

# Refugee influx adds to Mexico's problem

by Timothy Rush

Mexico's southern border with Guatemala has become a war zone of the spreading Central American conflagration. The pressure of dealing with this situation—particularly the waves of refugees it is generating—is one of the gravest problems Mexico faces.

Last summer, the first large group of Guatemalans arrived on the Mexican border, some 3-4,000 of them. Mexico reviewed their cases and decided they did not qualify as refugees, and repatriated them to Guatemala.

Today, according to U.S. press reports, 2,000 Guatemalans are showing up at the border *every week*. And now, because of international pressures from human-rights groups, Mexico is finding it increasingly hard to return them. Some 120,000 refugees are currently estimated to be scattered around the southern part of Mexico, primarily from Guatemala and El Salvador.

The original border crossings last summer were in response to increased repression and isolated massacres carried out by Guatemalan army patrols in the overwhelmingly Indian region northwest of Guatemala City bordering Mexico's Chiapas state. In the course of the year, the mutually reinforcing activity of the army, of right-wing death squads, and the Jesuit-directed insurgency movement, led to the deaths of an estimated 13,500—equal to the death count in El Salvador.

Then in January, the army made a qualitative shift. Fully a third of the army was deployed in "pacification" sweeps through the Indian highlands. Entire villages were terrorized and in some cases large portions of the population massacred. U.S. press reports in late February carried eyewitness accounts of Guatemalan military helicopters strafing populated villages along the border, driving the inhabitants into Mexico to seek refuge.

These Indian areas are among the most conservative in Latin America. The scorched-earth policy being followed by the Guatemalan military *is the only policy that could drive the region into sympathy for or active participation in guerrilla activity*.

Why is the Guatemalan military deliberately creating insurgency? One answer is the streams of refugees pouring over the border into Mexico. Since Henry Kissinger threatened Mexico three years ago with the spillover effect of the Central American bloodbath, in order to

abort Mexico's drive to become a modern, industrialized nation, complicit factions in the Guatemalan military have set about to do just that. At this point scenarios must be taken seriously which point to the possibility of Guatemalan advanced-design jets bombing Mexico's oil fields and hydroelectric dams, almost all concentrated a few hundred kilometers over the border in southern Mexico.

The other answer is a specific policy of depopulation, epitomized by the statements and actions of Guatemala's most notorious butcher, army commander Benedicto Lucas García. Benedicto, the brother of President Romeo Lucas García, has been identified by knowledgeable observers as an asset of United Brands Company in the region. He received his early training with OAS fascist terrorists in Algeria. Perhaps because of the large flow of Israeli weapons into the Guatemalan army, he views "Israel as an example to our soldiers."

Benedicto Lucas García argues simply that the population itself is the enemy. The core unit of the guerrilla forces is the "nuclear family," he explained to correspondents in January. "The father does the fighting, the mother provides logistical support, and the children make the bombs." The army's strategy, therefore, is mass extermination and mass relocation.

## The López Portillo plan

The López Portillo proposal presented before a mass rally in Managua, addressed specifically "three knots of conflict," El Salvador, Nicaragua, and U.S.-Cuba relations, in an impassioned, last-minute appeal for all parties to avoid what he termed a "continental convulsion." Guatemala's intimate connection to the events further south was clearly on his mind.

Speaking to "this people, the region . . . and my good friends in the United States," he shed any hesitance about direct Mexican involvement in arranging what he called "separate but converging" channels of negotiation: "we emphatically offer the possibility of Mexico's undertaking a more active role in the region." The Mexican President promised Washington "Mexico's guarantee" that no vital U.S. interests would be harmed by Mexican-backed negotiations for an end to the fighting in El Salvador. "Between elections without negotiations and negotiations without elections," he stated, "there no doubt exists a compromise."

On Nicaragua, López Portillo offered a three-point program: 1) that the U.S. cease all threats and use of force directed against the Sandinista government; 2) that Nicaragua begin reductions in its own arms build-up at the same time the U.S. withdraws support for invasion forces of Nicaraguan exiles being trained in Florida and Honduras; and 3) that a "system of non-aggression pacts" be set up between Nicaragua, the U.S., Honduras, and Costa Rica.