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ARE UNITED NATIONS CAMPS CHEATING REFUGEES IN HONDURAS ?

INTRODUCTION

There are growing concerns that United Nations refugee programs are cheating refugees. Evidence has been mounting that refugee camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Honduras on the border of El Salvador have been ignoring the needs of genuine refugees while serving as bases for leftist Salvadoran rebels and terrorists, in particular the so-called FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Movement) which is the Marxist-dominated coordinating organization for the anti-Salvadoran rebel movement. The camps not only house the FMLN, but provide them with medicine and other supplies. There are reliable reports, moreover, that these rebels are intimidating the genuine refugees, threatening them with retaliation unless they join forces in fighting the elected government of El Salvador. A high level State Department official told The Heritage Foundation that there is routine diversion of food and medical supplies to El Salvador from the camps. For these reasons, refugees by the hundreds have been avoiding UNHCR camps.

For two years, UNHCR has been promising to relocate these camps, in line with UNHCR policy to protect refugees and keep them away from combat areas. So far nothing much has happened. There is evidence, moreover, that many UNHCR employees sympathize with the guerrillas. This deteriorating situation undermines the effectiveness of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in caring for refugees; it also erodes seriously its credibility. As such, unless the UNHCR takes steps to prevent its camps from being used by those who terrorize genuine refugees and are fighting against democracy in Central America, the United States should withhold its \$5 million contribution to UNHCR operations in Honduras. This money then should be targeted at genuine refugees.

EVIDENCE OF POLITICIZATION OF UNHCR CAMPS IN HONDURAS

State Department officials report that UNHCR-funded camps on the Honduran border with El Salvador are being used by leftist rebels on a massive scale. Some of the evidence is classified, primarily to protect sources. State Department officials who have seen the classified cables describe them as a series of horror stories told by individuals who were forced to serve as cooks, porters, and even armed fighters for the anti-Salvadoran rebels. These individuals are afraid to have their names released for fear of retaliation against them and their families. Much evidence, however, is unclassified. Examples:

* On the night of February 18, 1984, a Honduran army patrol intercepted six persons about half a mile from the El Salvador border and two miles from the UNHCR camp at Colomoncagua (see map). When challenged, the persons tried to run away and were killed. They were found carrying correspondence addressed to refugees and staff members in the refugee camp asking for recruits, medicines, and other supplies to be sent to FMLN rebels. Other letters, of a personal nature, revealed that there is a regular mail service between the camp and the rebels.¹

* On February 20, a woman named Santos Gilberta Iglesias, who had documentation as a refugee, was captured close to the same camp of Colomoncagua wearing combat boots and fatigue pants, carrying a skirt in her bag. According to U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John Negroponte, there was strong evidence that she had provided assistance to Salvadoran rebels.²

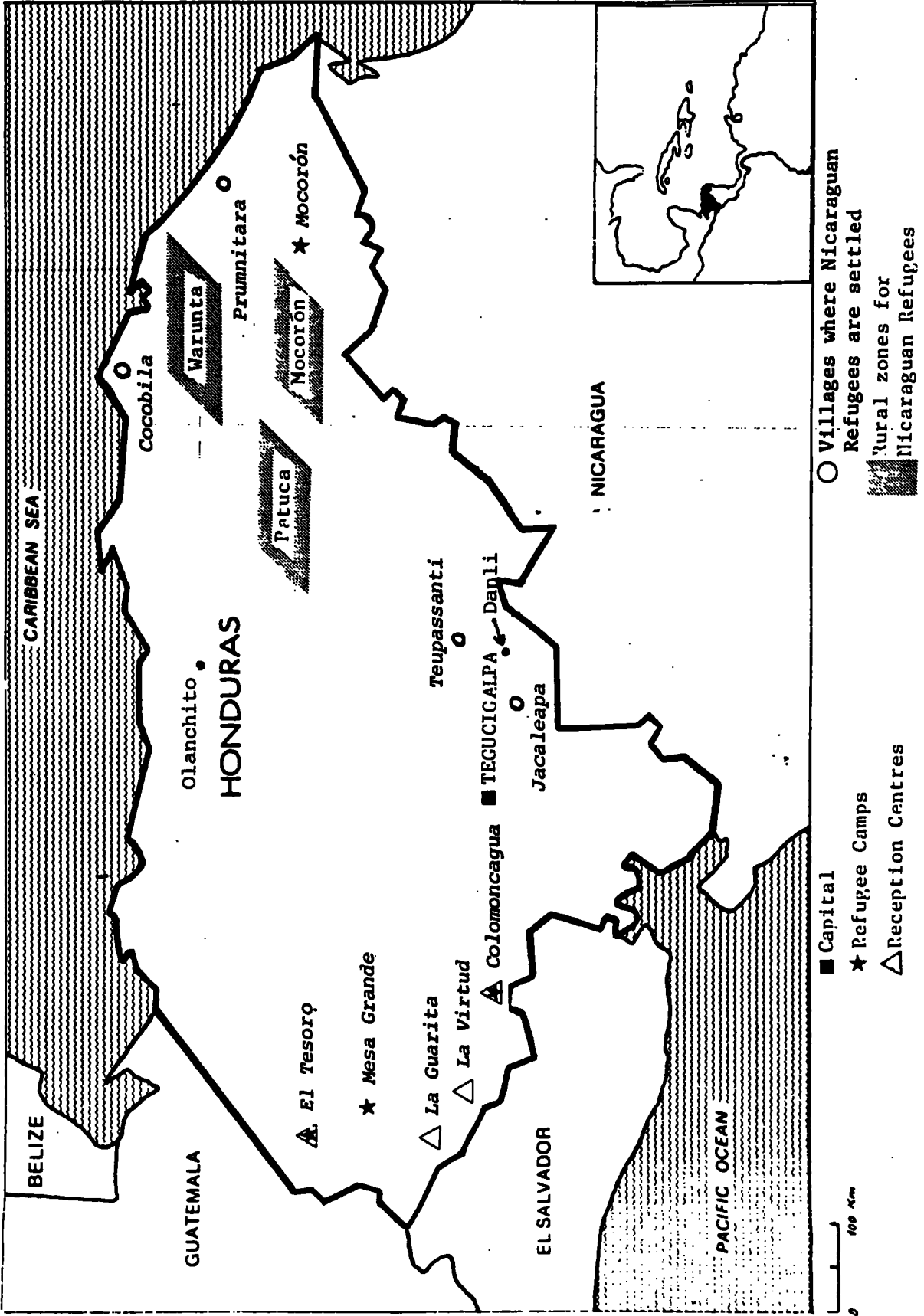
* On April 18, 1984, an unarmed U.S. helicopter carrying Senators Lawton Chiles and Bennett Johnston as well as the wife of the American Ambassador to Honduras, who were on a mission to visit the UNHCR refugee camp of Colomoncagua, came under very heavy fire. At a press conference immediately after the incident, the Senators stated:

We were not out looking for a fight. See, this refugee camp is just three to four kilometers within the border of Honduras. It has about 8,000 refugees, most of which are women and children. Now, what we know is that the guerrillas go out on a mission and then come back to a safe haven in the refugee camp, join their wives and children, get some free U.N. food, rest up and then go back to El Salvador. For that reason, there has been some discussion about moving that refugee camp to the North of Honduras.³

¹ State Department unclassified telegram, Tegucigalpa 06229, May 1984.

² Letter to Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY), State Department unclassified telegram, Tegucigalpa 05674, May 1984.

³ State Department unclassified telegram, Panama 04331, April 1984. Note: the telegram states that the "Statements are those of both senators. It is impossible to identify the individual senator making the particular comments."



UNHCR MAP - A/AC.96/620, p. 220

In addition to the camp at Colomoncagua, two other camps located very close to the border of El Salvador were La Virtud and Guarita (see map). Since, according to the UNHCR itself, the refugees there "were risking their lives,"⁴ most of those refugees were moved to Mesa Grande, slightly to the north. In March 1984, however, Guilherme L. da Cunha, in charge of the American Section at UNHCR Headquarters, stated that the refugees at Mesa Grande also need to be moved, not only for security reasons but also because it "remains a holding center offering very little opportunities for work. Its present population level is clearly excessive."⁵

* Several hundred Salvadorans who have fled areas in El Salvador under rebel control have told the Honduran government that they did not wish to become refugees, and that "they feared guerrilla retaliation if they entered the refugee camps."⁶ According to the Honduran press, those fleeing these areas in El Salvador told the government explicitly that they wished only to be relocated to areas in El Salvador free of rebel control, and refused being sent to refugee camps in Honduras even for a short time.⁷ State Department officials are convinced by the evidence that rebels inside the camps are forcing refugees into collaborating with them.

* On July 13, 1984, former Salvadoran rebel chief Alejandro Montenegro, captured in August 1982, told The Heritage Foundation that he knows from men under his command that the rebels use UNHCR camps in Honduras for food and medical supplies. They also use the camps to surreptitiously bring arms from Nicaragua through Tegucigalpa and other cities; the guerrillas in the camps are part of a "chain." Montenegro says that the idea of having refugee camps on the border with El Salvador in Honduras was actually thought up by rebels. They encouraged their families and friends to settle there so that the rebels could then use the location strategically. The rebels consider these camps to be very important for morale. When asked what impact moving the camps inland into Honduras might have on rebel actions, Montenegro said he thought it would have a considerable impact on morale, particularly in light of the great significance of the family in the Salvadoran tradition.

RELOCATING THE UNHCR CAMPS

In April 1984, the UNHCR released a backgrounder entitled "UNHCR and the Relocation of Salvadoran and Guatemalan Refugees in Honduras." It stated that since 1980, when large numbers of refugees began to cross the border from El Salvador into Honduras,

4 Refugees Magazine, September 1982, p. 11.

5 Refugees Magazine, March 1984, p. 18.

6 Tegucigalpa 06229.

7 State Department unclassified telegram, Tegucigalpa 06414.

UNHCR has pushed for their relocation closer inland--a "position [which] reflects UNHCR's long established policy that settlements for refugees should be placed away from border areas where they may be in physical danger and where their presence may exacerbate international tensions."⁸

The paper states that another reason for relocation is pragmatic: UNHCR is concerned about the longer term opportunities of economic self-sufficiency. The agency thus concludes that the factors of enhanced security, economic self-sufficiency, and greater freedom of movement have led to the choice of the Olanchito Valley (see map) as a relocation site.

The paper, however, cites news accounts that Salvadoran refugees in Honduras are "resisting a plan to relocate them further into Honduras" and would rather return to El Salvador than face such a prospect. The State Department confirms that about 7,000 refugees from the border area had refused to be located further inland to the Mesa Grande refugee camp. The probable reason, according to U.S. experts, is:

We believe it is likely that when the refugees are relocated away from the border, many of those who have used their refugee status as a cover to engage in other activities will choose to leave the refugee program and return to El Salvador.⁹

The State Department believes that the refugees will be much better off after their move to Olanchito, "except for those who wish, in fact, to pursue the covert role in support of the Salvadoran guerrillas."¹⁰

THE DOUBLE STANDARD IN UNHCR HONDURAN CAMPS

One State Department official complains about the UNHCR's double standard for its refugee camps in Honduras, which, he explains, involves applying the concept of a "refugee" unevenly to people fleeing from El Salvador and those fleeing from Nicaragua. Thus some UNHCR personnel reportedly refuse to believe that there even is a possibility that their camps could house refugees from a leftist government. Wycliffe Diego, former Coordinator of Health for the Miskito Indian refugees, and himself a Miskito Indian, told The Heritage Foundation that UNHCR employees not

⁸ The paper quotes the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies (page 59): "Sites should be removed from the frontier and potential military targets in order to provide security and protection for the refugees, and to prevent hostile activities by the refugees against the authorities of their country of origin which would undermine the principle that the granting of asylum is not an unfriendly act."

⁹ State Department unclassified telegram, Tegucigalpa 06229.

¹⁰ Ibid.

only urge Miskito Indians to return to Nicaragua but mistreat them while in camps. The Ladino refugees from Nicaragua, who are mostly in the Danli area (see map), live in strikingly poor conditions. Again, it appears that the UNHCR may not be sufficiently concerned about the fate of these refugees.

Dr. Othniel J. Seiden, an American physician sent to Honduras by the Victoria and Albert Gildred Foundation in August 1983, reports that U.N. teams have refused to offer medical treatment in many of Nicaragua's Miskito villages.¹¹ He also writes that the refugees told him that, if the U.N. staffers suspect any family member of belonging to member of the Contras (anti-Sandinista rebels), the U.N. cuts off food supplies to the entire family. States Dr. Seiden: "To me this seems a form of political extortion. The Miskito Indians consider the U.N. people as very leftist and I saw no evidence to argue the point."¹²

Indeed, State Department officials catalogue decidedly leftist biases not only on the part of UNHCR employees but also--particularly--their contractors or "operating partners." The principal operating partners in Honduras are World Relief and the Honduran Red Cross. Other voluntary agencies that cooperate with UNHCR are Caritas Honduras, the Mennonite Church, Catholic Relief Services, Medecins sans frontiers, and Comité Evangélico de Desarrollo Nacional (CEDEN).¹³

MOUNTING UNHCR PROBLEMS

The UNHCR is probably one of the least politicized United Nations agencies. Its humanitarian work has been praised by Jeane Kirkpatrick, Permanent Representative of the U.S. to the U.N., and others. The Nobel Peace Prize extended to the office of UNHCR in 1954 and again in 1981 was in all likelihood well deserved. The agency, however, has not been free of criticism. Some instances of actual or possible politicization are worth citing:

* Nicaragua. An unpublished State Department paper of April 1984, entitled "UNHCR Relief, Protection, and Assistance Activities in Latin America," explains that the refugee camps in Nicaragua "continue to be politicized, with pro-Sandinista posters and slogans in evidence." The paper states that "it is questionable how much control UNHCR is able to exercise over this situation,

¹¹ Othniel J. Seiden, M.D., "Medical Mission to Honduras," paper delivered at White House Outreach Conference, June 27, 1984, p. 2

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Report on UNHCR Assistance Activities in 1982-1983 and Proposed Voluntary Funds Programs and Budget for 1984, Office of the UNHCR, August 1, 1983, A/AC.96/620, pp. 221-222.

but the organization, and the Nicaraguan government, is aware of our concerns over these programs for which the U.S. is a major donor, through visits by Embassy and Department officers, including a visit by DAS Arthur E. Dewey in 1983."

* Africa. The UNHCR uses terrorist national liberation movements as contractors for Southern African refugees in Angola. According to the High Commissioner's report, "implementation of UNHCR projects for Namibians and South Africans is entrusted to the respective liberation movements, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and the African National Congress (ANC)." The programs cost over \$5 million.¹⁴ When asked whether the UNHCR is concerned about having such political, militant groups care for refugees, UNHCR's Washington press liaison Nick van Praag told The Heritage Foundation that SWAPO does "an excellent job." Yet the High Commissioner's report admits that "UNHCR hopes to improve the conceptual planning and technical evaluation of projects [run by SWAPO, particularly] in the construction sector..."¹⁵

* Thailand. According to the Italian journalist Lucio Lani, "all the U.N. humanitarian agencies [in Thailand] make efforts to prevent the truth [about the use of chemical warfare in that area] from appearing in the press....Indeed, we owe some of the most brilliant operations of suppressing the truth to U.N. officials."¹⁶ One example is the story of Adelia Bernard of the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief to Refugees, who claimed that in the spring of 1980 she witnessed experiments being conducted on approximately 100 children ranging from two to ten years old, involving toxic gases. After smuggling out the dead body of a three-year-old, Mrs. Bernard gave it to Mark Brown, a representative of the UNHCR who, according to her, did nothing. While Brown has denied these allegations, Mrs. Bernard is willing to defend her story.

Lani, moreover, charges that "UNHCR has conducted a pro-Soviet and pro-Vietnamese policy. It has forced Cambodian refugee children to return to Cambodia, after negotiating the question directly with Phnom Penh. These children were subsequently sent to Eastern Europe for 'reeducation.'...Against such policies all protest seems useless, even including the one in January 1982 by Thai lawyers in Paris who declared that the majority of child prostitutes in Thailand were recruited in refugee camps under UNHCR control. The refugees in these camps have also endured forced recruitment by the resistance; kidnappings; vendettas; assassinations; and even crucifixions."¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 7-16.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶ Lucio Lani, "Yellow Rain: The Conspiracy of Closed Mouths," Commentary, October 1983, pp. 60-61.

¹⁷ Commentary, February 1984, p. 10.

Such examples of possible politicization point to a need for much closer monitoring of UNHCR.

CONCLUSION

The use of UNHCR camps in Honduras on the border with El Salvador by leftist rebels poses a danger to the refugees currently in the camps. It thus is time that those camps be moved further inland, in accordance with UNHCR's own plans. There should be close monitoring of the move to ensure that the camps are not politicized. Moreover, all UNHCR camps in Honduras should be monitored to make sure that the refugees' needs are met. On the border with Nicaragua, it should be possible for Miskito Indians to receive far better medical treatment and adequate food supplies.

Finally, other UNCHR programs should also be monitored more closely by the U.S., its major donor. In 1984, for example, the U.S. is contributing approximately \$90 million to UNHCR, and has contributed \$550 million since UNHCR was founded in 1951. Allegations of possible politicization should be investigated, and changes should be made whenever such allegations prove true.

Unless the UNHCR camps in Honduras--or elsewhere--truly meet the needs of refugees, the U.S. should stop funding the UNHCR and rechannel the money into programs that truly provide refugees with the requisite assistance.

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