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# Central American refugees in Costa Rica

Anna M. Alejo

*Florida International University*

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CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES IN COSTA RICA

by

Anna M. Alejo

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

at

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Committee in charge:

Professor Douglas Kincaid

Chairperson

Professor Susan Waltz

Professor Damian Fernandez

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## ABSTRACT

### CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES IN COSTA RICA

by

Anna M. Alejo

The conflicts of the past decade in Central America have produced substantial refugee movements into neighboring nations. Costa Rica has had to cope with an influx of refugees and migrants as large as 10 percent of its population. This work presents a case study of the situation in Costa Rica, focusing on the issue of refugee integration into the host society. It draws on qualitative field research conducted in that country during 1986.

The study discusses the evolution of the Costa Rican state's response to the refugee crisis and analyzes the characteristics and impact of policies undertaken by various state bureaucracies. It also describes the assistance efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and private voluntary organizations, along with their interaction with the Costa Rican state. The study concludes that the government's need to maintain firm control of refugee programs has overshadowed its commitment to refugee integration. In so doing, the humanitarian purpose of refugee assistance has been compromised.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Costa Rica has experienced a massive influx of Central American refugees who have relatively low levels of education and skills. At mid-1986 the government registered close to 30,000, but estimated that an additional 150,000 to 250,000 Central Americans (mostly Nicaraguans) were in the country without documentation.<sup>1</sup> Combined, these numbers could equal 10 percent of Costa Rica's 2.5 million people, a substantial impact on a small developing country.

These refugees are among the 2 million persons who have been displaced by the conflict in Central America. Many have fled to neighboring nations on the isthmus where they are straining scarce resources. Costa Ricans are alarmed by the influx of foreigners into their country and fear that its stability is being threatened.

Most of the debate on the refugees and migrants has focused on emergency and relief efforts.<sup>2</sup> The long-term nature of the crises these people flee, however, poses the problem of whether and how they may be effectively incorporated into Costa Rican society. The objective of this work is to assess the prospects and obstacles for refugee integration in Costa Rica, based on an analysis of official and private assistance programs for Central American refugees during the period 1980-86.

## REFUGEES AND HOST COUNTRIES: ENDURING DILEMMAS

Refugee flows are increasingly affecting governments around the world. While today's estimated 13 million refugees do not surpass the number of people who were displaced during World War II, they present much greater problems. International attention toward some 22 million persons displaced during World War II focused on population movements originating in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Major refugee movements now occur in the less developed regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The plight of refugees is compounded by the existence of an unprecedented number of illegal migrants. Flows of labor across national boundaries have been the natural outcome of an international economic system. Unskilled workers and individuals seeking to rejoin family members constitute a large part of the world's illegal or undocumented migrants. Receiving states face the dilemma of distinguishing between refugees and migrants while also protecting themselves from uncontrolled immigration.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of "refugee" has become more complex, as have the conflicts that refugees leave behind. Some refugees flee individual persecution based on ethnicity, religion, or political activity, but others flee generalized conditions of poverty and oppression. Protracted violence and revolutionary wars spurred by severe social inequalities have caused massive outflows from some Third World countries.

Unlike those dislocated by earlier conflicts in the Third World -- such as the wars between Muslims and Hindus after the partition of India in 1947 -- many of today's refugees may never return to their home countries.<sup>5</sup> Voluntary repatriation may be the most desirable solution to refugee situations, but it is often the least practical. As the Central American case illustrates, civil strife or warfare could continue indefinitely, requiring more than just temporary assistance for those who seek refuge.

Few refugees can resettle in industrialized third countries. The majority of today's refugees remain in Third World countries of first asylum, where they impose burdens on already strained resources. In many developing countries there is an absence or weakness of effective political institutions. Infrastructure is fragile and economic outputs can hardly keep up with growing populations, leaving little surplus for emergencies.

A nation's refugee policy results from a complex interplay of domestic and international factors. The policymaking process reveals the delicate issue of balancing state rights against individual rights.<sup>6</sup> Adherence to international treaties on refugees obliges states to limit their "customary rights to decide the terms of entry and sojourn of individuals."<sup>7</sup>

Any country -- developed or underdeveloped -- is likely to encounter a surge of nationalism or xenophobia if it experiences an enormous influx of foreigners. Fearful statements by citizens or lawmakers that their country is being "overrun by aliens" or is "losing control of its borders" could easily be found in the United States or Honduras. Hostile popular attitudes toward

refugees -- and especially toward undocumented migrants -- are prevalent in many countries.<sup>8</sup>

Although refugees have often been integrated successfully and made valuable contributions to host countries, they tend to be viewed as liabilities, particularly when they arrive in large numbers. The special circumstances of refugees are often not understood by the general public; refugees are viewed as ordinary immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Like ordinary immigrants, refugees are easy targets for anxieties about rising unemployment rates, depressed wages, strained public services, and changing cultural values. Such arguments are recurrent and usually are not deterred by lack of evidence.<sup>10</sup>

It is inevitable, then, that refugee policies become politicized, reflecting domestic and foreign political interests as opposed to humanitarian concerns.<sup>11</sup> This occurs in varying degrees depending on the nature of the host state and the refugee influx.

In the past, foreign policy considerations have shaped United States refugee policy. These factors accounted in part for generosity towards refugees during World War II, and later, toward those fleeing communist countries. Such interests have been seen most recently in the different treatment accorded Cuban and Haitian refugees.

Once refugees and migrants have gained entrance into the United States -- either by legal or illegal means -- they are guaranteed constitutional rights to due process and equal protection. The desire to extend social programs to all who live in the United States can be seen in a recent ruling by the Supreme Court,

which holds that all children of undocumented workers have the right to attend public schools without paying additional fees.<sup>12</sup>

There is a wealth of literature on the experiences of immigrants in developed countries. The older writings on "assimilation" assumed that all immigrants -- if given enough time -- would eventually become economically successful and accepted by the majority in a receiving country.<sup>13</sup> The newer "adaptation" theory of migration abandons the idea of a "melting pot" and does not assume that the immigrant becomes integrated into the host society. Instead, it focuses on the process by which individuals come to establish themselves in a set of roles in a new society as a function of variables controlled by the immigrant, such as ethnicity, education and skills; and variables imposed on the immigrant by the receiving society, such as job opportunities and government initiatives in promoting integration.<sup>14</sup>

The United States and other Western countries are leading contributors to the international refugee assistance system. This aid is intended to lessen the impact of refugees on first asylum countries. Despite this generosity, there has been a tendency to avoid accepting Third World refugees in their own states. One recent survey cites the lessening commitment of the United States and European countries to resettle asylum seekers from the Third World.<sup>15</sup>

Little has been written about the long-term issues associated with refugees in developing countries. The large-scale integration of refugees is not considered a realistic option in states with severely restricted economic opportunities. When



it appears to be the only option, however, Third World countries emphasize the need for relief assistance from the industrialized countries.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the major disbursing of international refugee assistance. Its mandate is to protect the rights of refugees and to promote durable solutions to their problems. The UNHCR is not intended to be an operational body; its funds flow to refugees through intermediary organizations. In many less developed countries, international voluntary agencies are called in to implement assistance when national capacities are deemed too limited or fragile.

A Third World government may feel its sovereignty threatened when it is challenged by UNHCR and voluntary agency officials who have their own views of how resettlement should be carried out. This situation becomes especially complicated when the refugees are perceived as a threat to national security.<sup>16</sup>

The citizens of a host country are often envious of the special care given to refugees. Refugee camps have requirements similar to those of a small town, so as large shipments of aid come in, the effect is felt in surrounding areas. Even if the refugees are initially welcomed, their burden is soon felt as locals express concern that they themselves are being crowded out or disadvantaged.<sup>17</sup> When refugee self-reliance is pursued by a government, disadvantaged groups within the society may express opposition in response to a perceived competition with refugees for jobs and social services.<sup>18</sup>

Governments often do not wish to admit the long-term nature of refugee problems, preferring to take a series of temporary measures while other options

are evaluated. Investment in integration may be discouraged for making repatriation appear less attractive by comparison.<sup>19</sup> But if repatriation or third country resettlement is a remote possibility, resources should be directed toward self-reliance strategies for the refugees. Extended stays in camps can have detrimental effects on refugees even if their protection, nutrition, medical and basic educational needs are met.<sup>20</sup>

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Costa Rica makes a good case study of a less developed state beset by a large refugee influx. It is a small country with limited economic opportunities. Policies adopted toward the refugees are likely to affect the poorer sectors of Costa Rica's population, who suffer unemployment, uneven land tenure, rural poverty and substandard housing.

Yet Costa Rica is different from many Third World countries in a variety of ways. Costa Rica has enjoyed a standard of living that is generally higher than that of its Central American neighbors. Indeed, the country exhibits many political and social features of more developed states. As a stable democracy, it has fostered a strong sense of nationalism in its citizens. This is institutionalized in a welfare system that offers health services to the mass of the population; and public employment to about one fifth of the total work force.

These factors have undoubtedly contributed to Costa Rica's liberal asylum policy. The country is a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention

and Protocol as well as to numerous Latin American conventions on asylum. In keeping with this liberal policy, in the late 1970's Costa Rica began accepting refugees from the various conflicts in Central America.

The new influx, however, has been different from those encountered before. Earlier refugee movements involved only a few political exiles who were educated, frequently had wealth, and who stayed temporarily. The refugees entering Costa Rica recently have come in large numbers; they lack education and job skills and require high levels of assistance.

These refugees are a challenge to Costa Rica's traditional concept of asylum, and to the self-image and operation of the welfare state. Official policy has stated that refugees should be integrated into the society by advancing through certain stages, from "reception" centers, to "active" training centers, to final incorporation in the economy. Through financing by the UNHCR, the government also advocates that refugees have access to national education and health care services, demonstrating an intention to prevent the development of an underclass. But accepting international financial and organizational assistance implies ceding some sovereignty, at a time when national interests call for greater state control of the refugee crisis.

There is little research published on the refugee problem in Central America. Perhaps scholars have seen the crisis as ephemeral, and thus not warranting study, or not appropriate for study because of its transitory nature. Recent studies have pointed to this lack of research on refugees in other parts of the world as well.<sup>21</sup> Much of the work that does exist is in the form of

consultancies commissioned by humanitarian agencies, lacking theoretical sophistication. There is benefit to be derived, therefore, from a careful analysis of the structures, policies and processes involved in the aid to refugees in Costa Rica.

This thesis seeks to assess the prospects for the integration of refugees in Costa Rica registered by the UNHCR, in light of the widely varying interests affecting this issue. The level of analysis is the national context of the refugee problem. My units of analysis are the institutional actors in this process: the different agencies within the Costa Rican government: the international agencies involved in refugee assistance, particularly the UNHCR; and the private voluntary organizations (PVOs) that work directly with the refugees. From time to time, I will bring in comparative material from other countries that have dealt with large refugee influxes.

Based on the prevailing views in the literature cited above, I have formulated the following research questions:

1. How is Costa Rica's traditionally liberal asylum policy affected by the enormous refugee influx? What effect do domestic political pressures, and economic and institutional limitations have on Costa Rica's policy of refugee integration?
2. The UNHCR is not an operational agency, and thus must rely on government and private voluntary organizations to implement its assistance. What role, then, can the UNHCR play in the integration process? Is this agency geared toward providing the long-term assistance necessary for integration?

3. PVO experience is mainly in emergency relief; but some PVOs have close contact with refugees, can be sensitive to their needs, and may play a crucial role in integration. How do the different political, social or economic agendas of PVOs affect their capacity to integrate the refugees?
4. To what extent is refugee integration successful in Costa Rica, considering the various interests described above?

## METHODOLOGY

The lack of research on the refugee problem in Costa Rica made fieldwork for this thesis imperative. Fagen (1986), Ferris (1985), the U.S. GAO Report (1984), and Torres-Rivas (1985) offer good comparative overviews of refugee policies in different countries of the region. These and other writings are mainly descriptive, however, and focus on emergency and relief efforts.

With financial support from the Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University, I conducted fieldwork in Costa Rica in July and August of 1986. My research was facilitated by ties with the Escuela de Relaciones Internacionales of the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica. This link was arranged through Professor Francisco Rojas Aravena, a leading member of the Escuela's staff and a Visiting Fulbright Scholar at FIU during 1986-87.

I visited four major refugee camps at Albaperal, Boca de Arenal, Limon, and Achioté and completed over 70 qualitative interviews with refugees and Costa Rican citizens, and with officials from the government, the UNHCR, and PVOs. (See the Appendix for a list of the interviews). Some interviewees asked to be cited anonymously.

Primary informants who provided insight on the refugee assistance system included a representative of the government refugee commission, the commission's former director, two former members of President Monge's cabinet, the chief UNHCR official for Costa Rica, a UNHCR field officer, refugees at the Albaperal and Limon camps, and officials from the Costa Rican Red Cross, the Center for Sociopolitical Analysis (CASP-Re and CASP-CAMP) and the International Rescue Committee.

Key secondary sources were obtained in Costa Rica from libraries at the Universidad de Costa Rica, the Universidad Para la Paz, the UNHCR, the National Commission for Refugees, and from other students researching the refugee influx -- Kinnon Scott, Krysia Munoz, and Peggy Levitt. Other data were obtained from numerous articles in Costa Rican newspapers: La Nacion, La Prensa Libre, La Republica, and The Tico Times. Two critical studies of the government refugee agency, PRIMAS, were written by Vargas and Marmora (1984) and by the ILO/UNHCR (1985). Cleary (1985) and the UNHCR Handbook (1982) describe the principles which should guide refugee self-sufficiency programs, and Koch (1986) analyzes UNHCR programs in Costa

Rica. Studies commissioned by the International Rescue Committee and by CASP-CAMP provide crucial information on the policies of those two PVOs.

While comments by interviewees, and the works cited above, were important to the writing of this thesis, responsibility for the final version rests entirely with the author.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses world refugee affairs in historical perspective and demonstrates how they have become increasingly complex over time. It also characterizes Costa Rica's "migratory bomb" by describing the refugees and their impact.

Chapter 3 analyzes the relationship between the refugees and the Costa Rican welfare state. It discusses labor laws and norms on access to land and housing that restrict the integration of foreigners. This chapter studies the public agency which administered refugee assistance from 1982 to 1985, and looks at the government refugee commission created to coordinate assistance efforts.

Chapter 4 studies the role of international organizations in Costa Rican refugee affairs. The first section discusses the changing role of the UNHCR and analyzes UNHCR programs in Costa Rica. The second section looks at the major influence PVOs are having on refugee integration. Three PVOs are introduced, and their strategies are evaluated.

Chapter 5 presents general conclusions. It summarizes the findings of previous chapters, reviews research questions, and discusses issues requiring further study.



## NOTES - CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup> See Tables 2:2 and 2:3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Refugees and Displaced Persons in Central America," in Patricia Weiss Fagen and Sergio Aguayo, Fleeing the Maelstrom: Central American Refugees, Occasional Paper No. 10, Central American and Caribbean Program, Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins University, 1986, pp. 1-93; and Edelberto Torres Rivas, "Report on the Condition of Central American Refugees and Migrants," Occasional Papers Series, Hemispheric Migration Project, Georgetown University Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance. Washington, D.C. July 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Ford Foundation, "Refugees and Migrants: Problems and Program Responses," Working Paper No. 431, August 1983, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Astri Suhrke, "Global Refugee Movements and Strategies of Response," in Mary M. Kritz, ed., U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy: Global and Domestic Issues, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1983, pp. 157-173.

<sup>5</sup> Landrum Bolling and Craig Smith, Private Foreign Aid: US Philanthropy for Relief and Development, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982, p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Ferris, "Overview: Refugees and World Politics," in Elizabeth Ferris, ed., Refugees and World Politics, New York: Praeger, 1985, pp. 1-25.

<sup>7</sup> Suhrke, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> Ford Foundation, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Alejandro Portes and A. Douglas Kincaid, "Alternative Outcomes of Reform," *Immigration and its Consequences*, in Society, May-June 1985, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Suhrke, p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> Ford Foundation, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People, Boston: Little, Brown, 1951; and Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Barry N. Stein, "Occupational Adjustment of Refugees: The Vietnamese in the United States," International Migration Review, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1979, pp. 25-45; Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach, "Immigrant Earnings: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States," International Migration Review, Vol. 14, No. 3, Fall 1980, pp. 315-41.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey: 1987 in Review, Washington, D.C.: American Council for Nationalities Service, 1988, pp. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Schmidt, "In Need of Safety: Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras," Migration Today, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1984, pp. 21-26.

<sup>17</sup> W. R. Smyser "Refugees: A Never Ending Story," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 64, No. 1, Fall 1985, pp. 154-168.

<sup>18</sup> Ferris, pp. 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Suhrke, p. 167.

<sup>20</sup> Smyser, pp. 154-168.

<sup>21</sup> B. E. Harrell-Bond and Laila Monahan, "The Sociology of Involuntary Migration," Issue of Current Sociology, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 1988.

## Chapter 2

### **CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES IN COSTA RICA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

This chapter looks at refugee affairs in historical perspective and introduces Costa Rica's refugee problem. It discusses the concept of "refugee" and the contemporary problem of refugees in developing countries -- in particular, the region of Central America. Costa Rica's refugee influx is described, as are the variables affecting their integration into that country.

#### THE CONCEPT OF "REFUGEE"

According to the UNHCR, a refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution in his home country for what can broadly be defined as ethnic, religious, or political reasons. The fundamental obligation of states is to adhere to the principle of "non-refoulement," that is, to prevent the forced repatriation of a person to a country where he would be persecuted.

Refugees have existed throughout history. The practice of offering safe haven was embodied in such concepts as "Christian refuge," "Islamic sanctuary," and "African brotherhood."<sup>1</sup> Since the modern state system arose, it has been universally acknowledged that the right to regulate entry is a fundamental aspect of sovereignty. The responsibility for granting asylum to refugees has thus fallen on national governments.

The international framework for assisting refugees was established in the 1950's and 1960's, and was spurred by concern for those displaced by World War II. The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 and the Refugee Protocol of 1967 are the legal instruments which guide states in the determination of refugee status, and outline states' obligations in the treatment of refugees. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951 as the focal point in the international refugee assistance system. Its primary goals are to safeguard the rights of refugees, and to provide material assistance to governments of countries of asylum.<sup>2</sup>

Governments face tremendous dilemmas if they wish to form coherent policies towards refugees. The fact that persons may flee both political and economic repression complicates policy-making. A person who rejects an economic system -- which might require his being arbitrarily shifted to a new occupation, for example -- is making a political choice. Although refugees can legitimately claim that persecution has economic roots and manifestations, there is widespread abuse of refugee status by persons who migrate solely for economic reasons. Even when "political persecution" is the strict criterion for determining refugee status, the use of the term varies: e.g., are persons evading military service traitors, or refugees for whom a state's discipline has become intolerable? If the definition becomes too broad, public support for refugee admission policies may decline.<sup>3</sup>

## REFUGEES AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

There are estimated to be over 13 million refugees in the world.<sup>4</sup> Today the concept of refugee is considerably more complex than it was immediately following World War II, and the capacity of nations to deal with large, continuous flows has become a controversial issue. In the early 1950's, international attention centered on refugee movements originating in Europe. Now, more than 90 percent of the world's refugees are found in the Third World, and are concentrated in the poorest countries. In recent years, two-thirds of the countries in the World Bank's lowest income category have been either sending or receiving countries for refugees.<sup>5</sup> They flee civil war, insurrection, foreign intervention, revolution, and communal strife.

The definition of refugee was expanded slightly in 1969 by the Organization for African Unity (OAU) to recognize as refugees those aliens fleeing warfare and other life-threatening crises, such as famine. While the OAU definition was born out of political circumstances peculiar to Africa, it has gained increasing influence in worldwide standards.

Enduring political crises in Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa, South Asia and Central America have forced millions of people to flee their homes in search of safety in other nations. Concern for the reasons behind these refugee movements leads one to the issue of development: What is the relationship between poverty and warfare; between underdevelopment and emigration?<sup>6</sup>

Refugees often result from "development" itself, when ideologies or policies conflict. As the Nicaraguan case illustrates, revolutionary development policies can be the cause behind an exodus of refugees. Nicaragua's activist economic and social programs have challenged the conservatism of some farmers and fishermen who were accustomed to freedom from government intervention. Miskito Indians have been fleeing Nicaragua, for example, to avoid persecution for resisting movement away from their tribal homelands and for reluctance to join revolutionary organizations. Such persecution indicates the difficulty of ensuring that economic development or social change will fit the desired pattern:

Resistance to [development] programs, which may imply disruption of individual lives and even of whole societies, usually provokes pressure and punishment. The affected persons often perceive their choices as either complying and therefore abandoning dearly held values, including livelihood itself, or resisting and facing punishment. Such circumstances impel people to become refugees.<sup>7</sup>

The most desirable solution to refugee situations is for them to return to their native lands voluntarily. The wars and civil strife in the refugees' home countries may continue indefinitely, however, leaving resettlement in other countries as the only option. While no states are completely immune to refugee influxes, those states proximate to the zones of conflict must carry the heaviest burden.

Resettlement of Third World refugees in the developed world is possible only in the minority of cases. A Ford Foundation study stresses that:

Economic difficulties in the developed world, heightened xenophobic tendencies resulting from the marked growth of both legal and illegal migrant populations, the high costs associated with resettlement, and the difficulty of integrating the uneducated and unskilled into an advanced industrial society all argue against the widespread use of this solution.<sup>8</sup>

These refugees are likely to remain in Third World countries, therefore, placing long term burdens on nations with scarce resources.

## REFUGEES AND THE CRISIS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

### SOURCE COUNTRIES

The root causes of the conflicts producing refugees in Central America are found in decades of economic and social inequality, exacerbated by an uneven development. Between 1950 and 1978 the Central American countries averaged high growth rates of 5.3 percent; real per capita income doubled. But this growth increased inequality, as wealth was shifted from salaried and wage earning workers toward investors and entrepreneurs. The mechanization of agriculture for exports and the development of capital intensive industries increased unemployment and inflation.<sup>9</sup>

Economically active populations in Central America grew and became impatient in the 1970's. Those governments that did not heed the calls for



redistributive public policies and social reform were eventually faced with armed resistance movements. In densely populated El Salvador, the traditional oligarchy and the military refused to meet popular demands for change, particularly in the area of land reform. The intense violence produced by military-guerrilla clashes, human rights violations, poverty and fear has prompted over 750,000 persons to flee El Salvador since the late 1970's.<sup>10</sup>

In Guatemala, particularly during the early 1980's, the military repression of opposition produced terror in the country among affected civilian populations. Paramilitary attacks against students, peasants, workers, religious leaders, and indigenous groups resulted in thousands of deaths. Since the mid-1970's over 150,000 people have left this country in search of refuge.<sup>11</sup>

Nicaragua too has been a major producer of refugees. During its 1978-79 civil war, over 100,000 Nicaraguans fled to Costa Rica, Honduras, and the United States. Although approximately 60,000 of these refugees returned to Nicaragua after the downfall of Somoza in 1979,<sup>12</sup> deteriorating economic conditions, ideological disputes, human rights violations, and a new civil war have led over 250,000 to emigrate since 1981.<sup>13</sup>

### RECEIVING COUNTRIES

The United States has been reluctant to resettle large numbers of Central Americans. Past refugee policy has shown that recognition of refugee status is relative to U.S. foreign policy interests. Persons fleeing antagonistic communist

governments such as Cuba have easily been granted asylum, whereas persons fleeing friendly governments such as Haiti and El Salvador have largely been denied asylum. These latter groups are said to be economically motivated migrants. Since 1981, however, few of the persons fleeing Communist Nicaragua have been granted asylum. Many Nicaraguans requesting refugee status in the U.S. are subject to long bureaucratic delays; others are denied asylum outright. Both practices are inconsistent with Reagan administration statements about Nicaragua, but reflect the larger interest in stemming the flow of Central American refugees to the U.S.

U.S. refugee assistance is channeled primarily through the UNHCR. U.S. policy emphasizes the resettlement of refugees within the region rather than in the United States. The rationale for this policy, the U.S. government contends, lies in the tradition of asylum in the region:

The United States... supports programs designed to encourage and maintain the tradition of the Central American countries to readily provide asylum to refugees. The administration believes that because of the long-standing tradition in the region of granting refuge to political exiles, there is no need for the United States to provide either asylum or resettlement for large numbers of these refugees. As a result, for fiscal year 1984, the U. S. refugee admissions ceiling was reduced to 1000 (down from 2000 for the previous 2 years) for refugees from the Latin American and Caribbean regions.<sup>14</sup>

The Central American countries have acceded to numerous Latin American asylum treaties; some, also, to the UN Refugee Convention and Protocol.

Common heritage, language, and culture of most political exiles encouraged governments to grant asylum to individuals.

The nature of refugee flows in Central America today, however, is incomparable in magnitude to any past flows. Recent refugees have arrived in massive numbers (see Table 2:1); they lack education and job skills, and they require greater levels of assistance.<sup>15</sup> Migration laws in these countries are inadequate to deal with mass asylum situations. Refugee policies of two Central American countries -- Belize and Honduras -- are described in Chapter 3, and contrasted with Costa Rica's policies. Economic conditions in all of Central America and Mexico are poor; they hardly suffice for their own growing populations. The introduction of refugees into these scenarios places great strains on already weak political, economic, and ecological resources.

### COSTA RICA AND ITS "MIGRATORY BOMB"

Costa Rica is an exemplary democracy among developing nations. Its democratic institutions, commitment to social welfare, and pacifist philosophy stand in stark contrast to the practices of its neighbors. Costa Rica's humanitarian policy towards refugees -- which includes accession to the UN Refugee Convention and Protocol -- has been tested by the "migratory bomb"<sup>16</sup> confronting the nation since 1980.

Table 2:1

Central American Refugees In The Region  
1986

SOURCE COUNTRY	RECEIVING COUNTRY				
	Costa Rica	Honduras	Mexico	Belize	Nicaragua
Nicaragua	22,000	26,450	-	-	-
El Salvador	6,100	35,000	120,000	6,000	2,300
Guatemala	-	1,000	45,000	3,000	500

Source: U. S. Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey: 1986 in Review, Washington, D. C.: American Council for Nationalities Service, 1987, p. 37. Estimates serve to indicate the directions of refugee flows in the region. Totals must be used with caution, as sources vary significantly in the number of refugees reported.

The traditions that have made Costa Rica a special haven are rooted in its history. Isolation during colonial times and the lack of an exploitable indigenous population prevented the establishment of an entrenched landlord class in Costa Rica. Labor laws and an extensive social security system were initiated in the 1940's. The army was disbanded then, greatly reducing future military expenditures. These developments eased the impact of growth during the 1960's and 1970's. Extreme inequalities of wealth -- so evident in other parts of Central America -- have been avoided somewhat in Costa Rica.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Costa Rica is not exempt from the problems of underdevelopment, nor from the issues that plague the Central American region. Costa Rica's uniqueness stirs a pride that can blind one to the country's serious social, economic, and political dilemmas. These problems (elaborated on later in this chapter) are now compounded by the pressure of refugees.

### IMMIGRATION POLICIES

Costa Rica was unprepared for the mass entrance of migrants and refugees that began in the late 1970's. This has made refugee status and refugees' rights unclear. Immigration offices have been overworked and understaffed, and the determination and documentation of refugee status is terribly backlogged. In some cases, the Immigration Service has deliberately stalled processing because it does not know what to do with persons ineligible for refugee status -- and thus for UNHCR assistance -- but who cannot be repatriated.<sup>18</sup>

At the root of these ambiguous policies is an antiquated immigration law, written circa 1940, that is only now in the process of being revised. A Tico Times editorial states:

(In) the innocent old days... the law was so broad and so flexible that it permitted innumerable interpretations. Immigration officials admitted the rules could be bent this way or that, depending on who needed what. Frustrated foreigners often found themselves colliding headlong with maddening regulations that frequently seemed to be created on the spot, and applied just as arbitrarily. That's because the old law contained no specific guidelines, and rules could -- and did -- change with the whims of those applying them at any given time.<sup>19</sup>

The gradual reform of immigration policies began in 1977 when Costa Rica became the first country in Central America to sign the U.N. Refugee Convention and Protocol. In response to growing conflict in Central America, the UNHCR established its regional headquarters in San Jose during Nicaragua's 1978-79 civil war. In the early years of the crisis, Costa Rica gave the UNHCR and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) substantial autonomy in refugee work.<sup>20</sup> Soon, however, the government realized that the refugee problem affected important national security and economic issues. In 1980 the National Commission for Refugees (CONAPARE) was established to elaborate and coordinate refugee policy. In August 1983 the government issued a decree that defined its application of the Convention and Protocol. Persons then on assistance would be given refugee status, while those not on assistance and future arrivals would be determined on a case by case basis. Steps would also be taken for possible group determination of refugee status.<sup>21</sup>

In the same year the government began to confront the problem of illegal migrants with an "empadronamiento" or registration drive. This allowed persons in the country illegally -- but who did not qualify for refugee status -- to become legal immigrants. The system, designed by the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) has had little success: many migrants have not registered because they fear forced repatriation. Also, many of those who did come forward never were legalized because the government repeatedly demanded further studies and eligibility criteria.<sup>22</sup>

At the international level, Costa Rica's refugee policy has been characterized by rhetoric favoring the acceptance of persons seeking safety, in keeping with the country's peaceful, humanitarian traditions. This was exemplified in Costa Rica's participation in the "Declaracion de Cartagena." This document resulted from the 1984 UNHCR colloquium, attended by several Latin American countries, which studied the special problems of refugees in Central America. The "Declaracion" asked that the OAU precedent be adopted, namely, that the countries in the region adopt an amplified definition of "refugee," to include:

Persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.<sup>23</sup>

## THE REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

As of June 30th, 1986, the Costa Rican government registered 29,918 refugees; 70 percent of whom are Nicaraguan, 21 percent Salvadoran, and the remainder of other nationalities.<sup>24</sup> The government estimated, however, that as many as 250,000 Central Americans, mostly Nicaraguans, were in the country without documentation.<sup>25</sup> Providing these figures are correct, this would equal 10 percent of Costa Rica's 2.5 million people, a substantial impact on a country said to document about 2 percent foreigners just a decade ago.<sup>26</sup>

While the Costa Rican government put the number of undocumented migrants around 250,000, the U.S. Embassy in San Jose calculated a lower figure of 150,000 to 175,000.<sup>27</sup> Table 2:2 indicates that a portion of the migrants are Nicaraguans who have been living in Costa Rica for decades; many have constantly moved back and forth across the border. Similar to the situation with Mexicans in the U.S., the Costa Rican government allowed Nicaraguans to come in to harvest sugar cane. At the border town of Los Chiles, Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans have long engaged in commerce, resulting in an ethnic mix in the area.



Table 2:2

Costa Rica's Undocumented Migrants  
1986

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25,000 - 30,000	Nicaraguans, have been living in Costa Rica for several decades.
30,000	Nicaraguans, came to Costa Rica during Nicaragua's 1978-79 civil war, and remained. (60,000 others who came during the revolution returned after the Sandinista triumph.)
50,000 - 60,000	Nicaraguans, are believed to have come to Costa Rica since 1979.
45,000	Salvadorans and other Central Americans who arrived in Costa Rica in the 1970's and early 1980's.
----- Total	
150,000-165,000	

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Source: US Embassy of San Jose's World Refugee Report to Congress, FY 1987, p. 3.

### Why Do They Come?

The refugees and migrants have come to Costa Rica for a variety of reasons. As of June 30th 1986, there were 6169 registered Salvadoran refugees.<sup>28</sup> Most of these Salvadorans arrived soon after 1980, when 200 campesinos occupied the Costa Rican Embassy in San Salvador. Many Salvadorans fled the military's "death squads" which were becoming active then, clamping down on opponents of the government.

Neutral civilians may have felt increasingly caught up in the clashes between the guerrillas and the military. The inflow of Salvadoran refugees slowed down abruptly in 1983 when the Costa Rican government began placing restrictions on the entry of Central Americans. Requirements included an entry visa, a bank deposit of 15,000 colones, and a return ticket to one's home country. Because El Salvador shares no border with Costa Rica, most of its refugees were arriving by air. The restrictions could thus be enforced for the Salvadorans, as could not be done for the Nicaraguans who crossed the uncontrolled border.<sup>29</sup> The conflict in Nicaragua has also prohibited the arrival of more Salvadorans who might have traveled over land through Nicaragua into Costa Rica.

Nicaraguans in Costa Rica may have been against sweeping changes made by the new revolutionary government at home, such as the teaching of Marxist ideology, and restrictions on religious freedoms and personal property rights. Others fled the general conditions of war. Obligatory military service has prompted thousands of young men -- and more recently, women -- to seek refuge

in Costa Rica.<sup>30</sup> The uncertain future of the insurgency on Nicaragua's southern front has likewise caused many "contras" to seek safe haven in Costa Rica. A recent government report found that 37 percent of the Tilaran refugee camp's population were men between 13 and 40 years old;<sup>31</sup> a number of them are former combatants.

Some fled Nicaragua for what appear to be economic reasons, such as when food rationing resulted in acute shortages. These persons are often treated as refugees by the UNHCR for humanitarian reasons, according to Kofy Asomani, the UNHCR's Deputy Regional Representative in Costa Rica. Persons fleeing starvation are received as refugees even though they do not fit the strict definition.<sup>32</sup>

As economic oppression is increasingly used as a tool of warfare -- by both governments and guerrilla movements -- the distinction between political and economic motivations for flight becomes unclear. "Where armies burn fields and destroy warehouses to seek out opposition forces... there is a mixture of economic and political repression at work."<sup>33</sup> Many Nicaraguans in Costa Rica have fled this type of economic chaos.

Undoubtedly some "refugees" and undocumented immigrants are in Costa Rica largely for economic reasons. The "push-pull" theory of migration holds that individuals move "in response to population pressure, lack of economic opportunity, political change, and the promise of a better life."<sup>34</sup> As the most developed country in the region, Costa Rica offers immigrants incentives for

settlement. Persons may take advantage of the political situation in their home country to claim "refugee" status.

International assistance available to refugees has been shown to encourage persons to immigrate. "Quasi refugees are attracted to host countries by assistance and/or resettlement programs rather than being forcibly expelled by the governments in their countries of origin."<sup>35</sup> The existence of this phenomenon places governments and humanitarian agencies in a difficult position. They must strike a delicate balance in the giving of assistance: if too much is given "refugees" may be attracted and encouraged to settle in a host country.

### Characteristics

As indicated earlier, data on the number of refugees and migrants in the country are quite inaccurate. The actual number may be impossible to obtain, given the limitations of Costa Rica's immigration offices. Since 1980, however, the number of refugees documented in Costa Rica has risen steadily (see Table 2:3) and the flows have shown no signs of abating. In 1986, only 22.4 percent or 6,692 of the 29,918 registered refugees resided in camps; the rest lived mainly in metropolitan San Jose.<sup>36</sup> Urban refugees represent a greater strain on overused public services; they raise rents, and they aggravate high urban unemployment. If faced with inactivity, they are more prone to engage in petty and criminal legal violations.<sup>37</sup>

Table 2:3

Distribution of Costa Rica's Refugee Population:  
Documented Between 1978/79 and June 30th 1986

YEAR	NATIONALITY					TOTAL
	Salvadorans	Nicaraguans	Guatemalans	Cubans	Others	
1978/79	254	486	46	1,562	2	2,350
1980	2,147	86	26	23	7	2,289
1981	2,161	243	48	203	6	2,661
1982	931	333	11	164	20	1,459
1983	330	2,945	17	332	30	3,654
1984	280	4,912	22	101	24	5,339
1985	37	6,823	8	54	11	6,933
1986	29	5,126	8	59	11	5,233
TOTALS	6,169	20,954	186	2,498	111	29,918

Source: Departamento para Refugiados de Migracion, San Jose, Costa Rica, 1986.

A survey conducted in 1984 notes that refugees -- particularly Nicaraguans -- have very low levels of education. (See Table 2:4). They are more likely to compete, therefore, with the poorer sectors of Costa Rica's labor market.

The real threat to the wage laborer, however -- and to the Costa Rican economy in general -- may be the undocumented migrant.<sup>38</sup> Many illegal migrants who arrived after 1979 might qualify for refugee status, and thus for UNHCR assistance. They prefer to remain illegal because they fear repatriation or having to be enclosed in camps, or feel they have more to gain by integrating spontaneously and working without permits.<sup>39</sup>

The rising xenophobia in the country may be triggered more by the presence of unregistered migrants than by the refugees. Because illegal migrants cannot receive UNHCR assistance, they are maintained solely by the Costa Rican economy. They might take jobs at subminimum wages and thus displace local workers. It is believed that the undocumented migrants have contributed to the uncontrolled growth of the informal sector. In recent years the number of street vendors has soared, threatening hygiene standards. Since they have no access to social security, undocumented migrants increase hospital budget deficits when they receive medical attention.<sup>40</sup>

Table 2:4  
Educational Level of Refugees Interviewed in Costa Rica,  
by Nationality

EDUCATION	Salvadoran Refugees		Nicaraguan Refugees		TOTAL	
	Abs.	Rel.	Abs.	Rel.	Abs.	Rel.
Elementary incomplete	31	20.00	33	44.59	64	28.00
Elementary complete	26	16.77	5	6.76	31	14.00
Secondary incomplete	37	23.87	11	14.86	48	20.50
Secondary complete		7.74	5	6.76	17	7.00
University incomplete	12	10.97	1	1.35	18	7.50
University complete	17	1.29	-	-	2	1.00
Never studied	2	2.58	19	25.68	23	10.00
No reply	4	16.78	-	-	26	12.00
	26					
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Vega Carballo, Jose Luis "Inmigrantes Centroamericanos en Costa Rica," Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos, No. 40, Enero - Abril 1986, p. 94.

## CONDITIONS FOR REFUGEE INTEGRATION

### Political

The orientation of the Costa Rican government regarding the integration of refugees will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. But some factors are presented here.

The refugee crisis is a long term problem that will affect the development of Costa Rica. Unable to handle the crisis alone, the government must cautiously coordinate the use of relief funds, and the actions of international organizations and voluntary agencies. The country must plan, as well, for the possible incorporation of the refugees into the local economy.

Costa Rica is unable to control its northern border: it is 220 miles long and passes through jungle along the San Juan River, where there are few towns and roads. Costa Rica has no military and its Civil Guard is unequipped to adequately patrol the border.<sup>41</sup> The persistent entry of foreigners is threatening the country's generous refugee policy.

Immediate and long range policies will be affected by the many thousands of undocumented migrants. Any escalation of the war in Nicaragua will pose the question of whether these migrants will become "a posteriori" refugees: persons who entered as migrants but who become refugees given their inability to return to their home country.<sup>42</sup>

The continued violation of asylum and neutrality policies by Nicaraguan migrants has produced an increasing antagonism toward foreigners in the country



that threatens the fair treatment of refugees. The existence of rebels along the border struggling against the Sandinistas has been a key factor in deteriorating relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Costa Rican asylum policy allows for exiles to organize politically, but military activities are illegal.<sup>43</sup>

### Economic

Despite its advancements, Costa Rica does suffer many of the ills of developing countries. These will directly affect its ability to accept and incorporate the mass influx of refugees. Only 11.6 percent of the total land surface in Costa Rica is suitable for intensive agricultural use.<sup>44</sup> The size of private land holdings has grown in the past few decades, and three-fourths of all rural workers are landless peasants. Development planning has favored the urban center: health and education services in rural areas are inferior. One quarter of Costa Rica's population lives below the poverty level, but 75 percent of the poor live in rural areas. Migration to metropolitan San Jose has caused overcrowding: jobs are scarce, housing is inadequate, slums are growing.<sup>45</sup> An estimated 300,000 Costa Ricans reside in deplorable living conditions.<sup>46</sup>

The refugees will be a heavy burden on Costa Rica's welfare state. The desire to provide equal services for all residents of the country is a high priority for the government, both just and wise in one official's opinion.<sup>47</sup> But the welfare system has already come under sharp criticism in recent years. It provides Costa Ricans with extensive health care services and education despite a weak tax base, resulting in persistent budget deficits. Critics say that the welfare

state has grown beyond the capacity of the Costa Rican economy to support it.<sup>48</sup> The goal of providing the refugees with equal access to social services is very forward-looking on the part of the Costa Rican government, according to one voluntary agency official. It demonstrates the intention to prevent the development of an underclass. At the same time, however, this goal has paralyzed negotiations for the integration of the refugees since it is impossible for the Costa Rican government to provide such services without continuing assistance from the UNHCR.<sup>49</sup>

The financing of Costa Rica's welfare state has resulted in a foreign debt of \$4.5 billion, one of the highest per capita rates in the world. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is pressuring the government to cut social spending, a pill which Costa Rica's powerful bureaucracy may refuse to swallow. One austerity measure asks for the elimination of up to 4,000 government jobs over the next four years. This would increase unemployment, which is officially 6.1 percent,<sup>50</sup> but is estimated to be more than twice that figure.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, the Arias administration's campaign slogan promised to Costa Ricans 25,000 new jobs and 20,000 new houses; these two goals, Arias contended, could be achieved through stimulation of the private sector.<sup>52</sup> Continued regional instability, however, will lead to capital flight and reduced investment and tourism. Arias' goals would hence necessitate expanded state involvement.

Costa Rica's economic conditions are hardly conducive to a warm reception for the tens of thousands of refugees in need of assistance. The country cannot have the luxury of selecting at its borders the most economically profitable

refugees, moreover. To turn back refugees would be inhumane and subject to international condemnation.

### Social

Costa Ricans have traditionally considered themselves different from and even superior to other Central Americans. They base this on their homogeneous, "whiter" appearance, but also on their comparatively higher standards in health, education, and social welfare, and their strong political democracy.<sup>53</sup> They have been apprehensive about the possibility that large numbers of refugees -- many of them poor and illiterate -- may be in the country permanently.

Costa Rica's influential press has played a role in portraying the refugee as an unstable person, who threatens established health and cultural standards, and who is in the country largely for economic reasons.<sup>54</sup> These misrepresentations result partly from a lack of in depth study, and partly from failure to distinguish between the undocumented migrant and the refugee.<sup>55</sup> Misunderstanding has led to the adoption of policies, such as opposition to the establishment of new camps and settlements, which might put off the time when refugees can become productive members of society. The illegal migrants, not the refugees in settlements, for instance, evade health standards. Opposition to new settlements, therefore, exacerbates the problems of the migrants and of declining health standards.

During 1986, government officials made statements indicating that persons who violate the country's asylum traditions may be expelled forcibly. On one

occasion, the Vice Minister of Government indicated that entering Nicaraguans should be returned at the border;<sup>56</sup> this would be a clear violation of "non refoulement." Such policy statements often occur after a change of government, because officials do not understand the refugee field, and the implications certain actions can have internationally.<sup>57</sup> Given local pressures against the presence of foreigners, some officials react xenophobically.

Xenophobia becomes dangerous when actions taken out of dislike of foreigners are out of proportion to the actual problem, and go beyond what may be reasonably perceived as defending a nation's interest.<sup>58</sup> Asylum seekers may be given less than sympathetic treatment, and deterrent measures may be taken to stem the flow of refugees. The danger is that the asylum seeker is treated as a regular alien; his special situation as a refugee is overlooked. The persistence of an alarmist, or "emergency" view of the refugee influx could hinder the evolution of policies that will make refugees a resource rather than a burden for Costa Rica. While the refugees' presence is officially seen as a crisis, some studies have shown that refugees fill labor shortages and stimulate markets in certain areas.<sup>59</sup>

The following chapter describes in detail Costa Rica's refugee policies and programs. By comparing these briefly to the policies of other developing countries, one sees the benefits and limitations refugees face in Costa Rica's welfare state.

## NOTES - Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> W. R. Smyser, "Refugees: A Never Ending Story," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 64, No. 1, Fall 1985, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> The functions of the UNHCR, as outlined in Refugees, No. 22, October 1985, p. 4, are: INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION - to promote and safeguard the rights of refugees in such vital fields as employment, education, residence, freedom of movement, and security against being returned to a country where they may be in danger of persecution.

MATERIAL ASSISTANCE - to assist governments of countries of asylum in the task of making refugees self supporting as rapidly as possible. Though UNHCR is sometimes called upon by governments to provide emergency relief, its assistance is intended primarily to promote durable solutions to the problems of refugees through voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement in another country.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Ferris, "Overview: Refugees and World Politics," in Elizabeth Ferris, ed., Refugees and World Politics, New York: Praeger, 1985, p. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey: 1987 in Review, Washington, D. C.: American Council for Nationalities Service, 1988, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ford Foundation, Refugees and Migrants: Problems and Program Responses, Working Paper No. 431, August 1983, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ferris, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Leon Gordenker, "Refugees in Developing Countries and Transnational Organization," The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science, Vol. 467, May 1983, p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Ford Foundation, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Edelberto Torres-Rivas, "Report on the Condition of Central American Refugees and Migrants," Occasional Paper Series, Hemispheric Migration Project, Georgetown University Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance, July 1985, p. 3; and John A. Booth, "'Trickle-up' Income Redistribution and Development in Central America During the 1960's and 1970's," in Mitchell A. Seligson, The Gap Between Rich and Poor, Boulder: Westview, 1984, p. 357.

<sup>10</sup> Torres-Rivas, p. 23; and U.S. Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey: 1985 in Review, Washington, D.C.: American Council for Nationalities Service, 1986, p. 38. Sources vary significantly in the number of refugees reported. The number of refugees from these countries could be substantially higher.

<sup>11</sup> Torres-Rivas, pp. 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office (US GAO), Central American Refugees: Regional Conditions and Prospects and Potential Impact on the United States, Report to the Congress of the United States by the Comptroller General of the United States, GAO/NSAID-84106, Washington, DC: July 1984, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> This is an unofficial estimate. The actual number of Nicaraguan refugees could be substantially higher. This figure is based on the 200,000 Nicaraguans believed to be in the United States and the 50,000 who seek refuge in the region.

"Immigration Rules are Eased for Nicaraguan Exiles in the U.S.," The New York Times, 9 July 1987; and U.S. Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey: 1986 in Review, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> US GAO, pp. 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> US GAO, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Expression used by President Luis Alberto Monge in his 1985 State of the Nation Address, 1 May 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Charles D. Ameringer, Democracy in Costa Rica, New York: Praeger, 1982; Richard Biesanz, et. al., The Costa Ricans, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982; Booth, pp. 351-365; Mark B. Rosenberg, "Bureaucratic Politics and Social Policy: The Emergence of Costa Rica's Welfare State," in Steven W. Hughes and Kenneth J. Mijeski, Politics and Public Policy in Latin America, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984, pp. 117-130; Mitchell A. Seligson, Peasants of Costa Rica and the Development of Agrarian Capitalism, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> Peggy Levitt, Thesis, Columbia University, Spring 1986, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> "Too Much of a Good Thing," The Tico Times, 8 August 1986, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Universidad Para la Paz, Los refugiados centroamericanos, Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica: enero de 1985, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Decree Number 1485-G, La gaceta No. 184, 29 September 1983, Cited in Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Refugees and Displaced Persons in Central America," in Patricia Weiss Fagen and Sergio Aguayo, Fleeing the Maelstrom: Central

American Refugees Occasional Paper No. 10, Central American and Caribbean Program, Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins University, 1986, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Levitt, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> "Declaracion de Cartagena," Coloquio sobre la proteccion internacional de los refugiados en America Central, Mexico, y Panama: problemas juridicos y humanitarios, Cartagena, Colombia: 19-22 de Noviembre de 1984, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Departamento para Refugiados de Migracion, "Registro de la poblacion refugiada en Costa Rica segun nacionalidad," San Jose: 30 de junio de 1986.

<sup>25</sup> "Arias Worried About More War Next Door," The Tico Times, 15 August 1986, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Osvaldo Farias Caro, "Caracteristicas Demograficas economicas y sociales de los inmigrantes centroamericanos por pais de origen," Pais Receptor: Costa Rica, San Jose: diciembre de 1985, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Embassy of San Jose, World Refugee Report to Congress, FY 1987, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Departamento para Refugiados de Migracion, "Registro de la poblacion refugiada en Costa Rica segun nacionalidad," San Jose: 30 de junio de 1986.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Sylvia Porras, Social Worker, Oficina de Orientacion y Asistencia Social a Refugiados (OARS), 4 August 1986.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews with refugees at the Albaperal, Boca de Arenal, Achioté, and Limón refugee camps in Costa Rica, July - August 1986; Betsy Jeane Clubine, "The Oral Histories of Four Miskito Indian Refugees from the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua," San Jose: ACM Tropical Field Research, Spring 1985, pp. 36-59.



<sup>31</sup> DIGEPARE, "Informe anual de labores," San Jose: abril 1986, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> Kofy Asomani, interviewed by David Dwyer in "Costa Rica Struggles to Cope with Refugees," The Tico Times, 14 March 1986, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ferris, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Pastor, "Migration in the Caribbean Basin: The Need for an Approach as Dynamic as the Phenomenon," in Mary M. Kritz, ed., U.S.-Immigration and Refugee Policy: Global and Domestic Issues, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1983, p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Ferris, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Jose Manuel Blanco, Direccion General para la Proteccion y Asistencia a los Refugiados, (DIGEPARE), 16 July 1986.

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR, "Urban Refugees," Refugees, September 1982, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Ricardo Araya, Presidente, Municipalidad Ciudad Quesada, 14 August 1986.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Enrique Araya, Migration Office, Ciudad Quesada, 14 August 1986.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Robert D. Tomasek, "The Deterioration of Relations Between Costa Rica and the Sandinistas," Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, Occasional Papers Series No. 9, September 1984, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Krysia Munoz, "Los refugiados en Costa Rica: Un Proceso Coyuntural - Politico, Periodo 1978-1984," Tesis de grado, Licenciatura en Ciencias Politicas, Universidad de Costa Rica, 1985, p. 106.

<sup>43</sup> Tomasek, pp. 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> C. Koch; D. Mora-Castro and R. Thiadens, "Refugee Settlements in Central America and Mexico," Geneva: Technical Support Services, UNHCR, April 1986, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Ameringer, pp. 100-103.

<sup>46</sup> Alberto Fait, "El problema de la vivienda en Costa Rica," La Republica, Costa Rica, 22 de Agosto de 1986, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Armando Vargas, Minister of Information and Communication during the Monge administration (1982-1986), 22 July 1986.

<sup>48</sup> Ameringer, p. 93.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Demetrio Alvero, Costa Rica Representative, International Rescue Committee, 21 July 1986.

<sup>50</sup> "Inversiones, abono, para producir empleo," La Nacion, Costa Rica, 17 de Agosto de 1986, p. 6A.

<sup>51</sup> "Costa Rica Faces Financial Crisis," Journal of Commerce, U.S.A., 24 June 1986.

<sup>52</sup> "Inversiones..."

<sup>53</sup> Biesanz, et. al., pp. 8-9.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. "Ministro reconoce adversidades en salud," La Nacion, Costa Rica, 18 July 1986; "Denuncian critica situacion en la zona norte," La Nacion, Costa Rica, 4 July 1984, p. 4A; Victor Hugo Murillo, "Prejuicio y rumor distancian a tilaraneses de refugiados," La Nacion, Costa Rica, 17 October 1983, p. 4A; "Gobierno anuncia severidad contra quienes violen asilo," La Nacion, Costa Rica,

16 October 1982, p. 4A; "Gobierno confia en la Oficina de la ONU: Refugiados," La Prensa Libre, Costa Rica, 7 October 1982, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Munoz, pp. 195-227.

<sup>56</sup> Lic. Alvaro Ramos, August 1986.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with high level UNHCR official, San Jose, August 1986.

<sup>58</sup> Poul Hartling, "Xenophobia is a Chronic Illness: If Left Unchecked it May Have Far Reaching Effects for the Family of Nations," in Refugees: Victims of Xenophobia, Geneva: UNHCR, 1984.

<sup>59</sup> Rene Kivikko, "Diversificacion y produccion en una comunidad agricola de subsistencia," San Jose: ACM Tropical Field Research, Spring 1986, p. 27, 29, 36, 38, pp. 42-43.

## Chapter 3

### REFUGEES AND THE COSTA RICAN STATE

A refugee influx tests the capacity of a government to make policy and solve problems. Refugee affairs affect many sectors of society: public security, health, education, employment, land tenure, and development planning.

A refugee problem also tests a nation's capacity to deal in the international realm. Few developing countries would be able to handle a refugee influx without substantial international aid. Outside intervention is needed to cope with a problem which already threatens a nation's sovereignty. This is the scenario within which refugee assistance operates.

If a host state must accept international financial and organizational assistance, it can expect to receive pressure from abroad. In such a case, a government may find it difficult to remain dominant when it is challenged by international and voluntary agency officials who have their own views of how assistance or resettlement should be carried out.<sup>1</sup>

While a government may speak of acceptance or integration of refugees in the abstract, policies tend to be determined by practical political considerations. No government -- no matter how altruistic -- is likely to sacrifice any considerable national interest to a cause which is still of secondary importance.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter studies how Central American refugees fare in Costa Rica, a country with a strong welfare state. Costa Rica's social and refugee policies are

compared to those of other countries. The implementation of specific policies is detailed, and then evaluated.

## THE CONTEXT OF ASSISTANCE IN COSTA RICA

Refugees in Costa Rica appear to have far better opportunities than in other developing countries. The social welfare system provides universal education and health care. Refugees (through financing by the UNHCR) have access to these services that might not have been available in their home countries. But this point is not so simple. Costa Rica's highly institutionalized state protects its citizens but is resistant to the reforms necessary to accommodate a sudden influx of foreigners.

Social legislation protects nationals through labor laws, and laws on access to land. These standards affect the refugees in the following ways:

- (1) Refugee integration is hindered through laws that limit the employment of foreigners.
- (2) Land, which is scarce, is reserved for nationals.
- (3) Costa Rica's "colegios profesionales," or professional associations, restrict the employment of foreigners. This includes refugee doctors who could be of great use in rural refugee camps and settlements, where most Costa Rican doctors are unwilling to practice.

## BENEFITS

Refugees in Costa Rica can benefit from the most advanced educational and health care services in the region. In Costa Rica, all children must attend school; health standards are high, supported by the social security system (the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social, CCSS).

By comparison, Honduras, which has also received large numbers of refugees, suffers inferior social standards. Fifty-seven percent of Honduran families live in extreme poverty, lacking enough income to buy the basic basket of food. Over 40.5 percent of the population is said to be illiterate, and 72.5 percent of children under age 5 show some degree of malnutrition.<sup>3</sup> (Other socioeconomic indicators for Costa Rica and its neighbors are found in Table 3:1).

The Costa Rican government holds that all residents of the country should receive the proper social services, in order to maintain the country's high standards and prevent the development of an underclass.<sup>4</sup> The UNHCR thus pays the CCSS monthly for medical attention, at camps and in urban areas, to all refugees who carry the proper identification.<sup>5</sup> Similar payments are made to the Ministry of Public Education; schools are set up in camps, and urban refugee children attend public schools.<sup>6</sup>

Most refugees from Nicaragua never had access to such services at home. Many of them have arrived in Costa Rica without ever having attended school, or having received inoculations.<sup>7</sup>

Table 3:1

Various Social and Economic Indicators Comparing  
Costa Rica with its Central American Neighbors

	Population 1980 (in thousands)	Area (square miles)	Percent of National Budget Spent on Education 1977	Literacy, 1975 (percent)	Death rate among Children of 1-4 Years of age, 1970 (per thousand inhabitants)	Life Expectancy at birth 1975-80	Inhabitants per Doctor, 1968-71
Costa Rica	2,286	19,695	32.7	89	4.0	69.7	1,804
El Salvador	4,813	8,260	22.8	59	14.5	62.2	5,101
Guatemala	7,100	42,042	16.0	48	30.0	57.8	4,498
Honduras	3,595	43,277	19.1	45*	20.0	53.1	4,085
Nicaragua	2,733	57,000	13.0	52	18.4	52.9	2,014

  

	Percent of Population with Electric Lighting, 1973	Percent of Population with Drinking Water, 1975		Telephones 1976		Length of Roads 1975 (in kilometers)	
		Urban	Rural	in thousands	per hundred inhabitants	Total	Paved
Costa Rica	66.4	100	56	127	6.2	24,724	1,939
El Salvador	34.0	89	28	60	1.4	10,975	1,408
Guatemala	22.1	85	14	52*	1.0*	13,625	2,638
Honduras	17.0	100	10	20	.7	6,595	1,327
Nicaragua	45.0	100	14	55	2.5	17,526	1,597

\* In 1961

\* In 1973

From: Charles D. Ameringer, Democracy in Costa Rica, New York: Praeger,  
1982, pp. 14-15.

## RESTRAINTS ON ACCESS TO JOBS AND LAND

While refugees might benefit from the conditions described above, they do not have easy entry into the formal economy. The Costa Rican case can be illustrated by describing the contrasting situation in Belize, another Central American country that is haven to the region's refugees. In the early 1980's Belize received Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. Belize is one of the least populated countries in the region, and has a substantial amount of unused land. As refugees entered, they squatted on arable land and formed communities. They also took jobs in the agro-industry, where there were numerous openings. The Belizean government adopted a "do-nothing" policy, which only later would be altered in the face of growing numbers of refugees.<sup>8</sup>

Refugees encountered different circumstances upon entering Costa Rica. Legislation protects national workers and hence limits the employment of refugees. Costa Rica's Commerce Code, Article 8, states that foreigners cannot engage in commerce until they have resided in the country for 10 years.<sup>9</sup> Article 13 of the Labor Code notes that no more than 10 percent of a company's workers can be of foreign extraction.<sup>10</sup> The Costa Rican Constitution, Article 68, also states that in equality of conditions, the Costa Rican worker will be preferred over the foreigner.<sup>11</sup>

Only 11.6 percent of Costa Rica's land is suitable for intensive agricultural use. Most of this is privately owned.<sup>12</sup> The government has been under considerable pressure from land-hungry Costa Rican peasants -- increasingly so as



employment opportunities in agribusiness and industry decrease.<sup>13</sup> Public land is reserved for landless farmers, therefore, for the establishment of agricultural cooperatives. This land is not available for refugee settlement.<sup>14</sup>

### THE "COLEGIOS PROFESIONALES"

Costa Rica's powerful professional classes, through their "colegios profesionales," have been criticized for being "parasitic and inefficient because they are immune to competition."<sup>15</sup> They limit the employment of foreigners in teaching and medicine among other fields. The colegios have been intransigent in the face of the refugee problem: refugee professionals are restricted from practicing. The irony of this custom is that the country chooses to exclude the contributions of qualified individuals, who might improve medical or educational services in rural areas, for example.<sup>16</sup>

Refugees in camps also suffer the traditions of the colegios. Medical attention is poor because Costa Rican doctors are reluctant to practice in remote areas. The UNHCR has had to offer national physicians special bonuses, above and beyond basic salaries, to persuade them to remain in the camps, and persevere in their work.<sup>17</sup>

Refugees could benefit from solving their own problems. But the colegios maintain a nationalistic outlook: if refugee doctors (and US volunteers) are barred from practicing, the UNHCR will have to hire Costa Rican doctors.<sup>18</sup>

## POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Costa Rican government was unprepared to handle the large influx of refugees that began to cross its borders in the late 1970's. It initially delegated much work to the UNHCR and a few PVOs (most of which had no experience in the refugee field). The government gradually came to play a more active role, however, and urged the UNHCR to hire national rather than foreign agencies to run major refugee programs.<sup>19</sup> This policy differed from that of Honduras, which allowed numerous foreign PVOs to operate refugee camps and settlements in the country. Many of the PVOs in Honduras are experienced in working with refugees and are members of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).

### COSTA RICA'S REFUGEE COMMISSION 1980-82

Costa Rica's National Commission for Refugees (CONAPARE) was created in 1980, but it was not until 1982 that it began to actively coordinate refugee affairs. Members of the incoming Monge administration charged that the previous Carazo administration had delegated too much to the UNHCR and PVOs.<sup>20</sup> CONAPARE had no executive office and little political power.<sup>21</sup>

Monge issued a decree in December of 1982<sup>22</sup> which called for reform in CONAPARE, appointing a director and placing the commission under the Ministry of Justice. The Commission would also have representatives from the

Ministries of Foreign Relations, Interior, Labor and Social Security, Public Security, Planning and the Presidency. Four semi-autonomous national agencies, as implementors of refugee programs, also would participate in CONAPARE: the Social Assistance Institute (IMAS), the Agrarian Development Institute (IDA), the National Training Institute (INA), and the Costa Rican Red Cross. The UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM), involved primarily in transporting refugees at the border, would be invited to attend CONAPARE's weekly meetings, but without votes.

The reformed CONAPARE was to supervise the day-to-day functioning of refugee assistance, authorizing all projects of the UNHCR and PVOs, and coordinating with relevant government ministries. In conjunction with the National Security Council, CONAPARE would define refugee policies, such as that of integration. CONAPARE declared that refugees should advance through certain stages, from reception centers to productive projects, and eventually be incorporated into the national economy.<sup>23</sup>

#### HONDURAN REFUGEE POLICY: A COMPARISON

The Honduran government has not directly involved itself in refugee programs. While it does have a National Commission for Refugees, the UNHCR and international PVOs coordinate and implement most of the assistance.<sup>24</sup> These agencies are said to have more political restrictions than in Costa Rica.<sup>25</sup>

Honduras is more actively involved in the region's conflicts, and the refugees in its territory are treated differentially.

Faced with the entrance of large numbers of Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees, the Honduran government has favored the Nicaraguans. This affects the programs agencies can pursue with the refugees. Nicaraguans are allowed to leave their camps, participate in local markets, and even to conduct their struggle against Nicaragua's government from Honduran territory. The Salvadorans, in contrast (who have long been the subjects of Honduran antipathy) are allowed little freedom of movement and are kept in insecure border zones where they have been attacked by both the Salvadoran and Honduran militaries.

In operational matters, however, Honduras gives international agencies substantial autonomy. CARITAS, the Catholic Episcopal Conference, administers a few camps for Salvadorans and Guatemalans, and is responsible for education and workshops at these camps. Catholic Relief Services conducts employment/training projects at a number of camps for Salvadorans. World Relief coordinates the entire assistance project for Miskito and Sumo Indians in the Gracias a Dios province. Medecins Sans Frontieres, a French agency, conducts health programs in all of Honduras' refugee camps.<sup>26</sup>

In keeping with its neutral and centrist political tradition, Costa Rica has accepted refugees from both El Salvador and Nicaragua. The UNHCR and PVOs experience few political restrictions regarding treatment of different groups. Yet in operational matters, the government has sought to play a dominant role. Costa Rica's major refugee programs have been run by nationals.

## CONAPARE AND IMAS: 1982-1985

As the Costa Rican government sought to increase its role in refugee affairs after 1982, its relations with the UNHCR deteriorated. The UNHCR was not accustomed to the limitations brought on by Costa Rica's strong governmental structure, and found it difficult to plan and execute its programs.<sup>27</sup> Unlike in Honduras, where the UNHCR had substantial autonomy in the coordination of relief activities, all projects - no matter how small - were subject to CONAPARE's authorization.

Critics charged that CONAPARE did not have the experience or administrative capacity to realize such authorization. Rather than facilitating the work of implementing agencies, CONAPARE was seen to interfere; leading to a duplication of functions and extensive bureaucratic delays.<sup>28</sup>

As Levitt notes, UNHCR officials found that:

The government's need to exercise control was excessive and misdirected, as demonstrated by its decision to delegate responsibility for refugee training and camp administration to incompetent (government) agencies... . There was also a sense that the government did not know what it was doing but would not accept UNHCR's guidance. Indeed, some allocated funds were not spent because the government could not devise feasible proposals for their expenditure.<sup>29</sup>

The Costa Rican Red Cross had been called on to implement refugee assistance when the crisis began in 1979-80. A shift in agencies after 1982 illustrated the government's interest in controlling the affairs of refugees, who were growing in number and appeared to be staying indefinitely.<sup>30</sup> From 1982 to

1985 major refugee programs were implemented by an existing semi-autonomous government agency. The Social Assistance Institute (IMAS) -- a welfare agency designed to combat extreme poverty -- distributed emergency assistance, administered camps, and oversaw productive projects for refugees. The National Training Institute (INA) also began to train refugees for possible insertion into the labor market.

PRIMAS, the Refugee Program within IMAS, proved inadequate for refugee assistance. Studies conducted by Fagen and by the International Labor Organization (ILO) with the UNHCR revealed administrative deficiencies in the whole program, especially with respect to camps.

1. Decision-making -- even on minor issues -- was highly centralized in IMAS. There was no well-defined delegation of responsibilities to PRIMAS, much less to individual camp administrators.<sup>31</sup>
2. There were extensive delays in the delivery of supplies to refugees in camps. IMAS staff...

"was required to purchase all major supplies from government outlets -- the equivalent to the U.S. General Services. These supply channels, designed for long term supplementary assistance programs, were inadequate for refugee needs. For example, the government did not supply fresh vegetables, and there was inadequate space in the camps to grow them in sufficient quantity. Hence, although vegetables could be purchased inexpensively in local markets, refugees lacked these fundamental nutritional elements in their diets."<sup>32</sup>

3. PRIMAS poorly controlled the distribution of emergency assistance. Many refugees in urban areas began working but continued to receive assistance.<sup>33</sup>

4. PRIMAS' administrative bureaucracy grew excessively, duplicating functions in accounting, for instance, while leaving other areas understaffed. Personnel were hired by IMAS (many times unqualified for positions) without consulting the UNHCR or PRIMAS.<sup>34</sup>

PRIMAS was finally replaced as a refugee agency after it was discovered, in late 1984, that 10 million colones (approximately \$300,000) had been embezzled. PRIMAS officials allegedly over-reported expenditures for supplies they bought more cheaply or never purchased.<sup>35</sup> A UNHCR audit requested that the government agency IMAS divest itself of refugee programs.

A new set of private voluntary organizations, two of them national, began implementing assistance in 1985. The procedure by which these agencies were chosen is unclear and has not been studied in depth. One foreign PVO, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), began managing a camp at Achioté; a few other foreign agencies ran small-scale employment and training programs, mostly for Salvadorans. Other major camps, however, and the urban program which assisted over 23,000 refugees in 1986,<sup>36</sup> were administered by national agencies. The Costa Rican Red Cross managed assistance at the Boca de Arenal and Alvaperal camps for Nicaraguans. A new agency, the Center for Sociopolitical Analysis (CASAP), implemented the urban program and camps at Tilarán and Limón. As will be discussed later, these two agencies showed major deficiencies

as administrators of long term refugee programs. In its concern with having nationals run programs, Costa Rica sacrificed the efficiency of assistance to national interest.

#### POLICY REFORMS: 1985-1986

General dissatisfaction with the administration of assistance culminated in a seminar in the summer of 1985, attended by government, UNHCR, and PVO officials. A consensus was reached: the refugee problem could no longer be considered in isolation. Because refugee issues involved all ministries of government, it was difficult to implement CONAPARE policies from within the Ministry of Justice.<sup>37</sup>

A decree issued in August of 1985 announced another change in the refugee commission.<sup>38</sup> It would be placed directly under the executive, establishing mechanisms of "cohesion and efficiency" that could result in a quicker channeling of international funds and more effective application of policies defined by the President.<sup>39</sup> A National Council for Refugees -- composed of the President, Vice President, Minister and Vice Minister of the Presidency -- would replace CONAPARE as policy-maker for refugee affairs. An Executive Director who would head the Directorate General (DIGEPARE) would be responsible for carrying out directives of the Council, and continuing coordination of assistance.



A prominent goal of the new DIGEPARE was to speed the integration of the refugees, by facilitating the granting of work permits, and the transfer of refugees from transit centers to "active" (training) centers and to "mixed" projects, involving nationals.<sup>40</sup>

Before going on to an evaluation of Costa Rica's refugee policies and programs, it may be useful to discuss briefly the procedures through which refugees are documented.

### DOCUMENTATION PROCEDURES

After 1982, an office devoted strictly to refugee affairs was created within Costa Rica's Immigration Service, to speed documentation in the face of increasing entries. The following describes official procedures.

Individuals crossing at the border may request refugee status at a station. The Refugee Office interviews applicants there, and determines whether they qualify for this status. If so, they are given a "resolution," a temporary identification. They are then transferred by the ICM to a reception center where they receive emergency medical treatment, food, and shelter. Refugees are later transferred to transit centers, where they are reinterviewed by the Refugee Office. Resolutions are renewed at first every 30 days and later every 60 days. Eventually, refugee cards are given to those who qualify, and are renewed yearly.<sup>41</sup>

Refugees entering through the airport are documented in a similar fashion. If they enter with tourist visas, however, they have a certain time period (15-30 days) to request refugee status. Persons who do not qualify for refugee status must seek a different status, or leave the country; but few had been deported through 1986.<sup>42</sup>

### EVALUATION OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Administrative changes and the influx of new funds did little to bolster the effectiveness of Costa Rica's refugee commission. Visits to camps and observations made during 1986 indicated that serious deficiencies existed in refugee programs. As is detailed below, camps were overcrowded and government ministries were very slow in delivering services to refugees. DIGEPARE -- the new refugee commission -- had grown, but not substantially improved its ability to coordinate assistance or integration.

Transit Centers were populated well above capacity, and refugees remained in them for months or years. The Tilaran camp, for example, housed 3041 people as of June 1986,<sup>43</sup> well beyond its supposed 1500 person capacity.<sup>44</sup> These centers did not have the proper services or structures for such long range assistance.

Government ministries communicated poorly with the PVO's that were administering camps. The Ministry of Health's responses to health and sanitation problems were insufficient or extensively delayed, resulting in contamination and

disease.<sup>45</sup> The Ministry of Public Education delayed payments of salaries to teachers in camps, sometimes for many months, thus placing a great burden on implementing agencies.<sup>46</sup> Excessive customs delays prohibited the arrival at camps of gifts and donations from abroad. Merchandise was known to remain in customs warehouses for months.<sup>47</sup>

DIGEPARE did little to expedite the documentation of refugees in camps or of migrants outside of camps. The procedures outlined earlier were not followed in practice. Many refugees in camps were not issued "resolutions," or identification documents. Local hospitals and CCSS offices had to attend these persons, thus running up budget deficits.<sup>48</sup> At times, PVOs did extensive paperwork to get clinics reimbursed by the UNHCR.<sup>49</sup>

Without knowledge of who were bonafide refugees, it was extremely difficult to make refugees part of any development or integration plan. The large number of undocumented workers in the country continued to evade health standards, work at sub-minimum wages, and burden weak infrastructures. Municipal governments in northern regions called for more concrete policies from the national government.<sup>50</sup>

In late 1985, DIGEPARE received a grant of \$1.8 million from the European Economic Community (EEC).<sup>51</sup> This money financed new technicians and professionals, and new cars,<sup>52</sup> but did not substantially improve DIGEPARE's ability to coordinate assistance or integration. As of August 1986 none of this money had been signed off for integration projects.

DIGEPARE had little political power. It failed to negotiate with a local community opposed to the opening of a new camp at Altamirita in August 1986. DIGEPARE also failed to prevent passage, in the summer of 1986, of measures in a new Migration Law<sup>53</sup> which were detrimental to refugee interests. The new law would remove the voice of DIGEPARE and the Ministry of Labor from the Mixed Commission which grants work permits to refugees. Costa Rica's Immigration Service -- traditionally hostile to giving foreigners permits -- was left in charge.

#### COSTA RICAN BUREAUCRACY

The tendency of Costa Rican bureaucracy to expand and to distribute salaries -- rather than concentrate more heavily on problem solving -- had surfaced in the refugee commission. By late 1986 DIGEPARE had over 80 employees.<sup>54</sup>

Costa Rica's public sector employs approximately 20 percent of the total work force and absorbs 28 percent of the national income.<sup>55</sup> The public sector has grown to such proportions, according to one expert, because it is used as a means of employing, and thus controlling, educated urban classes.<sup>56</sup> Public employees are the best paid and most highly unionized salaried workers in the country. They are protected by a civil service system that rewards seniority rather than ability.<sup>57</sup>

This bureaucracy often leaves its basic mission unfulfilled: to provide social services to the Costa Rican people. Instead, services are monopolized by the bureaucracy and never reach the poor:

"The bureaucratic middle class is often called a bottleneck; its voracity eats up so much of the social benefits provided by the government that many of these never reach the poor."<sup>58</sup>

The "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" have become so powerful that they are able to prevent reforms that, while in the interest of the poor, would require them to make sacrifices.<sup>59</sup>

International humanitarian funds intended for refugees have thus been lost in large, lethargic bureaucracies, just as national funds intended for the poor are.

## CONCLUSION

A UNHCR official with experience in Africa and other Latin American countries characterized Costa Rica's as the most difficult bureaucracy he has ever worked with. "The answer to every question is 'yes, but...'" He tempered this complaint with praise for Costa Rica's liberal democracy. The democratic government has to answer to so many competing interests that it is difficult to effect policy.

The refugee crisis is an unexpected burden on Costa Rica. It has taken time for the government to develop policies, and the institutions to implement these. The rights of refugees are unclear. Many live in squalid conditions in

camps, which refugee commission members visit infrequently. There is poor communication between the government and the agencies which administer assistance.

The ineffectiveness of Costa Rica's refugee program, however, results from more than inexperience and the increasing numbers of refugees. The government is under pressure for jobs from its own lower and middle class citizens. Costa Rican bureaucracy naturally tends to expand and to distribute salaries to put off discontent among growing working classes. This tendency has been reproduced in the national refugee commission, which has received new funds and has grown in its number of employees, but has improved little in its ability to coordinate assistance.

One does not find any blatant diversion of refugee relief in Costa Rica. Upon closer examination, however, it is evident that the humanitarian purpose of much assistance is lost. The Costa Rican government has declared a policy of acceptance and integration of refugees. It cannot realize these goals, however, because it must first satisfy its citizens, whose interests it has traditionally defended.

Costa Rica's welfare state maintains firm control of refugee programs, for security reasons, but also to employ the country's large pool of technicians and professionals. This has meant sacrificing the efficiency of assistance. A public agency, IMAS, chosen to administer assistance, proved inadequate. It was slow in resolving problems and delivering supplies, decision-making was highly

centralized, its administrative bureaucracy grew excessively, and some of its employees embezzled assistance funds.

National PVOs have taken over major refugee programs from public institutions, but health and education are still run by relevant government ministries. Refugees are low on the scale of issues important to these large bureaucracies and thus receive poor attention.

Although the new refugee commission, DIGEPARE, has grown through funding by the UNHCR and other sources, it has little political power and cannot effectively coordinate assistance.

The next chapter discusses another set of actors involved in refugee affairs: the nongovernmental organizations. Specifically, it evaluates the roles played by the UNHCR and PVOs in integrating refugees into Costa Rican society.

## NOTES - CHAPTER 3

<sup>1</sup> Leon Gordenker, "Refugees in Developing Countries and Transnational Organization," The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science, Vol. 467, May 1983, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Vernant, The Refugee in the Postwar World, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, pp. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> "Honduran Government's Economic Report to the Kissinger Commission," in Nancy Peckenham and Annie Street, eds., Honduras: Portrait of a Captive Nation, New York: Praeger, 1985, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Armando Vargas, Minister of Information and Communication during the Monge administration (1982-86), 22 July 1986.

<sup>5</sup> "Convenio suscrito entre la Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social, el Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados y la Direccion General para la Proteccion y Asistencia al Refugiado." San Jose: 21 July 1986, pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Universidad para la Paz, "Los proyectos productivos para refugiados: casos de Costa Rica y Nicaragua," Ciudad Colon: August 1985, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Thomas Keables, Director, Achiote Active Camp for Nicaraguan Refugees, San Isidro El General, Costa Rica, 31 July 1986.



<sup>8</sup> An estimated 10,000 - 15,000 refugees/migrants were in Belize at mid-1986. The total population of the country is approximately 150,000. Joseph O. Palacio, "Recent Immigrants to Belize: A Challenge to Development," paper presented at Caribbean Studies Association Meetings, Caracas, Venezuela, May 1986; and Milton H. Jamail and Chandler Stolp, "Central Americans on the Run: Political Refugees or Economic Migrants?" Public Affairs Comment, Vol. XXXI, No. 3, Spring 1985, University of Texas at Austin, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Artículo 8, Codigo de Comercio, Coleccion Juridica Lehman, San Jose, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Alejandro Chan, Legal Assistant, Center for Socio-political Analysis for Refugees, CASP-RE, 21 August 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Constitucion Politica de la Republica de Costa Rica, Dictada el 7 de Noviembre de 1949, San Jose: Imprenta Nacional, 1986, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> C. Koch; D. Mora Castro and R. Thiadens, "Refugee Settlements in Central America and Mexico," Geneva: Technical Support Services UNHCR, April 1986, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mitchell A. Seligson, Peasants of Costa Rica and the Development of Agrarian Capitalism, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Koch, et. al., p.5.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Biesanz, Karen Zubris Biesanz, and Mavis Biesanz Hiltunen, The Costa Ricans, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Interviews with UNHCR and PVO officials, San Jose, July - August 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews conducted at refugee camps and with UNHCR officials, July - August 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews with PVO officials, July - August 1986.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews with UNHCR officials, July - August 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Hugo Alfonso Munoz, Minister of Justice during the Monge administration (1982-86), 14 August 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Peggy Levitt, Thesis, Columbia University, Spring 1986, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Decree Number 14155-J, Appearing in La Gaceta, No. 248, 23 December 1982.

<sup>23</sup> DIGEPARE, "Informe anual de labores," San Jose: April 1986, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Refugees and Displaced Persons in Central America," in Patricia Weiss Fagen and Sergio Aguayo, Fleeing the Maelstrom: Central American Refugees Occasional Paper No. 10, Central American and Caribbean Program, Washington, DC: The Johns Hopkins University, 1986, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with UNHCR officials, July - August 1986.

<sup>26</sup> Fagen, pp. 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Lic. Hilda Porras, Director of CONAPARE 1982-1985, 11 August 1986.

<sup>28</sup> Victor Ml. Vargas Meneses, Ministry of Justice; and Lelio Marmora, ILO-UNHCR, Analisis de los aspectos de coordinacion y ejecucion de los programas de accion sobre los refugiados en Costa Rica, San Jose: 31 January 1984, pp. 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Levitt, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Universidad Para la Paz, Los refugiados centroamericanos, Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica: enero de 1985, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> Vargas and Marmora, pp. 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> Fagen, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> ILO-UNHCR, "Diagnostico preliminar del programa de atencion para refugiados en Costa Rica, No. 1," Proyecto integracion socio-economica de refugiados urbanos y semi-urbanos en Costa Rica: OIT/ACNUR, San Jose: May 1985, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Vargas and Marmora, pp. 20-22.

<sup>35</sup> Levitt, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Jose Manuel Blanco, Direccion General para la Proteccion y Asistencia a los Refugiados (DIGEPARE), 16 July 1986.

<sup>37</sup> "Concentran en Presidencia coordinacion para refugiados," La Nacion, 27 August 1985.

<sup>38</sup> Decree Number 16479-P, Appearing in La Gaceta, No. 164, San Jose: 30 August 1985.

<sup>39</sup> DIGEPARE, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> US Embassy of San Jose, World Refugee Report to Congress, FY 1987, p. 3

<sup>41</sup> Levitt, pp. 7-8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> UNHCR, "Situation of the Refugee Programme in Costa Rica," San Jose: 30 June 1986, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Frazier, Linda, "New Refugees Swell Shelters to Bursting," The Tico Times, 25 November 1983, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> International Rescue Committee, "Summary of Current Operations, El Achote Active Center," San Jose: November 1985, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Thomas Keables, Director International Rescue Committee, El Achote Active Center, 31 July 1986.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 1 August 1986.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Johnny Viques, Social Worker, Costa Rica Red Cross, Alva-peral Reception Center, 23 July 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Keables, 31 July 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Alvaro Gonzalez, Ejecutivo Municipal, Ciudad Quesada, 14 August 1986.

<sup>51</sup> Decree Number 16809-RE, Appearing in La Gaceta, No. 21, San Jose: 30 January 1986.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with official of the UNHCR, San Jose, August 1986.

<sup>53</sup> Law No. 7033, Appearing in La Gaceta, No. 100, 30 May 1986.

<sup>54</sup> Telephone interview with PVO official in San Jose, Costa Rica, May 1987.

<sup>55</sup> Charles D. Ameringer, Democracy in Costa Rica, New York: Praeger, 1982, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Mark B. Rosenberg, "The State, Bureaucracy and Social Security Reform in Latin America," Presented at the Ninety-Third Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, San Francisco, CA: 28-30 December 1978, p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> The Biesanzes, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ameringer, p. 96.

## Chapter 4

### **NONGOVERNMENTAL ACTORS AND REFUGEE INTEGRATION**

This chapter examines the important roles nongovernmental actors play in assisting and integrating refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is at the center of the international refugee assistance system. Over the years, its functions have changed as refugee needs have changed. The first section below analyzes characteristics of the UNHCR as they affect long term solutions to Costa Rica's refugee problems.

The second part of the chapter discusses the roles of private voluntary organizations (PVOs) as implementors of refugee assistance. PVOs have been found in many cases to assist refugees more effectively than government agencies. I introduce three PVOs assisting refugees in Costa Rica and evaluate them, based on their bureaucratic interests and strategies for refugee self-sufficiency.

## THE UNHCR

The primary functions of the UNHCR are defined as follows:

**INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION** -- to promote and safeguard the rights of refugees in such vital fields as employment, education, residence, freedom of movement, and security against being returned to a country where they may be in danger of persecution.

**MATERIAL ASSISTANCE** -- to assist governments of countries of asylum in the task of making refugees self supporting as rapidly as possible. Though UNHCR is sometimes called upon by governments to provide emergency relief, its assistance is intended primarily to promote durable solutions to the problems of refugees through voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement in another country.<sup>1</sup>

The UNHCR persuades some governments to safely accept citizens who have fled and wish to return, and persuades others to integrate refugees who cannot return to their home countries. While the agency offers advice on how to use refugee assistance, it does not engage actively in operations.

The UNHCR has gradually evolved since its inception in 1951 in order to meet the changing needs of refugee phenomena. Its original purpose was to protect refugees emerging from World War II, assisting them in camps until they were permanently resettled. It is now the major recipient and disbursing of international funds contributed by governments for refugees. The UNHCR has grown in a haphazard manner, in part because it has had to deal with unanticipated difficulties, such as the new long-term nature of refugee problems.<sup>2</sup> Until 1972 a large portion of the UNHCR's material assistance efforts were meant for host-state integration programs. Since then, the proportion of spending

allocated for relief has grown substantially, indicating that permanent solutions are increasingly difficult to achieve.<sup>3</sup> As seen in Tables 4:1 and 4:2, the ratio of 1985 spending in Costa Rica for maintenance versus settlement of refugees was about 3 to 1.

This section studies characteristics of the UNHCR as observed during field research in Costa Rica. Three points are emphasized:

- (1) The UNHCR is not a service delivery institution.
- (2) The UNHCR is oriented toward providing short-term rather than long-term assistance.
- (3) By virtue of its diplomatic status, the UNHCR must adapt its political work to the national policies of a specific country.

Each of these points is considered in the following subsections.



Table 4:1

UNHCR Assistance in Costa Rica

Type of Assistance	1985 Expenditures \$U.S.	1986 Proposed Expenditures \$U.S.
Local Settlement		
a. Urban Local Settlement assistance to refugees of Central American origin, approx. 12,300	858,656	1,132,570
b. Rural Settlement assistance to Nicaraguan refugees, approx. 7,500	106,500	2,355,056
Lower Secondary Education	109,000	95,000
Multipurpose Assistance (Urban and rural)	4,935,172	3,322,575
Resettlement	8,200	---
Voluntary Repatriation	20,000	37,000
Legal Assistance	89,000	70,000
Counselling	215,000	169,000
Assistance to Handicapped Refugees	43,000	49,900
Supplementary Aid	378,000	46,300
<u>SPECIAL PROGRAMS</u>		105,000
Higher Education	250,000	
TOTAL \$U.S.	7,012,528	7,382,401

Source: Regional Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, Situation of the Refugee Program in Costa Rica, San Jose, Costa Rica; 30 June 1986.

Table 4:2  
Operational Program for Activities in 1986

TYPE OF ASSISTANCE	DESCRIPTION SUMMARY
Local settlement	a) Urban local settlement assistance to refugees of primarily Central American origin, approx. 12,300. b) Rural settlement assistance to Nicaraguan refugees, approx. 7,500.
Multipurpose assistance	Care and maintenance of urban and rural refugees, approx. 20,000, pending durable solutions.
* For urban, includes rent subsidies, education, health; for rural, food, housing, health and education.	
Lower secondary education	Scholarships for some 550 refugee students.
Resettlement	Medical and travel costs for refugees and their families resettled from the various countries covered by the Regional Office.
Voluntary repatriation	Travel and related costs for refugees voluntarily repatriated from Costa Rica.
Legal assistance	Funding of legal fees, documentation and related legal services for refugees.
Counselling	Funding of legal fees, documentation and related legal services for refugees.
Assistance to handicapped refugees	Therapeutic treatment for handicapped refugees including vulnerable groups and victims of torture.
Supplementary aid	Temporary assistance to newly arrived refugees.
Program support and administration	Junior Professional Officer.
<u>SPECIAL PROGRAMS</u>	
Education account	Scholarships for approx. 380 refugee students: higher secondary and university.
Other trust funds	

Source: Regional Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, Situation of the Refugee Program in Costa Rica, San Jose, Costa Rica; 30 June 1986.

## INDIRECT ROLE IN REFUGEE ASSISTANCE

The UNHCR emphasizes flexibility in management in order to adapt to the diverse political, economic and social environments of countries. UNHCR officials are assigned to specific countries for brief periods of 2-3 years in order to maintain the political neutrality necessary for diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> This often means that officials are unfamiliar with a local political and socioeconomic structure.

These practices have made it difficult for the UNHCR to accumulate technical expertise and discretion. As one analyst notes, the institution has a limited sense of history: in the UNHCR, "twenty years of experience is one year's experience twenty times."<sup>5</sup>

Members of the refugee policy community differ on how the UNHCR might enhance its technical efficiency. Some argue for increased planning. Others stress flexibility. Pitterman has discussed this debate:

The advocates of more systematic planning argue that there are certain elements to international assistance programs that need to be thoroughly conceptualized on a longer term basis... improved planning will lead to more responsive and goal-oriented policies as well as more effective coordination among administering agencies.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, since refugee problems are unique and complex, planning may

...constrain innovative responses to what are essentially unpredictable crises... A change in the ecological or political environments can make or break an assistance program especially in Third World countries.<sup>7</sup>

Two refugee programs discussed below serve to illustrate the nature of UNHCR involvement in Costa Rica, as well as its limitations. One program gave emergency assistance to Salvadoran refugees in a "paternalistic" fashion; the other used a rural integration scheme inconsistent with Costa Rican conditions.

### Emergency Assistance

Salvadoran refugees began arriving in Costa Rica in 1980, soon after the UNHCR opened its regional headquarters in San Jose. According to a senior UNHCR official a standard was set of "overprotecting" this first major refugee group to come to Costa Rica.<sup>8</sup> The Salvadoran cause received much sympathy from the refugee policy community; agencies not associated with the UNHCR offered assistance. Project Counseling Service for Latin American Refugees, funded by Europeans, and Diakonia, a Swedish agency, established offices in San Jose. A support system was organized by Salvadorans; the Office for Assistance to Salvadoran Refugees (OARS) offered health and educational programs and cultural activities.<sup>9</sup>

From 1980 to 1983, the UNHCR distributed its cash assistance to urban refugees through the Episcopal Church, the Costa Rican Red Cross, and then through IMAS. Costa Rica restricted the employment of refugees and encouraged instead that they develop income-generating projects. The National Commission for Refugees (CONAPARE) stated during this period that refugees should receive emergency assistance for 3-6 months, while projects were being formulated.<sup>10</sup>

UNHCR assistance was continued, however. In 1983, many refugees had been receiving emergency aid for three years. Although cash assistance offered by the UNHCR was only enough for subsistence, many refugees received money from more than one agency. Refugee families were said to receive more in benefits than the average salaries of low-income Costa Rican families.<sup>11</sup> Some also worked while continuing to receive assistance. Productive projects begun at this time failed, in part, due to disincentives already ingrained by the aid. Fagen argues:

Many of the refugees are more troubled by the psycho-social effect of three years of dependence on public assistance than by the amount of that assistance. The Salvadorans are characterized throughout Central America as the hardest working group in the region, but in Costa Rica, apparently, the dependence and consequent loss of self-esteem has, for many, eroded the will to work and build for the future.<sup>12</sup>

These practices clearly went against policy outlined in the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies, namely, that assistance should be given in such a way as to promote self-sufficiency.<sup>13</sup>

CONAPARE announced an abrupt change in January 1985: assistance policy would be applied more strictly. Beginning October 1986, refugees then on assistance and newcomers would have it discontinued after two months.<sup>14</sup> Nicaraguans, who were then arriving in massive numbers, charged that this shift showed a bias against them.<sup>15</sup> But UNHCR and CASP-Re officials insisted they were trying to avoid earlier practices which created dependency.<sup>16</sup>

### Rural Settlement

In 1980 the rural settlement of Los Angeles was established in northeastern Costa Rica, intended for 1000 Salvadoran refugees. This agricultural project was based on the classic UNHCR model predominantly used in Africa, where over three million<sup>17</sup> (of the world's thirteen million) refugees reside. The goal is to have refugees settle on uninhabited or sparsely populated land. They are assisted in becoming self-sufficient by being provided with agricultural inputs and basic social and physical infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

In Africa numerous countries have offered large tracts of land to settle refugees of rural extraction. Hundreds of thousands have settled in Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, and Zambia. During 1985 Tanzania allowed 35,000 Burundian refugees to settle in its western highlands, in a large agricultural project at Mishamo.<sup>19</sup> The prominence accorded rural settlements can be seen in the 58 percent allocated for them in the UNHCR's 1982 budget for Africa.<sup>20</sup>

The UNHCR chose to use this policy in Costa Rica, hoping the Los Angeles farm would become a "model" project. Large amounts of money, time, and labor were spent before it was realized the plan would not work. The limited availability of land in Costa Rica imposed high costs, resulting in a smaller size settlement and reduced economies of scale. High standards of facilities required by the Costa Rican government also pushed up costs.<sup>21</sup> The 1980-81 UNHCR budget allocated \$387,000 for Los Angeles, which never served more than a few hundred people; the same year only \$439,000 was allotted for

assisting close to 5000 refugees in San Jose.<sup>22</sup> The costs to settle one family in Central America have been estimated at \$10,000-\$20,000, about three times more than costs for settlement in Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Few studies were made before the great investment in Los Angeles. Only 20 hectares out of 196 were suitable for intensive crop production.<sup>24</sup> The settlement was located in an isolated area with poor climate, and there were few markets for products the refugees produced.<sup>25</sup> Mismanagement and social factors also contributed to Los Angeles' failure; the refugee population consisted mostly of women, children, and elderly persons not able to operate a labor-intensive agricultural project.<sup>26</sup>

## BUDGETING

The UNHCR is not a development agency. As the two cases above have illustrated, it cannot allocate large portions of its budget to research on appropriate technology. The "crisis-and-relief" orientation of UNHCR assistance makes programming for long term projects difficult, as budgets are constantly being revised.

PVO officials in Costa Rica have pointed to inadequate and unpredictable funding for camp operations as "the severest obstacle in maintaining steady progress in the aid to refugees..."<sup>27</sup> Table 4:3 provides information on camps. The UNHCR makes a yearly budget for a country's operations. But the "emergency" nature of refugee relief necessitates month-to-month revisions, as

money is shifted around for different purposes. Projects often remain incomplete when the UNHCR suddenly cuts off funds. The International Rescue Committee (IRC), which administers the Achote Active Center or "Centro Activo," reports:

Short term, much less long term, programming is impossible without a secure and sufficient economic base from which to work, and it is in this regard that the UNHCR's current funding policies have hindered the acceptable development of assistance activities in the camp. Mid month changes in crucial line items have the potential for leaving buildings half-built, programs partially developed, and an overall stagnation of progress. ...It has been impossible to project the operation of the camp beyond a strictly routine, maintenance level -- a far cry from what one would expect in a truly "Active Center" for refugees.

The absence of accountability which results from constant revisions of budgets and unspecified objectives increases chances that UNHCR staff will cut operational costs before administrative ones, a point often brought up by critics outside the agency.

### DIPLOMATIC STATUS

Through the resources it provides, the UNHCR can greatly influence how a government will treat refugees. UNHCR officials in Costa Rica and around the world persuade communities to accept refugees by financing clinics, schools, and roads; while intended for refugees these can also benefit a wider area. The community association at Boca de Arenal, for example, has reacted positively to the refugees' presence. Their community center is rented to the UNHCR, and local businesses have increased sales.<sup>29</sup>



But the UNHCR is limited in the amount of pressure it can exert on a community or a host government to integrate refugees. Efforts to persuade the community at Altamirita to open a refugee center in the summer of 1986 were fruitless, despite incentives offered.<sup>30</sup> The UNHCR could not react by threatening to lessen or cut assistance as the European Economic Community (E E C) or another state might. This would go against its mandate. In this sense, the UNHCR lacks leverage on states.

#### PRIVATE VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS (PVOs)

The PVOs have been integral to the international refugee assistance system that has evolved since the 1950's. They have gained esteem among development agencies too, for their cost-effectiveness and success in fostering self-help initiatives among the poor.

PVOs are non-profit agencies which provide services for overseas relief and development; most commonly, they are formally independent of governments. The term "PVO" is sometimes used broadly, however, to describe all types of non-profit, service-oriented entities -- private and public, international and domestic.<sup>31</sup>

As non-governmental institutions, PVOs can presumably maintain apolitical images; they are more likely to gain the acceptance of refugees and host communities, and can act as intermediaries between the two. Because they work on an individual level, PVOs are effective in building and bolstering community

institutions. They are also freer from bureaucratic restrictions than U.N. and government agencies, and thus are more likely to produce innovative projects.<sup>32</sup>

A study by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) of ten large PVOs found that they incurred substantially less administrative overhead than government-to-government aid programs: 3 to 7 percent of expenses versus 20 to 30 percent.<sup>33</sup> One source of this difference is found in lower staff salaries. Bolling and Smith state:

People who love their work and are driven by a high sense of mission often work for less money than others less strongly motivated. PVO administrative and field staff members are willing to work for less money than their counterparts within AID and even those attached to host governments who might otherwise receive AID grants.<sup>34</sup>

The capabilities of individual PVOs do vary significantly, as do their agendas, values, and organizational philosophies.

In some cases, the politics of PVOs in refugee relief will extend to positions of advocacy or to outright challenges to the policies and practices of donor and host countries ...in addition to humanitarian motives that PVOs espouse, they also have instincts for continued access to refugees, for growth, and for self preservation.<sup>35</sup>

But the potential contributions of PVOs to refugee assistance should not be underrated. On the whole, they have proven to work effectively in areas where governments cannot.

## PVOs IN COSTA RICAN REFUGEE AFFAIRS

The problems encountered with implementing assistance through the Costa Rican government were outlined in Chapter 3. The government sought direct control of refugee affairs which affected national security and economic issues. It also wished to employ its own technicians and professionals. The Social Assistance Institute (IMAS), a semi-autonomous government agency, distributed emergency assistance, administered two camps, and oversaw productive projects for refugees from 1982 to 1985.

General administrative deficiencies included:

1. Insufficient delegation of authority to PRIMAS, the refugee body within IMAS.<sup>36</sup>
2. Excessive growth of the administrative bureaucracy without a concomitant increase in professional staff.<sup>37</sup>
3. Extensive delays in the delivery of supplies (even basic foods) to refugees in camps, exacerbating malnutrition.<sup>38</sup>
4. Very little emphasis in social work programs on encouraging refugee self-sufficiency.<sup>39</sup>

The embezzlement of \$300,000 by low-level government officials in PRIMAS ultimately proved the need for new refugee assistance agencies. The UNHCR requested that these be private.

PVOs are humanitarian organizations that have a greater interest in problem solving than large, lethargic bureaucratic organizations. Given limited policy

direction and guidelines from the Costa Rican government, PVOs can play a major role in meeting the basic needs of the refugees, and in fostering attitudes and work habits that are conducive to a healthy adaptation to their host country. PVOs can also influence the attitudes of refugee-affected communities.

While the UNHCR offers advice to governments on how to use refugee assistance, the choice of implementing agencies is made by the host government. A number of variables affect this decision, including the availability of qualified national agencies. Political pressures also influence this decision; hence, contracts may not be awarded to the most competent agencies.

The extended stay of the refugees in Costa Rica has called for PVOs able to work beyond the emergency or relief stage, that is, agencies able to administer long-term assistance and promote refugee self-sufficiency.

This requires a careful planning of operations and staff with technical, managerial, and community development experience. Ability to work in cross-cultural situations and to tolerate tough living conditions have also proven to play an important role.<sup>40</sup> As one PVO director in Costa Rica emphasized, it is difficult to find personnel willing to work in remote camp areas.<sup>41</sup>

Three PVOs administer Costa Rica's rural refugee programs (see Table 4:3). They are evaluated below, based on their strategies for refugee self-sufficiency and their bureaucratic interests. The Costa Rican Red Cross and the Center for Sociopolitical Analysis (CASP) are indigenous agencies and had little or no prior experience in refugee work. The International Rescue Committee (IRC), a U.S.-based PVO, has assisted refugees around the world for over fifty years.

### The Costa Rican Red Cross

The Costa Rican Red Cross was called on in the early stages of the refugee influx; as its expertise was in emergency situations, it initially ran reception centers along the border with Nicaragua. The Red Cross's role as an "always-ready" and "quick-to-mobilize" relief agency<sup>42</sup> poses the question of whether it is qualified to administer long term assistance and promote refugee self-sufficiency.

The Red Cross runs centers at Albaperal and Boca de Arenal, which may have the worst camp conditions in Costa Rica. They have bad hygiene practices, no preventive health care, and poorly planned housing with little ventilation.<sup>43</sup> Overcrowding and a constant inflow at these centers are beyond the Red Cross's control; they were intended to be only "reception" centers where refugees would remain for a brief period.<sup>44</sup>

Table 4:3

UNHCR - Funded Implementing Agencies in Costa Rica  
(Rural Programs)

AGENCY	REFUGEE PROGRAM	RESPONSIBILITIES	POPULATION	
1. CASP/CAMP	Nicaraguan ladinos creoles miskitos others	Implementation of multipurpose assistance program: food, nutrition, housing, water supply, education, counselling in <u>Limon</u> and <u>Tilaran</u> camps.	<u>Limon</u> 977	<u>Tilaran</u> 3041
2. COSTA RICAN RED CROSS	Nicaraguan ladinos	Same as above, for <u>Alvaperal</u> and <u>Boca Arenal</u> reception centers.	<u>Alvaperal</u> 1389	<u>Boca Arenal</u> 475
3. INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (IRC)	Nicaraguan ladinos (Also Miskitos in future Playa Blanca Project)	Active camps: <u>Achiote</u> 1. Food, nutrition, household goods, health, environmental health, housing and other constructions, water supply, education and counselling. 2. Agriculture, cattle raising, poultry keeping, beekeeping, workshops, agriculture projects outside camp, employment out of camp. 3. Logistics.	<u>Achiote</u> 2015	

Source: Regional Office, UNHCR, San Jose, Costa Rica, 30 June 1986.

At Albaperal, Red Cross relief personnel work in teams at the various camp activities. Their motto is to be the "jacks of all trades"; Red Cross workers, not the refugees themselves, plan and construct refugee housing.<sup>45</sup>

The Costa Rican Red Cross assists victims of all types of disasters, natural and man-made. Refugees are not the top priority within the work of this large bureaucracy.

#### Center for Sociopolitical Analysis (CASP)

When the government agency PRIMAS was charged with embezzling funds in 1984, the UNHCR asked that it be replaced by a private agency. CASP was founded in 1985 by Costa Rican academics, social workers and other professionals. It was hired in an effort to keep the largest refugee programs in the hands of a Costa Rican organization. CASP-Re runs the urban refugee program and CASP-CAMP the rural camps at Tilaran and Limon. CASP's executive director, Gianina Tanzi, was an advisor to President Monge (1982-86). Some members of CASP's staff belong to the National Liberation Party (PLN), the ruling party since 1982, and are former employees of PRIMAS.<sup>46</sup>

Because CASP is closely tied with the government, it might not represent the interests of the refugees objectively, and could be used to implement restrictive policies. One diplomat in Costa Rica argued:

...CASP is oriented toward internal political goals and does not have the values of a humanitarian agency. It uses instruments in a very bureaucratic way, and has displayed little effort to promote creative solutions, such as the teaching of 'survival tactics' to the refugees.<sup>47</sup>

CASP-CAMP, the rural project component of CASP, assumed administration of the Tilaran and Limon camps after Socorro<sup>48</sup> left, in December 1985.

All administrative staff at the Limon camp are Red Cross personnel. The camp director conditioned acceptance of his position on their selection.<sup>49</sup> The staff is cohesive and works separately from the refugees, according to a CASP-CAMP study.<sup>50</sup>

#### International Rescue Committee

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) began administration of the Achiote "active" center for Nicaraguan refugees in 1985. This private, U.S.-based PVO was founded in 1933 as a refugee relief and resettlement agency, and has worldwide experience. This experience is its major advantage over the Costa Rican agencies. IRC's policy is to work with less than 10 percent overhead costs.<sup>51</sup> It is the only refugee PVO in Costa Rica that finances its own administrative costs (other agencies receive UNHCR funds for this.)<sup>52</sup> IRC has also made an effort to hire locals: the IRC Representative in Costa Rica and the director of Achiote are U.S. citizens; the rest of IRC's staff are Costa Ricans.

Although IRC has also been basically an emergency/rescue PVO, it has a strong policy of refugee self-reliance and has begun to alter its strategy to operate in development situations.<sup>53</sup>

At the Achiote "active" center, refugees participate in projects that promote their self-sufficiency, and help offset the center's expenses. They receive



technical aid and training in carpentry, farming, animal breeding, and other activities.<sup>54</sup>

### REFUGEE SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies argues that refugees in camps will reach self-sufficiency more quickly if PVOs allow them to run their own community services. Regimented refugee camps should be avoided: the assistance system should draw on the refugees' own methods for solving problems.<sup>55</sup>

"Anti-participatory" strategies used in Costa Rica have already proven ineffective and wasteful. The Los Angeles settlement for Salvadoran refugees is cited in a UNHCR document for its poor record in this area. Under administration by the Costa Rican Red Cross (1980-82), IMAS (1982-85) and CASP (since 1985), refugees have assumed minimal management of the settlement's activities:

There is no refugee committee or representation with whom project management can discuss settlement matters. Refugees have not been consulted nor been part of a decision-making process regarding settlement planning and implementation. It was the implementing agency who decided what to do, when and by whom. Refugee participation in actual settlement implementation has been very limited. Many of the constructed facilities are pre-fabricated and were set up by the implementing agency with the help of local contractors. No refugees have been trained in management and administration. Productive activities were initially done on a communal basis. The people who were working in agriculture or other activities did not receive any remuneration as the farm produce was sold by the settlement management and the profits were reinvested in settlement activities.<sup>56</sup>

The following describes general principles which should guide PVO social work programs, and the degrees to which the agencies in Costa Rica follow these.

The first principle, as stated in the UNHCR Handbook, is that refugees should play the central role in a camp or settlement. The PVO administering assistance should build on the refugees own resources to the extent possible.<sup>57</sup>

The working philosophies of the Costa Rican Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) are divergent on this issue. Red Cross workers (contracted by CASP-CAMP) at the Limon camp informally coordinate the administration of activities among themselves. They have no meetings on technical or social work matters and instead work cohesively and separately from the refugees.<sup>58</sup> Refugees are not involved in maintenance, electrical or sanitary tasks, for example. A group of Limon refugees found their communication with Red Cross workers so poor, that they went to the U.S. Embassy in San Jose to protest about camp policies.<sup>59</sup>

IRC staff encourage refugees to solve their own problems. IRC has tried to make refugees as self-sufficient as possible by de-centralizing responsibilities within the Achiote camp. Refugee groups distribute food, hygiene products and domestic items.<sup>60</sup> During a housing expansion that took place in 1986, refugees received technical assistance and a small budget to design and build their own family dwellings.<sup>61</sup>

Social workers at Achiote have tried to delegate more and more responsibility to refugees over the months. Refugee health promoters, for example, are trained to encourage preventive health care -- a necessary element given crowded camp conditions.<sup>62</sup>

A second principle stated in the UNHCR Handbook is that

familiarity with social values and customs is essential... Sympathy with and understanding of the kinds of problems faced, and a knowledge of local preferences for their resolution are essential. The importance of professional impartial conduct cannot be overstressed.<sup>63</sup>

Refugee preferences -- on matters of diet or health care, for example -- can be better understood if social workers conduct group, family, and individual studies. IRC has done this to some extent at Achiote. Refugees have been actively involved in decision-making on the kinds of goods and services used in the camp. The administration has decided to work with UNHCR restrictions on food, for example, in order to help refugees obtain the staples so important to their diet: e.g., meat, "pinolillo" (a drink), beans and tortillas.<sup>64</sup> IRC has sought to accommodate opposition by refugee women to male obstetricians by searching for female ones.<sup>65</sup>

Social workers at Achiote have also obtained valuable information on family composition and vocational abilities of refugees. These detailed family files have played a major role in the employment of men, women, and children in local coffee harvests.<sup>66</sup>

Such studies have not been conducted by Red Cross workers at the Limon camp. The social worker has obtained no ethnic or cultural information on which to base strategies for refugee involvement in the camp.<sup>67</sup> The administration has imposed its own authority and style of work without understanding refugee organization and preferences.

Some Red Cross workers at Limon argue that refugees do not work because they are "maladjusted" and aid-dependent; this should be changed, they say, via regulation or sanctions.<sup>68</sup>

#### PVO STRATEGIES AND HOST COMMUNITIES

A PVO can lessen community opposition to the refugees' presence. Friction between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans are common and have preceded the opening of each new refugee camp.<sup>69</sup> Many Costa Ricans believe Nicaraguans have lower health and educational standards. They have feared also that Nicaraguans settling nearby in large numbers will take jobs and strain social and municipal services.<sup>70</sup>

The more regimented camp life is and the more refugees are separated from local communities, the greater the likelihood that refugees will be viewed as "different," become scapegoats, and even the subjects of open hostility.

A PVO can foster positive relations between refugees and nationals by encouraging commercial and social ties. Expenses on resources and materials for

camps should be considered in socio-economic terms, not just budgetary ones:<sup>71</sup> local materials and the skills of local people should be used whenever possible.

The Tilaran camp purchases its durable and perishable supplies each week through the CASP-CAMP office in San Jose. CASP-CAMP has chosen to centralize procurement in this way to avoid the stealing and waste of food that occurred when Tilaran was administered by Socorro. In so doing, CASP-CAMP has fallen into a trap, like PRIMAS did earlier. Deliveries have often been delayed, causing refugees to go without certain foods and resulting ultimately in malnutrition.<sup>72</sup>

IRC has made a conscious effort to purchase food and supplies from the communities surrounding the Achiote camp. The people of Buenos Aires initially were very opposed to the opening of this camp.<sup>73</sup> Many have become accepting, however, as refugees have stimulated depressed markets. Numerous farmers in the area could not sell their vegetables or had to do so through an intermediary because transport facilities to markets were poor. IRC's policy of buying from locals has resulted in increased sales, and diversification and expansion of production for some farmers who view Achiote's refugees as 2000 new consumers.<sup>74</sup> The camp benefits from the relationship because it can depend on a supply of fresh vegetables.

IRC has cultivated community relations in other ways. It has sought to hire its staff locally. The camp agronomist, for example, is from the region and is helping refugee families resettle as sharecroppers or tenant farmers on local farms.<sup>75</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has studied the roles of non-governmental actors in refugee integration. The UNHCR was created with a "crisis-and-relief" orientation that makes planning for long term projects difficult. It is not a development agency and hence cannot allocate large portions of its budget to research on appropriate technology. In Costa Rica, the UNHCR assisted many Salvadoran refugees ineffectively, and used an integration scheme inconsistent with Costa Rican conditions.

UNHCR assistance lessens the burden of refugees on host countries and may encourage governments to issue favorable asylum policies. But its power to coerce governments to integrate refugees is limited.

PVOs have been found in many cases to better implement refugee assistance than government agencies, because they tend to be more cost effective and function with smaller staffs. PVOs are also freer of bureaucratic and political restrictions and tend to be more strongly driven by humanitarian goals.

In Costa Rica, deficiencies in the government agency were rampant. PRIMAS was slow in resolving problems and delivering supplies, its administrative bureaucracy grew excessively, and some of its employees embezzled assistance funds.

Three major PVOs now run Costa Rica's rural refugee programs. But only the International Rescue Committee -- a private, foreign agency -- actively

encourages refugee self-sufficiency, and promotes positive relations with host communities. The Red Cross and CASP were chosen because the Costa Rican government wished to maintain refugee programs in the hands of nationals. The working philosophies of these two agencies have proven inadequate for the long term administration of assistance.

The Red Cross has been involved in Costa Rica for many years but its expertise is in emergency situations; its working style hinders the achievement of durable solutions. CASP-CAMP, a new agency, is also lacking in solutions for refugees. Some of CASP's staff are former employees of PRIMAS and are members of the ruling party, the PLN. These ties could restrict the agency's pursuit of an active integration program.

## NOTES - Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> Outlined in Refugees, No. 22, October 1985, UNHCR, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Avrin McLean, "International Institutional Mechanisms for Refugees," in Mary M. Kritz, ed., U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy: Global and Domestic Issues, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1983, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Shelly Pitterman, "A Comparative Survey of Two Decades of Assistance to Refugees in Africa," Africa Today, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1984, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Jose M. Mendiluce, UNHCR Representative for Costa Rica, 19 August, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Shelly Pitterman, "International Responses to Refugee Situations: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees," in Elizabeth Ferris, ed., Refugees and World Politics, New York: Praeger, 1985, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jose M. Mendiluce, UNHCR Representative for Costa Rica, 19 August 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Sylvia Porras, Social Worker, Oficina de Orientacion y Asistencia Social a Refugiados (OARS), 4 August 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Peggy Levitt, Thesis, Columbia University, Spring 1986, pp. 13, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Refugee families allegedly took in 5000 to 30,000 colones a month in benefits; Levitt, p. 27.



<sup>12</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Refugees and Displaced Persons in Central America," in Patricia Weiss Fagen and Sergio Aguayo, Fleeing the Maelstrom: Central American Refugees, Occasional Paper No. 10, Central American and Caribbean Program, Washington, D. C.: The Johns Hopkins University, pp. 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Handbook for Emergencies Part One: Field Operations, Geneva: December 1982, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Nedy Zamora, Directora Tecnica, CASP-Re, 19 August 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Comandante Julio Zelaya, "ACNUR... humanitaria?," La Prensa Libre, 30 January 1986, pp. 11, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Zamora, Center for Sociopolitical Analysis for Refugees (CASP-Re), 19 August 1986; and Mendiluce 19 August 1986.

<sup>17</sup> W. R. Smyser, "Refugees: A Never Ending Story," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 64, No. 1, Fall 1985, p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> Louise W. Holborn, Refugees: A Problem of Our Time, The Work of The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1951-1972, Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1972, Vol. 2, pp. 905-906; and C. Koch, D. Mora Castro and R. Thiadens, "Refugee Settlements in Central America and Mexico," Geneva: Technical Support Services, UNHCR, April 1986, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Smyser, p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> B. E. Harrell-Bond, Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Koch, et. al., p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Fagen, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Koch, et. al., p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Levitt, pp. 17-18.

<sup>26</sup> Fagen, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> International Rescue Committee, "Summary of Current Operations, El Achote Active Center," San Jose: October 1985, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Araceli Segura Retan, Member, Boca de Arenal Community Association, 24 July 1986.

<sup>30</sup> Residents of the region issued a statement indicating their fear that refugees would aggravate unemployment, spread disease, bring an increase in alcoholism and prostitution, and because of their proximity to the border, threaten security. "Todo Agua Zarcas se opone a centro de refugiados alli," La Republica, Costa Rica, 8 August 1986.

<sup>31</sup> Robert F. Gorman, "Private Voluntary Organizations in Refugee Relief," in Elizabeth Ferris, ed., Refugees in World Politics, New York: Praeger, 1985, p. 83; and Landrum Bolling and Craig Smith, Private Foreign Aid: U. S. Philanthropy for Relief and Development, Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1982, p. 153.

<sup>32</sup> Bolling and Smith, p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Bolling and Smith, pp. 190-191.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>35</sup> Gorman, p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> Victor Ml. Vargas Meneses, Ministry of Justice, and Lelio Marmora, ILO-UNHCR, Analisis de los aspectos de coordinacion y ejecucion de los programas de accion sobre los refugiados en Costa Rica, San Jose: 31 January 1984, pp. 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 20; and ILO/UNHCR, "Diagnostico preliminar del programa de atencion para refugiados en Costa Rica, No. 1," Proyecto integracion socio-economica de refugiados urbanos y semi-urbanos en Costa Rica: ILO/UNHCR, San Jose, May 1985, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Vargas and Marmora, p. 11; ILO/UNHCR, p. 7; and Isaura Esquivel, "Graves casos de desnutricion y anemia entre los niños refugiados en el Centro de Tilaran," El Debate, San Jose, Costa Rica, 2 March 1984, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Vargas and Marmora, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Lance Clark, "The Refugee Dependency Syndrome: Physician, Heal Thyself!," Washington, D.C.: Refugee Policy Group, July 1985, p. 5; and Roger Brown, "From Camp to Village: Preparing to Initiate Development Activities Among Refugees," Save the Children, USA: 1 December 1985, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Sherman Thomas, President, Socorro International, San Jose, 29 July 1986.

<sup>42</sup> Bolling and Smith, p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> Visits to Albaperal and Boca de Arenal Refugee Camps, 23-24 July 1986; and Interview with Patricia Drolet, Field Officer, Northern Region, UNHCR, Santa Rosa de Pocosol, Costa Rica, 23 July 1986.

<sup>44</sup> "Es lamentable estado de centros de refugiados," La Prensa Libre, San Jose, Costa Rica, 6 August 1985, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Visits to Albaperal and Boca de Arenal Refugee Camps, 23-24 July 1986; and Drolet, 23 July 1986.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with UNHCR and PVO officials, July-August 1986.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with UNHCR official, August 1986.

<sup>48</sup> Socorro International, a Costa Rican PVO, administered the Tilaran and Limon camps for Nicaraguan refugees, in 1984 and 1985 (after PRIMAS did). Socorro also helped open and run the Achiote camp between 1984 and 1985. Created in 1984 by members of the Union Church in Costa Rica, Socorro was replaced at the UNHCR's request because it was overspending its budget, was poorly organized, and was allegedly allowing Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries to enter the Limon camp.

<sup>49</sup> CASP-CAMP, "Diagnostico Tecnico-Administrativo de los Campamentos de Limon y Tilaran:" San Jose: Centro de Analisis Sociopolitico, 1986, p. 40.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp. 40-41.

<sup>51</sup> International Rescue Committee, "Fact Sheet," New York, 1 July 1985.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Demetrio Alvero, Costa Rica Representative, International Rescue Committee, 21 July 1986.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Thomas Keables, Director, International Rescue Committee, El Achiote Active Center, 31 July 1986.

<sup>54</sup> International Rescue Committee, Annual Report 1985, New York, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, Part One: Field Operations, Geneva: December 1982, pp. 4-5.

<sup>56</sup> C. Koch; D. Mora-Castro and R. Thiadens, "Refugee Settlements in Central America and Mexico," Geneva: Technical Support Services, UNHCR, April 1986, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> UNHCR Handbook, pp. 156-159.

<sup>58</sup> CASP-CAMP, p. 41; and visit to Limon Refugee Camp, 15 August 1986.

<sup>59</sup> CASP-CAMP, p. 44; and interviews with Limon camp refugees, 15 August 1986.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Paula Busto Obando, Social Worker, International Rescue Committee (IRC), El Achiote Active Center, 31 July 1986.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Thomas Keables, Director, IRC, El Achiote Active Center, 31 July 1986; and interviews with Achiote Center Refugees, 1 August 1986.

<sup>62</sup> Busto Obando, 31 July 1986.

<sup>63</sup> UNHCR, Handbook, p. 159.

<sup>64</sup> Keables, 31 July 1986; and Elaine Schwartz, "Food Habits and Beliefs of Nicaraguan Refugees in El Achiote," ACM Tropical Field Research, Spring 1986, p. 38.

<sup>65</sup> IRC, "Summary of Current Operations, El Achiote Active Center," San Jose: June 1986, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> IRC, "Summary of Current Operations, El Achiote Active Center," San Jose: December 1985, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> CASP-CAMP, p. 41.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 42; and visit to Limon Refugee Camp, 15 August 1986.

<sup>69</sup> Victor Hugo Murillo S. "Perjuicio y rumor distancian a tilaraneses de refugiados," La Nacion, San Jose, 17 October 1983, p. 4A; "Buenos Aires contra refugiados," La Prensa Libre, San Jose, Costa Rica, 14 July 1984, p. 2; "San Carlos no aceptara campamentos refugiados," La Republica, San Jose, 30 May 1986; Todo Agua Zarcas se opone a centro refugiados alli, " La Republica, San Jose, 8 August 1986; and Acta No. 82, Secretaria General Municipalidad Ciudad Quesada, 8 August 1986.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Anna Cleary, "ICVA/UNHCR Workshop on Development Approaches to Refugee Situations Held at Puidoux, 1-4 December 1985," Geneva: UNHCR Liaison Unit with Non-Governmental Organizations, 17 December 1985, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> CASP-CAMP, pp. 58-61.

<sup>73</sup> "Buenos Aires..."

<sup>74</sup> Rene Kivikko, "Diversificacion y produccion en una comunidad agricola de subsistencia," ACM Tropical Field Research, Spring 1986, pp. 27, 29, 36, 38, pp. 42-43; and Keables, 31 July 1986.

<sup>75</sup> IRC, "Summary of Current Operations, El Achiote Active Center," San Jose: October 1985, pp. 4-5; and Keables, 31 July 1986.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

Chapter 2 of this thesis emphasized the changing nature of the world's refugee problem. Today most of the world's thirteen million refugees have fled ongoing conflicts in the Third World. Since they are increasingly shunned by the United States and other Western nations, these refugees are likely to remain in Third World countries, placing long-term burdens on already strained resources.

As was shown in Chapter 2, massive numbers of Central Americans have entered Costa Rica in recent years. While some flee the region's economic chaos, many flee persecution and general warfare and are genuine "refugees." In peaceful Costa Rica, refugees have found physical safety but little assurance about their legal status or prospects for settlement.

Costa Rica has traditionally offered asylum to political dissidents, as it did in the 1970's to persons fleeing Pinochet's Chile and Somoza's Nicaragua. But they were relatively educated and few in number. Today Costa Rica faces a far different task: providing services to tens of thousands of poor refugees who have little formal education. The country's immigration laws are inadequate for such mass asylum situations. Economic factors exacerbate the problem: Costa Rica suffers high unemployment, uneven land tenure, rural poverty and substandard housing.

Chapter 3 discussed the role of the state in Costa Rican refugee affairs. In keeping with its humanitarian practices, Costa Rica has accepted the refugees, and declared that they be integrated into the society. One early goal of the national refugee commission was to provide refugees with access to education and health care, available to Costa Ricans through the welfare state. This demonstrated the government's intention to prevent the development of an underclass. But Costa Rica's welfare state is already overburdened, and constantly operates with budget deficits. Unable to effect these policies with its own resources, therefore, Costa Rica has relied on international aid.

While Costa Rica has defined and addressed the refugee problem over the last decade, institutional changes have been slow. The government has spoken of refugee integration, but actual policies have been determined by practical political considerations, namely, that national interests are more important than international commitments. Costa Rica's welfare state first meets the needs of its own citizens, whose interests it has traditionally defended. Labor legislation and norms on access to land and housing, for example, protect nationals but hinder the integration of refugees.

The government is under pressure for jobs from its own citizens. Costa Rican bureaucracy naturally tends to expand and distribute salaries to put off discontent among growing educated classes. This tendency has been reproduced in refugee programs, and in so doing the humanitarian purpose of refugee assistance has been lost.



Refugees in Costa Rica appear to have far better opportunities than in other developing countries: education and health care services, for example, are the most advanced in Central America. The degree to which they are able to take advantage of these services, however, is not so clear.

Unlike the Honduran government, which has not involved itself directly in refugee programs, leaving health and education projects to be implemented by international agencies, the Costa Rican government has sought to play a dominant role. A public agency which administered assistance from 1982 to 1985 was inefficient and wasteful. IMAS was chosen in order to maintain refugee programs in the hands of nationals, for security reasons, but also to employ the country's technicians and professionals. IMAS was slow in making decisions and delivering supplies, and its administrative bureaucracy grew excessively. The government refugee commission, created to coordinate assistance efforts, has also grown too much and been wasteful with UNHCR funds and other assistance. It has failed, for example, to organize the work of the Ministry of Health, so refugees at camps receive very poor medical attention.

Chapter 4 studied the part played by nongovernmental actors in integrating the refugees into Costa Rican society. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) seeks to protect the rights of refugees, and to promote durable solutions to their problems (through voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement in other countries). It offers advice on how to use refugee assistance, but does not engage actively in operations. Assistance is

implemented by the Costa Rican government and by private voluntary organizations (PVOs).

The UNHCR has provided substantial assistance to Costa Rica, averaging \$7 - \$9 million per year. About 75 percent of this aid is used in short term relief programs for refugees (see again Tables 4:1 and 4:2). The UNHCR does not have the technical expertise needed to involve itself in large integration projects, and lacks the political power to ensure their implementation.

As was found in Chapter 4, PVOs could play the strongest role in helping refugees integrate. Because they are freer of bureaucratic and political restrictions than government and UN agencies, they are more likely to produce innovative projects. PVOs vary in their capacity to integrate according to their different political, economic and social agendas.

Research has shown that refugees in camps will reach self-sufficiency more quickly if PVOs pursue "participatory" strategies, which allow refugees to run their own community services to the extent possible. The assistance system should draw on the refugees own resources and methods for solving problems; regimented refugee camps should be avoided.<sup>1</sup>

Refugees in camps are more likely to be accepted by host communities if PVOs encourage commercial and social ties. A socioeconomic structure should be created which encourages local purchases and self-reliance.<sup>2</sup>

In Costa Rica's rural refugee program, only the IRC, a foreign agency with over 50 years experience in refugee work, has pursued policies that are favorable to integration. IRC has encouraged commercial and social interaction between

refugees and nationals and has promoted refugee self-sufficiency, despite the lack of resources and direction from national policymakers. The working philosophies of the two national agencies, the Red Cross and CASP-CAMP, have -- intentionally or not -- been less favorable to integration.

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first research question asked how Costa Rica's liberal asylum policy is affected by the enormous refugee influx. This study found the government's need to be involved in all aspects of refugee assistance has overshadowed commitment to a policy of refugee integration.

The Costa Rican state has sought to maintain firm control of refugee programs. By delegating implementation of relief to government -- rather than private -- agencies, the state has employed a large pool of Costa Rican technicians and professionals and likewise maintained control over important national security issues. In so doing, however, the state has lost sight of the humanitarian purpose of this assistance, which has been dissipated in large, lethargic bureaucracies.

The second research issue was the UNHCR's role in the integration process. This agency's mandate is to provide assistance and promote long term solutions to refugee situations. In the absence of other options, the UNHCR supported "integration" of Central American refugees into Costa Rican society. Because of

the "emergency" nature of refugee relief, however, it is difficult for the UNHCR to program long term assistance. It is not a development agency.

The third question asked how the different political, economic, and social agendas of PVOs affect their capacity to integrate the refugees. As the actions of IMAS and CASP demonstrate, the stronger the identification of a refugee agency with the Costa Rican government, the weaker was its pursuit of an integration policy.

The state's role in so many aspects of Costa Rica's refugee programs made it difficult to objectively analyze the policies of different PVOs. Because of CASP's ties with the government, only two agencies -- the Red Cross and IRC -- could be evaluated on their strategies for refugee self-sufficiency and their bureaucratic interests. It was difficult to distinguish, therefore, what made IRC more effective than the Red Cross: IRC's experience working with refugees, or the fact that it was a "foreign" PVO representing the interests of the refugee within the host country.

My last research question involved the central theme of this thesis: the degree to which refugee integration is effective, in light of the various interests involved -- the refugees, the Costa Rican state, and the nongovernmental actors. Costa Rica's integration policy has come into conflict with competing local demands. The government may be restrictive in allowing refugees to work, because it cannot afford to train foreigners for employment in a tight economy that leaves many national workers unemployed.

It is interesting to note, however, that other studies have demonstrated the tendency of the Costa Rican government not to live up to stated social or developmental goals. One example is its agrarian reform program. Two autonomous institutions have been involved in agrarian reform -- the Institute for Land and Colonization (ITCO), and IMAS, the antipoverty organization discussed in this thesis (see Chapter 3). Seligson (1980) states that:

...both ITCO and IMAS have sometimes been more interested in enhancing their own institutional image than in providing the impoverished peasant with real help, while the major political parties pay only lip service to the agrarian question. They mouth their agreement with the need for reform (everybody claims to be in favor of reform) but the serious talk of politics concerns other issues.<sup>3</sup>

In another study, DeWitt (1977) discusses how the National Liberation Party (PLN) addresses pressing social issues without taking concrete action:

Using reformist legislative or administrative agencies like ITCO, the Agrarian Reform Agency, that will not solve the problem but will address the issue, PLN has been able to gain popular support.<sup>4</sup>

Delaying the implementation of integration policies might make the refugees a greater burden for Costa Rica. The longer refugees are kept in camps the more difficult it becomes to integrate them. Refugees do not work, their productive spirits decline, and they may come to suffer from "dependency syndrome" where they become too demanding and unwilling to take jobs for low pay. When refugees are kept separate from local communities, political

antagonisms are likely to occur between the groups. If given no viable opportunities, the Nicaraguan refugees could damage neutral Costa Rica's international image, as they will be more prone to involvement in Nicaragua's counterrevolution.

It would be useful to study the possibility of having PVOs such as IRC (whose integration strategies were found to be most effective) implement refugee assistance in Costa Rica. The government may be wary of such agencies because they interfere on its own realm. But the costs of having rural refugees without employment and adequate health and educational services could be higher than the costs of allowing foreign PVOs to run refugee programs.

Perhaps Costa Rica has favored short-term assistance over self-sufficiency because the latter serves as a disincentive to repatriation. This question has been highlighted in events subsequent to the research done on this thesis. When President Oscar Arias proposed the Central American Peace Accord, signed by the region's five presidents on the 7th of August 1987, one of the benefits he envisioned was an end to Costa Rica's refugee problem.

Costa Rica's refugee policy shifted from "integration" to attacking the root causes of the region's refugee flows. The Accord asked for national reconciliation, cease fires, and democratization in each Central American country. Point 8 requested that signatories provide assistance to refugees and begin repatriation programs.

The Peace Plan increased cooperation between countries in the region but did not sufficiently change conditions in refugees' home countries to encourage

massive repatriation. Repatriation treaties signed by Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and the UNHCR had limited success. The UNHCR hoped to repatriate some 500 Nicaraguans to their homes on the Atlantic Coast in 1988, but by midyear only 75 had returned.<sup>5</sup>

The number of documented refugees in Costa Rica fluctuated after 1986, but not significantly. While many more immigrated, others may have left the country or left the camps, making it difficult to keep track of them. During the late 1980's refugee flows were actually increasing throughout Central America as their principal causes were not amenable to change. Political and economic repression was again on the rise.<sup>6</sup> This means Costa Rica must still face the question of whether it should seek to integrate the refugees; long range strategies must be determined.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

More independent studies are needed on the long-term problems of refugees in developing countries. Little theoretical discussion exists in this area and there is too much reliance on "in house" reports conducted by government and international agencies.

Several aspects of the refugee problem in Costa Rica remain unclear and require further research. Should refugees be incorporated into the economy through income-generating, self-sufficiency projects or should they be integrated into established industries, farms and cooperatives? Many self-sufficiency

projects in Costa Rica have failed due to inadequate testing of markets and refugee skills. Social factors affecting project success -- furthermore -- are often not considered in proposals. For instance, the Palmar Sur project for Nicaraguan refugees would have refugees working for payment in kind next to Costa Ricans working for salaries.

In late 1985, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the UNHCR began a data bank on labor demand by industry. Matched by information on refugee skills and characteristics, this urban program was said to have employed 1000 refugees by late 1986 in areas where local labor was not displaced. More research is needed on this program and whether a similar program could succeed in rural areas.

Refugee group organization and kinship ties could play significant roles in the integration process and should be researched. (e.g. Salvadoran refugees in Costa Rica are more highly organized politically than Nicaraguan refugees).

The problems of Costa Rica's urban refugees were touched upon lightly in this thesis and should be the focus of other studies.

Research should also be done on the undocumented migrants in Costa Rica, many of whom are "integrating" spontaneously. This work could focus on the migrants' impact on labor markets: on whether they are an exploited class, and whether they displace local labor. Another key question is what impact the migrants have on health and educational standards. And, finally, whether it is in the country's interest to control the actions of this group.



Finally, given recent political changes in Nicaragua, one would wonder whether refugees would begin returning in large numbers. If this were to occur, research would be needed on the repatriation process. After many years of refuge in Costa Rica, however, some Nicaraguans may choose not to return. The interactions of the Costa Rican government with this group of "reluctant returnees" would merit study.

## NOTES - Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, Part 1: Field Operations, Geneva: December 1982, pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Cleary, "ICVA/UNHCR Workshop on Development Approaches to Refugee Situations Held at Puidoux, 1-4 December 1985," Geneva: UNHCR Liaison Unit with Non-Governmental Organizations, 17 December 1985, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell A. Seligson, Peasants of Costa Rica and the Development of Agrarian Capitalism, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> R. Peter DeWitt Jr., The Inter-American Development Bank and Political Influence, With Special Reference to Costa Rica, New York: Praeger, 1977, p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> Telephone interviews with Santiago Romero, UNHCR Representative for Costa Rica, and Lic. Cecilia Urena, DIGEPARE official, 6 May 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Julia Preston, "More Nicaraguans Cross into Costa Rica," The Washington Post, 20 October 1987; Mary Martin, "Peace Eludes Refugees in Costa Rica," The Miami News, 12 July 1988; Ellen Hampton, "Peace Plan A Year Old, But Strife Continues," The Miami News, 6 August 1988; Sam Dillon, "Repression on the Rise After Treaty," The Miami Herald, 3 October 1988; Sam Dillon, "Many Flee Troubled Nicaragua: Fear Sandinistas, Chaotic Economy," The Miami Herald, 17 October 1988.

## APPENDIX

### FIELD INTERVIEWS

#### July 14-18, 1986

Gonzalo Retamal, Director, Social Programs, UNHCR  
 Patricia Drolet, Field Officer, Northern Region, UNHCR  
 Francisco Rojas Aravena, Professor, International Relations, National University of Costa Rica  
 Jose Manuel Blanco, Direccion General para la Proteccion y Asistencia a los Refugiados, DIGEPARE  
 Fred Morris, Executive Director, Institute for Central American Studies; Editor, MESOAMERICA  
 Nelson Sauci, Project Counseling Service for Latin American Refugees

#### July 21-25, 1986

Eduardo Palomino, World University Service of Canada  
 Demetrio Alvero, International Rescue Committee, IRC  
 Armando Vargas, Minister of Information and Communication during the Monge Administration  
 Trip to Boca de Arenal and Alvaperal, 23 - 24 of July (Reception Centers in Northern Costa Rica, administered by the Costa Rican Red Cross)  
 Patricia Drolet, UNHCR  
 Wilder Avellan Saldana, Camp Doctor  
 Arturo Maire, Red Cross, Accountant  
 Federico Paredes Valverde, Director, Refugee Program, Red Cross  
 Johnny Viques, Social Worker  
     15 Refugees  
     Elisa Alfaro Mata, Teacher, Alvaperal, PRODINREC  
     Alonso Badilla, Teacher, Boca de Arenal  
     Araceli Segura Retan, Asociacion de Boca de Arenal  
     Juan Fernandez, Owner Pulperia in Boca de Arenal  
 Carlos Denton, Consultora Interdisciplinaria de Desarrollo, Gallup Poll Service for Costa Rica

July 28 - August 1

Charlie Harrington, Political Officer, US Embassy

Jorge Rovira Mas, Director, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, University of Costa Rica

Luis Guillermo Solis, Jefe de Gabinete, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores

Padre Higinio Alas, Oficina de Orientacion y Asistencia Social a Refugiados, OARS

Dr. Sherman Thomas, President, Socorro International; Vice Rector, Universidad Estatal a Distancia

Trip to Achioté, Active Camp near Buenos Aires, Costa Rica, 31 of July through 1st of August (Administered by the International Rescue Committee)

Thomas Keables, Director of Achioté

Carmen Maria Orozco Molina, Nutritionist

Roman Montero, Assistant Administrator

Paula Busto Obando, Social Worker

10 refugees

August 4-8, 1986

Sylvia Porras, Social Worker, Oficina de Orientacion y Asistencia Social a Refugiados, OARS (Work with Salvadorans)

Anthonie Devries, Director, Refugee Program, European Economic Community (Rural Employment Expert)

Jacques Meulmeester, European Economic Community (Urban Employment Expert)

Mario Moreira, Attorney, OARS (Legal Aid)

Mario Guerra, Coordinator, Productive Projects, OARS

Ulises Otarola, Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje

Mario Ramirez, Sociologist, Centro de Analisis Socio-Politico Para Refugiados, CASP-RE (Administers Urban Program)

Carmen Maria Romero, Executive Director, CASP-CAMP (Administers Tilaran and Limon Camps)

Amanda Carrizo, ILO-UNHCR Project (Searches for areas of the labor market where refugees can be inserted)

August 11-15, 1986

Hilda Porras, former Director, CONAPARE

Antone Thybergin, Embassy of Holland (Playa Blanca Project for Miskito Refugees)

Gale Nystrom, Worked with Salvadoran Refugees

Eliases Valverde, Universidad Para La Paz

Edelberto Torres Rivas, Secretary General, FLACSO

Alejandro Solis, Deputy, PLN, Canton de Perez Zeledon (Regarding Playa Blanca and Achiote)

Hugo Alfonso Muñoz, Minister of Justice under President Monge

Alvaro Gonzalez, Ejecutivo Municipal, Ciudad Quesada, Canton de San Carlos  
(where most refugees and undocumented migrants are)

Ricardo Araya, Presidente, Municipalidad Ciudad Quesada

Enrique Araya, Immigration Office, Ciudad Quesada

Trip to Limon Transit Center in Puerto Limon, 15 of August (Administered by CASP-RE)

Mayor Madrigal, Guardia Rural

Flannigan Waggon Gonzalez, Miskito Refugee, on the Camp's Refugee Committee

Katia Azofeifa, Secretary for Camp

Maritza Campos, Nutritionist

12 Refugees

#### August 18 - 22, 1986

Maritza Gutierrez, DIGEPARE

Amanda Carrizo, ILO-UNHCR Project Expert

Demetrio Alvero, IRC

Dr. Sherman Thomas, Socorro International

Nedy Zamora, CASP-RE

Jose Luis Vega Carballo, Professor of Political Science, University of Costa Rica

Luis Pal, Director, DIGEPARE

Jose M. Mendiluce, Chief Official, UNHCR, Costa Rica

Eduardo Palomino, World University Service of Canada, (Altamirita Project)

Gilbert Villalobos, Director, Immigration Office, Refugee Division

Gonzalo Retamal, Social Programs, UNHCR

Alejandro Chan, Legal Assistant, Durable Solutions Unit, CASP-RE

Liliana Rojas, Social Worker, El Productor (Projects for Salvadoran Refugees)

Martin Fernandez Borge, Manager, Melkis de Costa Rica, (Maquila-assembly clothing industry that employs Nicaraguan and Salvadoran refugees)

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