

### THE LEGEND OF TECUN UMAN

Despite centuries of ongoing oppression, contemporary Mayas have preserved and gained strength from their ancestral mythology. The legend of the last Mayan king, Tecun Uman, offers hope that the Mayas will free themselves from repression and the Mayan civilization will flourish again. Tecun Uman was mortally wounded by the Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. As the king lay dying, a beautiful green quetzal flew down and landed on his chest. When the bird touched the blood of the dying king, its breast turned bright red before it flew away. Now the bird no longer lives among the Mayan people. In fact, it will die in captivity. But, the Mayas believe that when the Guatemalan people are free again, the quetzal will return to live among the people once more.

## THE LONG ROAD HOME



## STUDY GUIDE

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## INTRODUCTION

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In 1992, Rigoberta Menchu, an indigenous Guatemalan, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. Her tireless struggle to win respect for human rights has focused international attention on the brutal injustices suffered by the Guatemalan people at the hands of an elite wealthy class and powerful military.

On the day the award was announced, thousands of people celebrated in Guatemala. With the award comes hope that, someday, human rights abuses will cease. But Guatemala is steeped in a history of repression that goes back centuries. Just within the last twenty years, tens of thousands of people have fled the country, fearing for their lives. In 1987, as part of this exodus from oppression, an indigenous Mayan family escaped to the United States, after living for several years in a refugee camp in Mexico. The Hernandez family was given protection by the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation (JRC) of Evanston, Illinois. JRC's Sanctuary Committee assisted in providing them with food, shelter, and a forum where they could tell their story.

JRC's commitment to help the Hernandez family is rooted in their Jewish history. Not long ago, the Jewish people too had been targeted for destruction by their European rulers. As in Guatemala, the killings were made possible by a process of dehumanization, in which, through propaganda and fear, the killers come to see the victims as an inhuman breed that threaten their own survival. The Jewish community is dedicated to never forgetting such horrors and to weakening the hand of all oppressors. The plight of the Guatemalan refugee is a Jewish concern because Jews have known persecution

and cruelty, because they too have lived under sanctuary offered by strangers, and because Jewish law commands that we treat the stranger as we would treat ourselves and love them as we would our own.

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## THE PLIGHT OF THE GUATEMALAN REFUGEE IS A JEWISH CONCERN

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In 1992, the oldest Hernandez son returned to the refugee camp in Mexico where he had stayed with his family. He was accompanied by a member of JRC. The result was The Long Road Home.

The Long Road Home follows 19-year-old, Ricardo Hernandez to his former refugee camp in Chiapas, Mexico. The

viewer learns why Ricardo had to leave Guatemala, how he adjusted to life in America, what life is like in a refugee camp, and how the refugees are working together to return to their homeland.

Beginning in early 1993 and continuing for the next few years, refugees living in camps in southern Mexico will be returning to live in Guatemala. They return knowing that their fight for human rights and democracy will be hard won. The goal of The Long Road Home and its accompanying Study Guide is to inform the viewer about what is going on inside Guatemala and to raise public awareness about the situation confronting Guatemalan refugees.



## TEACHER'S GUIDE

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### GOALS — STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

1. Develop an appreciation of the traditions and beliefs of the Guatemalan people.
2. Articulate ideas in cooperative learning discussion groups.
3. Think critically about social, political and economical issues linking the United States and Guatemala.
4. Take responsible action by supporting the cause of refugee sponsorship.

### THEMES OF THE LONG ROAD HOME

- The importance of returning to and living in your own country
- The value in acting cooperatively
- The importance of maintaining cultural tradition

### AGES SIXTH GRADE AND UP.



### VOCABULARY

**Agrarian reform**— measures taken toward a more equitable division of land

**Campeño**— farm worker or peasant

**Civil patrols**— military-style groups of civilian peasants, working under the direction of the Guatemalan military

**Democracy**— government in which the people hold the ruling power either directly or through elected representatives; the principle of equality of rights, opportunity, and treatment.

**Indigenous**— belonging to a region or country as a native; existing, growing, or produced naturally in this region

**Marimba**— a musical instrument similar to a xylophone, with 30 hard wooden bars, played by being struck with small mallets; the national instrument of Guatemala

**Maya**— a tribe of Indians found in southern Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras with a highly-developed civilization dating back to 200B.C.

**Model villages**— closely supervised housing sub-divisions constructed by the Guatemalan military, designed to insulate the population (mostly Mayan peasants) from guerrilla forces or any organization which isn't army-controlled

**Refugee**— a person who flees from his home or country to seek safety elsewhere, as in a time of war, or for political or religious persecution

**Sanctuary**— a place of refuge or protection; immunity from punishment by taking refuge in a church or temple

**Tradition**— the handing down from generation to generation of a story, belief or custom; a long-established custom or practice that becomes an unwritten law handed down through generations



**COMAR**— Mexican Refugee Aid Commission/Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados

**UNHCR/ACNUR**— United Nations High Commission on Refugees/Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados

### **THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE VIEWING THE VIDEO**

1. What does freedom mean to you? What does it mean to “lack freedom”?
2. How would you react if you were forced to leave your home?
3. What are some traditions in your own culture?
4. What is your personal identity (according to your age, sex, nationality, race and religion)? What struggles have you experienced on these various levels: personal; local (community); national; international.

### **AFTER VIEWING THE VIDEO, DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AND SITUATIONS**

1. What was your reaction to the video?
2. What is a model village? Why would the government consider them “model” villages?
3. How do the children, the adults and the elderly suffer? What would be the hardest thing for you to live with?
4. How do the refugees living in camps empower themselves to take progressive action?
5. For a Guatemalan refugee like Ricardo, what is the difference between living in the United States, in a camp in Mexico, and in Guatemala?
6. How does Ricardo maintain his indigenous culture? How do you preserve your own traditions?

7. Despite the hardships and continual injustices these indigenous people would face in Guatemala, they maintain a desire to return to their homeland. Why?
8. When the refugees return to Guatemala, they want to be involved in the democratic process. How could Guatemala be more democratic?
9. Discuss the Six Points listed by the Guatemalan Permanent Commissioners as conditions for return. Compare them to our own Bill of Rights.
10. What role has the United States government had in Guatemala? How is our Congress responsible for U.S. involvement? [Also see History Section & #5 in Follow-Up Activities]

### **FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

(These projects can be carried out by individual students or in small groups over the course of a few weeks or throughout the school year. See Resource List)

1. Review the list of freedoms you made before watching the video. Which ones could you live without? Which freedoms would you be willing to fight to keep? Is there any thing from the list you have taken for granted?
2. The video recognizes a Mayan concept: We must do what is good for our community, not only for individuals. Identify other themes that were brought up in the video. What are some examples?
3. Contact someone from Guatemala to come as a guest speaker. Prepare questions and concerns you have.
4. Brainstorm ways you can actively aid the refugees and people from Guatemala. Do some research by contacting human rights organizations, indigenous groups and



organizations who work in solidarity with the refugees. Develop a plan of action.

5. Look for newspaper and magazine articles written about Guatemala to keep abreast of current events. Ask your congressperson which current bills relate to Central American foreign policy. Share your information with your family, friends and teachers. Write your senators and congresspeople to express your opinion.
6. Ask the Social Action Committee at your church or synagogue to address the refugee issue in their activities.
7. Set up Sister-relationships between your school or community and the resettlement communities in Mexico and Guatemala.

### PROBLEM SOLVING SITUATIONS

Students should work in small groups to examine the following situations. Within the group they should come to a decision and explain their problem-solving strategies.

1. The Oxib K'ajau [o-SHIP Ka-HOW] Marimba Ensemble, a group of Guatemalan refugees, are currently living in your community. They play music for a living and send the little money left over each month to their relatives back home. Being Student Council President and aware of the Guatemalan plight, you hire them to perform at your school without consulting anyone. The Council is furious. They feel they won't be able to relate to another culture's music. They prefer to find a local band. What can you do to get them to see your point of view?

**Keep in mind:** The Council may be ignorant to the problems the country has; the Council may feel it is important to support local groups having trouble earning money. Do you

want to break your promise to the Ensemble? Perhaps you're doubting your initial decision and are worried the student body won't appreciate the music.

2. During the summer you attend an international festival. At a booth sponsored by the Guatemalan government, an official representative talks about the beauty of the country and displays colorful fabrics and handicrafts. He describes the government's model villages and shows pictures of them. A crowd gathers, obviously impressed. You have read about the problems in Guatemala and know that he is not telling the truth. How do you react?

**Keep in mind:** As a student, do you have the right to dispute what a government official says? Is an international festival the place for a political forum? Would the crowd welcome another point of view? How would you feel if you walked away without saying anything? Besides direct confrontation with the official, what else could you do to expose the real facts?

3. Gabriel, a young refugee boy from Guatemala, is attending your school. His English isn't very good yet, but he makes great efforts to communicate. You have been assigned to be his mentor and help ease him into a new, American lifestyle. You want to design a plan to introduce him to teenage life. Where are you going to take him? Explain why.

**Keep in mind:** Gabriel's experiences have been very different from yours, and you will want to be sensitive to his background. Perhaps you could prepare questions to find out what interests he has and design your plan around his answers.



## FACTS ABOUT GUATEMALA

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**AREA:** 42,042 sq. miles (similar to Tennessee or Ohio ).

**POPULATION:** 9.5 million; 65% Mayan; 63% live in rural areas.

**LANGUAGE:** Spanish and 22 Mayan languages.

**RELIGION:** 75% Roman Catholic; 25% Protestant.

**GOVERNMENT:** Civilian with military control.

**LAND DISTRIBUTION:** 2% of population owns 72% of land.

**HEALTH:** 65% die before the age of 15; 73% of children under five suffer malnutrition; 80% of all health services are in Guatemala City, one doctor per 25,000 people in rural areas where 63% of population lives.

**HOUSING:** 80% of population is without housing; 75% of houses have dirt floors, 38.5% have water supply, 18.5% have sanitary services.

**EDUCATION:** 55% of population over 15 years is illiterate; 88% of indigenous population is illiterate; average level of education is 2nd grade.

**INCOME AND ECONOMICS:** 64% of urban Guatemalans live in extreme poverty, 84% in rural areas; minimum wage is below \$4 per day in the city and \$2 per day in rural areas; 52% of the population works only 3 months a year.

**EXPORT CROPS:** Coffee; sugar; cotton; cardamom; bananas; garments.

**NATURAL RESOURCES:** Petroleum; nickel; antimony; zinc; lead.

**INDUSTRIES:** Food processing; textiles; beverages; petroleum products. Approximately 400 U.S. firms have investments in Guatemala, including Goodyear, Texaco, Castle & Cooke, R.J. Reynolds/Del Monte, United Brands, Ralston Purina, Exxon, J.C. Penney, K-Mart, Liz Claiborne, Gap, Sears, and leading chemical and pharmaceutical firms; 70% of garments assembled in the maquilas (sweat shops) are shipped to the U.S.

**U.S. FOREIGN AID:** The U.S. provides fiscal support to Guatemala in the form of programs sponsored by the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.), food loans, emergency food grants and monies contributed to the national budget. In 1987, Guatemala was the 7th largest recipient of U.S. economic aid, receiving almost \$200M. In 1993 five thousand U.S. military personnel participated in drug-enforcement programs and rebuilding infrastructure destroyed by the Guatemalan military. No direct military support is given, but monies contributed to the Guatemalan national treasury can be budgeted for the military.

**HUMAN RIGHTS:** Repression by the Guatemalan military against the indigenous population resulted in 440 villages eliminated from 1979-1985; 40,000 disappearances since 1954; 150,000 orphans in the cities of Guatemala; 50,000 widows; 300,000 Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, Honduras, Belize, U.S. and Canada; and 700,000 internally displaced persons.



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF GUATEMALA

Guatemala is a land rich in ethnic culture, timeless traditions and breathtaking vistas. But, the country's natural beauty masks the suffering the people have had to endure for centuries. In *THE LONG ROAD HOME* the viewer meets Ricardo Hernandez, a young man of Mayan ancestry whose story really begins when the Spanish colonized the Americas.

### THE MAYA

The Maya Indians occupied most of what is known today as southern Mexico, Honduras, Belize and Guatemala. From 300-900 A.D, during the height of their civilization, the deeply religious Maya developed a sophisticated calendar and had expertise in astronomy, with which they recorded events with profound accuracy. Although the Mayans shared a communal, agrarian way of life, they also developed a civilization that built pyramids, temples and palaces to honor their kings, poets and musicians. Twenty-two distinct, regional groups developed, each with their own language. Men traditionally worked in the fields, growing corn and beans. In addition to household duties, women wove exquisite and often intricate patterns using backstrap looms. With the weavings they made clothing. The Maya were and still are a poetic, accomplished and resilient group of people.

### THE CONQUISTADORS

The Mayan way of life changed forever when, in 1524, Hernan Cortes invaded Mexico and established himself as ruler. He sent deputies, or conquistadors, to conquer Central America for Spain. Small pox, measles, plague and influenza were introduced. Disease and brutality quickly wiped out two-thirds of the Mayan civilization. A new race emerged combining Spanish, other European and Mayan heritage. These people were known as Ladinos.

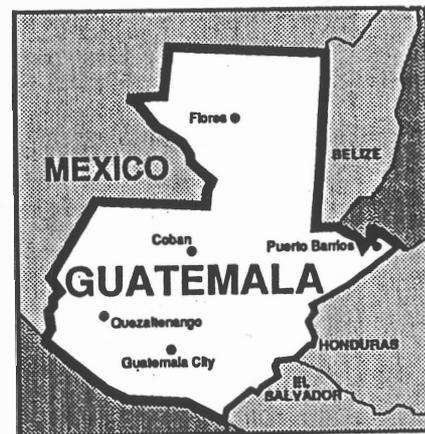
## SPANISH COLONIALISTS , THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND INDEPENDENCE

For three centuries descendants of the conquistadors governed Guatemala for Spain. A few very powerful Spanish and Ladino families ruled. They took the land from the Maya and forced them to work on large plantations or fincas where they grew cocoa and indigo dye. The Catholic Church was introduced to convert the indigenous from their "pagan" ways and to help the colonial administration control the Mayan. Villages were reorganized and controlled by priests and government officials. Indifference towards the new faith was taken as a sign of rebellion.

Indigenous men and women were required to wear special clothing to show where they came from and to restrict where they could go.

Although the styles were new, Mayan women were able to introduce their own spirited symbols into the brilliantly colored woven designs. The Mayan culture persisted as they incorporated foreign elements forced on them. Throughout the centuries the Catholic church became a powerful presence, supporting the aristocrats and converting the "heathen" Maya

In 1821 the colonialists won independence from Spain. The Church's strong economic and political hold on the country



was curtailed as political leaders bowed to foreign interests. Well into the 1900's, Britain, Germany and the United States developed strong economic interest in the coffee and banana exports that had replaced cocoa. To protect their own interests, land-owning rulers relied on the military to enforce their abusive practices, often through systematic violence and repression. Poor Ladino and Indigenous Maya became landless farmers or campesinos. They lived on plots of land mostly in the highlands, too small to provide for their own needs. Campesinos traveled across country to the fertile coastal plains where they found work on fincas. They suffered under colonialism and independence, and they continue to suffer today.

### **CORRUPTION AND REFORM**

As the 20th century began the United Fruit Company, an American concern, was the largest landowner and exporter of the predominant cash crop, bananas. In 1904, ruling dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera arranged for an exchange of " favors" with United Fruit Company. In exchange for building a railroad across the nation, United fruit was to be granted thousands of acres of the country's most fertile land found along the Atlantic coast. Another deal in 1936 with Dictator Ubico provided United Fruit with fertile Pacific coast acreage, total exemption from taxation, duty free importation of necessary goods and guaranteed low wages. The United Fruit Company flourished for decades, making enormous profits at the expense of thousands of campesinos.

There had been sporadic trouble with workers who resented large profits being extracted from their labor. In addition, a growing middle class of teachers, doctors, and intellectuals began demanding more economic and political rights. But, Aristocrat Ubico was not ready for democracy. Like his prede-

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## **UNITED FRUIT AND ITS SHARE- HOLDERS STOOD TO LOSE A FORTUNE, IF ARBENZ' LAND REFORMS CONTINUED**

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cessors, he was used to governing a large body of passive peasants with force and brutality. When Ubico refused to hold elections in 1944, massive protests by diverse segments of the population occurred, resulting in more killings and massacres. The momentum created by the dissidents eventually

forced elections and reformer Juan Jose Arevalo was chosen as president. At the same time, the growing middle class realized they had developed an effective popular movement.

The elections marked a dramatic break with the past. In the aftermath, Guatemala's hated secret police was abolished, enemies were exiled, repressive laws were repealed, a new democratic constitution was drawn up and the common worker was guaranteed a better lot in life.

### **THE COUP OF 1954**

The reforms continued when, in 1950, Jacobo Arbenz succeeded Arevalo as president. One of Arbenz' first acts of office was to initiate a land reform program that expropriated idle lands and redistributed them to peasants. At that time only 15% of United Fruit's land was under cultivation. Arbenz offered the company \$1.2 million as compensation, United Fruit's own valuation of the property's worth according to tax returns. United Fruit took exception to the offer, claiming the land was worth \$16 million, and the U.S. state department backed it's claim. United Fruit and its shareholders stood to



lose a fortune, if Arbenz' land reforms continued.

Shareholders of United Fruit, who held high state department and CIA offices, successfully lobbied Congress to stop what they referred to as communist influences within Guatemala. President Eisenhower, convinced of Arbenz' communist backing, approved "Operation Success," a plan organized and financed by the CIA to remove the Guatemalan leader from power. The CIA trained Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in the U.S. at Fort Levenworth and prepared his army for combat at a United Fruit plantation in Honduras. In 1954 Colonel Castillo Armas overthrew Jacobo Arbenz.

The coup d'etat had disastrous results for the campesinos. Thousands were thrown off their recently acquired land as agrarian reform was repealed. Unemployment rose and wages dropped. Trade unions, student groups and farm workers' movements were destroyed. Ten thousand people were arrested, tortured or killed for being suspected Marxists. Progressive economic and political reforms instituted by Arevalo and Arbenz were quickly replaced with right wing politics supported by military might.

### **REBELLION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

The earliest guerrilla movements began when reform-minded military personnel became disillusioned with the turn of events caused by the coup of 1954. A few attempted to overthrow Castillo Armas' army but were defeated and exiled from the military. In 1960, the rebels tried again, attempting to overthrow the new president, Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes. This time, the US government intervened with bomb strikes, wiping out the most of the rebel army. Those who survived fled to Honduras. In 1963 the rebels regrouped and returned to the



highlands of Guatemala to continue their struggle. In response to the growing guerrilla movement, the U.S. Green Berets entered Guatemala to retrain the Guatemalan military, turning them into an effective counterinsurgency force. The political and geographical nature of Guatemala provided an opportunity to test strategies the U.S. had developed in Vietnam.

### **LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

During the years of strong foreign influence, the Catholic church had lost its former position of authority. During the Ubico regime, however, the church was allowed to reassert itself in rural communities. But, by this time, the indigenous priests had developed a syncretized form of Catholicism, alarming the traditionalist clergy. The liberalizing trends of the later civilian governments had added new threats to the church's power. The Catholic Church came out against Jacobo Arbenz claiming his administration was communist and thus the church cooperated with the CIA's campaign to topple the democratically elected government.

Once the Americans began to retrain the military in the highlands, the conservative Catholic Church enlisted clergy from all over the world to begin establishing schools, clinics and churches in these same rural areas. With the abandonment of agrarian reform, the newcomers encouraged the development of small cooperatives where campesinos could gain some measure of economic independence.

At first, political disobedience was not encouraged by the church. But, as changes occurred within the church hierarchy, and as the missionary priests developed a closer working relationship with the peasants, the newcomers came to



understand the brutality and injustices the peasants had to endure. At the 1968 conference of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Columbia, clergy and laity were encouraged to reexamine the church's traditional place in society and politics. Following the conference, local priests and lay workers preached a doctrine supporting change despite the official Guatemalan Catholic church's position of alignment with the military. This "Liberation Theology" also encouraged landless Maya to homestead on unused land in the highlands. A split developed within the Guatemalan clergy as angry landowners turned to the retrained military force to assist in maintaining control over their lands.

### **GROWTH OF THE GUERRILLA AND POPULAR MOVEMENTS**

Into the 1970's, much of the popular movement and guerrilla activity, with its resulting military repression, involved Ladino teachers, doctors, union organizers, students and peasants living on the flat, fertile plains in the south of Guatemala. In 1976, a severe earthquake brought attention to the interior highlands of Guatemala and to the lives of the Maya Indians who live there. Thirty thousand people were killed in the earthquake. When emergency aid programs were taken to the region, relief workers discovered that just as many peasants were dying from military repression as had died in the earthquake. This realization led to an international outcry.

Throughout the 1970's the popular movement stepped up its activities and the guerrillas grew in number. As tens of thousands demonstrated publicly, death squads began to target priests, students, union officials, leaders of the cooperatives and church lay workers for assassination or disappearance. As protests increased, so did the repression. The military became

less selective about who was to be assassinated or disappeared. Entire groups and whole villages came under attack. While the popular movement grew in scope, separate groups within the guerrilla movement solidified and coordinated their activities. In 1982, four of these groups formed an alliance known as the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, or URNG.

### **MILITARY RESPONSE: THE SCORCHED EARTH POLICY**

In 1982 another coup took place, this time installing retired General Efraim Rios Montt as president. He was an Evangelical Christian, converted by the United States' Gospel Outreach Church. He firmly believed his actions were inspired by God.

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### **MAYAN COMMUNITIES WERE HELPLESS IN THE FACE OF THE MILITARY'S TYRANNY**

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The Evangelicals in Guatemala preached that rebellion was against the will of God and liberation theology was communist inspired. Rios Montt's religious doctrines became the basis for his brutal actions.

The military, under the direction of Rios Montt, instituted an all out campaign to crush the guerrilla movement. Indigenous communities and cooperatives located in the highlands of Guatemala, near the Mexican border, were targeted for the devastating "scorched-earth" policy. Hundreds of villages were burned to the ground and thousands of innocent people were tortured and murdered. Rios Montt believe that the Maya, at the very least, provided the guerrillas with food, shelter and information. If he wiped out the guerrillas' support



system, the rebellion would be defeated. But while the indigenous population had shared the guerrillas' goals of economic autonomy and freedom from human rights abuses, the Mayan communities had never taken up armed resistance. They were helpless in the face of the military's tyranny.

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**THE VILLAGERS  
BECAME TOTALLY  
DEPENDENT ON  
THE ARMY FOR  
SUBSISTENCE**  
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Thousands of men, women and children literally ran for their lives. Some crossed into Mexico seeking protection. Ricardo Hernandez, along with his family and community, were part of the group who settled into refugee camps with the assistance of the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations. Scores of other communities fled into the jungle. They became known as Communities of Population in Resistance, barely surviving and with absolutely no outside support. Those who were spared death and did not flee were forced to live in model villages and serve in civil patrols.

**MODEL VILLAGES AND CIVIL PATROLS**

The model villages, built adjacent to army bases, were officially called re-education or social re-adaptation centers. Survivors from a variety of ethnic communities, speaking different languages, grouped together. This forced residents to speak Spanish to communicate with each other. Conversations could thus be overheard by the army and informants, strongly curtailing any chance for rebellion within the village. Villagers were sent to regimented schools where they were taught that the army had their best interests in mind and the guerrillas were evil communists. Strict daily schedules included singing

patriotic songs, repeating slogans and saluting the flag while chanting the national hymn of Guatemala. Instead of growing rice and beans, the villagers were required to plant snow peas and orchids for export. As they were not allowed to leave the village to work on plantations, and did not have much land of their own, the villagers could not earn enough money to buy food and became totally dependent on the army for subsistence.

An important aspect of Mayan identity had always been their woven and embroidered clothing. But, without enough money to buy these clothes and no time for weaving, the Mayan resorted to wearing cheaper Ladino clothes. For some this anonymity was a blessing in disguise. Many needed the security provided by hiding their identities in Western clothing. If they had come from a village identified by the army as subversive, their indigenous clothing would have marked them as subversive, too.

Men thirteen years and older were required to serve in civil patrols, paramilitary units supervised by the army. Patrols worked on construction crews for no pay, building roads and army bases. They acted as informants and were sometimes forced to kill suspected guerrillas. The civil patrols put indigenous men in the forefront of danger, forcing indigenous to kill indigenous. If an individual did not show up for civil patrol duty or ran away from the village, the families left behind often paid with their lives.

The Rios Montt years were the worst in the Mayan's modern history. During his regime, it is estimated that up to 70,000 people were killed or disappeared. Displacement of survivors resulted in severe loss of cultural identity for the indigenous Maya.



## THE REFUGEES

During the early 1980's, an estimated 300,000 people sought refuge outside of Guatemala in Mexico, Honduras, Belize and the United States. In Mexico, the Catholic church and local communities along the border responded immediately to the needs of the tired, hungry and wounded who were streaming into their arms. Non-governmental organizations from all over the world sent food, clothing and medicine. With funding from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), refugee camps were established in Chiapas, Campeche and Quintanaroo. The Mexican Refugee Aid Commission (COMAR) administered the camps with United Nations' funds.

A long, slow healing process took place among the refugees with the aid of the international community. At no time did the refugees intend to make these refugee camps their permanent home. Within a few years, they began to organize themselves so they would be prepared to go home, to Guatemala. They elected health and education promoters for each camp. The women formed Mama Maquin, an organization to promote literacy and health among refugee women of child-bearing years throughout Mexico. Over time, the refugees became stronger and more self-determined. They were safe from immediate danger, at least for the time being.

In 1990, Guatemalans living in refugee camps in Mexico only, created the Permanent Commission of Representatives of Guatemalan Refugees (CCPP). Members were elected to represent the refugees in negotiations with officials from the Guatemalan government.

To facilitate a peaceful return, the CCPP insisted that the refugees return as a group only after six points had been met:



- The right to return home, voluntarily in a collective and organized fashion.
- The right to return to and take possession of their former lands.
- The right of organization and freedom of association
- The right to life and integrity, both personal and of the community
- The right to freedom of movement both within the country and internationally
- The right to be accompanied during the return by national and international delegations.

## A CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT BRINGS UNFOUNDED HOPE

While the refugees were organizing outside of Guatemala, inside the country change was a slow process. The refugee camps were a great embarrassment to the Guatemalan government. Rios Montt sent his troops across the border into Mexico to "bring the refugees back." Refugees were kidnapped and several camps were completely destroyed. Although threats continued, direct armed attacks on the camps ceased with the election of Vinicio Cerezo in 1985. Guatemala began to develop a civilian government. Cerezo campaigned to end repression, death squad activity and initiate agrarian reform.

Cerezo reneged on his promises and death squad activity increased, targeting students, labor leaders and campesino resistance groups. Indigenous peoples continued to flee the country, fearing for their lives.

## THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT

President Reagan supported any and all of Rios Montt's anti-



communist tactics. Meanwhile, as a result of those repressive tactics, Guatemalans were beginning to cross into the United States illegally. If caught, they were sent back to Guatemala where death was certain. Groups within the U.S. cried out against this immigration policy and continued military aid to Guatemala. In response to the increasing flood of refugees, churches, synagogues and solidarity groups opened sanctuary communities to provide refugees with shelter, food and a forum where they could tell of their experiences. A large and effective grass roots support organization grew in the United States and Canada and became known as the Sanctuary Movement.

### **ELECTIONS BRING RENEWED HOPE**

The election of Jorge Serrano Elias in 1990 marked the first time in Guatemalan history one civilian administration followed another. In 1992 President Serrano created a Human Rights Commission and appointed a Human Rights Ombudsman to investigate abuses by the military and National Police.

Shortly after his election the Permanent Commissioners presented Serrano with the six point document, intending to open negotiations on behalf of the refugees. The military of Guatemala has always viewed the refugees as subversive guerrillas. The Permanent Commissioners made it very clear that they were negotiating for the refugees' return, and were not at all involved with the separate negotiations going on at the same time between the government and the UNRG, the armed rebellion forces.

Serrano saw that supporting the return of the refugees was a way to bolster the country's human rights image. Negotiating

was extremely difficult for both sides. On October, 1992, the conditions for a return were finalized and the CCPP's signed an agreement with the government. The Guatemalan refugees were to begin returning home early in 1993.

As preparations for the return advanced, kidnappings, disappearances and other human rights abuses intensified inside the country. Communities of Population in Resistance were bombed by the military since the army did not want the returning groups to form any kind of coalition with the internal refugees. All refugees, whether internal or external, were and still are regarded as suspect. The military relied on a campaign of propaganda to alienate the refugees from the

campesinos who had remained in Guatemala. Rumors that the returnees were communists and intended to steal land from the local peasants were rampant and caused extreme distrust of those returning.

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## **THE MILITARY OF GUATEMALA HAS ALWAYS VIEWED THE REFUGEES AS SUBVERSIVE GUERRILLAS**

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On January 20, 1993 some 2,500 refugees traveling in a convoy were escorted to Guatemala by representatives from the Red Cross, the UNHRC, and solidarity groups from around the world. After many delays and conflicts with government officials and the military, the refugees settled in Ixcán, a jungle area of the Department of Quiché. They were grateful to have returned home but knew there was further hardship ahead.



It is unclear if the refugees will be allowed to live on land they occupied before leaving Guatemala. Since some of the land is already occupied the new settlers will have to be compensated with different land. Suspicion of the refugees hampers interactions between them and the local people. The department of Quiché is an area of active conflict between the military and URNG guerrillas and the army continues to accuse the refugees of being rebel supporters. Although the UNRG and the government are engaged in peace talks, nothing has been resolved. Violence is a constant threat for the refugees. Understandably, they fear that persecution by the military will continue.

### IN SUMMARY

There are an estimated 100,000 Guatemalan refugees dispersed in Mexico. Many will be returning to Guatemala within the next two or three years. For Ricardo Hernandez and the other refugees in *THE LONG ROAD HOME*, returning to their home may give them an opportunity to participate in a burgeoning, but fragile democracy, an opportunity they did not have while living in exile.

When an informed and responsible citizenry takes action, things do change. But help from the international community is needed, in the form of technical assistance and funding. Even more important, the repression which caused the refugees to flee cannot be allowed to repeat itself. In the past, the Guatemalan military has relaxed its grip on the population only when international news exposed its abuses. The continued activities of concerned individuals and human rights organizations before, during and after the return is crucial to ensure the safety of the refugees as they begin new lives inside Guatemala.

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## CREDITS

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The Long Road Home video documentary was produced by Andrea E. Leland in collaboration with the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation Sanctuary Committee and the Guatemalan Community Cultural Organization. It was directed by Andrea Leland, with Rana Segal, videographer, Carol McCall, scriptwriter, and Deborah Marks, editor. This is a project of The Shefa Fund.

**RUNNING TIME:** 30 minutes

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