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ARACEN FOR AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE NEGROPONTE

EO 12065: GDS 10/22/87 (SHAW, DAVID G.) OR-P
TAGS: SREF HO ES
SUBJ: REFUGEE SITUATION IN HONDURAS - BACKGROUND PAPER

1. (U) HONDURAS HAS BEEN HOST TO TWO MAJOR INFLUXES OF REFUGEES IN THE LAST THREE YEARS. THE FIRST GROUP, NICARAGUANS BEFORE AND AFTER THE REVOLUTION, WERE RESETTLED HERE OR ELSEWHERE, OR HAD RETURNED TO NICARAGUA BY OCTOBER 1980. MOST OF THE CURRENT REFUGEE POPULATION CONSISTS OF SALVADORANS; THEY BEGAN ARRIVING IN EARLY 1980, WITH MAJOR INFLUXES IN DECEMBER 1980, AND MARCH 1981. THERE ARE ALSO SMALL NUMBERS OF GUATEMALAN AND NICARAGUAN MISKITO INDIAN REFUGEES.

2. (U) THE U.N. HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR) PROVIDES FUNDS AND OVERALL COORDINATION TO ALL RECOGNIZED REFUGEES IN HONDURAS. LOCAL COORDINATION IS PERFORMED BY CEDEN (COMITE EVANGELICO DE DESARROLLO Y EMERGENCIA NACIONAL), A LOCAL RELIEF ORGANIZATION, WHICH IN TURN WORKS THROUGH NGO'S: CARITAS, WORLD VISION, WORLD RELIEF AND MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES.

3. (U) CURRENTLY, ABOUT 19,000 SALVADORANS, 800 NICARAGUANS AND 450 GUATEMALANS ARE REGISTERED WITH UNHCR AND RECEIVING ASSISTANCE. THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF SALVADORAN REFUGEES MAY BE UP TO 5,000 HIGHER, AND THE TOTAL NICARAGUANS AS MANY AS 15 TO 18 HUNDRED. SOMEWHAT UNDER HALF OF THE SALVADORANS ARE IN TYPICAL

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TENT CAMPS IN LA VIRTUD AND COLOMONCAGUA. THE REST ARE SCATTERED IN VILLAGES IN A 40 MILE STRETCH NEAR THE SALVADORAN BORDER. THE NICARAGUANS ARE BILLETED IN TWO CAMPS OUTSIDE PUERTO LEMPIRA ON THE NORTHEAST COAST. THE GUATEMALANS ARE IN COPAN DEPARTMENT NEAR THE BORDER. THE SALVADORAN REFUGEE POPULATION HAD BEEN BASICALLY STABLE AND APPARENTLY DROPPING SLIGHTLY SINCE THE MAJOR INFLUX OVER THE RIO LEMPA IN MARCH. HOWEVER, ON OCTOBER 10-11 A WAVE OF 800 NEW REFUGEES ARRIVED, WHICH MAY PRESAGE SIGNIFICANT FURTHER INCREASES.

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Donna M. DiPaolo, Senior Reviewer

4. (U) THE UNHCR IS IN THE PROCESS OF ORGANIZING A MAJOR RESETTLEMENT OF THE SALVADORAN REFUGEES AWAY FROM THE BORDER. THE CHOSEN SITE IS 50 KILOMETERS IN FROM EL SALVADOR AND HAS ROOM FOR THE MAJORITY OF REFUGEES PRESENTLY IN THE LA VIRTUD ENCAMPMENT AND IN THE SURROUNDING VILLAGES. THE REFUGEES IN COLOMONCAGUA, WHO ARE ALREADY ADEQUATELY HOUSED AWAY FROM THE FRONTIER, WILL REMAIN WHERE THEY ARE.

5. (C) THE RIO SUMPUL AND RIO LEMPA INCIDENTS. INTERNATIONAL INTEREST IN THE REFUGEE QUESTION HAS FOCUSED ON TWO MAJOR INCIDENTS WHERE HONDURAN MILITARY HAVE BEEN ACCUSED OF TRYING TO BLOCK REFUGEE INFLUXES. THE RIO SUMPUL INCIDENT, WHICH TOOK PLACE IN MAY 1980, WAS MARKED BY ALLEGATIONS THAT HONDURAN MILITARY FORCEFULLY BLOCKED THE ENTRY OF A LARGE GROUP OF SALVADORANS, SAID TO HAVE NUMBERED OVER A THOUSAND IN SOME ACCOUNTS. AN EMBASSY OFFICIAL VISITED THE SITE SHORTLY AFTER THE INCIDENT BUT WAS UNABLE TO MAKE AN ACCURATE DETERMINATION FROM AVAILABLE EVIDENCE AND TESTIMONY. ACCOUNTS OF INCIDENT, HOWEVER, APPEARED GREATLY EXAGGERATED.

6. (C) THE RIO LEMPA INCIDENT TOOK PLACE IN MARCH 1981. FOUR TO FIVE THOUSAND SALVADORAN CIVILIANS WERE CAUGHT IN A SWEEP OPERATION AND, WITH GUERRILLA FORCES APPARENTLY COVERING THEIR

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MOVEMENT, PUSHED TOWARDS THE BORDER PURSUED BY SALVADORAN HELICOPTERS, SURVEILLANCE PLANES AND GROUND UNITS. THEY WERE FIRED ON BY SALVADORAN FORCES UP TO AND WHILE CROSSING THE LEMPA RIVER INTO HONDURAS. ALTHOUGH THERE WERE ALLEGATIONS THAT THE HONDURAN MILITARY ATTEMPTED TO BLOCK THE REFUGEES, OUR INVESTIGATIONS INDICATE NO HONDURAN TROOPS WERE PRESENT AT THE SCENE OF THE INCIDENT. MOREOVER, SOME 4,500 SALVADORANS DID MANAGE TO CROSS INTO HONDURAS, WHERE THEY WERE RECEIVED AS REFUGEES. EIGHT BODIES WERE REPORTEDLY FOUND ON THE HONDURAN SHORE OF THE LEMPA, BUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THEIR DEATHS ARE NOT KNOWN. THE NUMBER OF DEAD ON THE SALVADORAN SIDE IS ANYBODY'S GUESS. THIS INCIDENT HAS BEEN THE SOURCE OF A VIGOROUS DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN BY LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEES OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE SALVADORAN GUERRILLAS, AS WAS THE RIO SUMPUL INCIDENT. THE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST HONDURAN MILITARY ARE LARGELY IF NOT ENTIRELY UNFOUNDED; CHARGES DIRECTED AGAINST THE SALVADORAN FORCES MAY NOT BE WITHOUT SUBSTANCE.

7. (C) THERE HAVE BEEN ALLEGATIONS IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA THAT HONDURAN MILITARY HAVE BEEN PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY HARASSING SALVADORAN REFUGEES IN HONDURAS. ALTHOUGH THERE HAVE BEEN INCIDENTS, THE UNHCR HAS EXPRESSED TO THE EMBASSY THEIR OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH GOH PERFORMANCE AND RESPONSIVENESS; THEY CONSIDER THAT THEIR RELATIONS WITH THE HONDURAN MILITARY ARE GOOD. THERE HAVE BEEN A FEW CASES OF ENFORCED REPATRIATION (REFOULEMENT) OF SUSPECTED GUERRILLAS. THESE HAVE BEEN PROTESTED VIGOROUSLY BY THE UNHCR AND IN ONE VERIFIED CASE RESULTED IN THE

TRANSFER OF THE LOCAL MILITARY COMMANDER. THE INCIDENTS HAVE BEEN FEW AND ISOLATED, AND DO NOT REPRESENT A PATTERN OF REFUGEE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS. THE GOH CONTINUES TO DEMONSTRATE SENSITIVITY TO ITS OBLIGATION UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW AND TREATY TO PROVIDE PROTECTION TO REFUGEES AND, ALTHOUGH NOT A SIGNATORY TO THE GENEVA CONVENTION ON REFUGEES, APPEARS TO BE FULFILLING THOSE OBLIGATIONS.
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