

Refugees seek international support for journey homeward

By Teresa A. Parsons

Sometime later this month, more than 300 displaced Salvadorans plan to leave the Honduran refugee camp known as Mesa Grande and begin their journey home.

In the meantime, Sister Kathleen Weider, SSJ, and other members of an interfaith group of religious leaders supporting the Salvadorans' efforts are trying to ensure that the eyes of the world will be upon them.

Experience has shown that the refugees' road home will be a difficult and dangerous one. At least one village which they plan to repopulate, Santa Marta, was reportedly bombed by the Salvadoran military as recently as September 1. Residents of other resettled communities report that local military authorities frequently hold up shipments of food, medicine and supplies sent by international relief agencies. Some individuals who have returned to their villages have disappeared; others have been imprisoned, tortured and killed.

Despite the danger, the refugees of Mesa Grande told Sister Weider that they see their aim as akin to that of the Old Testament Israelites, whom God sent in search of a promised land.

"They want to go back no matter how dangerous it is," she observed. "Their faith in God is the basis on which they've been able to survive so far, and on which they base their return. They believe that God is leading them back to their land."

Sister Weider, assistant chaplain at Nazareth College, was one of seven Americans who visited Honduras and El Salvador for nine days last month on behalf of "Going Home," a Washington, D.C.-based campaign to support the return of displaced Salvadorans to their country (repatriation) and their villages (repopulation). Delegates met with refugees as well as with government, Church and relief agency officials in an effort to enlist their support for the refugee movement.

After arriving in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on Tuesday, August 25, Sister Weider and her fellow delegates drove for nine hours over rutted dirt roads to reach Mesa Grande. Located on a dry and desolate plateau, the camp houses more than 12,000 displaced Salvadorans in communal shanties that are infested with rats, cockroaches, mosquitos and lice.

For the next several days, Sister Weider interviewed refugees who told her story after story of the bombings, attacks and murders that had prompted them to flee from their homes during the course of the eight-year-old Salvadoran civil war.

Delegates observed only minor improvements in living conditions at their next stop in the village of Panchimilama, a town west of San Salvador which was resettled in Janu-

ary, 1987, by 70 families. The people's spirits, on the other hand, were much higher at the village than were those of people in the camp. "It was clear to me from what I saw there that the campesinos want to go back because they want to work," Sister Weider said. "They are not looking for economic gain or a luxurious lifestyle, but to be able to contribute to a prosperous, peaceful country again."

Arriving in San Salvador, the delegates spent the second half of their visit meeting with Salvadoran Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez, Major Vargas of the Salvadoran High Command, and representatives of the U.S. Embassy and international relief agencies.

Support among Church officials and humanitarian organizations for the repatriation/repopulation effort is growing, Sister Weider observed. Such groups as Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the Lutheran World Federation, and Diaconia are preparing to provide the returning refugees with transportation, food, medical supplies, agricultural and building materials. Whether that support ever reaches the repopulated areas, however, depends on the mood of local authorities.

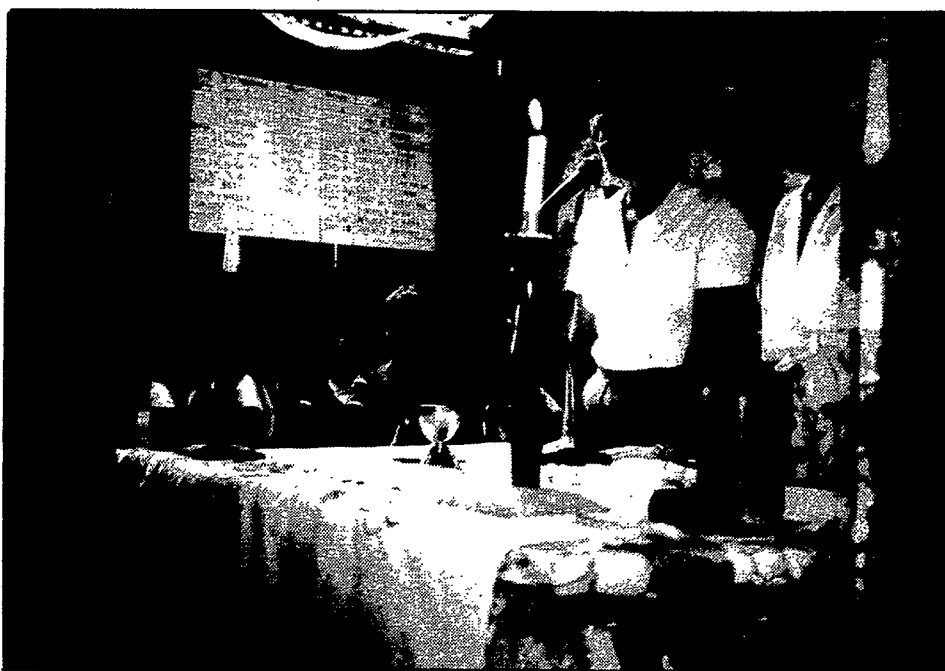
Governments, especially that of President Jose Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador, want repatriation on their own terms, Sister Weider explained. Members of the armed forces would prefer to assign individual refugees and families to a few highly militarized areas so that their movements and activities can be closely monitored.

The refugees are determined to resist those plans. They claim to need the combined skills and earnings of a large group to support the many widows and orphans among them, in an economy in which 76 percent of workers are unemployed. When refugees return to El Salvador alone, they pointed out, 80 percent wind up displaced, and many have disappeared or been imprisoned.

Among the best ways to ensure the refugees' safety, delegates learned, is to attract worldwide attention to them, both during their journey and after they arrive at their destinations. That's particularly true in light of the peace initiative signed in August by the leaders of five Central American nations. The initiative specifically commits those nations to "facilitate in the repatriation, resettlement and relocation (of groups of refugees and displaced persons)."

"If the eyes of the world are focused on what's happening here, it's much more likely to be peaceful," Sister Weider explained.

Besides publicizing the repatriation efforts, Going Home delegates are seeking financial support for refugee families who are returning home. Repopulated villages generally don't



Sister Kathleen Weider, SSJ, one of seven U.S. delegates who visited El Salvador and Honduras last month to enlist support for the repopulation of Salvadoran refugees, addressed a group gathering for Mass at Mesa Grande, a refugee camp in Honduras.

become self-supporting for up to three years. Thus, CRS officials estimate the cost of relocating a single family at \$1,000.

Sister Weider and other delegates are urging interested parishes and groups to consider sponsoring Salvadoran families. The Going Home Campaign alone has pledged to raise \$100,000 before the end of October, with an additional \$400,000 to follow.

The Going Home campaign and other groups are also seeking religious and lay volunteers from other countries to accompany the Salvadorans back to their villages and thus help to diminish the likelihood of attacks on them.

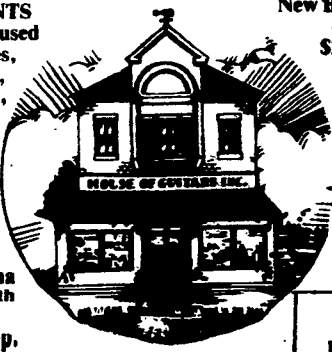
Sister Weider has not yet decided whether she will return to El Salvador and personally accompany the refugees on their journey home. She is offering presentations on the repatriation/repatriation in El Salvador to local church congregations and other groups. For more information, contact her at (716) 586-2525 or 232-7363.



Sister Kathleen Weider More than 12,000 Salvadorans occupy the desolate, dry Honduran plateau known as Mesa Grande. The refugees live in communal shanties infested with lice, rats, mosquitos and cockroaches.

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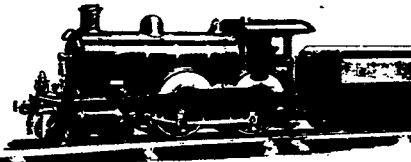
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