

World & Nation

# Military action threatens Salvadoran refugees' repatriation

By Tracy Early

**New York (NC)** — Successful repatriation of Salvadoran refugees from Honduras has been put in doubt by actions of the Salvadoran military, said the director of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) program in Honduras. He also credited the Central American regional peace plan, signed in Guatemala August 7, with spurring an initially reluctant Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte to allow the refugees to return home.

Patrick W. Ahern, the CRS representative, was interviewed in New York October 21, where he met with CRS officials about the refugee repatriation.

Ahern, a native of Fond du Lac, Wis., and a group of church leaders accompanied 4,413 Salvadoran refugees who had been living at the Mesa Grande camp in southwestern Honduras to the Honduras-El Salvador border October 10. U.S. religious leaders who accompanied the refugees as 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.

It was the largest single repatriation of refugees to El Salvador since its civil war began eight years ago.

The refusal by the Salvadoran military to let Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador, El Salvador, visit one of the sites where the returning refugees have gone to re-establish themselves does not "bode well" for the prospects of the refugees' reintegration into Salvadoran life, said Ahern. In addition, the future for 6,000-7,000 refugees still at the Honduran camp is uncertain, said Ahern. He said they wish to return home, but are watching the outcome of the recent repatriation before attempting the trip.

Duarte's decision to allow the refugees entry was a fruit of the peace plan signed by five Central American presidents in Guatemala, Ahern said.

"The peace plan raised the stakes," he said. "In the atmosphere generated by the plan, it would have been embarrassing for the Salvadoran government not to let the refugees return." 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 them.

Ahern said the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees assists all the refugee groups in Honduras, and contracts with various voluntary agencies to provide services to them. CRS has worked with the Salvadoran refugees residing in camps near the Salvadoran border since the early 1980s.

He said refugees allowed back in El Salvador would need continuing help from humanitarian agencies such as the CRS-supported Social Secretariat of the San Salvador Archdiocese.

The refugees originally fled to Honduras to escape the "scorched earth" policy carried out by the Salvadoran military in its struggle

against guerrilla forces, Ahern said. Despite continuing danger, the refugees at Mesa Grande believe it is time to return, he said, adding that some 10,000 Salvadoran refugees who live in two other Honduran camps and hail from different regions of El Salvador do not believe conditions have improved sufficiently for them to return.

Ahern said the Honduran Red Cross and the Honduran Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa are assisting 8,000-10,000 Spanish-speaking

refugees from Nicaragua; World Relief, an agency of the U.S. National Association of Evangelicals, is assisting 15,000 Indian refugees from Nicaragua, and a Honduran Protestant agency, CEDEN, is assisting 400 refugees from Guatemala. There are 12,000 Hondurans displaced within their own country as a result of activity by the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan contras and cross-border fighting, he said. CRS provides some help to a program of the Honduran

Caritas assisting them, he said.

Hondurans were hopeful the peace plan would bring an end to the conflict, Ahern said. Although the Honduran government failed to move quickly to set up a National Reconciliation Commission as is called for in the regional peace plan signed in Guatemala, it is expected to do so soon, said Ahern. Archbishop Hector Enrique Santos Hernandez of Tegucigalpa is to be commission chairman.

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