals.³⁵ The return of refugees was one way by which the Nicaraguan government could assure Western European countries, ever more attentive to human rights abuses, that it had rectified its policy on the Atlantic Coast.

Along with the international dimension, the 'return to the river' was also aimed at improving relations with the Miskito population. This was in keeping with earlier government efforts which included releasing the majority of detained Miskitos in December 1983 and the announcement of a general amnesty for those who had opposed the government.³⁶ A less publicised development was the suspension of large-scale arrests during military sweeps of Miskito villages.³⁷ In October 1984, Brooklyn Rivera was permitted to return to Nicaragua for a ten-day trip while, in December of that year, talks between the government and Rivera's *Miskito, Sumu, Rama and Sandinista, Asla Takana* (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Working Together, MISURASATA) got underway in Bogotá.³⁸

Peace talks with Rivera soon collapsed, however, and it was in the aftermath of this that the announcement of a return from *Tasba Pri* came. In July 1985, meanwhile, in a move dismissed by Rivera as a unilateral imposition of Sandinista ideas, and rejected by KISAN (*Kos Indianka Aslasa Nicaragua*, Nicaragua Coast Indian Union) and MISURA's (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama) leadership, the government initiated an autonomy project, assembling over 100 coastal leaders in Managua and publishing proposals for the creation of 'autonomous regions'

³⁵ Eline van Ommen, *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War* (California: University of California Press: 2024): 120.

³⁶ R. L. Owen, British Embassy Costa Rica to J. Elsdon, FCO 'Nicaragua: Miskito Amnesty and Ortega 4 December Speech', 9/12/1983, FCO 99/1645, TNA; Juan E. Mendez, Americas Watch, to Commandante Guerrillero William Ramirez, 4/6/1984, Human Rights Organisations – Correspondence, BWM 257, BWM.

³⁷ Wilde, 'A Missionary Church in Ethnic and Political Conflict'.

³⁸ Martin Diskin, Thomas Bossert, Salomón Nahmad S., Stéfano Varese, *Peace and Autonomy on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: A report of the LASA task force on human rights and academic freedom*, (Pittsburgh: Latin American Studies Association: 1986).

on the Atlantic Coast.³⁹ Perhaps the clearest indication that anti-Sandinista Miskito leaders viewed Managua's concessions and overtures to the indigenous population as undermining their armed struggle came in the aftermath of the repopulation from *Tasba Pri*. Here, as detailed in the previous chapter, KISAN employed disinformation and intimidation to force thousands, many of whom had come from *Tasba Pri*, into Honduras in an attempt to generate renewed criticism of Managua, to increase the population under its control in Honduras, and to convince those already in Honduras that conditions at home had not improved.

The very different nature of the Contra War compared to the Salvadoran conflict thus meant that Contra leaders were forced to struggle against regional developments which favoured repatriation, while FMLN leaders were able to embrace them. The FMLN's military and political strength lay in El Salvador, in areas to which the refugees would return. In contrast, Honduras was the main staging ground for the Contra War and thus leaders found themselves working against these developments, and against the refugees' growing instinct to return home.

The Return to El Salvador: a Blow for Peace and for the FMLN's Campaign

Excitement was the main emotion recalled by Roberto when describing his return from Colomoncagua to Morazán, El Salvador in 1990.⁴⁰ A child when he arrived in Colomoncagua some nine years previously, he only had faint memories of El Salvador. However, as Teresa Cruz, a former refugee of Mesa Grande, recalled, there was also much sadness in returning to areas where loved ones had been massacred and lives uprooted.⁴¹ Celia, who repatriated from Mesa Grande in 1986 described the fear of returning during an ongoing war. Yet, she explained this fear was tempered by a love for El Salvador and the conviction that returning

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Roberto, author's interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

⁴¹ Teresa Cruz, author's interview, online, 6/9/2021.

was important.⁴² It was this fear of returning to the war he had escaped, that meant that Manuel Monterrosa, a refugee of Mesa Grande, did not return until after the signing of the peace accords in 1992.⁴³

As well as being a deeply personal and emotive issue for the refugees, a primary driver of repopulation was, according to Ángel Serrano, a member of Mesa Grande's first repopulation committee, to assist the FMLN and to 'contribute to the revolutionary process'.⁴⁴ The FMLN's aforementioned reversion to guerrilla warfare, difficulties in obtaining food and medicine, and the drive to engage the *masas* all meant that, by returning to El Salvador, refugees, like those engaged in internal repopulations, could better assist the FMLN's campaign. According to US intelligence reports, this strategy had long since been planned. Captured FPL documents from March 1984, for example, highlighted repopulation as a partial solution to these difficulties.⁴⁵ Repopulation through legal channels was also considered helpful, according to the US intelligence summary of these documents, in combatting government efforts to depopulate those same areas.⁴⁶ Another captured FPL document allegedly spoke of the need to 'relocate the greatest possible number of displaced personnel in the FMLN-occupied zones in Chalatenango' and to 'mould the repatriation process into a factor that will ensure FMLN control and, at the same time, strengthen the FMLN strategic rear guard'.⁴⁷

Repatriation was, however, not in keeping with the ERP's strategy. As Serrano noted, given Colomoncagua's proximity to the border it made more strategic sense for the ERP to maintain the camp's population in Honduras than it did for the FPL regarding Mesa Grande.⁴⁸

⁴² Celia, author's interview, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 25/10/2022.

⁴³ Manuel Monterrosa, author's interview, online, 25/10/2021.

⁴⁴ Ángel Serrano, author interview, online, 3/10/2021.

⁴⁵ CAJIT Special Advisory, 'Salvadoran Insurgent Manipulation of Repopulation and Repatriation Projects', 10/04/1989, DNSA, ES 1980 – 1994.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Serrano, author's interview.

An accord between the FPL and the ERP in June 1988 spelt this out, speaking to the ‘different realities’ which existed between the camps, each requiring their own line of action.⁴⁹ In addition to the camps’ distances from the border, the accord also noted that Mesa Grande’s targeted areas of repopulation were closer to urban centres and relatively accessible whereas the areas to which Colomoncagua’s population would return were isolated and subject to military encirclement.⁵⁰

The Duarte government was not opposed to the principle of refugee repatriation. Given the focus on improving its international image, a return of refugees could, after all, be used as proof of improved conditions within El Salvador. While the government had publicly signalled its support for repatriation, participating in a 1986 UNHCR-sponsored Tripartite Commission to plan and promote voluntary repatriation, it was unprepared to handle repatriation as proposed by Mesa Grande’s *Comité de Repoblacion* in January 1987.⁵¹ Among the refugees’ eight conditions were that they would collectively repatriate to places of their choosing which would then remain free from military posts, would not be targeted by government bombing, and would remain open to assistance from the international community.⁵²

Such conditions were unacceptable to San Salvador, in particular the stipulation that refugees choose the areas to which they would return. Such a demand clearly conflicted with the government’s strategic repopulation efforts while the government and military were aware that the proposed repatriation fitted with the FMLN’s strategy. Unable to reject

⁴⁹ Direccion Nacional de Inteligencia Republica de El Salvador, ‘Documentos Subversivos: Plan Fuego’, ‘Reunion del Secretariado del Comite Central del Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos, realizada en Junio de 1988, en Morazán’, File 8, Box 6, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford, CA, (hence: DS).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 190.

⁵² UNHCR Honduras to UNHCR Geneva, ‘Mission undersigned to Mesa Grande’, 19/1/1987, 610.HON.SAL.A, UNHCR.

repatriation outright, the government chose non-engagement, issuing no response to the refugees nor meeting with them, despite the urging of UNHCR officials.⁵³

Pressure, however, continued to mount. Rivera y Damas, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was particularly supportive of the refugees' demands. His Social Secretariat, the operational Church agency for displaced and marginalised people, under Father Octavio Cruz, would play an important role in coordinating and building support for the Mesa Grande repatriations. In a visit to Mesa Grande in February 1987, Cruz promised the refugees his support while emphasising that, if repatriation was fuelled solely by difficulties in Honduras then they should remain there as the situation in El Salvador was worse again.⁵⁴ Within El Salvador, meanwhile, the Church oriented its assistance and development programmes with displaced people toward those who did not wish to work through government-sponsored programmes.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, as Cruz made clear to Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas, the UNHCR's representative in its newly opened El Salvador office, the Church wanted the UNHCR, rather than the government, to adopt a leadership role in the repatriations.⁵⁶ In addition to promising financial assistance to help rebuild repatriated communities, Church officials also used their position to pressure the government in the face of its inaction. In June 1987, for example, Rivera y Damas publicly called for all those who wished to return to their places of origin to be able to do so without discrimination.⁵⁷

The refugees were effective not just at mobilising pressure from within El Salvador but also internationally. Here, refugees and their supporters relied on apolitical language and

⁵³ L. Franco (UNHCR Regional Rep. in Central America) to R. Muller (UNHCR Head Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean), 21/4/1987, 610.HON.SAL.B, UNHCR.

⁵⁴ Roberto Rodriguez-Casabuenas, UNHCR San Salvador to UNHCR Geneva, 'Repatriation in El Salvador', 4/3/1987, 610.HON.SAL.A, UNHCR.

⁵⁵ R. Casabuenas, 'Progress Report on the Mission in El Salvador (22 August – 16 September), 16/09/1986, 001.SAL.A, UNHCR.

⁵⁶ R. Casabuenas, 'Repatriation in El Salvador', 4/3/1987; R. Casabuenas, 18/2/1987, 610.HON.SAL.A, UNHCR.

⁵⁷ Rev. Gustav Schultz, Eileen M. Purcell, National Interfaith Campaign in Solidarity with the Salvadoran Refugees of Mesa Grande on Their Journey Home, 1/6/1987, Folder 39, Box 7, National Sanctuary Defence Fund Collection, Graduate Theological Union Library, Berkeley (hence GTU).

slogans rejecting, for example, government efforts to dictate the places of return by positing that they had the right to return to their ‘places of origin’, something which was not always the case. A letter from Mesa Grande’s repopulation committee, addressed to the ‘Religious Communities in the United States’ via the Inter-Faith Office on Human Rights in El Salvador, asked for ‘accompaniment’ in their journey from Honduras to El Salvador expressing the hope that ‘the international religious community will lend us support for our protection’.⁵⁸ Other announcements even confronted accusations of FMLN links, stating their right to be treated as people without any such connections.⁵⁹

Within the US, the Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research and Education Foundation (SHARE) and the Inter-Faith Office launched the ‘Going Home’ campaign, positioned as a response to the refugee’s request for physical, moral, and material support. The campaign called on those in the US to support the repopulation movement by joining a delegation, donating to take out advertisements in Honduran and Salvadoran newspapers, giving money toward the cost of rebuilding homes, or writing to congressional leaders, journalists, and other figures.⁶⁰ With frequent comparisons between the refugees and Moses, the campaign was steeped in religious imagery. A typical leaflet read described how ‘the presence of American religious people is critical to provide spiritual and moral support as well as security for the refugees’.⁶¹

Despite the growing campaign in the US, declarations of support by the Salvadoran Catholic Church, and letters and declarations from the refugees, the Salvadoran government, much to the frustration of UNHCR officials as well as others, refused to meaningfully engage with the issue. By August, with UNHCR officers becoming aware that, in the absence of a

⁵⁸ Committee of Repopulation, Mesa Grande, to Religious Communities in the United States, c/o Inter-faith Office on Human Rights in El Salvador, 29/05/1987, Folder 39, Box 7, GTU.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Jose Artiga Escobar, Interfaith Office on Human Rights, June 1987, Folder 39, Box 7, National Sanctuary Defence Fund, GTU.

⁶¹ Ibid.

response, up to 900 families were prepared to walk toward the border, this frustration deepened.⁶² Officers were concerned here not just with refugee welfare but regarding difficulties for the UNHCR's standing. By this stage, following discussions with refugee coordinators at Mesa Grande, a consensus had been reached between UNHCR representatives in El Salvador and Honduras and Leonardo Franco, the UNHCR's Regional Representative in Central America, that they had a responsibility to facilitate repatriation regardless of the Salvadoran government's stance.⁶³ Nonetheless, an agreed repatriation coordinated by the UNHCR and the Honduran and Salvadoran governments remained the institution's preference, with UNHCR officials worried that clashes could occur if the Salvadoran government refused to cooperate.⁶⁴

By September the matter was coming to a head in a way that illustrated both the success of the refugees' strategy and the futility of San Salvador's. A statement affirming the 'legitimate right of refugees in Honduras to repatriate' betrayed the government's inability to reject repatriation outright, especially given the recent signing of Esquipulas II.⁶⁵ The statement included a promise to send a delegation to Mesa Grande and to discuss the issue at the forthcoming tripartite meeting in September.⁶⁶ Such an attempt to focus on the international forum of the Tripartite Commission was ineffective against the forthcoming surge in transnational activism, however. In full-page advertisements in *El Mundo*, addressed to both the Salvadoran people and the global community, the refugees announced their intention to walk to the border and to places of their choosing given the absence of a response from the Salvadoran government.⁶⁷ A letter, signed by 45 US Senators and Congressional

⁶² Waldo Villalpando, UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 3/8/1987, 610.HON.SAL.C, UNHCR.

⁶³ L. Franco (UNHCR Regional Rep. in Central America) to R. Muller (UNHCR Head, Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean), 'Voluntary Repatriation of Salvadorean Refugees in Honduras', 21/4/1987, 610.HON.SAL.B, UNHCR.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ UNHCR New York, 1/9/1987, 610.HON.SAL.C, UNHCR.

⁶⁶ UNHCR New York, 1/9/1987, 610.HON.SAL.C, UNHCR.

⁶⁷ Comunidad Salvadoreña Refugiados en Mesa Grande Honduras, 'La Repatriacion y el Retorno a Nuestras Tierras es Nuestro Derecho', *El Mundo* (El Salvador), 25/09/1987, 610.HON.SAL.C, UNHCR.

Representatives called on Duarte to do everything in his power to ‘assist the refugees’ efforts to repatriate and repopulate free from all military intervention or harassment’.⁶⁸ The letter was taken by Going Home representatives who, on 5 October, following a press conference in Washington, travelled to Honduras to accompany the refugees on their journey.⁶⁹ Among the delegation, which was met by aid workers from Catholic Relief Services, was Yvonne Dilling, a former aid worker who had previously helped refugees flee the Salvadoran military across the Río Sumpul.⁷⁰

Just days before the planned march, San Salvador lacked any strategy to counter the refugees’ ambitions. Privately conceding to Leonardo Franco that the government would have to permit the refugees to cross the border, the Salvadoran Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ricardo Peralta, outlined a plan to house the repatriates in temporary camps under military supervision.⁷¹ Expressing concerns about the possibility of a protracted camp situation, Franco voiced the UNHCR’s frustration, emphasising that the government’s lack of engagement was becoming damaging to the UNHCR’s credibility.⁷² The institution was, at this stage, coming under public pressure from both the refugees and groups such as SHARE. At the same time, Geneva emphasised to those in Honduras that, in the absence of an agreement with the Salvadoran government, no logistical support was to be given to the marchers.⁷³ In a last attempt to gain control of the situation, and citing the UNHCR’s lack of preparedness, Peralta, called on the Honduran government to prevent the refugees from departing Mesa Grande.⁷⁴ However, Tegucigalpa and San Salvador’s Cold War alignment

⁶⁸ Signed by US Senators and Representatives, addressed to President Duarte, 23/9/1987, Folder 11, Box 3, Sanctuary Collection: Gustav Schultz, GTU, Berkeley, CA, (hence: Schultz collection).

⁶⁹ Going Home campaign, ‘4,500 Salvadoran Refugees Journey Home Accompanied by North American Religious’, 1/10/1987, Folder 11, Box 3, Schultz collection.

⁷⁰ Going Home campaign, ‘National Religious Delegation Accompanying the Salvadoran Refugees of Mesa Grande in their Journey Home’, 12/10/1987, Folder 11, Box 3, Schultz collection.

⁷¹ Franco, ‘Note for the file’, 9/10/1987, 610.HON.SAL.D, UNHCR.

⁷² Franco to Muller, ‘Possible spontaneous mass repatriation from Mesa Grande’, 5/10/1987.

⁷³ Muller to UNHCR Honduras, ‘On possible spontaneous mass repatriation from Mesa Grande’, 6/10/1987, 610.HON.SAL.D, UNHCR.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

was insufficient to overcome the Honduran government's desire to shed its refugee burden. Instead, the Honduran Minister of the Interior signalled his government's 'strictly humanitarian and apolitical' intention to assist the refugees in the spirit of Esquipulas II. Moreover, the Honduran military would guarantee a free journey to the border and provide transport and logistical support which was not forthcoming from the UNHCR.⁷⁵ Honduran fatigue at hosting the refugee population, later forcefully articulated during the aforementioned Honduran Foreign Minister's speech to the UN, undoubtedly contributed to this facilitation. It is probable that the ongoing Honduran–Salvadoran border dispute, proceedings which had recently gotten underway at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, also played a role.⁷⁶

Confronted with what they saw as a security challenge amid a civil war, the Salvadoran government found itself caught in a bind. Despite his view that both the refugees and internationals at Mesa Grande were agitators and provocateurs, Duarte found himself unable to simply block the refugees' entry.⁷⁷ The need to win an international 'war of legitimacy', or at least to prevent his government's standing from being further tarnished, along with previous statements in support of regional efforts to resolve the refugee crisis, clashed with Duarte's security concerns. Efforts by the US Ambassador to El Salvador, Edwin Corr, to quell the Church's support for the movement had been ignored and were, in fact, strongly resented by Rivera y Damas.⁷⁸ Indeed, Cruz had signalled to Purcell the Church's unwavering support for the refugees and promised that any alternative government plan be rejected.⁷⁹ Nor had intimidation proved successful; addressing a crowd of between 4,000 and 5,000 refugees gathered in Mesa Grande's soccer field, government representatives

⁷⁵ Villalpando, UNHCR Honduras, 8/10/1987, 610.HON.SAL.D, UNHCR.

⁷⁶ Maura A. Belichert, 'The Effectiveness of Voluntary Jurisdiction in the ICJ: El Salvador v. Honduras, A Case in Point', *Fordham International Law Journal*, 1992 (16), 817.

⁷⁷ 'Call from Eileen', notes, 9/10/1987, Folder 39, Box 7, National Sanctuary Defence Fund Collection, GTU.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ 'Call from Eileen', notes, 8/10/1987, Folder 39, Box 7, National Sanctuary Defence Fund Collection, GTU.

promised that any repatriates would, for their safety, be placed in *haciendas* where they would be processed before being resettled.⁸⁰ According to the Reverend Michael Kennedy, in the crowd as part of the Going Home delegation, one man spoke up in response; ‘we are not cattle or any other type of animals. We are not going to an *hacienda*’.⁸¹ For Kennedy, the moment ‘gave life and flesh to the Biblical hope of the powerless receiving justice’.⁸²

As busses and trucks approached Mesa Grande in the early hours of the morning on October tenth, repatriates learned that Duarte had relented and that they would be permitted to return to their places of origin. Following fruitless discussions between UNHCR officials and those from the Salvadoran government, UNHCR representatives sought contact with Duarte directly.⁸³ Duarte’s ‘personal respect’ for the High Commissioner and his recognition of the UNHCR’s ‘seriousness and capability’ was, according to the UNHCR’s review, pivotal in bringing about this change of policy.⁸⁴ Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas, Head of the UNHCR in El Salvador, meanwhile recalls the High Commissioner urging Duarte to imagine the international press reaction if the government and military denied their citizens the right to return in peace and freedom despite the promises of Esquipulas II.⁸⁵

Duarte’s apparent respect for the High Commissioner demonstrated how the changing regional context altered the UNHCR’s standing in El Salvador. Rodriguez, who had first joined the UNHCR working with Chilean refugees in Argentina, recalled how, on his first mission to El Salvador in 1986, both the Salvadoran government and the US Embassy were highly opposed to his presence there, and to the opening of a Salvadoran UNHCR office.⁸⁶ With the move toward a negotiated peace and the recognition, at least in principle, that

⁸⁰ Reverend Michael Kennedy, ‘Accompaniment from Mesa Grande, Honduras’, undated, Folder 32, Box 5, Schultz collection.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 192.

⁸⁴ Franco to Muller, UNHCR, ‘Voluntary repatriation of Mesa Grande refugees: Salvadorean side of the operation’, 26/10/1987, 610.HON.SAL.D, UNHCR.

⁸⁵ Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas, author’s interview, online, 8/8/2023.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

refugees would return, and that UNHCR assistance would therefore be required, this position shifted. Establishing itself in El Salvador to monitor and facilitate repatriation, the UNHCR turned to in-country protection as refugees returned.⁸⁷ As Courtney Mireille O'Connor, a human rights lawyer who joined the UNHCR team in El Salvador in 1988, recalled, this was 'precedent-setting'.⁸⁸ Traditionally, the UNHCR's role had been limited to countries of asylum but now it operated in El Salvador in a very hands-on manner, providing protection in country of origin, applying to the Salvadoran courts for habeas corpus on behalf of returnees, accompanying returnees from the border to their chosen destination of return, and negotiating with the Salvadoran military to resolve disputes.⁸⁹ According to both O'Connor and Rodriguez, the UNHCR's work with returnees, the military, and the government, was crucial in building military and FMLN confidence in the UN as a whole, significant given the UN's eventual role in peace negotiations.⁹⁰ One recognition of this was the push by the UN Secretary-General to have UNHCR staff loaned to the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL), the UN peacekeeping mission.⁹¹

However, Salvadoran government and military trust in the UNHCR was not unanimous. In this respect, repatriation offers a view into the divisions fracturing the Salvadoran government and military. According to Rodriguez, during the first repatriation from Mesa Grande, the government and military had been split with Duarte and the military chiefs accepting that the refugees would return but the regional military commanders adamant that they would not.⁹² Meanwhile, Colonel Humberto Figueroa, who would later replace Rene Emilio Ponce as Defence Minister following the latter's naming in a UN report

⁸⁷ Courtney Mireille O'Connor, author's interview, online, 6/7/2023.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.; UNHCR, 'Review of UNHCR's Phase-Out Strategies: Case Studies in Selected Countries of Origin', 1/2/1997, accessed online (<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/review-unhcrs-phase-out-strategies-case-studies-selected-countries-origin>)

⁹⁰ O'Connor, author's interview; Rodriguez, author's interview.

⁹¹ Ibid.; O'Connor, author's interview.

⁹² Rodriguez, author's interview.

on atrocities committed during the war, told Rodriguez that his job would be in jeopardy if he agreed to a repatriation from Colomoncagua in December 1989.⁹³ While he accepted the UNHCR's 'professionalism and neutrality', there was an ongoing campaign by the Vice President and Joint Chiefs of Staff linking the repatriation to FMLN action.⁹⁴ During the renewal of violence at the end of 1989 (detailed later), UN property was targeted by the military while O'Connor, of UNHCR El Salvador, was shot at by an army patrol just after she had finished consulting with an army officer while attempting to evacuate local UNHCR staff.⁹⁵

The repatriation from Colomoncagua, which began during this period of renewed conflict at the end of 1989, differed from Mesa Grande's not only in terms of timing but also in how repatriation occurred. Refugees collectively repatriated from Mesa Grande over a number of years, with each group returning to several different areas in Chalatenango and Cabañas. In contrast, Colomoncagua's repatriation took place in a matter of months, and the vast majority of the camp's population returned to Meanguera in northern Morazán, forming the community of Ciudad Segundo Montes. In a March 1990 speech celebrating the town's founding, Juan Jose Rodriguez, one of Colomoncagua's leaders, explicitly noted that this was not simply a community of former refugees, but was one that would retain the collective ethos of Colomoncagua: 'We want to reproduce the experience of refuge, but not to produce another refugee camp in El Salvador'.⁹⁶ The tighter-knit and more collective nature of Colomoncagua compared to Mesa Grande thus shaped life in El Salvador, not just in Honduras. Colomoncagua's former refugees were determined to replicate the shared

⁹³ UNHCR El Salvador to UNHCR Geneva, 1/12/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ L. Franco (Head Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, UNHCR), 'Note for the file: Subject: Situation in El Salvador', 16/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

⁹⁶ Juan Jose Rodriguez, 'Inauguration Day Speech', unofficial translated version via Voices on the Border, accessed online (<https://voiceselsalvador.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/imag0005.pdf>)

economy of the camp in Ciudad Segundo Montes, believing they could form a new type of society than that which they had left behind in El Salvador a decade earlier.⁹⁷ Experiences of refugeedom, therefore, continued to impact life after refugeehood.

As with the return from Mesa Grande, that from Colomoncagua illustrates the extent to which repatriation and the course of the Salvadoran conflict were linked and the degree to which refugees were able to determine the manner and timing of their return. Whereas repatriations from Mesa Grande had been fraught with tension between the refugees and the Salvadoran government, Colomoncagua's seemed to signal a new era of refugee-government cooperation. The 6 November 1989 visit by the Salvadoran Vice-President, José Francisco Merino, to Colomoncagua was, for example, described in positive terms by UNHCR officials.⁹⁸ Both the refugees and the representatives of Alfredo Cristiani's government – whose *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA) party had won the March 1989 Salvadoran election – gave 'conciliatory' speeches.⁹⁹ The wishes of those refugees, who greeted the delegation by chanting 'We want to be back in Meanguera, Morazán before Christmas', appeared to be heard, with refugees assured that repatriation would begin in early December.¹⁰⁰ Discussions centred around practicalities such as the issuing of documentation and the construction of a road between Colomoncagua and the border.

Just three days later, however, François Fouinat, a UNHCR official in Colomoncagua, phoned headquarters to express his view that 'things may go sour'.¹⁰¹ The atmosphere, he said, had completely changed, with the refugees suddenly adopting an aggressive attitude

⁹⁷ For more on Ciudad Segundo Montes see Mandy Macdonald & Mike Gatehouse, *In the Mountains of Morazan: Portrait of a Returned Refugees Community in El Salvador*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1995); Binford, 'A Perfect Storm of Neglect...'; Beth Cagan, 'A Case of Populist Community Development in Rural El Salvador', *Social Development Issues* 16 (1994): 36-49.

⁹⁸ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 8/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ J. Telford, UNHCR Geneva, 'Note: Concerning Telephone Conversation Fouinat / Telford', 9/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

toward the Salvadoran government's documentation team, and toward the UNHCR.¹⁰²

Moreover, the refugees now declared that they would repatriate on 15 November, just six days later.¹⁰³ As Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas, UNHCR head in El Salvador, described it,

what had appeared like 'the model repatriation' was now becoming the most problematic.¹⁰⁴

In El Salvador, television and press adverts, aired on 7 and 8 November, announced that those in Colomoncagua would return the following week while denouncing the government's 'false attitude' and inaction.¹⁰⁵

Given the previously cordial meeting between the refugees and government representatives, this change in tone cannot be ascribed to the alleged government inaction. More likely, it was linked to the sudden escalation of violence in El Salvador. In the months prior, fighting had eased with the FMLN calling for a cease-fire by 15 November as they engaged in talks with the Cristiani government.¹⁰⁶ On 31 October, however, the headquarters of the *Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños* (FENASTRAS), the most militant trade union, was bombed, killing its secretary general and nine others.¹⁰⁷ While the government denied involvement and promised to investigate, the Truth Commission for El Salvador would later conclude that state agents carried out the bombing.¹⁰⁸ In the days after the bombing, the earlier talks of ceasefires and peace vanished from the FMLN's rhetoric and, on 11 November, it launched a massive military operation, *la ofensiva hasta el tope y punto* (all at once to the maximum), with simultaneous attacks on government positions in San Salvador and across the country.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ R. Rodriguez, UNHCR El Salvador, to UNHCR Geneva, 11/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1995), 216.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 242

¹⁰⁹ Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 432.

Seven days later, with the evacuation of United Nations staff from El Salvador underway, 1,500 refugees left Colomoncagua and walked to the Salvadoran border.¹¹⁰ Accompanied to the border by the Honduran military, UNHCR officials, representatives from Voices on the Border, and a Spanish television crew, they continued to Meanguera, Morazán.¹¹¹ Despite the Salvadoran government's position that, given the State of Siege declared in response to the FMLN's campaign, and given that the repatriation had not been approved, the refugees' return was illegal, another group of 500 followed in December. Merino, the foreign minister, along with Salvadoran military chiefs, publicly linked the refugees' return, including earlier returns from Mesa Grande, with the FMLN's offensive.¹¹² In a refugee statement signed 'the community of Colomoncagua', the refugees condemned Merino, recalling how he had appeared 'moderate, kind, and promising' during his recent visit to the camp.¹¹³ Now, however, he had presented his true face and the refugees declared themselves 'proud' that his 'fascist' government no longer wanted to take advantage of their repatriation to improve its image.¹¹⁴ Neither Merino's words nor the bombing would, the statement finished, stop the refugees on their 'path toward peace'.¹¹⁵ By March 1990, Colomoncagua was empty.

Given the Salvadoran government's position that the repatriations were unlawful, UNHCR officials felt caught between their obligation to the refugees, and their desire to have a repatriation agreed by all parties. Furthermore, given the situation in El Salvador and the evacuation of UNHCR staff, officials would not be able to carry out in-country protection once the refugees crossed the border. As UNHCR Tegucigalpa noted to headquarters, the

¹¹⁰ CRS Honduras to CRS Baltimore, 'Re: Salvadoran Refugees Repatriation', 21/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

¹¹¹ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 18/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

¹¹² UNHCR San Salvador to UNHCR Geneva, 1/12/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

¹¹³ Refugee community of Colomoncagua, 7/12/1989, Refugee 1989, 1980-1994 Honduran Field Files, MCC.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

timing of the return indicated that some refugees were intent on participating in the FMLN's offensive, while the high degree of organisation also raised questions as to whether all participants had freely decided to join.¹¹⁶ Indeed, UNHCR staff were informed by 'military and civilian sources' that several repatriates from Mesa Grande had been killed in the fighting.¹¹⁷ The reply from Anders Johnson, the UNHCR's Senior Legal Adviser, who noted his concern at UNHCR Tegucigalpa's views, clarified how the UNHCR interpreted its role. The UNHCR, Johnson stressed, should never oppose a refugee's right to repatriate and nor should officials pass judgment on the underlying motive of repatriation.¹¹⁸ While the Salvadoran government had every right to temporarily suspend the right of return, the UNHCR, continued Johnson, had a mandate of refugee protection and must, therefore accompany any repatriation and intervene if necessary to ensure refugee welfare.¹¹⁹ Despite Johnson's acknowledgement of Salvadoran sovereignty, and despite earlier warnings to refugees that the UNHCR's mandate ended once refugees returned home, Johnson's position was also that the UNHCR retained 'legitimate concern' for refugees even after they had returned and should therefore seek access to them as soon as possible.¹²⁰ Johnson himself was no stranger to the situation in Honduras, having been stationed there in 1982.¹²¹

The UNHCR had, of course, been forced to clarify its position by the refugees' actions. Yet Johnson's position represented something of a vindication of the refugees' efforts and a rejection of the Salvadoran government's position. Despite knowing that repatriation served a role in the FMLN's strategy, neither the Duarte nor Cristiani governments were able to stop it. The right to return and the changed regional context foreclosed taking action

¹¹⁶ UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR Geneva, 22/11/1989, 600.HON.H, UNHCR.

¹¹⁷ UNHCR San Salvador to UNHCR Geneva, 28/11/1989, 610.HON.SAL.H, UNHCR.

¹¹⁸ Anders Johnson, Senior Legal Adviser, UNHCR Geneva to UNHCR Tegucigalpa, undated, 610.HON.SAL H, UNHCR.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Anders Johnson, author's interview, online, 15/7/2020.

against repatriation. In this regard, acknowledging the FMLN's involvement is important. Those who returned in FMLN-organised repatriations were not motivated by some abstract notion of peace. During their time in Honduras, they had remained committed to the FMLN's struggle, and they returned to El Salvador with that same commitment. To deny or overlook this element risks accepting the premise of those who wished to deny them entry: that refugees could only return when stripped of their political convictions.

Repatriation from the Mosquitia: Imposing Peace on Contra Leaders

As outlined previously, it was in the interests of Miskito Contra leaders to maintain a refugee population in Honduras. Threatening refugees who wished to repatriate, forcibly preventing repatriation, and forcing those in Nicaragua to move to Honduras in 1986 all speak to this. Control over repatriation was an important tool for leaders as they vied for leverage in internal disputes and negotiations with the Sandinista government. Following Steadman Fagoth's exclusion from KISAN, for example, he advised those in Honduras to return to Nicaragua.¹²² The refugee representatives who, as mentioned earlier, wrote to President Reagan declaring that they would repatriate unless KISAN's leadership was reconfigured, were allies of Fagoth. Upon the formation of *Yapti Tasba Masrika nani* (Descendants of Mother Earth, YATAMA) in 1987, and Fagoth's inclusion as one of its leaders, Fagoth promptly changed course and urged those in Honduras not to repatriate. Nor was this unique to Fagoth; Brooklyn Rivera's stance on repatriation constantly changed over the decade.

In contrast, the Sandinista government sought to encourage repatriation. In this regard, the government saw the UNHCR as an ally, seeking the institution's help in both communicating domestic changes to refugees, as well as providing logistical assistance to

¹²² *LA Times*, 7/3/1987.

those who wished to return. Shortly after the announcement of the 1983 amnesty, for example, government officials approached Philip Sargisson, the UNHCR's Regional Director, so that the UNHCR could assist those in Honduras who wished to take advantage of the amnesty.¹²³ Along with the UNHCR, the government sought to build support for repatriation from religious groups, including the Moravian Church. At the government's initiative, a Coordinating Committee for the Repatriation of Miskito Indians was formed in December 1983. Tasked with helping to organise the transfer and resettlement of refugees in Honduras and Costa Rica, commission members included the UNHCR, the Nicaraguan government, and the Moravian Church alongside other churches.¹²⁴ Satisfied that the Amnesty Decree meant that refugees could return without fear of reprisals, Guilherme de Cunha, the UNHCR's Protection Officer for the Americas, instructed representatives in Tegucigalpa and Managua to form a tripartite commission for a voluntary repatriation programme.¹²⁵

As in the Salvadoran case, repatriation was thus not only linked to peace but was also an issue over which both sides of the conflict sought to gain control. The criticism, by those linked to the Miskito Contra, of efforts in favour of repatriation makes this clear. For example, the 'Second Peace Ship' project – organised in late 1985 by the Moravian Church Board of World Mission, the American Friends Service Committee, and other aid, charity, and religious groups – was condemned by the Indian Law Resource Center (ILRC), the D.C. based organisation linked to Brooklyn Rivera.¹²⁶ The project aimed to charter a ship to supply tools, building materials, and other goods to assist Miskito Indians in their return to the Atlantic Coast. A specific objective of the project was to encourage resettlement to support

¹²³ R. L. Owen, British Embassy Costa Rica to J. Elsdon, FCO 'Nicaragua: Miskito Amnesty and Ortega 4 December Speech', 9/12/1983, FCO 99/1645, TNA.

¹²⁴ US Embassy Managua to SecState Washington, 'Miskito Update', 20/12/1983, DNSA, Nicaragua; *Xinhua General Overseas News Service*, 18/12/1983, accessed through Factiva.

¹²⁵ Flora Liebich (UNHCR), 'UNHCR / NGO Exchange of Information on Development in Honduras', 23/2/1984, 400.HON Non-Government Organisations – Honduras, UNHCR.

¹²⁶ Richard Erstad, Corinne Johnson, 'El Segundo Barco de la Paz', 21/11/1985, BWM 207.2, BWM.

peace and reconciliation something which, as acknowledged by an internal document, would undermine the efforts of KISAN and MISURASATA to continue the war.¹²⁷ The ILRC took strong exception to this, accusing the project of seeking to advance the political objectives of the Sandinista government and the Moravian Church under the guise of humanitarianism.¹²⁸ Not only was the project politically motivated but, designed as it was to ‘undercut genuine Indian efforts’, it was also manipulative and a continuation of a tradition whereby non-Indian organisations and individuals decided what was in the best interest of the Indian people.¹²⁹ Similarly, Armstrong Wiggins, himself a Miskito Indian and confidante of Rivera working for the ILRC, wrote to the International Indian Treaty Council warning the organisation against fundraising in support of repatriation. Such work was, according to Wiggins, ‘very counterproductive’ and an occasion where ‘serious Indian human rights issues’ were ‘being misused for political or personal ends’.¹³⁰

In a strikingly similar fashion to the Salvadoran situation then, opponents of repatriation attempted to delegitimise efforts in favour of repatriation by describing them as being ‘politically’ motivated. Moreover, such political motives were allegedly disguised as ‘humanitarian’ or as being driven by human rights, thus adding to the disingenuousness of repatriation’s proponents. This argument was, however, based on the false premise that repatriation could somehow be apolitical. It also obscured the fact that Wiggins’ objections to repatriation were, themselves, deeply political.

Although the maintenance of a refugee population had always been important to Miskito Contra leaders, preventing repatriation grew increasingly important as the decade wore on. Successive Sandinista policies, such as the Amnesty Decree, the ‘return to the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ S. Tullberg, Armstrong Wiggins to Asia Bennett, AFSC, 15/1/1986, BWM 207.2, BWM.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ A. Wiggins, ILRC to W. Means, IITC, 13/4/1984, Folder 54, Carton 1, Bernard Nietschmann papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

river’, and work on regional autonomy, as detailed above, had undercut some of the Contra demands. While Sandinista-led improvements do not imply that militant Miskito leaders lacked cause, evidence suggests that these leaders did not always negotiate in good faith. During the Iran-Contra hearings, for example, Robert Owen, a key player in the Reagan administration’s Contra-support network, revealed that Rivera had been given \$100,000 to abandon his peace talks in May 1985.¹³¹ Regardless of the motivates on each side, however, conditions on the Atlantic Coast had materially improved since the start of the decade.

Against this backdrop, it was particularly important that those in Honduras did not return home. The return of this refugee population would further boost claims, largely true, that systematic human rights abuses were no longer an issue on the Atlantic Coast. Added to this was the opinion that, as bemoaned by the Honduran army colonel, Erik Sanchez Sandoval, in February 1987, fighting by Indian troops was ‘sporadic at best’.¹³² More worrisome still for Contra leaders was the Sandinista practice of negotiating with individual Contra subcommanders. The May 1985 ceasefire with Eduardo Pantin, a regional MISURA commander, was one such example. Toward the end of 1985, a breakaway group of KISAN (itself only formed less than a year previously), called KISAN *por la paz*, entered into dialogue with the Sandinista government.¹³³ Ultimately, the group was permitted to keep their weapons and administer and patrol the town of Yulu in something of a pilot autonomy project.¹³⁴ As anthropologist Charles Hales noted, the spectacle of scores of KISAN *por la paz* combatants ‘fully armed, marching through the streets’ signalled that serious change was afoot.¹³⁵ The political opening which followed allowed the government to strengthen its role

¹³¹ *Wall Street Journal*, 22/5/1987.

¹³² *Chicago Tribune*, 25/2/1987.

¹³³ Reynaldo Reyes, J.K. Wilson, Tod Stratton Sloan, *Ráfaga: the life story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press), 156 – 161.

¹³⁴ Hans Petter Buvollen, ‘Autonomy: Tactic and Self-Determination: The Sandinista Policy towards the Indigenous Peoples of Nicaragua’, *Caribbean Quarterly* 36 (1990), 107.

¹³⁵ Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 176.

in education, health, and other services. Reynaldo Reyes, known as Ráfaga, a Miskito commander in these negotiations, recalled his negotiations with Tomás Borge, the Nicaraguan Minister of the Interior, and his unsuccessful attempts to bring Rivera into the talks.¹³⁶ Soon after, KISAN launched an attack on KISAN *por la paz*.¹³⁷ By 1986 then, although the Sandinistas had not necessarily won the support of those on the Atlantic Coast, that population's appetite for war had certainly diminished. KISAN troops in Honduras were meanwhile largely ineffective, and the movement was riven with splits.

Control over repatriation was clearly important to Miskito Contra leaders. 'Intense propaganda' against repatriating was, according to the UNHCR's representatives in Honduras, spread by these leaders among refugees.¹³⁸ A 1987 UNHCR report described Fagoth violently threatening refugees waiting for repatriation, accusing them of betrayal.¹³⁹ Rivera, meanwhile, was explicit in his denunciation of repatriation as undermining the legitimacy of leaders.¹⁴⁰ Despite this, refugees repatriated in growing numbers. Repatriation, then, offers a view into the growing disconnect between the refugees and those whose legitimacy was increasingly based on claims to represent them.

From 1984 onward, the number of UNHCR-assisted repatriations from the Mosquitia grew steadily.¹⁴¹ While 242 such repatriations occurred in 1984, this rose to 961 in 1985, 1,770 in 1986, and 4,100 in 1987.¹⁴² Those who returned were not exclusively responding to the improved conditions in Nicaragua. Nor were they necessarily endorsing the Sandinista government. Instead, they complained of conditions in Honduras and this, coupled with the improvements in Nicaragua, meant that repatriation was often seen as the lesser of two evils.

¹³⁶ Reyes, Wilson, Sloan, *Ráfaga*, 164.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Waldo Villalpando, UNHCR Honduras to UNHCR Geneva, 10/8/1987, 610.HON.NIC.B, UNHCR.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Refugees who repatriated without UNHCR assistance are not tracked here. For obvious reasons it is more difficult to estimate these numbers.

¹⁴² Marvin Ortega, *Nicaraguan Repatriation to Mosquitia* (Georgetown: Hemispheric Migration Project Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance Georgetown University: 1991), 34.

This, at least, was the sentiment expressed by Carlos as he boarded a UNHCR truck at Mocerón bound for Nicaragua: 'I do not think I will have a happy life there [Nicaragua], but it is better to be poor there than poor here'.¹⁴³ Similarly, Guillermo, also boarding that truck after five years in Honduras, complained that, in Honduras, 'we never have enough to eat; we cannot work or plant'.¹⁴⁴

If not an endorsement of the Sandinistas, repatriation was, for some, therefore, a repudiation of refugeedom in Honduras and the Miskito Contra. As one returning refugee remarked, 'all three [Fagoth, Diego, and Rivera] want to be number one still. I do not think they have learned anything'.¹⁴⁵ The alliance with the wider Contra movement was meanwhile referenced by Uriel Vanegas, a former Miskito commander: 'we never got along well with the CIA and the FDN...they've just wanted to use us politically'.¹⁴⁶ The fact that those urging the refugees to remain as refugees were themselves living comfortably did not go unnoticed. As Ráfaga, the KISAN *por la paz* leader, remembered discussing with those who had returned to Nicaragua, both Diego and Fagoth had moved their families to Miami Beach and purchased Florida homes.¹⁴⁷

Unsurprisingly, when repatriation did occur it was discredited by its opponents and presented as something forced upon the refugees. Bernard Nietschmann, a UC Berkeley academic turned advisor to anti-Sandinista Miskito leaders, for example, wrote of the UNHCR's 'forced' removal of refugees from Honduras. Refugees, he claimed, were returning because they would rather die on their own land than 'sit in the mud in the refugee camps and be abused by the UNHCR'.¹⁴⁸ Dr. Von Houwaldt, a former German Ambassador to Nicaragua

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ *LA Times*, 2/8/1987.

¹⁴⁶ *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 8/5/1988, as found in 92/807, Carton 11, Nicaragua Information Center Records, Bancroft Library Berkeley.

¹⁴⁷ Ráfaga, 164.

¹⁴⁸ Bernard Nietschmann, *The Unknown War: The Miskito Nation, Nicaragua, and the United States*, (New York: Freedom House: 1998), 44.

turned champion of the Mayanga cause meanwhile railed against the ‘leftist fanatics’ of the ‘refugee authorities’ who, he claimed, had tricked the ‘poor’, ‘clueless people’ into returning to serve political purposes.¹⁴⁹ This paternalistic and patronising view was roundly rejected by Robert Muller, UNHCR Head Regional Bureau for Americas and Europe, who outlined the process by which refugees were informed of the realities in Nicaragua and were free to come to their own individual conclusions about the best course of action.¹⁵⁰

Honduran Perspectives

An important factor in the growing number of repatriations was the evolving attitude of the Honduran government. Having initially rejected the UNHCR-proposed tripartite commission, the Honduran government agreed to its formation in 1987 while, that May, permission was granted for repatriation flights to depart from the airstrip at Mocerón rather than Tegucigalpa, reducing the length of the repatriation journey dramatically.¹⁵¹ Within several days of this decision, some 500 refugees applied for repatriation.¹⁵² The situation was further improved that October with the opening of a border post at Leimus allowing refugees to cross the Río Coco by boat under UNHCR protection.¹⁵³ During 1988 the number of UNHCR-assisted repatriations increased again, to 8,055.¹⁵⁴

This changing Honduran position concerning repatriation offers a view into Tegucigalpa’s increasing ambivalence to the Contra War. As noted previously, the overthrow of General Álvarez was precipitated by the growing unease of other military figures with his

¹⁴⁹ Dr. Jur. Martin Kriele to Robert Muller, Head Regional Bureau for Americas and Europe, 3/4/1986, 610.HON.NIC.A, UNHCR; T. Tirado, UNHCR Honduras to R. Muller, UNHCR, ‘Voluntary Repatriation Sumo Nicaraguan Refugees’, 31/07/1986, 610.HON.NIC.A, UNHCR.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ L. Valladares Lanza, Legal Assessor to the Honduran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Organising the Homeward Movement’, *Refugees*, March 1989, SCF/OP/3/AMCN/6, Save The Children UK archive, Cadbury Library Birmingham.

¹⁵² Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, ‘The Uprooting of a People: Miskitu Indian Refugees’, talk at University of Oxford, September 1987, BANC MSS 2004/222z Carton 4:59, Dunbar Ortiz papers.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ortega, *Nicaraguan Repatriation to Mosquitia*, 34.

virulence toward the Sandinista government. While the new military command remained sympathetic to the Reagan administration, Reagan's domestic difficulties seemed to demand a more considered Honduran approach. The Iran-Contra revelations and the blocking of Contra aid packages by the US Congress sparked fears that Honduras could ultimately be left to shoulder the Contra burden.¹⁵⁵ As the UK Ambassador to Honduras, Bryan White, described it, debates in the US over aid to the Contras were having 'unsettling side effects' in Honduras, with local press printing allegations on the damaging effects of Contra presence including the transmission of AIDS, sexual abuse by Contra troops, and forest fires.¹⁵⁶

This, in turn, speaks to the domestic pressures faced by the Honduran government regarding the Contra. A 1986 *Los Angeles Times* interview with Andres Martinez, chairman of Las Trojes town council, points to the disruption wrought by the Contra War.¹⁵⁷ Situated less than a mile from the Nicaraguan border, Las Trojes, once home to 4,500 people, housed some 3,000 internally displaced Hondurans by 1986. Clashes between Contra and Sandinista troops had forced these people to leave their homes and, with a Sandinista missile strike having targeted Contra commander Enrique Bermudez on the outskirts of Las Trojes, many of that town's residents now sought to leave. Martinez, who attempted to meet with newly elected President Jose Azcona Hoyo to discuss the matter, was clear as to the solution: 'as far as I am concerned, those Contras should be removed from the border zone'.¹⁵⁸ In the Mosquitia too, articles in the Honduran daily *La Tribuna* described how an estimated 3,000 Nicaraguan Miskitos had falsely obtained Honduran identity documents, creating a scarcity of employment for local residents.¹⁵⁹ Although it failed to win support, the introduction of a Congressional motion declaring the presence of Contra forces to be a violation of national

¹⁵⁵ B.O. White, British Embassy Tegucigalpa, to S. Brown, FCO, 'Honduras / Nicaragua: An Improvement in Relation', 30/3/1987 FCO 99/2609, TNA.

¹⁵⁶ White to FCO, 'US / Honduras: Support for the Contras', 17/3/1986, FCO 99/2433, TNA.

¹⁵⁷ *LA Times*, 9/11/1986.

¹⁵⁸ Martinez as quoted in Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ *La Tribuna*, June 1987, as found in Nicaragua Miscellaneous 1985-1987, BWM 155, BWM.

sovereignty by a National Party congressman in October 1986 indicated the greater questioning of Honduras' role in the conflict.¹⁶⁰ Several months later, meanwhile, some 2,000 students, members of peasant organisations, trade unionists, and others took to the streets of Tegucigalpa in a "March for Dignity and Sovereignty".¹⁶¹ The main chants and banners were, according to reports from the British Embassy, "Contras out!". That evening the Tegucigalpa residence of two Contra officials was targeted in a bomb attack.

Growing Honduran facilitation of repatriation allowed the UNHCR to simplify and shorten refugees' journey home. While important, the UNHCR's role went beyond the logistical, however. Diplomatically, the UNHCR was a party to agreements between Nicaragua and Honduras, signed in March 1987, to facilitate the repatriation of Miskito refugees.¹⁶² The UNHCR's involvement with returning refugees also did not stop once they had crossed the border. Since mid-1986, the UNHCR provided repatriates with tools, building materials, seeds, clothing, and other materials.¹⁶³ In 1987, such assistance was greatly expanded with the initiation of Quick Impact Projects.¹⁶⁴ These projects, sponsored by the UNHCR, supported the repair of infrastructure, such as schools and health centres, in communities to which refugees had returned.¹⁶⁵ These initiatives marked the UNHCR's first serious foray into refugee reintegration, and Quick Impact Projects soon became part of the UNHCR's toolkit.¹⁶⁶

European governments, in particular, were eager to contribute additional funding. The opening of a UNHCR office in Puerto Cabezas, the major town in Nicaragua's northern

¹⁶⁰ US Embassy Tegucigalpa to SecState Washington, 'Honduras Legislator Introduces Measure to Oust OR Forces from Border Region', 29/10/1986, DNSA, Nicaragua.

¹⁶¹ B.O White (British Embassy Tegucigalpa) to FCO, 'Honduras: Protests against the presence of the Contras', 11/3/1987, FCO 99/2644, TNA.

¹⁶² White, British Embassy Honduras, to FCO, 'Honduras/Nicaragua: An "Improvement" in Relations', 30/3/1987, FCO 99/260, TNA.

¹⁶³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, 'The Uprooting of a People: Miskitu Indian Refugees', talk at University of Oxford, September 1987, BANC MSS 2004/222z Carton 4:59, Ortiz papers.

¹⁶⁴ UNHCR, 'Review of UNHCR's Phase-Out Strategies: Case Studies in Selected Countries of Origin.'

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Atlantic Coast, was, for example, financed by Norwegian and Danish bodies in 1987.¹⁶⁷ Opening this office was seen by the Nicaraguan government as a key element of the repatriation project. In addition to such bilateral assistance, the European Economic Community pledged \$1.5 million toward reintegration efforts coordinated by the UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Nicaraguan government.¹⁶⁸ Such peace-building efforts can be seen as a rebuke to Contra leaders and those in Washington seeking to prolong the Contra War, designed as they were to help mend the Sandinista's relations with those on the Atlantic Coast.

While the FMLN, via the refugees in Honduras, had been able to reference Esquipulas II as they fought to return their supporters home, YATAMA's statements raged against these developments, and against the regional reality which was unfolding. A statement issued in November 1989 declared that Esquipulas II had 'given new impetus to the communist aggression in Latin America'.¹⁶⁹ The 'crumbling of the decadent walls of the Iron Curtain' was, the statement continued, distracting the world from the ongoing aggression by the 'Kremlin-Havana-Panama-Managua Axis'.¹⁷⁰ Despite this rhetoric, however, Miskito Contra leaders clearly recognised that they had little hope of stemming the tide. A year and a half before this statement, and in contradiction with it, for example, YATAMA leaders, along with the Nicaraguan Foreign Minister, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, wrote to the UNHCR seeking assistance in the rehabilitation of YATAMA supporters who had repatriated from Honduras.¹⁷¹ Public Cold War rhetoric and denunciations were thus increasingly at odds with a changing reality on the ground. Regional peace efforts, changes in Sandinista policy, and

¹⁶⁷ UNHCR Costa Rica to UNHCR Geneva, 17/2/1987, 610.HON.NIC.B, UNHCR.

¹⁶⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz, 'The Uprooting of a People: Miskitu Indian Refugees'.

¹⁶⁹ YATAMA Statement, 'To US Citizens from YATAMA Free Organisation of Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indians and Creoles of Nicaragu', 10/11/1989, DNSA Nicaragua.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Jean-Pierre Hocke (High Commissioner for Refugees) to UN Secretary General, 16/5/1988, 610.HON.NIC [c], UNHCR.

the decision by refugees and former combatants to return home had largely destroyed what leverage Miskito Contra leaders had once had.

Conclusion

Addressing the Royal Institute for International Relations in 1992, Sadako Ogata, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, outlined the UNHCR's contribution to peacekeeping efforts. The UNHCR, she argued, could help implement peace accords by 'helping refugees to return home'.¹⁷² As this chapter has shown, the linking of refugee repatriation with peace in Central America allowed the UNHCR to carry out assistance and protection work in countries of origin.

Beyond peace accords, repatriation was also strategic. Given that population displacement was such an integral part of the Central American conflicts, it was perhaps impossible that it would be anything else. While the differing fortunes of the FMLN and YATAMA in terms of repatriation have already been discussed, a comparison of the two cases is revealing for another reason. The Contra, despite the relative impunity with which they were able to operate in the Honduran Mosquitia, were unable to prevent refugees from repatriating. This, then, calls into question the argument, posited by some observers, that the FMLN was able to control repatriation. As detailed, the FMLN certainly directed repatriation but, as the Nicaraguan case makes clear, this was only possible with the consent of the refugee population. Importantly, however, as discussed in the previous chapter, the consent of the 'refugee population' is not synonymous with the consent of each refugee.

Indeed, although the majority of Salvadoran refugees in Honduras returned home before the signing of the Peace Accords, not everyone did. Several families remained in Mesa

¹⁷² Sadako Ogata, 'Refugees: A Humanitarian Strategy – statement by Mrs. Sadako Ogata, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the Royal Institute for International Relations, Brussels', 25/11/1992, accessed 1/2/2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/refugees-humanitarian-strategy-statement-mrs-sadako-ogata-united-nations-high>

Grande until 1997, despite the fact that UNHCR assistance had long since been phased out. According to one of these refugees, fear both of the Salvadoran military and the FMLN prevented their return.¹⁷³ Camp leaders had branded some of these refugees as a security risk, others had experienced social difficulties, and others simply wished to go elsewhere and were waiting for immigration processes to be completed in third countries.¹⁷⁴ Much as ‘peace’ was not a prerequisite for repatriation, nor did it, then, resolve all barriers to one’s return home.

¹⁷³ Author’s interview with former refugee of Mesa Grande, 30/11/2021.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

During a 2022 research trip, I arrived at the Temple of Heroes and Martyrs in Ciudad Segundo Montes during a lively discussion regarding the community's social issues.¹ On the walls of the temple hang *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) rolls of honour while, at the front, hangs a picture of murdered archbishop Óscar Romero. An elderly man stood up and recalled how, in the past, in Colomoncagua, Honduras, everyone in the community used to care for one another. There were no banks, everyone had access to the same resources, and work was done for the collective, not for individual advancement. Here, some 30 years after the refugees' return, Colomoncagua was being evoked as an aspiration, an idealised vision of community that residents were seeking to uphold.

While speaking to the nature of life within Colomoncagua, this individual's statement also reflects the changes which have, and have not, occurred in El Salvador after the signing of the Peace Accords. As Leigh Binford has highlighted, the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords were signed just as President Alfredo Cristiani was 'intensifying the structural adjustment and neoliberal policies' begun under the José Napoléon Duarte administration.² Although positive societal changes, such as increased freedom of expression, occurred in the following years, these neoliberal policies deepened inequalities.³ A move toward 'electoral authoritarianism' rather than democratisation, according to Sonja Wolf, best described post-war El Salvador.⁴

¹ Author's trip to Morazán in October / November 2022.

² Leigh Binford, 'A Perfect Storm of Neglect and Failure: Postwar capitalist restoration in Northern Morazán, El Salvador', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37 (2010): 539.

³ Sonja Wolf, 'Subverting Democracy: Elite Rule and the Limits to Political Participation in Post-War El Salvador', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41 (2009): 431.

⁴ Ibid.

The FMLN's 2009 electoral victory, which ushered in the country's first-ever centre-left government, brought some element of reprieve. However, the government, as with many of Latin America's Pink Tide governments, was unable to adequately address the country's deep-rooted structures of inequality.⁵ Disillusionment, widespread gang violence, and charges of corruption against the FMLN all contributed to the 2019 election of Nayib Bukele. Increasingly authoritarian, Bukele's crackdown on gang violence saw him re-elected in 2024.⁶

That some in Ciudad Segundo Montes hark back to the memory of Colomoncagua is not, however, only the result of the country's political trajectory. Instead, it also reflects a deeper, more local, disappointment. In forming Ciudad Segundo Montes, the former refugees had hoped to forge a new kind of society, one which emulated the positive aspects of camp life.⁷ As many former refugees recalled to me with pride, Segundo Montes, one of six Jesuit priests assassinated by the Salvadoran military in 1989, had once visited the camp and remarked that he once again believed that El Salvador had a future. By 1993, however, the community was in disarray. Freed from the confines of the refugee camp, some simply chose to seek employment outside of the community. As humanitarian aid gave way to development grants, residents, unaccustomed to paying for services and goods, accused leaders of corruption. International aid workers, at least one of whom had spent years in Colomoncagua, were soon expelled. While some of this likely stemmed from the difficulty and trauma of building life in a post-conflict environment, it also came from political divisions with the

⁵ Hillary Goodfriend, "The Limits of Change: El Salvador's FMLN in Power", in *Latin America's Pink Tide: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings*, Steve Ellner & Boaventura de Sousa Santos (eds), (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield: 2019): 312.

⁶ For more on Bukele see, Manuel Sánchez Cabrera, 'Bukele's War Against the Past', NACLA, 9/11/2023; Christine Murray, 'Nayib Bukele: The TikTok Authoritarian Feted Across Latin America', *Financial Times*, 9/2/2024;

⁷ For more on Ciudad Segundo Montes see Mandy Macdonald & Mike Gatehouse, *In the Mountains of Morazan: Portrait of a Returned Refugees Community in El Salvador*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1995); Binford, 'A Perfect Storm of Neglect...'; Beth Cagan, 'A Case of Populist Community Development in Rural El Salvador', *Social Development Issues* 16 (1994): 36-49.

Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army, ERP), the dominant organisation in the region, splitting from the FMLN in March 1995, deepening the sense of confusion.⁸

That the former refugees of Colomoncagua were not able to fully succeed in their vision for Ciudad Segundo Montes does not mean that their time in Honduras did not have a lasting impact. There is, contends those in Ciudad Segundo Montes but also those in Las Vueltas, Chalatenango, a town settled by returning refugees from Mesa Grande, a higher degree of community organisation in their communities than elsewhere. Many former refugees note the international connections, forged in refuge, which continue to this day.⁹ Others recall the education they received in Honduras and the opportunities this has given them. In this respect, the ambition of Ciudad Segundo Montes' founders can be seen as an example of 'unfailure'; despite not fully realising their goals, they continue to exist as a framer for present day ambitions.¹⁰

Nor is the history of these camps firmly in the past. Each year in Las Vueltas and in other returnee communities, youth groups recreate the moment of the refugees' return to El Salvador. Accompanied by people wearing luminous vests emblazoned with the letters UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the crowd of 'refugees', armed with megaphones, confront those who have donned the costumed of the Honduran and Salvadoran militaries, demanding to be allowed home. In a project organised with San Salvador's Museo de la Palabara y Imagen, former refugees are also recreating the embroidery they once created in the camps. When I arrived in Las Vueltas, Doña Emma, introduced at the very start of this thesis, was putting the finishing touches to her embroidery

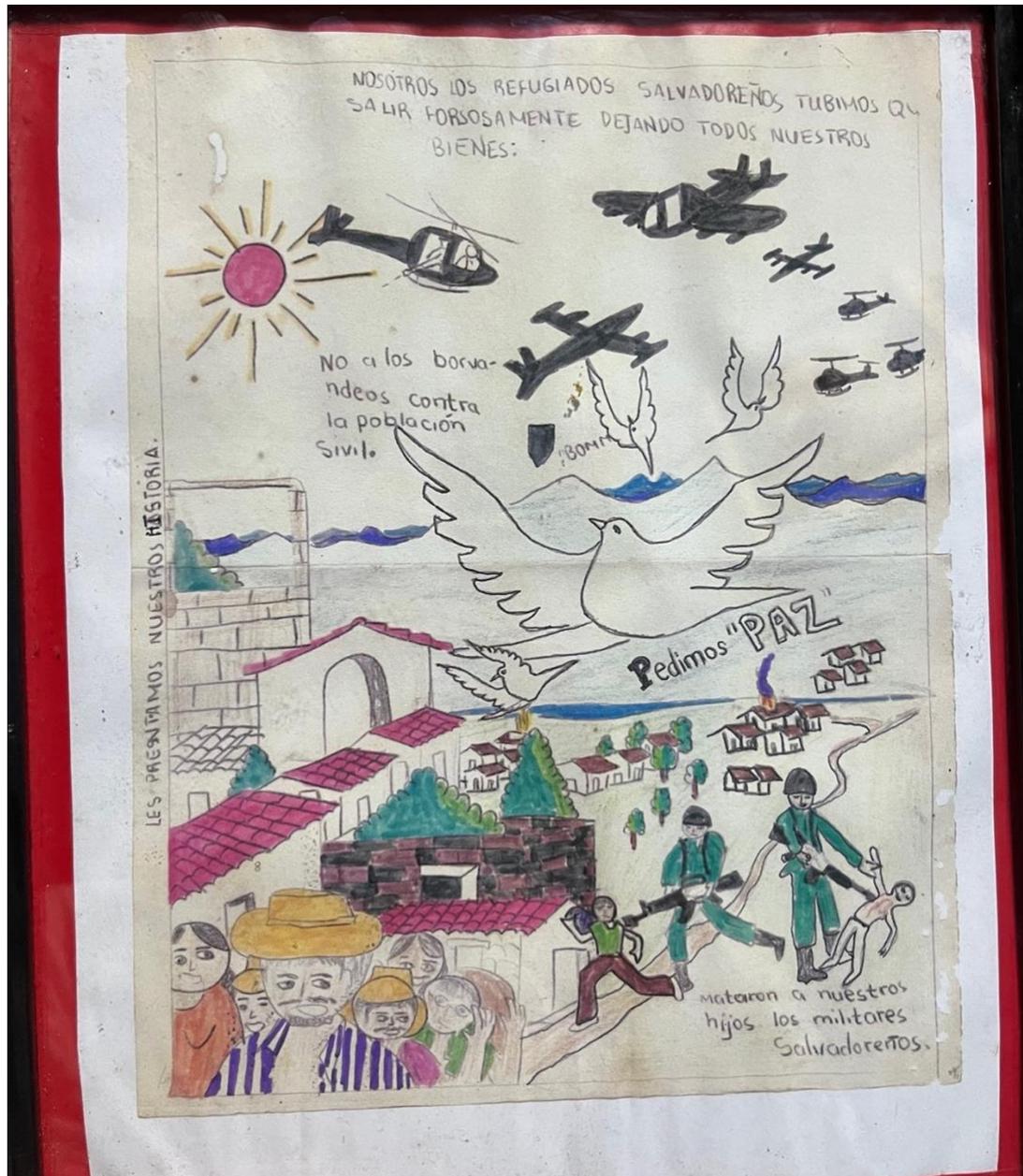
⁸ Binford, 'A Perfect Storm of Neglect...' 546

⁹ Various interviews conducted during author's trip to Chalatenango and Morazán, October / November 2022.

¹⁰ Nils Gilman, 'The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction', *Humanity* 6 (2015): 10.

project. It was a recreation of her killed son's drawing, depicting the family's flight from El Salvador.

Figure 6 *Doña Emma's Son's Drawing*



Source: Author's Image

As quickly became clear when carrying out oral history interviews, experiences in Honduras were formative for many UNHCR staff as well. Without exception, each of those interviewed remarked upon the determination and organisational brilliance of the refugees.

Some remained in touch with former refugees, putting me in contact with them. Others were quick to share mementoes gifted to them by refugees. Interviewing Leila Lima and Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas over Zoom I noticed that on their office wall hung a painting of the refugees crossing the Honduran border.¹¹ In the years and decades since the 1980s, many continued working for the UNHCR but Honduras, for various reasons, seems to stand out amongst the myriad of refugee situations in which they worked. As John Telford, the UNHCR officer introduced in Chapter Five recalls, the Salvadoran camps were a show of ‘human resilience, human organisation, and human resistance’.¹²

Interestingly, given that the Salvadoran refugees were kept separated from their Honduran neighbours, the issue was also emotive for Hondurans who lived near the camps. Each year, former refugees return to Mesa Grande, with many visiting the camp’s cemetery. When I joined one such trip, it was the local Hondurans who housed the Salvadoran visitors and who organised the food and music of that night’s celebrations.¹³ Gabriel, in charge of this organisation on the Honduran side, recalled watching the refugees arrive as a child.¹⁴ Throughout his childhood, the refugees remained an unknown other. Indeed, Denia Cortes, who grew up near Mesa Grande, only realised in the years after the refugees’ return that her cousins had been living in the camp.¹⁵ Now, some forty years later, these barriers were broken, the local residents’ rigid separation from the Salvadorans giving way to a shared commemoration.

Nor are refugees an issue confined to Honduras’ past. Today, rather than being a country of refuge, Honduras is a refugee-producing country and a country of transit. In 2023

¹¹ Author’s interview with Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas and Leila Lima, online, 8/8/2023.

¹² John Telford, author’s interview, online, 1/4/2021.

¹³ Author’s trip to Mesa Grande, Honduras, November 2022.

¹⁴ Gabriel, author’s interview, San Marcos de Ocotepeque, Honduras, November 2022.

¹⁵ Denia Cortes, author interview, online, 8/3/2021.

some 300,000 people journeyed through Honduras as they sought refuge elsewhere.¹⁶ Yet, here, too, memories of 1980s Honduras reappear in surprising ways. Responding to the growing number of refugees passing through Honduras, the UNHCR expanded its presence, opening a field unit in Ocotepeque, the department in which Mesa Grande had been located. Shortly thereafter, a man approached the newly opened UNHCR office.¹⁷ As a child, he explained, he had always dreamed of sitting in one of the UNHCR's jeeps. Noticing that, once again, vehicles emblazoned with the letters ACNUR (the UNHCR's Spanish acronym) were present in his town, he requested that a photo be taken of him with the jeep. As the town responded to the UNHCR's reappearance after so many years, community leaders organised a reunion of those who had worked in the camp. In attendance was Roberto Meier, the Argentinian UNHCR official introduced in this thesis' introduction. His return to Honduras marked the end of a decades-long UNHCR career which had started in that country.¹⁸

One Honduran who was not separated from the refugees was Mario Argeñal, the former schoolteacher who, as detailed in Chapter One, helped hundreds cross the banks of the Río Sumpul. For him, the legacy of such action continues to impact him in very real ways. Despite securing a job with the UNHCR, and thus believing himself to be relatively protected against reprisals, he was arrested in April 1985, accused of assisting the FMLN.¹⁹ For two years he was placed under house arrest, unable to work and eventually forced to give up his home. While other former UNHCR staff showed me mementoes, he showed me a photograph of his former home, which he was never able to recover. Today, he lives in a house purchased with the help of friends unable, he says, to collect a full teacher's pension. His story, like so

¹⁶ UNHCR, 'Honduras: Country Factsheet', August 2023, accessed online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103417>

¹⁷ Roberto Meier, author's interview, online, 20/4/2021; UNHCR, 'La solidaridad de los hondureños 4 décadas después', 24/3/2021, accessed online: <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/historias/la-solidaridad-de-los-hondurenos-4-decadas-despues>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mario Argeñal, author's interview, Honduras, 2/11/2022.

many others, reveals the ongoing legacies so many different groups and people experienced – at a very personal, and oftentimes traumatic level – of refugeedom in Honduras.

Refugee Camps in History & the Present

An influx of well-meaning individuals transformed the refugee camp into a ‘cosmopolitan crossroads of civil solidarity efforts’.²⁰ Volunteers sometimes stayed for an extended period, sharing in the ‘everyday life of the refugees’, while others expressed their solidarity in ‘the form of a one-off visit’.²¹ The arrival of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières, with their expert and well-tested approach, soon sparked divisions between the volunteers of ‘local mobilisation networks’ and the ‘humanitarian professionals on short-term missions’.²² For those, meanwhile, who spent months in the camp, the ‘experience of assisting’ the refugees ‘amounted to a transformative experience...which shaped consciousness and reoriented professional careers’.²³

One could be forgiven for thinking that this is a description of Salvadoran refugee camps in 1980s Honduras, although it is not. Rather, it is Michel Agier’s 2021 analysis of the Calais ‘Jungle’ refugee camp in France. What does it mean that such obvious parallels can be drawn between camps which existed in such different times and places? At its most basic, it shows that the figure of the refugee always moves some to lend assistance. For many, giving such assistance ignites an engagement with the politics behind the refugees’ condition and the politics behind the causes of their flight. This, inevitably, leads to tensions between those aid workers who have different conceptualisations of their role. Debates present in 1980s Honduras, over refugee empowerment, over the meaning of neutrality and impartiality, and

²⁰ Agier, Michel, *The Jungle: Calais's Camps and Migrants*, (Cambridge: Polity Press: 2018), 79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²² *Ibid.*, 89-90.

²³ *Ibid.*, 92.

regarding the separation of humanitarianism, human rights, and solidarity, all continue to this day in different situations across the world and in reference to the past.

Global and temporally comparative studies of refugeedom are important for revealing continuity, agency and motivations of the multiple actors involved, as well as the structural opportunities and challenges in providing refuge on a mass scale. However, they should not obscure the specificity of each refugee camp. As this thesis has shown, how refugees engage with their situation, the ways in which they are able to mobilise support, the barriers they face, and the motives and drivers of those working with them, have much to tell us about the local, regional, and global political and ideological systems of which they are a part. In Honduras, the conflicts from which the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees had fled continued to shape the refugees' lives. So, too, did Cold War politics, most notably via Honduras' alignment with Washington, San Salvador, and the Contra. On an ideological level, refugee leaders were able to tap into the rhetoric of the 1980s Cold War and the rhetoric of human rights to win support across a huge number of countries. As this thesis has shown, the Cold War's impact on refugees varied enormously from group to group. Yet, unlike those in Calais, the Cold War polarity allowed each refugee group to frame their struggles in a globally relevant manner, the structures of the 1980s, therefore, helping to flatten complexities, magnify refugee voices and ignite activism.

Methodologically, this thesis has used the confines of the refugee camps to bring together a range of actors. The perspectives, demands, and priorities of refugees, aid workers, government officials, activists, and international institutions have been put into conversation with one another thereby allowing this thesis to combine history from below with international and transnational history. What emerges is a history which reveals the entanglement of the local, transnational, and global, one that illustrates not just how

international actors can shape local developments, but how local action can shape the international.

What, then, does this methodology and these refugee camps reveal about the Central American conflicts of the 1980s? Most obviously, they illustrate how these conflicts transcended borders, extending into Honduras and its refugee camps. They offer up new perspectives on resistance and violence, showing how deeply everyday life was entangled with the conflicts' politics. Escape from the politics of these conflicts was impossible. Simply existing as a refugee was, itself, a political statement, serving as an indictment upon one's home government. This contributed to a dynamic whereby guerrilla groups sought to maintain a camp population for both propaganda and strategic purposes. But, as this thesis has shown, this dynamic was not always exploitative. In the Salvadoran case, many refugees actively supported the FMLN and worked to further their struggle. In the Nicaraguan case, many refugees supported the various Miskito Contra leaders.

Acknowledging the refugees' links with the different guerrilla groups is important. Salvadoran refugees, faced with the hostility of the Honduran military and subjected to rhetoric which insisted that refugee status and ties to the FMLN were mutually exclusive, vigorously denied such links. Nor was this dynamic unique to them. Throughout the Central American conflicts, as Kirsten Weld has articulated, one had to be apolitical, or 'innocent', to 'claim true victimhood'.²⁴ The militancy of refugees was thus, understandably, downplayed, but needs uncovering in order to move beyond the false binary of 'true' refugees and those refugees who assisted the guerrilla. To detail the mistreatment of refugees without acknowledging the refugees' guerrilla links risks implying that the premise by which refugees were mistreated was faulty, not that mistreatment was in and of itself, wrong.

²⁴ Kirsten A. Weld, 'Dignifying the Guerrillero, Not the Assassin: Rewriting a History of Criminal Subversion in Postwar Guatemala', *Radical History Review* 113 (2012), 43.

In the Nicaraguan case, an examination of refugees in the Honduran Mosquitia reveals the growing disconnect between Miskito Contra leaders and those they claimed to represent. This, in part, was driven by the mixing of the Miskito cause with the anti-Sandinista one while leaders used increasingly coercive means to maintain a refugee population in Honduras. This disconnect was not, however, a rupture. In the 1990 elections, which saw the victory of opposition candidate Violeta Chamorro and the ending of the Sandinista government, the Miskito population overwhelmingly voted for *Yapti Tasba Masrika nani* (Descendants of Mother Earth, YATAMA) candidates.²⁵ As in El Salvador, and elsewhere in Latin America, the newly elected government quickly ushered in a neoliberal economic model.²⁶ As Charles Hale, writing in 1994 noted, the Chamorro government soon sought to overturn the Atlantic Coast autonomy conceded by the Sandinistas, wishing to turn the clock back ‘to pre-Sandinista times, when political and economic elites viewed the coast as little more than a reserve for exploitable natural resources’.²⁷ In December 2023, meanwhile, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights highlighted YATAMA’s persecution by the Daniel Ortega government, issuing a statement following the disappearance of Brooklyn Rivera.²⁸ Two months later, in January 2024, with Rivera’s whereabouts still undetermined, Steadman Fagoth appeared on Nicaraguan television to assure viewers that the Ortega regime remained committed to defending the identity of indigenous peoples.²⁹

In examining the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan camps, this thesis has also shed light on the role of Honduras during the Central American conflicts. Moving away from the dismissal of that country as simply being the ‘USS Honduras’, this thesis has shown how, as well as

²⁵ Charles Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1994): 196.

²⁶ Eline van Ommen, *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War* (California: University of California Press: 2024): 215.

²⁷ Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 196-7.

²⁸ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, press release, 19/12/2023, accessed 9/4/2024, https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2023/300.asp

²⁹ *Republica 18*, 15/2/2024, accessed 1/4/2024, <https://republica18.com/ahora/37379-steadman-fagoth-brooklyn-rivera-nicaragua/>

being a staging ground for Cold War interventionism, it was home to a range of actors including church groups, aid groups, and military officials, who sought to shape Honduran politics and society during this time. The Honduran military and government, meanwhile, were not only responsive to US interests but were driven by both national concerns and the demands of local populations. More research is needed here, and access to Honduran government archives could shed light on that country's shifting priorities during this time.

This thesis also asked, what shaped humanitarianism in 1980s Honduras? Johannes Paulmann has highlighted historians' tendency to emphasise how emergencies become 'instruments for political purposes' and how assistance is ideologically framed. In doing so, he warns, we can overlook the 'humane quality of understanding the suffering of others and the wish to do something about it'.³⁰ As this thesis has highlighted, it is not always easy to delineate where the instrumentalisation of emergencies begins and the concern for the suffering of others ends. A focus on identifying this delineating line can however obscure the more complex reality - that many aid workers are simultaneously moved by both the witnessing of human suffering and the political implications of that suffering. To some at least, the two were not mutually exclusive, but mutually constitutive.

However, different conceptualisations of humanitarianism abounded within these refugee camps. Humanitarianism variously melded with anti-Communism, religion, solidarity activism, human rights, and the personal backgrounds of aid workers. The result was an occasionally chaotic one in which humanitarians clashed not just with refugees, but also with each other over what purpose they had in Honduras. Despite these variations, however, the picture which emerges is not one in which humanitarian agencies sought to depoliticise the

³⁰ Johannes Paulmann, 'Conjectures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century', *Humanity* 2, no.2 (2013): 230.

refugees. Although there were exceptions, agencies were, to one degree or another, aware of the refugees' guerrilla links. For the majority, it was not the existence of these links that was problematic rather than the instances in which the demands of the refugee collective were detrimental to individual refugee rights. Rather than seeking to deny refugees' agency, aid agencies occasionally clashed with refugee leaders over the way this agency was exercised and the consequences of it. Humanitarian agencies were constrained by the realities of 1980s Honduras and different interpretations of humanitarianism's role within those constraints gave way to inter-agency conflict.

The final question posed by this thesis asked, how did the Cold War shape experiences of refugeedom in 1980s Central America? Most obviously, this thesis has shown how Honduras' Cold War alignment meant that Salvadoran refugees were confined to closed camps while Nicaraguan refugees were not. This, in turn, meant that the societies constructed within these camps were of a very different form. In the case of Colomocagua, the collective, communitarian ethos in which gender relations were made more equal reflected some of the FMLN's vision for El Salvador. In the Mosquitia, meanwhile, with refugees able to farm and sell their produce in a market system developed by international aid agencies, the population was able to approximate their traditional way of life something which, in their view, was under threat from the godless communism espoused by the Sandinistas. The Cold War's ideological battle over how to structure society was thus reflected within these camps.

The 1980s, the last decade of the Cold War, are a particularly useful period in which to interrogate the relationship between the Cold War and humanitarianism. As illustrated by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's 1999 'humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo, the language of humanitarianism would outlast that of the Cold War.³¹ While humanitarianism

³¹ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 186.

has a history which pre-dates that of the Cold War, it would only emerge as an international system of governance in the post-Cold War period. The 1980s offers a decade in which to analyse the growth of this system and the collapse of the Cold War framework. Looking at camps in Honduras and recognising the Cold War's influence on refugee camps far removed, both geographically and politically, from centres of power, demonstrates the pervasiveness and reach of the conflict's ideological dimension.

The Cold War's closing did not, however, 'depoliticise' humanitarianism. Instead, as Michael Barnett has argued, the 1990s saw humanitarianism's agenda venture 'beyond relief and into the political world' as agencies 'began working alongside, and with, states'.³² Ultimately, according to Barnett, humanitarian workers, who once 'saw themselves as apolitical as they defied systems of power' and stood in 'solidarity' with 'victims', became increasingly 'implicated in governance structures', finding themselves collaborating 'with those whom they once resisted'.³³

In using the case study of Honduras to 'lay bare the true mechanics of humanitarian action', this thesis has shown the tendency of different forms of humanitarianism to align itself with states in the decade prior.³⁴ As this thesis has demonstrated, humanitarianism during this time was caught between the Cold War world, which seemed to demand solidarity, and the emerging post-Cold War liberal world, which demanded adherence to norms and human rights. The line between these worlds was, however, blurry at best. Humanitarianism was contested, not just by its practitioners, but also by those receiving aid and by those who sought to instrumentalise it. At the same time, neat categorisations of 'practitioner', 'receiver', and 'instrumentaliser' were all but impossible. Alongside this were the multitude of understandings of what it meant to be a refugee, and the different

³² Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarianism Transformed', *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 724.

³³ *Ibid.*, 733-734.

³⁴ Kevin O'Sullivan and Enrico Dal Lago, 'Introduction: Toward a New History of Humanitarianism', *Moving the Social* 57, (2017): 8.

interpretations regarding the very purpose of refugee camps. Refugeedom, then, was itself contested and elastic, negotiated by those actors who simultaneously defined its meaning while being forced to navigate parameters defined by others.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archives

France

Médecins sans Frontières archives, Paris

Switzerland

Archives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva

United Kingdom

Bodleian Library, Oxford

- Oxfam UK Records

Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham

- Save the Children UK Records

The National Archives, Kew

- FCO 40 (Foreign and Commonwealth Office Records)
- FCO 99
- FCO 160
- HO 394 (Home Office Records)

- PREM 19 (Prime Minister's Office Records)

School of Oriental and African Studies, Archive & Special Collections, London

- War on Want Records

Senate House Library, London

- Institute of Latin American Studies Political Pamphlets

University of East London, Archive & Special Collections, London

- British Refugee Council Records

United States

American Friends Service Committee Records, Philadelphia, PA

Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA

- Bernard Nietschmann Papers
- Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz Papers

Board of World Mission, Moravian Church Archives, Bethlehem, PA

Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

- National Sanctuary Defence Fund Records
- Schultz (Gustav) Sanctuary Collection

Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford, CA

- David Spencer Collection

- David Stoll Collection
- Honduran Special Subject Collection
- James Anaya Transcript
- Nidia Diaz Papers
- Resistencia Nicaraguense Ejercito Records

Massachusetts Institute of Technology Special Collections, Boston, MA

- Martin Diskin Papers

Mennonite Central Committee Archives, Akron, PA

New York Public Library, NY

- CARE Records

University of Notre Dame Archives and Special Collections, IA

- Pax Christi USA records

Online Archival Collections

Chief George Manuel Memorial Indigenous Library, Center for World Indigenous Studies

Accessed online via <https://www.cwis.org/chief-george-manuel-memorial-indigenous-library/search/>

CIA FOIA Reading Room

Accessed online via <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/home>

Digital National Security Archive

- El Salvador: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1977-1984
- El Salvador: War, Peace, and Human Rights, 1980-1994
- The Iran-Contra Affair: The Making of a Scandal, 1983-1998
- The Negrofonte File
- Nicaragua: The Making of US Policy, 1978-1990
- Public Diplomacy and Covert Propaganda: The Declassified Record of Ambassador Otto Juan Reich

Accessed online via ProQuest

MSF Speaking Out Case Studies

Accessed online via <https://www.msf.org/speakingout>

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Online Collection

Accessed online via <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/digitized-textual-material>

State Department FOIA Virtual Reading Room

Accessed online via <https://foia.state.gov/Search/Search.aspx>

Unfinished Sentences Testimony Archive

Accessed online via <https://unfinishedsentences.org/testimony/>

University of Washington Center for Human Rights, El Salvador FOIA

Accessed online via

<https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/38709>

Interviews Cited

Adrian Fitzgerald, Ireland, 27/12/2019.

Alejandro Ortiz, Morazán, El Salvador, 11/11/2022.

Anastasia Chicas Argueta, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

Anders Johnson, online, 15/07/2020.

Ángel Serrano, online, 3/10/2021.

Angela Berry-Koch, online, 23/03/2021.

Antonio Rodríguez, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 26/10/2022.

Arthur E. (Gene) Dewey, online, 17/08/2022.

Beth Cagan, online, 24/08/2022.

Blake Ortman, online, 09/03/2021.

Buenaventura Hernández, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

Celia, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 25/10/2022.

Courtney Mireille O'Connor, online, 6/7/2023.

David Befus, online, 6/4/2020.

Denia Cortes, author interview, online, 8/3/2021.

Denis Van Dam, online, 18/3/2021.

Elizabeth Shephard, online, 16/09/2022.

Esteban Chicas Sánchez, author interview, Morazán, El Salvador, 8/11/2022.

Florence Egal, online, 27/10/2023.

Gabriel, San Marcos de Ocotepeque, Honduras, November 2022

John Telford, online, 1/04/2021.

Jose Artiga, online, 24/9/2020.

Julio, online, 30/09/2021.

Leila Lima, online, 8/08/2023.

Lucinda Perez, Morazán, El Salvador, 11/11/2022.

Manuel Monterrosa, online, 6/9/2021.

Maria Elia, Chalatenango, El Salvador, 27/10/2022.

Mario Argeñal, Honduras, 2/11/2022.

Mark Malloch Brown, online, 2/10/2020.

Peter Gaetcher, online, 8/2/2021.

Prof. Willie, El Salvador, 31/10/2022

Roberto, Morazán, El Salvador, 10/11/2022.

Roberto Rodriguez Casabuenas, online, 8/8/2023.

Roberto Meier, online, 20/4/2021.

Rony Brauman, online, 22/12/2022.

Santos Yolanda Garcia, Morazán, El Salvador, 9/11/2022.

Steve Cagan, online, 24/08/2022.

Solange Muller, online, 28/3/2020.

Teresa Cruz, online, 6/9/2021.

Werner Blatter, online, 14/02/2020.

Newspapers and Magazines

United Kingdom

The Guardian

The Times

United States

Akwesasne Notes

Chicago Tribune

Newsweek

Soldier of Fortune

Sojourners

The Los Angeles Times

The Nation

The New York Times

The Wall Street Journal

The Washington Post

United Press International

Secondary Sources

Adelman, Jeremy, 'The Insecurity of El Salvadoran Refugees', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 3 (1983): 1, 3-4.

- Adler, Paul, “Creating ‘The NGO International’: The Rise of Advocacy for Alternative Development, 1974-1994”, in *The Development Century: A Global History*, Macekura, Stephen; Manela, Erez, (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2018), 305 – 325.
- Agier, Michel, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, (Cambridge: Polity Press: 2011).
- Agier, Michel, *The Jungle: Calais’s Camps and Migrants*, (Cambridge: Polity Press: 2018).
- Allison, Michael E. & Álvarez, Alberto Martín, ‘Unity and Disunity in the FMLN’, *Latin American Politics and Society* 54 (2012): 89-118.
- Álvarez, Alberto Martín, *From Revolutionary War to Democratic Revolution: The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador*, (Berlin: Berghof Conflict Research: 2010).
- Armony, Ariel, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America 1977-1984*, (Ohio: Center for International Studies: 1997).
- Avery, Molly, ‘The Latin American Anticommunist International: Chile, Argentina and Central America, 1977-1984’ (PhD Dissertation, London, London School of Economics and Political Science: 2022).
- Banko, Lauren; Nowak, Katarzyna; Gatrell, Peter ‘What is Refugee History, now?’, *Journal of Global History* 17 (2022): 1-19.
- Baracco, Luciano (ed.), *National Integration and Contested Autonomy: The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua*, (New York: Algora: 2011).
- Barnett, Michael. *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, (London: Cornell University Press: 2011).
- Barnett, Michael, ‘Humanitarianism Redefined’, *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 723-740.
- Barnett, Michael, “Refugees and Humanitarianism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena; Loescher, Gil; Long, Katy; Sigona, Nando (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014), 242-252.

- Bataillon, Gilles, *Cronica Sobre una Guerrilla*, (Madrid: Libreria CIDE: 2015).
- Baughan, Emily; Davey, Eleanor; Bronwen, Everill; Hilton, Matthew; O'Sullivan, Kevin; Sasson, Tehila, 'History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation', *Past & Present* 241 (2018): e1–e38.
- Behrens, Susan Fitzpatrick. "From Symbols of the Sacred to Symbols of Subversion to Simply Obscure: Maryknoll Women Religious in Guatemala." *The Americas* 61 (2004): 189-216.
- Belichert, Maura A., 'The Effectiveness of Voluntary Jurisdiction in the ICJ: El Salvador v. Honduras, A Case in Point', *Fordham International Law Journal* 16 (1992): 799-847.
- Bell, Aaron T., 'Transnational Conservative Activism and the Transformation of the Salvadoran Right, 1967-1982' (PhD Dissertation, Washington D.C, American University: 2016).
- Bethell, Leslie ed., *Central America Since Independence*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1991).
- Biekart, Kees. *The Politics of Civil Society Building: European Private Aid Agencies and Democratic Transitions in Central America*, (Amsterdam: International Books and the Transnational Institute: 1999).
- Binford, Leigh, 'A Perfect Storm of Neglect and Failure: Postwar capitalist restoration in Northern Morazán, El Salvador', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37 (2010): 531-557.
- Binford, Leigh, 'Hegemony in the Interior of the Salvadoran Revolution: The ERP in Northern Morazán', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4 (1999): 2-45.
- Bourgois, Philippe. 'The Miskitu of Nicaragua: Politicised Ethnicity', *Anthropology Today* 2 (1986): 4-9.
- Bourgois, Philippe, 'The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador', *Ethnography* 2 (2001): 5-34.
- Bradley, Megan, "Forced Migration in Central America and the Caribbean: Cooperation and Challenge", in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Fiddian-

- Qasmiyeh, Elena; Loescher, Gil; Long, Katy; Sigona, Nando (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 664-676.
- Bradley, Megan, *Refugee Repatriation: Justice, Responsibility and Redress*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2013).
- Brown, Matthew, 'The Global History of Latin America', *Journal of Global History* 10 (2015): 365-386.
- Buvollen, Hans Petter, 'Autonomy: Tactic and Self-Determination: The Sandinista Policy towards the Indigenous Peoples of Nicaragua', *Caribbean Quarterly* 36 (1990): 98-112.
- Bulloven, Hans Petter, Book Review, *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, (1991): 138-141.
- Bulley, Dan, 'Inside the Tent: Community and Governance in Refugee Camps', *Security Dialogue* 45 (2014): 63-80.
- Bulnes, Danira Miralda. *Latwan laka danh takisa: los pueblos originarios y la guerra de baja intensidad en el territorio de la Moskitia, República de Honduras*, (Tegucigalpa: Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia: 2012).
- Burke, Kyle. *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2018).
- Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers: 1996).
- Cagan, Beth, 'A Case of Populist Community Development in Rural El Salvador', *Social Development Issues* 16 (1994): 36-49.
- Cagan, Beth & Cagan, Steve. *This Promised Land, El Salvador*, (London: Rutgers University Press: 1991).
- Casals, Marcelo, 'Which borders have not yet been crossed? A supplement to Gilbert Joseph's Historiographical Balance of the Latin American Cold War', *Cold War History* 20 (2019): 367-372.

- Chávez, Joaquín M., *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017).
- Ching, Erik, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press: 2003).
- Chiriboga, Isabel *Espíritus de vida y muerte: los Miskitu Hondureños en época de guerra*, (Honduras: Editorian Guaymuras: 2002).
- Coatsworth, John H. *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne Publishers: 1994).
- Conrad, Sebastian, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2016).
- Cosemans, Sara, 'The Internationalisation of the Refugee Problem: Refugee Resettlement from the Global South during the 1970s', (PhD Dissertation, Belgium, KU Leuven: 2021).
- Crandall, Russell, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2016).
- Crossen, Jonathan, 'Decolonisation, Indigenous Internationalism, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples', (PhD Dissertation, Canada, University of Waterloo: 2014).
- Csicsery, George Paul, 'Ballad of the Little Soldier: Werner Herzog in a Political Hall of Mirrors', *Film Quarterly* 39 (1985): 7-15.
- Danuta, Paszyn, *Soviet Attitude to Political and Social Change in Central America, 1979-90: Case-Studies on Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala*, (London: Basingstoke: 1999).
- Davey, Eleanor, *Idealism Beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954-1988*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2015).
- De La Cruz, Rachel, 'No Asylum for the Innocent: Gendered Representations of Salvadoran Refugees in the 1980s', *The American Behavioral Scientist* 61 (2017): 1103-1118.
- Dennis, Philip A., 'The Miskito-Sandinista Conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s', *Latin American Research Review* 28 (1993): 214-234.

- Diamond, Sara, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, (London: South End Press: 1989).
- Dilling, Yvonne, *In Search of Refuge*, (Pennsylvania: Herald Press: 1984).
- Dilling, Yvonne, “The Refugee Crisis Within Central America”, in *Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugee's Struggle*, MacEoin, Gary Ed., (London: Harper & Row: 1985).
- Diskin, Martin, “The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles” in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, Walker, Thomas (ed.), (Boulder: Westview Press: 1986)
- Drüke, Luise. *Preventive Action for Refugee Producing Situations* (Paris: Peter Lang: 1993).
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne, *Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press: 2005).
- Dunkerley, James, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America*, (London: Verso: 1988).
- Durham, William H., *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1992).
- Edwards, Beatrice; Siebentrit, Gretta Tovar, *Places of Origin: The Repopulation of Rural El Salvador*, (Lynne Rienner: London: 1991).
- Elie, Jérôme, “Histories of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena; Loescher, Gil; Long, Katy; Sigona, Nando (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 24 – 36.
- Espada, Fernando; Fiori, Juliano; Rigon, Andrea; Taithe, Bertrand; Zakaria, Rafia, “Introduction: Humanitarianism and Liberal Ordering”, in *Amidst the Debris: Humanitarianism and the End of Liberal Order*, Espada, Fernando; Fiori, Juliano; Rigon, Andrea; Taithe, Bertrand; Zakaria, Rafia (eds), (London: Hurst Publishers: 2021): 11-23.

- Estrada, Verónica Rueda, *Recompas, recontras, revueltos y rearmados: Posguerra y conflictos por la tierra en Nicaragua 1990 – 2008*, (Mexico: Instituto Mora, 2015).
- Euraque, Darío, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1996).
- Field, Jr, Thomas; Krepp, Stella; Pettina, Vanni (eds), *Latin America and the Global Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2020).
- Fisher, James T. *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley: 1927-1961*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 1997).
- Freeman, Dena, *Tearfund and the Quest for Faith-Based Development*, (London: Routledge: 2019).
- Garcia, Christina, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2006).
- Garcia, Elvia Elizabeth Gómez, ‘Refugiados Nicaragüenses y desplazados en Honduras en la década de los ochenta’, *Historia Contemporánea* 65 (2021): 163-195.
- Gatehouse, Mike; McDonald, Mandy, *In the Mountains of Morazán: Portrait of a Returned Refugees Community in El Salvador*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1995).
- Gatrell, Peter; Dowdall, Alex; Ghoshal, Anindita; Nowak, Katarzyna, ‘Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History’, *Social History* 46 (2021): 70-96.
- Gatrell, Peter, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013).
- Gilman, Nils, ‘The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction’, *Humanity* 6 (2015): 1-16
- González, Leonel; Sánchez, Claudia; Perales, Iosu, *Con sueños se escribe la vida: autobiografía de un revolucionario salvadoreño*, (México, D.F.: Ocean Sur: 2009).
- Goodfriend, Hillary, “The Limits of Change: El Salvador’s FMLN in Power”, in *Latin America’s Pink Tide: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings*, Ellner, Steve & Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (eds), (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield: 2019).

- Gosse, Van. "The North American Front: Central American Solidarity in the Reagan Era", in *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s*, Davis M. & Sprinker M. (eds), (London: Verso: 1998), 11-50.
- Grandin, Greg, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2011).
- Guest, Iain; Orentlicher, Diane *Honduras: A Crisis on the Border: A report on Salvadoran refugees in Honduras*, (New York: Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights: 1985).
- Roniger, Luis, 'Displacement and Testimony: Recent History and the Study of Exile and Post-Exile', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 29 (2016): 111-133.
- Roniger, Luis; Green, James Naylor; Yankelevich, Pablo (eds.), *Exile and the Politics of Exclusion in the Americas* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press: 2012).
- Hale, Charles, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State*, (California: Stanford University Press: 2011).
- Hammerstad, Anne, *The Rise and Decline of a Global Security Actor: UNHCR, Refugee Protection and Security*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014).
- Hammond, John, 'Popular Education as Community Organising in El Salvador', *Latin American Perspectives* 26 (1999): 69-94.
- Hanhimäki, Jussi, 'Introduction: UNHCR and the Global Cold War', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27 (2008): 3-7.
- Harmer, Tanya, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2011).
- Harmer, Tanya, *Beatriz Allende: A Revolutionary Life in Cold War Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2020).
- Harmer, Tanya, 'The View from Havana: Chilean Exiles in Cuba and Early Resistance to Chile's Dictatorship, 1973-1977', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 96 (2016): 109-146.

- Harrell-Bond, Barbara; Voutira, Eftihia, 'In Search of 'Invisible' Actors: Barriers to Access in Refugee Research', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20 (2007): 281-298.
- Hayden, Bridget, *Salvadorans in Costa Rica: Displaced Lives*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2003),
- Hong, Young-Sun, "The Algerian War, Third World Internationalism and the Cold War Politics of Humanitarian Assistance", in *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, Paulmann, Johannes (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2016), 289 – 309.
- Holzer, Elizabeth, 'What Happens to Law in a Refugee Camp?', *Law & Society Review* 27 (2013): 837-872.
- Huezo, Stephanie M., 'Remembering the Return from Exodus: An Analysis of a Salvadoran Community's Local History Reenactment', *Journal of Latino / Latin American Studies* 11 (2021): 56-74.
- Irfan, Anne, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System*, (New York: Columbia University Press: 2023).
- Janmyr, Maja, 'The 1951 Refugee Convention and Non-Signatory States: Charting a Research Agenda', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 33 (2021): 188-213.
- Jarquín, Mateo C., 'Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981-1982', *Cold War History* 18 (2018): 91-107.
- Jarquín, Mateo C., *The Sandinista Revolution: A Global Latin American History*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2024).
- Jenkins, James. "The Indian Wing: Nicaraguan Indians, Native American Activists, and US Foreign Policy, 1979-1990", in *Beyond the Eagle's Shadow: New Histories of Latin America's Cold War*, Garrard V., Lawrence M., Moreno J. (eds.), (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 2013), 175-199.

- Joseph, Gilbert, 'Border Crossings and the Remaking of Latin American Cold War Studies', *Cold War History* 19 (2019): 141–70.
- Joseph, Gilbert, "What We Now Know", in *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, Joseph, Gilbert; Spenser, Daniela; Rosenberg, Emily (eds), (North Carolina: Duke University Press: 2008), 3-46.
- Kagan, Robert, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977 – 1990*, (New York: Free Press: 1996).
- Kaplan, Robert, *The Good American: The epic life of Bob Gersony, the U.S. Government's Greatest Humanitarian*, (New York: Random House: 2021),
- Kelly, Patrick, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2018).
- King, David, *God's Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2019).
- Kruijt, Dirk, *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America*, (New York: Zed Books: 2008).
- Kuhn, Konrad J. "The Credibility of our Humanitarian Effort is at Risk: Tensions between Solidarity and Humanitarian Aid in the Late 1960s", in *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, Paulmann, Johannes (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2016), 311-328.
- LaFeber, Walter, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (New York: W.W. Norton: 1993).
- Lapper, Richard, *Honduras: State for Sale*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1985).
- LeoGrande, William, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1998).
- Lingelbach, Jochen 'Refugees in the Imperial Order of Things: Citizen, Subject, and Polish Refugees in Africa (1942-50)', *Africa Today* 69 (2022): 14-35.

- Lipman, Jana, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Repatriates*, (California: University of California Press: 2020).
- Lischer, Sarah, *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2005).
- Loescher, Gil, *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1993).
- Loescher, Gil; Scanlan, John, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present*, (London: Collier Macmillan: 1986).
- Loescher, Gil, *The UNHCR in World Politics: A Perilous Path*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001).
- Malkki, Liisa H., 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricisation', *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1996), 377-404.
- McAlister, Melani, *The Kingdom of God has no Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2018).
- Seligson, Mitchell A.; McElhinny, Vincent, 'Low-Intensity Warfare, High-Intensity Death: The demographic impact of the wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 21 (1996): 211-241.
- McConnachie, Kirsten, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order, and Legal Pluralism*, (London: Routledge: 2014).
- McConnachie, Kirsten, 'Rethinking the "Refuge Warrior": The Karen National Union and Refugee Protection on the Thai-Burma Border', *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 4 (2012): 30-56.
- McConnachie, Kirsten, 'Securitisation and Community-Based Protection Among Chin Refugees in Kuala Lumpur', *Social & Legal Studies* 28 (2019): 158-178.

- McConnell, Michael, "A View from the Sanctuary Movement", in *The Moral Nation: Humanitarianism and US foreign policy today*, Nichols, Bruce; Loescher, Gil (eds.), (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press: 1989), 144-153.
- McSherry, Patrice, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield: 2005).
- Meringer, Eric Rodrigo, 'The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation: Intraethnic division among Nicaragua's Miskito people during the Sandinista era', *The Oral History Review* 37 (2010): 1-17.
- Molieri, Jorge Jenkins. *El desafío indígena en Nicaragua: el caso de los miskitos*, (Managua: Editorial Vanguardia: 1986).
- Montgomery, Tommie Sue, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1995).
- Morris, James, *Honduras: Caudillo Politics and Military Rulers*, (London: Westview Press: 1984).
- Morris, Nathaniel, 'Between Two Fires: Mayanga Indians in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979 – 1990', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 33 (2014): 203–218.
- Moyn, Samuel, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, (Boston: Harvard University Press: 2010).
- Nichols, Bruce, *The Uneasy Alliance: Religion, Refugee Work, and US Foreign Policy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1988).
- Nietschmann, Bernard, *Between Land and Water: the Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua*, (New York: Seminar Press, 1973).
- Nietschmann, Bernard, *The Unknown War: The Miskito Nation, Nicaragua, and the United States*, (New York: Freedom House, 1998).
- Nunan, Timothy, "Graveyard of Development? Afghanistan's Cold War Encounters with International Development and Humanitarianism", *The Development Century: A Global*

- History*, Macekura, Stephen; Manela, Erez, (eds), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2018): 220 – 239.
- O’Hara, Fionntán, ‘Mixed Motives: The Politics of US Interest in Refugees in Honduras During the 1980s’, *The Latin Americanist* 65 (2021): 481-510.
- O’Hara, Fionntán, ‘Refugee Camps as Spaces of the Global Cold War: Cold War Activism and Humanitarian Action within Refugee Camps in Honduras during the 1980s’, *Cold War History* (2024).
- O’Sullivan, Kevin. “Civil War in El Salvador and the Origins of Rights-Based Humanitarianism.” *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021): 246-65.
- O’Sullivan, Kevin & Dal Lago, Enrico, ‘Introduction: Toward a New History of Humanitarianism’, *Moving the Social* 57, (2017): 5-20.
- van Ommen, Eline, *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War*, (California: University of California Press: 2023).
- Oñate-Madrado, Andrea, ‘The Red Affair: FMLN-Cuban Relations during the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-92’, *Cold War History* 11 (2011): 133-154.
- Ortega, Marvin, *Nicaraguan Repatriation to Mosquitia* (Georgetown: Hemispheric Migration Project Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance Georgetown University: 1991).
- Paulmann, Johannes, ‘Conjectures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century’, *Humanity* 2 (2013): 215-238.
- Pearce, Jenny, *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*, (London: Latin American Bureau: 1986).
- Pentland, Sandra; Racicot, Denis, ‘Salvadorean Refugees in Honduras’, *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 5 (1986): 3-5.

- Perla, Héctor, 'Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement', *Latin American Research Review* 43 (2008): 136-58.
- Pineda, Baron, *Shipwrecked Identities: Navigating Race on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast*, (London: Rutgers University Press: 2006).
- Prisk, Courtney E. (ed), *The Comandante Speaks: Memoirs of an El Salvadoran Guerrilla Leader*, (Oxford: Westview Press: 1991).
- Purcell, James, *We're in Danger! Who Will Help Us? Refugees and Migrants: A Test of Civilisation*, (Bloomington: Archway Publishing Press: 2019).
- Rabe, Stephen, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012).
- Ramadan, Adam, 'In the Ruins of Nahr Al-Barid: Understanding the Meaning of the Camp', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40 (2010): 49-62.
- Ramadan, Adam, 'Spatialising the Refugee Camp', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, (2013): 65-77.
- Ramírez, Sergio, *Adiós Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution*, (Durham: Duke University Press: 2012).
- Randall, Margaret, *When I Look into the Mirror and See You: Women, Terror, and Resistance*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 2003).
- Redfield, Peter, "Doctors Without Borders and the Global Emergency", in *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology* L. Manderson, E. Cartwright, A. Hardon (eds.), (London: Routledge: 2016).
- Redfield, Peter, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Ex-Pats: Double Binds of Humanitarian Mobility', *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (2012): 358-382.

- Rediske, Michael; Schneider, Robin, “National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: The conflict between the Sandinista government and the Miskito Indians 1979 to 1982”, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, K. Ohland & R. Schneider (eds), (IWGIA: Copenhagen: 1982).
- Reyes, Reynaldo; Sloan, Tod Stratton; Wilson, J.K., *Ráfaga: The Life Story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press).
- Rieff, David, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, (London: Vintage: 2002).
- Rivera, “Great Anxiety Prevails in the Villages”, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity* K. Ohland & R. Schneider (eds), (IWGIA: Copenhagen: 1982).
- Robinson, William; Norsworthy, Kent, *David and Goliath: Washington’s War Against Nicaragua*, (New York: Monthly Review Press: 1987).
- Roniger, Luis, ‘Displacement and Testimony: Recent History and the Study of Exile and Post-exile’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 29 (2016): 111-133.
- Rostica, Julieta Carla, ‘The Collaboration of the Argentine Military Dictatorship with the Governments of Guatemala and Honduras in their “Fight against subversion”’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 54 (2022): 431-456.
- Schulz, Deborah; Schulz, Donald, *The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America*, (Boulder: Westview Press: 2004).
- Sigona, Nando, “The Politics of Refugee Voice: Representations, Narratives, and Memories”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena; Loescher, Gil; Long, Katy; Sigona, Nando (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 369-382.
- Stern, Steve, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973 – 1988*, (Durham: Duke University Press: 2010).

- Stites Mor, Jessica (ed.), *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity in Cold War Latin America*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2013).
- Storkmann, Klaus, 'East German Military Aid to the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua, 1979-1990', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16 (2014): 56-76.
- Sklar, Holly, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, (Toronto: Between the Lines: 1988).
- Snyder, Emily, 'Internationalising the Revolutionary Family: Love and Politics in Cuba and Nicaragua, 1979 – 1990', *Radical History Review* 136 (2020): 50-74.
- Sprenkels, Ralph, *Revolution & Accommodation: Post-Insurgency in El Salvador*, (Haveka bv: 2014).
- Taithe, Bertrand, 'The Cradle of the New Humanitarian System? International Work and European Volunteers at the Cambodian Border Camps, 1979-1993', *Contemporary European History* 25 (2016): 335-358.
- Tempo, Carl B., *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2008).
- Terry, Fiona, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, (London: Cornell University Press: 2002).
- Tillman, Benjamin F., *Imprints on Native Lands: The Miskito-Moravian settlement Landscape in Honduras*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press: 2011).
- Todd, Molly, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press: 2010).
- Vásquez, Lucio (Chiyo); Escalón, Sebastián Fontan, *Siete Gorriones*, (San Salvador: Museo de La Palabra y la Imagen: 2011).
- Viterna, Jocelyn, "Radical or Righteous? Using Gender to Shape Public Perceptions of Political Violence", in *Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on*

- Radicalisation and the Escalation of Political Conflict*, Bosi L, Demetriou C, Malthaner S, (eds.), (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing: 2014), 189-216.
- Viterna, Joecelyn, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilisation in El Salvador*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013).
- Walker, Thomas ed., *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986).
- Weld, Kirsten A., 'Dignifying the Guerrillero, Not the Assassin: Rewriting a History of Criminal Subversion in Postwar Guatemala', *Radical History Review* 113 (2012): 35-54.
- Westad, Odd Arne, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2005).
- Wolf, Sonja, 'Subverting Democracy: Elite Rule and the Limits to Political Participation in Post-War El Salvador', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41 (2009): 429-465.
- Wood, Elisabeth, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003).