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U.N. Sponsors Conference To Plan Resettlement Of Central American Refugees, Displaced (s/s)

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On May 29, an international conference organized by the United Nations opened in Guatemala City with the aim of endorsing a new strategy on dealing with Central America's nearly two million refugees, and issuing funding requests for implementing the plan. Participants in the three-day conference included UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, representatives from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Development Program (UNDP), 55 American and European governments, and from several private foundations. The new strategy expected to be endorsed is aimed at ending refugees' dependence on emergency aid by calling on regional governments to terminate confinement of refugees to camps and to help them return home or obtain work in the country of asylum. Next, the conference will urge Central American governments and refugee agencies to devote greater attention to thousands of internally displaced people driven from their homes by violence and natural disasters. Since these persons do not usually qualify as refugees under current international law, they receive little or no assistance from international aid agencies. The existing international machinery for dealing with refugees dates from the 1950s based on concern for Europeans left homeless by WWII and those fleeing communism in Eastern Europe. The machinery is essentially comprised of the UNHCR and a 1951 Convention defining the rights of refugees in cold-war terms. The convention says that the refugees must have fled to another country to escape "a well-founded fear of persecution." In today's world, most refugees are citizens of Third World nations, and are victims of violence and natural disasters, not ideological persecution. The UNHCR, with an annual budget of some $600 million, accepts responsibility for caring for about 12 million refugees. According to the Refugee Policy Group, a private Washington-based organization cited by the New York Times, another 14 million refugees do not qualify for UNHCR help, usually because they have been displaced within their own countries. Major capitalist powers have refused to change the mandate of the UNHCR or the 1951 Convention, largely due to fears of an influx of Third World migrants in search of better living and working conditions. They argue instead that those made homeless by civil wars are the responsibility of the Red Cross. Governments, however, are often reluctant to permit the Red Cross to operate in conflict areas. The new strategy offered at the Guatemala City conference avoids the above constraints by shifting emphasis away from humanitarian relief toward treating refugees as part of their host country's development process or labor force. The UNHCR is urged to cooperate with the UNDP in elaborating economic projects that will provide employment for refugees, for those who elect to return home and for internally displaced people. This strategy is considered to be a preferable alternative to simply confining them to camps. UN officials acknowledge their proposals are controversial. In Honduras, for instance, the military distrusts Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees, who are perceived as sources of disruption and discontent. They are confined to guarded camps. Consequently, the success of the new plan depends to a large extent on diminishing or eliminating tensions in Central America. In this way, it would be easier for refugees and internally displaced people to return home voluntarily or to be accepted into local communities. According to UNHCR estimates, around two million Central Americans have abandoned their homes since 1980. About 140,000 certified refugees are
currently receiving assistance from the international community. Over six times that number have fled their home countries for reasons similar to those of the refugees. They have not registered as refugees, and most are residing illegally in neighboring countries. In addition, 870,000 have been displaced within their own countries. The table below summarizes estimates of refugees by country and type. UNHCR 1989 Estimates of Central American Refugees, By Country and Type Political Undocumented Internally refugees aliens displaced people Belize 5,100 25,000 0 Costa Rica 40,800 250,000 0 El Salvador 500 20,000 400,000 Guatemala 3,000 220,000 100,000 Honduras 37,000 250,000 22,000 Mexico 53,000 128,000 0 Nicaragua 7,000 0 350,000 [Source: UNHCR, in New York Times, 05/29/89.] Summarized below are reports on statements and events related to the Guatemala City conference. May 26: UNHCR representative in New York, Guillerme da Cunha, told reporters that the apolitical nature of the conference prohibited including the Nicaraguan contras and their relatives camped in Honduras as part of the target refugee populations. However, he said, once the contras are disarmed, they will be transformed into civilians and thereby potential beneficiaries of the programs discussed at the Guatemala City conference. May 27: On Saturday evening, after two days of discussion, representatives of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Belize and Mexico completed budgetary requests for dealing with respective refugee and/or displaced populations. Together the seven nations request $375 million from the international community for a three-year program to create a more normal life for Central American refugees. Italy has already offered $115 million toward the costs of the program. May 29: In a speech opening the conference, UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar expressed his "profound concern" over the stalled peace process initiated by the 1987 Esquipulas II accords. He reiterated that the UN stands ready to send an international team to verify fulfillment of accord provisions. Perez said the conference would work to identify practical solutions to the refugee problem, represented by "hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons, mainly women and children, innocent victims of the region's unjust socio-economic structures." In recent years, he said, most refugees and displaced persons are former residents of the most economically depressed areas in Central America rather than victims of ideological or political persecution. These people, he added, fled violence or economic devastation exacerbated by natural disaster. The conference, said the Secretary General, "is a wise response by the governments in the region to this problem, the magnitude of which testifies to the political and social crisis which caused it." In an address to conference participants, Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo said that his government will not complete its task of constructing democracy until Guatemalan refugees are convinced that they will suffer no physical harm, and will return to a situation of peace and development. Another prerequisite to completion of his government's democratic experiment, said Cerezo, is the end of violence as a solution to conflict. (He referred specifically to individuals "in the mountains," i.e., the guerrillas.) According to Cerezo, proof of the democratization process in Guatemala is found in the gradual return of thousands of refugees to their home country. "Today Guatemala is a nation that has become conscious of the value of freedom...and which every day becomes an example to the world," he said. The Guatemalan president asserted that his country cannot be an "island of democracy" in Central America. As a result, he added, "we want joint solutions, institutions and dialogue" among all nations in the region. In a communique released in Tegucigalpa, capital of Honduras, some 7,000 Salvadoran refugees residing in camps located in the Colomoncagua area of western Honduras, expressed their desire to return home. Prerequisites for their repatriation included guarantees by the Salvadoran government regarding their physical safety and freedom of movement throughout the country, and that they will be permitted to return to their places of origin. The communique also
called for an end to the civil war in El Salvador, starting with a total and definitive ceasefire. (Basic data from Notimex, 05/26-29/89; AFP, New York Times, 05/29/89)

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