

Parish activists aid refugees in 'going home'

By Sean McNamara
Freelance writer

The thought of going home is a soothing one for most people, but not for Salvadoran refugees who have spent the last eight years exiled in Honduras.

When they try to go home, they face the resistance of the Salvadoran government and the fear that they may be pursued by paramilitary death squads.

In an effort to ensure the safe return of these refugees, Joseph and Lillian Piersante, Barbara Smullen and Donna Del Santo, all of Corpus Christi Parish, joined other members of the Going Home organization in Honduras last month to accompany Salvadoran refugees crossing the border into their homeland.

Going Home, a Washington, D.C.-based interfaith organization, accompanied 1,200 Salvadoran refugees on their odyssey from the United Nations' Mesa Grande refugee camp to the war-ravaged villages they left behind in El Salvador.

Accompanying the refugees is necessary, Joseph Piersante explained, because the Salvadoran government does not want the refugees back. And once they do enter the country, the refugees are at risk, he said.

The Salvadoran military, on the other hand, claims that leftist guerrillas of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation front have infiltrated the Honduran refugee camps, converting the camps into retreats for rebels and their families, and providing sanctuaries for combatants suffering combat fatigue and injuries.

The United States, which has backed the Salvadoran government against the Marxist insurgents, also considers refugees to be rebel sympathizers.

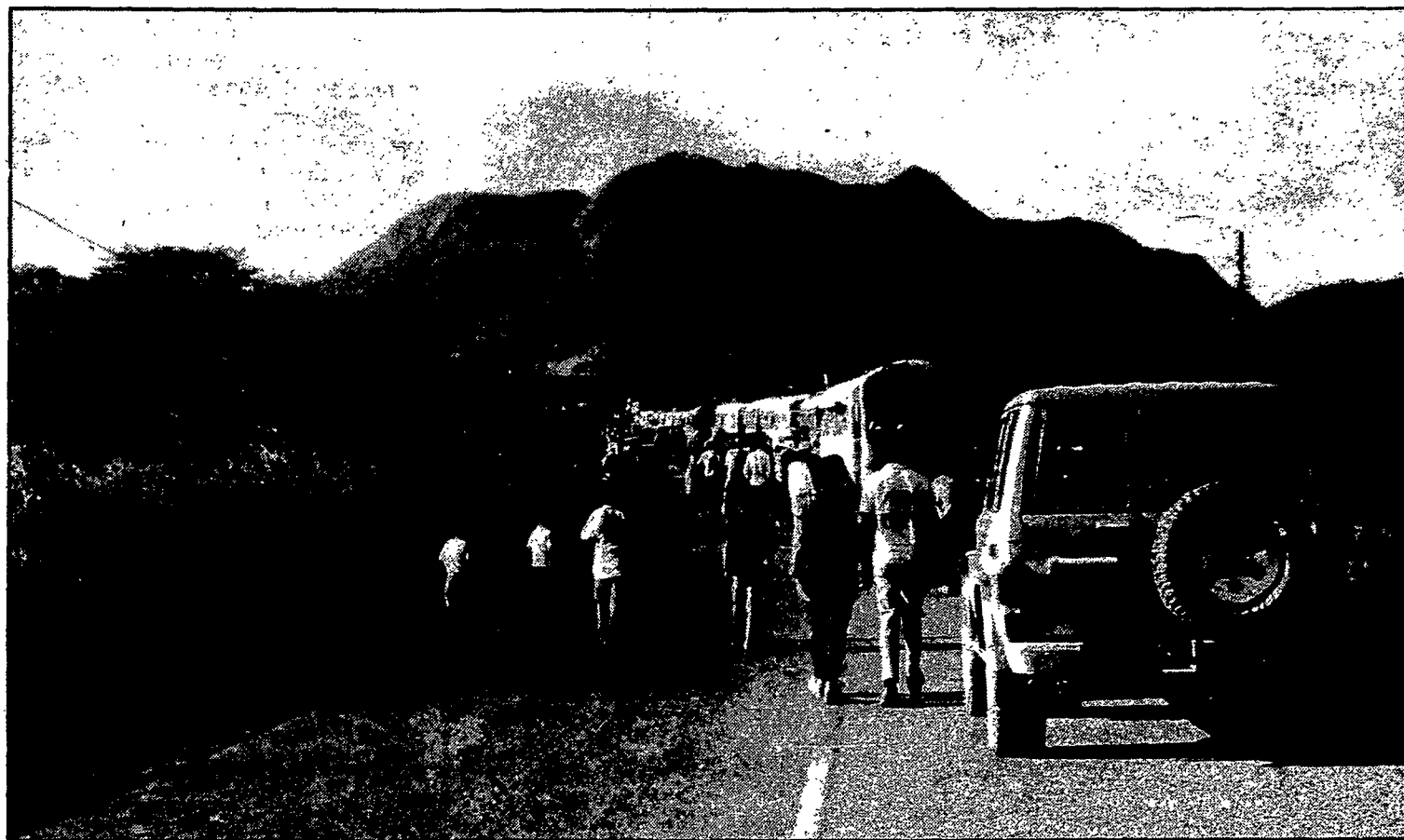
Members of Going Home deny allegations that the refugees are hiding rebels and fear that — because the refugees are considered rebel sympathizers — they will be attacked by the government.

"There is a tremendous fear that refugee leaders will be captured, detained, tortured and possibly killed by the Salvadoran military in the coming weeks," said Going Home representative Paul Scire.

Even the U.N. acknowledges the dangers. "The refugees, once they decide to return, they know the score," said Santiago Romero, assistant to the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees.

Yet Joseph Piersante said the refugees have no choice than to return to El Salvador, since the Honduran government has asked them to leave. He said the refugees want to return home and re-establish their communities to try to bring peace to the area.

Sister Kathy Weider, a Rochester advo-



Salvadorans leave refugee camps located in Honduras and head towards the mountains of their homeland looking for peace.

cate who has participated in some of Going Home's previous repatriation efforts, said that 24 of the refugees who crossed the border within the last year have since disappeared. She added that fear prevents 80 percent of the refugees from returning to their villages and towns.

"They (the refugees) face losing their lives because they have chosen to return. They face grave danger, which is why we continue to maintain accompaniment," Smullen explained.

Eugenio Castro, a spokesman for the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry, has denied the group's charge. "The Salvadoran government has demonstrated its willingness to receive refugees and will do it," Castro recently told the Associated Press.

Yet local Going Home delegates report that the Salvadoran government has made repatriation as difficult as possible for the refugees.

During their trip, Smullen and the Piersantes participated in a five-day hunger strike with other members of the Going Home delegation after the refugees' departure was delayed by new documentation requirements imposed by the Salvadoran government.

Joseph Piersante said the government mandated that each of the 1,200 repatriating refugees complete four-page questionnaires and submit to interrogations. By the

time the new requirements were announced, the refugees had already dismantled their homes in the camp and had begun preparations for the return, leaving them without adequate shelter and food during the long delay, he said.

While waiting in Mesa Grande, three refugees died from exposure when a cold spell hit the mountainous region and temperatures plunged to near freezing. Only after these deaths occurred, Smullen said, would the U.N. provide shelter or warm clothing for the homeless refugees.

Romero denied that the U.N. had any responsibility for the deaths.

The Piersantes, Smullen, Del Santo, other Going Home delegates and the refugees were detained in Mesa Grande until Oct. 26, when the U.N. agreed to provide 35 buses and 150 trucks for the 40-mile trip to the border. The local delegates said, however, that U.N. officials would only provide transportation if the Salvadoran requirements were met.

Three of the Rochester delegates — the Piersantes and Smullen — were not permitted to cross the border, when Salvadoran officials said their visas had expired. Del Santo did cross into El Salvador with the refugees, and spent a week there before returning to Rochester Thursday, Nov. 2.

"We felt the real reason we were not permitted through was because we had told the truth to the press," Smullen said. "We had denounced the U.N. and denounced the repression of the Salvadoran government."

"What we felt called to do was to head back to get the story out," she said of the trio's return to the United States.

The story they returned to spread was

one sharply critical of the U.N. refugee commission.

"I went down there believing the U.N. was the hope of the world, and I found out that is absolutely not true," Smullen said. "The sentiment on all sides seems to be that the U.N. is acting under the direction of the Salvadoran and United States governments, and both groups strongly oppose the repatriation effort."

"We found out from the Catholic workers down there that the U.N., in conjunction with the Honduran government, cut off the water to Mesa Grande for days," Joseph Piersante said. "We saw the children literally sucking on the pipes to get water. (U.N. officials) have become very politicized."

Saying that Going Home delegates were "no help at all," the U.N.'s Romero told the AP that the charges made by Going Home representatives were "absolutely not true ... They added to the confusion."

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Lillian and Joseph Piersante wait at the Salvadoran border after being denied entrance. The Piersantes traveled to Honduras with the Going Home organization to help ensure the safety of Salvadoran refugees returning to their homeland.

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