

World & Nation

Church pressure spurs Duarte to accept returning refugees

By Laurie Hansen

Washington (NC) — International church pressure forced the Salvadoran government to allow more than 4,000 refugees to return home from Honduras Oct. 10, said U.S. church leaders who accompanied them to the Honduras-El Salvador border.

Many of the 4,413 refugees who returned had been living at the Mesa Grande camp in southwestern Honduras for as long as seven years. It was the largest single repatriation of refugees to El Salvador since its civil war began eight years ago.

The religious leaders, who were members of Going Home, an interfaith campaign in support of the refugees, had intended to accompany the refugees into El Salvador. But the Salvadoran government turned them away at the border.

At a press conference on Capitol Hill Oct. 14, Going Home spokesmen denied charges by Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte that they had "manipulated" the refugees, and were behind refugee demands to return en masse.

"We were not leading anyone, or fomenting anything," said Sister Janet Gottschalk, a Medical Mission Sister from Indianapolis. "Our only function was to call international attention to the refugee situation."

Duarte's charges of manipulation are "totally false," said Franciscan Father Joseph Nangle, director of the peace and justice committee of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, based in Silver Spring, Md., a suburb of Washington.

In an interview after the news conference, he said the religious leaders had responded to an invitation by refugees, who hoped that the presence of international observers would prevent violence from taking place at the

border.

Father Nangle added that the Salvadoran government has labeled the returning refugees as sympathizers of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, the rebel group currently fighting the Salvadoran army.

The government decided to allow the refugees to return "only as a result of intense pressure from churches within and outside of El Salvador," said Jose Escobar, executive director of the Interfaith-Office on Human Rights in El Salvador, based in Washington.

The government had rejected or not responded to repeated requests by the refugees to return home. But three days before the date they hoped to cross the border, the refugees were told President Duarte had approved the move and would send a delegation to meet the group.

An estimated 7,000 Salvadoran refugees remain at the Mesa Grande refugee camp and 1,500 at another Honduran camp, Going Home spokesmen said.

They said refugees who were accepted into the country were not given necessary identification documents upon their return. This will limit their travel within the country and prevent them from voting in elections.

One bus carrying refugees back to El Salvador was marked with a banner proclaiming: "We enter under the protection of the Central American peace plan," according to Sister Gottschalk.

The banner referred to the Central American regional peace plan, signed by the region's political leaders Aug. 7. Its terms include a general cease-fire, amnesty for guerrilla forces, internal democratization, and prohibition on the use of one country's territory for aggression against another country.

Father Nangle said at the news conference that the first night of the trip he had stayed at the Mesa Grande camp in the home "of a man about my age who looked about 20 years older."

"I could not help thinking about his history and comparing it to mine, and then I thought about what was awaiting him in the future," said the priest.

Lutheran Bishop Gustav H. Shultz of San Francisco said he was moved by the words of a female refugee who had lost seven sons in the war. "She said, 'The price of freedom is very heavy.'"

Jesuit Father Lawrence Castagnola, an adviser to Bishop Francis A. Quinn of Sacramento, Calif., recalled another female refugee whose father had been shot and whose son burned to death. She asked him to relay the message, "After God, our only

hope is you."

Sister Gottschalk said a young man showed her what he said was his most prized possession — "a crude wooden box he had made that was closed with a padlock."

"Inside were rubber boots he would (wear) to till the land, and the tools he would use to build a new life, a new nation," she said.

"To me it was the symbol of the promise that President Duarte and the peace plan gave to those people by allowing them to return," she said.

Father Nangle described the refugees' journey home as "the Exodus story."

"It's uncanny," he said in an interview. "They were the Jewish people going back to their homeland. Just as the pharaoh had to be asked 10 times, Duarte had to be asked 10 times."



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