Salvadoran Government Charged With Delaying Repatriation Of 1,300 Refugees Suffering Illness & Exposure

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by Deborah Tyroler

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On Oct. 23, the National Resettlement Coordinator and members of a US church delegation accused the government of holding up the return of 1,300 refugees from a Honduran camp who are suffering illness and exposure because of the delay. They called on the government to remove all obstacles to the repatriation. Government officials assert that the refugees must be documented in Honduras by Salvadoran officials before returning to the country. The Resettlement Coordinator accused the government "of prolonging the documentation process" to delay the refugees' repatriation. The Mesa Grande camp residents had planned to return Oct. 17. The repatriation was to have been coordinated by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR said it could not provide transportation and other logistics for the repatriation effort without government approval. A delegation of 30 US churchpeople traveled to Honduras and El Salvador early this month to accompany the repatriated Salvadorans. The Rev. Marilyn Chilcote, a Presbyterian pastor from Oakland, Calif., said three people have died in Mesa Grande from exposure since the refugees dismantled their shacks last week to prepare for the departure. She added that an epidemic of dengue fever has afflicted many refugees. About 300 refugees accompanied by Salvadoran and US churchworkers left Mesa Grande on foot last week for the border. The refugee advocates said the Salvadorans reached San Marcos Ocotepeque, where they remain in precarious conditions in a church. They are waiting for the Salvadoran government to complete its documentation process. Since 1987, about 7,000 refugees have returned to El Salvador to resettle in the northern region of the country. The government claims the repatriates and the refugees in Honduras are sympathizers and collaborators of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. (Basic data from AP, 10/23/89)

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