

# The State of the World's Refugees 1993

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## Chapter Six Going Home: Voluntary Repatriation

In 1992, UNHCR helped some 2.4 million refugees to return home – including over 1.5 million Afghans. Repatriation of the first of the 50,000 Guatemalan refugees in Mexico began in January 1993; in the rest of Central America, the process had almost been completed. By the end of April, 365,000 Cambodians had returned, and in June 1993, plans to assist 1.3 million refugees to return to Mozambique began to be implemented. Throughout 1992, an average of 46,000 refugees went back to their home countries every week – a rate unprecedented in previous years (see Annex I.8). There have been setbacks as well. In October, for example, repatriation to Angola was abruptly halted by renewed fighting.

The easing of political tensions and the winding down of a number of civil conflicts have made large-scale voluntary repatriations possible. In several countries, the return of refugees is an essential part of the transition to peace, rather than simply a result of it. In Central America, long the theatre of seemingly intractable conflicts, the repatriation of Salvadorians and Nicaraguans was a key element of the political settlement that brought an end to the civil wars in both countries. Cambodian refugees in Thailand returned to their war-torn country in time to participate in the national elections held in May 1993. The repatriation of Namibian refugees in 1989 was not only one of the fruits of the political settlement that resulted in independence, but also played a role in the process of national consolidation.

Although every repatriation movement is unique, they all share some common characteristics. One of the most striking is that, rather than following the resolution of conflict, repatriation now often takes place in the midst of it – or at least in a context of continuing instability or insecurity. This poses formidable problems for the protection of returning refugees. The international community has accepted that the need for international protection does not end the moment someone crosses the border back into his or her homeland.

The ideal environment for the return of refugees is one in which the causes of flight have been definitively and permanently removed – for example, the end of a civil war or a change of government which brings an end to violence or persecution. This ideal is rarely achieved. Instead, refugees return to places where political disputes still simmer and occasionally boil over; where fragile cease-fires break down, are repaired and then break down again; where agreements are broken and trust is minimal. The great majority of returnees in the early 1990s have been going back to situations of just this kind – for example in Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

It is often difficult for external observers to understand why people choose to return in such uncertain conditions. While the emotional pull of the homeland is not to be underestimated, the motivation is usually a mixture of positive and negative. In ideal circumstances, voluntary repatriation is the best solution for most refugees. It restores citizenship and ends the pain of exile. For the many refugees whose prospects at home are far from certain, however, it is only the best of a shrinking range of choices. Opportunities for permanent settlement in countries of first asylum are narrowing. Resettlement in third countries is offered to no more than 0.5 per cent of the world's refugees. Even temporary asylum is being granted less often. A life of exile is for many a life of misery – of poverty, dependency and frustration.

Many refugees have seen security in their country of asylum deteriorate so suddenly and dramatically that the dangers at home become the lesser of two evils. Over 80,000 Ugandan refugees returned from southern Sudan after being attacked by Sudanese rebel forces in 1989; Angolans in Zaire and Ethiopians in Somalia fled back to their home countries when fighting broke out around them in 1991–92. Elsewhere, the protection and assistance

available is so inadequate that refugees have preferred to return to continuing insecurity at home. In such circumstances, they can hardly be said to have exercised a free choice.

For UNHCR, charged with protecting refugees and finding durable solutions for their problems, the standard criteria for return are “voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity”, preferably in an organized fashion and with the co-operation of the governments of both the host country and the country of origin. But refugees often decide to return independently, according to their own pace and criteria. UNHCR is then left with the choice of refusing to assist in the process, which would undermine the refugees’ autonomy and jeopardize their chances of successful return, or of facilitating it despite reservations. In practice, the only forms of refugee repatriation that UNHCR refuses to assist are those that are enforced.

### ***Organized repatriations***

When refugees return home under the terms of a plan that is worked out well in advance and has the support of both home and asylum governments, as well as that of UNHCR and the refugees themselves, some problems of protection and assistance can be avoided. Such plans commonly include amnesties for political offences, assurances of safe passage for returning refugees, material assistance to help them re-establish themselves and provisions for international presence of some kind to monitor their safety. Organized plans are also likely to have greater resources behind them, though rarely at the level desired.

### **“Repatriation plans are not just about the return of refugees”**

One of the most painstakingly organized repatriation plans ever to have been implemented has been taking place in Cambodia (see Box 6.1). The physical return of refugees from the Thai border camps was completed in April 1993, 13 months after it began. The repatriation operation is far from over, however. The economic and political situation in Cambodia is fragile. Urgent tasks of protection and assistance remain and are being carried out to try to ensure that this solution is indeed durable.

Arguably the single most important part of an organized repatriation takes place before it begins. Planning is crucial. Where the refugees will go, how they will survive the first hard months while they re-establish their livelihoods, what dangers they may face and who will protect them – such questions must be answered in advance.

A repatriation plan is not just about the return of refugees; it should also be closely connected to the processes of peace-making, peace-keeping, political reconciliation and economic reconstruction. Plans should allow room for flexibility, and the people who implement them must be ready to improvise as necessary. But a solid foundation, in the form of a comprehensive plan, increases the likelihood of success. The peace agreement for Mozambique, signed in October 1992, opened the way for a repatriation plan that was being prepared while the peace negotiations were still taking place (see Box 6.2).

Planned repatriations are not always initiated by governments or international organizations. Refugees themselves often take the lead. The organized movement of Guatemalan refugees back to their home country is an example. Although the violence and extensive violations of human rights that prompted their departure were still occurring, the 50,000 or so Guatemalan refugees resident in Mexico began preparing for their return several years ago.<sup>1</sup> Since mid-1991, the government of Guatemala has taken part in a dialogue with representatives of the refugees on issues surrounding repatriation.

Both sides established negotiating bodies in 1991. Shortly afterwards, a group was set up to mediate between the refugees and the government. It was composed of the Human Rights Ombudsman from Guatemala (who subsequently became President on 5 June 1993), a representative of the Bishops’ Conference, a member of the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission in Mexico, and UNHCR. A Tripartite Commission, consisting of UNHCR and the governments of Guatemala and Mexico was also established. In early 1992, these separate

negotiating bodies were joined by a fifth: the International Returnees Support Group, which included representatives of four foreign embassies in Guatemala and two international NGOs.

Two years of negotiations preceded the first repatriations. On 20 January 1993, nearly 2,500 refugees crossed the border into Guatemala. The return took place on the basis of an agreement between the government and the refugees' negotiating bodies. The agreement covered the following points:

- Return should be voluntary on the part of each person involved, and be carried out collectively in an organized fashion in conditions of safety and dignity.
- The government recognized the returnees' rights to free association and organization.
- Returnees were exempted from military service and participation in self-defence groups for three years.
- Return must be accompanied by UNHCR, the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman, the Catholic church and the Returnees Support Group.
- Returnees and their representatives should have freedom of movement within Guatemala.
- The rights to life and personal and communal integrity should be respected.
- Returnees should have access to land.
- International mediation, monitoring and verification of the terms of the agreement should be permitted.

A verification group was set up to perform the role outlined in this last point.

The first convoy of returning refugees was accompanied by some 240 foreign observers and health workers. It was escorted by Guatemalan government officials and highway police, UNHCR, the Red Cross and members of the refugees' negotiating team. Every aspect, including the route, the timing and the public visibility of the return journey were politically charged subjects of negotiation in which the views of the refugees usually prevailed.

The elaborate planning and implementation of the Guatemalan repatriation agreement is testimony to the high levels of mistrust and anxiety surrounding it. Despite numerous allegations of bad faith from both sides, the refugees submitted a plan for the repatriation of over 12,000 people in seven organized return movements scheduled between May and December 1993. Collective returns were, however, suspended following political upheaval in Guatemala in May and are expected to resume after consolidation of the new government. UNHCR has established a presence in the main areas of return, with the agreement of all parties, and will assist the reintegration process through grants to individuals as well as community-oriented aid. The latter consists mainly of short-term, high-impact projects designed to boost local incomes, as well as investments in education, water, sanitation and health.

**“Returnees everywhere know they will encounter hardship and possible dangers when they go back home”**

The refugees who have returned to Cambodia under UN auspices, or to Guatemala under the multi-party accords, know – like returnees everywhere – that they will encounter hardship and possibly danger in their reclaimed homelands. Planning and organization are fragile defences against such uncertainties. But the international community's involvement in their return does at least assure them that the outside world is not ignorant of, or indifferent to, their fate.

## ***Spontaneous repatriation***

The great majority of refugees who return to their home countries do so on their own initiative, rather than by agreeing to join a formal repatriation plan devised under international auspices after a “fundamental change of circumstances” has made possible a return “in safety and dignity”. In 1992, for example, of the estimated 2.4 million refugees who repatriated, around 1.7 million did so spontaneously.

Spontaneous repatriation poses a dilemma for the organizations involved in protecting refugees – namely governments, NGOs and UNHCR. Their duty to protect does not allow them to encourage repatriation into situations they consider unsafe; but they also have a responsibility to assist refugees who decide to exercise their right to return to their own country. If UNHCR believes repatriation to be premature, it usually attempts to tread the fine line between facilitating return and actively encouraging or promoting it. It will not advise people to go back – it may advise them not to – but it will, nonetheless, give repatriation assistance to those who decide they wish to do so. It will also go on trying to promote the conditions for a safe return and to negotiate guarantees for the protection of returnees, including access for international monitors.

### **“It is important to ensure that repatriation is truly voluntary”**

This has been the pattern of the largest repatriation that has taken place in recent years: the return to Afghanistan of refugees in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite continued fighting in the capital, Kabul, and other areas, Afghan refugees began to repatriate in increasing numbers following the fall of the Najibullah regime in April 1992. By the end of that year, well over 1.5 million people had gone back. The return movement has continued in 1993, though at a somewhat slower rate. By June 1993, a total of around 1.7 million Afghans had returned home with UNHCR assistance.

The divisions created by 15 years of war persist, and are not likely to disappear in the immediate future. A fragmented ethnic composition has been compounded by external intervention and various conflicting ideologies which threaten to tear the country apart. The major ethnic groups (Pushtun, Uzbek, Tajik, Baluch, Hazara and Turkmen) as well as the two major religious groups, Sunni and Shi'ite, are all represented in neighbouring countries and maintain close ties across borders. The complex political and humanitarian crisis has been accompanied by economic devastation. Afghanistan was one of the world's least developed countries even before it plunged into war in 1979. Today, the country's infrastructure has been destroyed, food is scarce, health care overburdened and water and sanitation services are severely degraded. On top of all this, the countryside is infested with mines (see Box 6.3). Nonetheless, a total of 1.3 million people are expected to return to Afghanistan during 1993, taking the overall number to almost three million.

As the return movement got under way, UNHCR allowed refugees leaving camps in Pakistan to trade in their ration cards for 300 kilograms of wheat and \$130 in cash. In the ensuing months, it established a presence within Afghanistan to monitor the safety of the returnees, help reconstruct destroyed houses and irrigation systems and provide humanitarian assistance during the harsh winter of 1992-93. Because of the precarious conditions, however, repatriation continued to be facilitated rather than formally encouraged.

Some spontaneous returns result from decisions by individuals or single family groups to go back. Others are planned and orchestrated by the refugees collectively, often through their own leaders, as happened in the case of the Afghans. One protection concern in these circumstances is to ensure that repatriation is truly voluntary for all of those involved.

A common image of refugees is one of passivity and dependence. Spontaneous repatriation shows the refugee in a different light – as a decision-maker, willing to undergo risks to take control of his or her own fate. People decide to go home for a variety of reasons: because they are confident that circumstances have changed, because they are afraid of missing the chance to reclaim property or rights of usage or because the conditions of exile have become

too difficult or dangerous. Repatriation may also be motivated by a desire to take part in the reconstruction and reconciliation process at home.

### ***Repatriation emergencies***

A special category of repatriation concerns movements caused by people fleeing from danger in their countries of asylum. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned to Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia and Sudan, among other countries, because fighting broke out in the place where they had sought refuge. Repatriation under emergency conditions is at the extreme end of the spectrum of unplanned and unorganized movements. As such, it produces acute humanitarian problems.

Some 500,000 Ethiopian refugees in Somalia were forced back into eastern Ethiopia when armed conflict in Somalia reached a climax in 1991. To begin with, many of the returning refugees, rather than proceed to their home villages, remained in crowded, dangerous border camps where the food supply was somewhat more reliable. However assistance to the returnees was severely hampered by the remoteness, extreme poverty and insecurity of the region, and the initial mortality rate was high.

Returnees were eventually dispersed to their home villages with the aid of travel grants provided by UNHCR. Nevertheless, conditions in areas affected by large concentrations of returnees, refugees and displaced people remained precarious as a result of a deadly combination of drought, famine and inter-clan fighting. In the face of such generalized deprivation, the government of Ethiopia, UNHCR and other UN agencies agreed to pool their resources to assist all those in need, regardless of whether they were local or displaced people. The programme carried out under this “cross-mandate approach” involves relief, rehabilitation and small-scale development aid, as well as repatriation assistance.

### **“Most refugees go back to areas devastated by war”**

Repatriation emergencies are sometimes provoked more directly, by attacks on refugee camps. When refugee camps housing Sudanese in western Ethiopia were engulfed by fighting in May 1991, some 380,000 refugees fled back to the border area and into Sudan itself. UNHCR had no access to the war zone into which they repatriated, and was unable to offer protection directly, despite recognizing a responsibility for people compelled to return to their home countries.

### ***From repatriation to reintegration: the “development gap”***

Most refugees go back to areas that are among the least developed in the world, and have been devastated by war. Habitability and productive capacity have been reduced; social and communal bonds unravelled. The potential scale of the problem is immense. Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia and Western Sahara have all either already experienced sizeable returns or are expected to do so soon. During recent months many thousands have returned without assistance, and millions more may do so over the next few years.

There is a yawning gap between the repatriation assistance made available to returning refugees and the enormous development needs of the areas to which they return. The durability of voluntary repatriation as a solution for refugees may hinge on an effective response to these longer-term requirements. Unless return is accompanied by development programmes that address people’s immediate needs as well as longer-term goals, it may undermine rather than reinforce the prospects for reconciliation and recovery. The lengthy timetables and planning processes typical of traditional development projects respond neither to the returnees’ own particular need for early self-sufficiency, nor to the wider requirements of the community into which they must reintegrate. An effort is being made to bridge this gap through development projects that can be formulated and implemented quickly, and that benefit the community as a whole.

In the past, repatriating refugees were provided with seeds, tools, a modest amount of food and equipment or perhaps a small cash grant. Occasionally, short-term projects were established in the areas to which they were returning to strengthen infrastructure and provide both the refugees and the local population with new economic opportunities. But in many cases, repatriation assistance stopped at the border.

It is now more widely recognized that the traditional approach is no longer adequate. It is not simply that individual returnees may need more assistance in order to survive or that, if they fail to get it, they may again head for the border. Instead, there is a growing realization that extreme deprivation and competition for resources can re-ignite conflict and undermine the achievements of a fragile peace. Some governments are reluctant to encourage their citizens to return because they know how difficult it will be to feed and shelter them once they are back. If repatriation is not linked to the rehabilitation of productive capacity, a vicious circle of renewed disintegration and displacement is likely to emerge. The development gap, for this reason, represents a problem of protection as well as assistance.

One factor that contributes to the development gap is the poor fit between the mandates of the institutions that deal with refugees and those responsible for promoting development. Like most governmental and non-governmental organizations that deal with refugees, UNHCR is not a development agency. And yet development institutions have no mandate to give priority to areas that are having to absorb large numbers of returning refugees. Caught in this gap, the needs of returnees are often overlooked or addressed inadequately. Greater attention is being paid to this problem, but a more systematic linkage between repatriation assistance and development aid is needed to help returnees and their communities cope with the difficult and often prolonged period of transition that follows mass repatriation.

## “It makes sense for humanitarian agencies and development institutions to work together”

Refugees often return to areas inhabited by internally displaced people, as well as by other residents who never moved but were nonetheless affected by the same factors that drove away the refugees. Demobilized soldiers and their families also sometimes require help to re-establish their homes and livelihoods. The mixture of people in need of assistance provides a strong argument for community-based programmes. Projects that focus on individuals or even single categories of people can be divisive, rendering the reconciliation process even more complex.

Returning refugees are often resented by people who stayed behind. Land, buildings or implements abandoned by those that flee may have been taken over by others, posing problems when returning refugees want to reclaim them. In such circumstances, assistance programmes that single out returnees can very easily aggravate simmering resentments, whereas aid that benefits an entire community may subdue potential conflicts.

The approach to returnee assistance developed by UNHCR in Nicaragua, known as the Quick Impact Project (QUIP) initiative, is now widely used as a model for reintegration programmes in countries that have been devastated by years of armed conflict and economic decline (see Box 6.4). QUIPs are small projects which attempt to address specific, often urgent, requirements affecting entire communities. They can be completed within a few months at relatively low cost (about \$30,000 on average). Having demonstrated their value in Central America, QUIPs are now being implemented in other settings, including Somalia and Cambodia.

It makes sense for humanitarian agencies and development institutions to work together to bridge the gap between short-term repatriation assistance and long-term development. Each has an interest in assuring that the momentum of development is not lost in the communities to which refugees return. On their own, QUIPs are limited and local in their effect. They cannot rebuild shattered economies, but they can play a useful role as part of a larger plan

that aims to do so. They can help to meet urgent needs and promote social reconciliation during the delicate period before the benefits of longer-term development become apparent.

Progress has been made, in conjunction with UNDP and other agencies, in laying the foundation of a more comprehensive approach to repatriation. Nevertheless, the roles and responsibilities of agencies involved at various stages of the continuum that stretches from relief to development still require further clarification. Co-operative efforts undertaken within the framework established at the May 1989 International Conference on Central American Refugees, usually known as CIREFCA (see Box 6.5), and plans for the reintegration of returnees in Cambodia and Afghanistan are encouraging examples of increased inter-agency co-operation in the process of reintegration. The coming years will present many more such challenges. They will be an important test of the capacity of the UN system to provide genuine and lasting solutions for refugees.

### ***Obstacles to repatriation***

The most acute obstacle to repatriation is obvious: continuing violence and persecution. In the former Yugoslavia and Liberia, to name only two examples, tensions have yet to subside to anything approaching a level that would permit the serious consideration of return. Outbreaks of fighting disrupted planned repatriations to Angola and Somalia, while the threat of renewed hostilities has raised questions about the wisdom or durability of others. Continuing violence is a major concern in South Africa, where returnees have been arrested and detained, often for the same reasons that caused them to flee in the first place, despite the amnesty agreed for the repatriation. In June 1992, UNHCR made a strongly worded protest to the South African government, expressing its concern at excessive use of police power, instances of brutality and torture and, above all, at the reported deaths of 15 returnees.

### **“There may be more mines in Cambodia than there are Cambodians”**

Normal repatriation operations sometimes stall because of failure to arrive at an agreement with the refugees' home government. In June 1993, an estimated half-million Eritrean refugees were still marooned in Sudan, many months after the EPLF victory brought *de facto* independence, owing to lack of agreement between the government of Eritrea and the international community over the level of external financial support for the repatriation effort. Some 50,000 people have returned spontaneously without international assistance, but many others who are ready and willing to repatriate have been unable to do so. The government of Rwanda refused to accept the return of refugees from Uganda, citing the acute shortage of land in the densely populated country – a stance that led to an armed attack by refugee forces in October 1990. Hundreds of thousands more people were displaced by the fighting that followed. Concern on the part of the Ethiopian government to ensure that adequate resources were made available for the reintegration of returnees also delayed organized repatriation of Tigrayan refugees from the Sudan. Following the conclusion of a Tripartite Agreement between UNHCR and the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan, UNHCR launched a \$10 million funding appeal and in June 1993 12,000 of the remaining 50,000 Tigrayan refugees returned home.

Land mines are a major obstacle to repatriation in a number of areas where armed conflict has raged. Cambodia and Afghanistan already have the world's highest proportions of people disabled by loss of limbs. It is estimated that there are between four and ten million mines in Cambodia. If the higher estimate is correct, there are more mines than Cambodians. The presence of mines in northern Somalia has hindered the return of refugees from Ethiopia. Similar problems cloud the prospects for repatriation to Mozambique. Modern plastic anti-personnel mines are difficult to detect and delicate to handle. Clearance is a lengthy and highly dangerous job that tends to be performed on an *ad hoc* basis, as no single international organization has a mandate or the capacity to carry it out systematically on a global scale.

Conflicts over the ownership of land are common after people return home. When 5,000 internally displaced people moved back from the capital of Tajikistan to their homes in the south of the country their path was blocked by local people, apparently because of disputes over land ownership and rights to water. Where exile has been prolonged, customary rights of usage may translate into *de facto* ownership. In other situations, land belonging to people affiliated with rebel movements is allocated to government supporters. Mechanisms for resolving land disputes need to be established in a manner that gains the trust of all parties, as they are a necessary part of the process of reconciliation and reintegration.

### ***Monitoring the safety of returnees***

Protecting refugees during the process of repatriation and reintegration involves, first and foremost, overseeing the guarantees or assurances that have made return feasible. Arrangements that permit international monitoring of the safety of returnees are an integral part of most formal repatriation agreements. Sometimes they are even negotiated during or after spontaneous repatriation movements.

Monitoring the safety of returnees is part of the repatriation component of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). Similarly, in Afghanistan, UNHCR officials have maintained a presence along major routes of return, at border crossings and in returnees' communities to keep an eye on safety and security. Monitoring is also taking place in Guatemala and El Salvador. Under the terms of an accord with the government of Guatemala, UNHCR is providing information and training about protection issues to returnees, NGOs, the government and the military. It is also allowed to obtain information about any Guatemalan refugee who is detained after returning home.

A crucial, if unglamorous, element of protection for returnees is documentation. Becoming a refugee often results in the effective loss of a legal identity in the home country. From the time of the League of Nations onwards, protecting refugees has meant supplying them with identity papers and travel documents when necessary, and negotiating the right to full national registration and recognition upon repatriation. Measures of this sort have been a particularly important aspect of the protection of returnees in Central American countries. Without this form of protection, the returnee may remain a virtual non-person, or become the target of discrimination or retaliation.

Arrangements for monitoring and protecting the safety of returning refugees is one of the most important advantages of international involvement in planning repatriation. Transitional in nature, such arrangements – if successful – should lead to their own demise. In the interval between repatriation and full reintegration, however, they can make a vital contribution to rebuilding both the confidence and the safety of returnees.

### ***Box 6.1 Repatriation to Cambodia***

Between 30 March 1992 and 30 April 1993, more than 365,000 Cambodians returned home – a rate of nearly 1,000 a day. Most of them had spent between 10 and 14 years in refugee camps in Thailand. About 2,000 of those who returned came from other countries in South East Asia.

The repatriation was one of the largest logistical operations ever undertaken by UNHCR, and was carried out under particularly difficult circumstances: the Cambodian infrastructure had been devastated by 22 years of war, and the situation in the country as a whole was far from secure. Yet despite the question marks that still hang over the future of Cambodia, many observers consider the repatriation programme a success.

In Thailand, Cambodian refugees were housed in seven camps. Three of these – Site 8, O'Trao and Site K – were controlled by the Democratic Party of Kampuchea (DPK), better known as the Khmer Rouge; a further two – Site 2 and Sok Sann – were affiliated to the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF); Site B was under the control of the Sihanoukist faction, FUNCINPEC; and finally, there was the UNHCR camp at Khao-I-Dang

which had, since the early 1980s, served as the staging post for resettlement overseas.

Preparations for repatriation began with the Paris Peace Accords of 23 October 1991. Shortly afterwards, UNHCR commissioned the French organization, Spot Image, to carry out satellite surveys of arable land in Cambodia. These appeared to show large, uncultivated areas. As the great majority of returnees were of peasant stock, it was decided to offer them between one and two hectares of arable land each. However, it soon became clear that this was impractical. Land had been redistributed after the war and much of that which remained unoccupied had either been mined or was inaccessible as a result of frequent cease-fire violations.

From 20 May 1992, less than two months after repatriation began, UNHCR started to diversify the options available to those returning. While continuing to offer them arable land as Option A, it added Option B (a smaller plot of land and a house) and Option C (a \$50 cash grant for each adult and \$25 for each child under 12). In addition, each repatriating family received a 400-day supply of food, as well as household utensils and agricultural tools.

This vast operation reached full momentum in the late summer of 1992, when the average monthly rate of return exceeded 30,000, despite difficulties caused by the monsoon season. More than 450 convoys of buses and trucks crossed the frontier, ferrying returnees to the six temporary reception centres that had been built in Cambodia. Those wishing to head east or south travelled by train. Between 30 April 1992 and 24 March 1993, the so-called Sisophon Express made 71 journeys, carrying 90,000 returnees in all, from Sisophon to the Phnom Penh reception centre. From there, they proceeded by truck, bullock cart, boat or even helicopter, depending on their destination and the state of the roads.

The great majority (87 per cent) of the returnees chose to take a cash grant because it offered greater freedom, notably the possibility to change their minds about where they wished to live after they returned to Cambodia. Contrary to expectations, most repatriates managed to find relatives whom they had believed dead or lost, and decided to settle down with them.

In accordance with the terms of the Paris Peace Accords, returnees were completely free to choose where they settled. Despite UNHCR warnings, some even opted for insecure areas. More than 77,000 refugees from the Khmer Rouge camps in Thailand spread out all over Cambodia without, initially at least, any serious signs of friction. Many others chose to settle in areas held by factions other than the State of Cambodia. Approximately 36,000 returned to KPRLF areas, some 4,000 to the FUNCINPEC zone and a similar number to areas controlled by the Khmer Rouge, all with the assistance of UNHCR.

The top priority following repatriation has been to promote the successful reintegration of returnees. In addition to negotiating the allocation of land by local authorities, UNHCR had by June 1993 committed \$7.8 million for some 50 quick impact development projects (QUIPs), which are being implemented in collaboration with UNDP. These are designed to help returnees reintegrate and reach self-sufficiency, while simultaneously benefiting the local population. Projects include the repair of 220 kilometres of roads and the construction of 355 schools, 1,300 water points and 32 health centres. Agricultural programmes have also been launched to rehabilitate 8,000 hectares of land and provide seeds for 60,000 families.

Since becoming involved in Cambodia, UNHCR has, for the first time in its history, tried to organize mine clearance in areas receiving large numbers of returnees. De-mining operations have been carried out in collaboration with military personnel from UNTAC and an NGO called Handicap International. In accordance with its traditional protection role, UNHCR, together with UNTAC's civilian police contingent and all its other partners, is closely monitoring the situation inside Cambodia to try and ensure that returnees do not suffer political reprisals.

The repatriation operation itself may have contributed to the process of national reconciliation in Cambodia. As it drew to a close, "refugees" and "returnees" were increasingly referred to simply as "Cambodians": citizens who, like the others, would soon exercise their right to vote. Nevertheless, the run-up to the national elections in June 1993 was fraught with tension: peace-keeping troops, election monitors and civilians were murdered; bomb blasts rocked

Phnom Penh; and important provisions of the Peace Accords continued to be violated by more than one party. The elections themselves were an unexpected success, with Cambodians turning out massively to vote. However, the ensuing difficult negotiations, which aimed to persuade all the parties to live with the results of the elections, indicate that the future of Cambodia still hangs very much in the balance.

## **Box 6.2 Planning a Repatriation Programme: Mozambique**

The signing of a peace accord between the Mozambican government and the armed opposition movement, RENAMO, in Rome on 4 October 1992 opened the way for the largest organized repatriation ever undertaken in Africa. Repatriating the 1.3 million Mozambican refugees scattered across five southern African countries – Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia and Swaziland – poses an enormous challenge. Indeed, the number of returnees could rise as high as 1.7 million, if an additional 400,000 unregistered Mozambicans in the region join the repatriation programme.

Fifteen years of conflict in Mozambique left as many as three million dead, a similar number internally displaced and most of the country in ruins. It caused an estimated \$15 billion in damage to the economy. Clinics, schools and government buildings were destroyed; basic community services were wiped out; and major roads were heavily mined or rendered unusable by years of neglect.

The devastation and economic chaos caused by the civil war, the fragile political situation and delays in various aspects of the peace process have made the repatriation programme especially difficult to plan. In an attempt to tackle the formidable obstacles to successful repatriation and reintegration, a regional plan of operation was drawn up in early 1993 by UNHCR in consultation with a number of other UN agencies and NGOs. The plan divided the operation into three principal phases: pre-departure, movement and reintegration. It is scheduled to be implemented over a three-year period, starting at the end of June 1993, at a cost of \$203.4 million. Half a million Mozambicans are expected to repatriate in 1993 alone, most of them from Malawi.

A major priority in the “pre-departure phase” of the plan was to establish a legal framework for the repatriation. An agreement was signed between UNHCR and the Mozambican authorities in March 1993. This stipulates that the voluntary character of repatriation must be strictly observed and that UNHCR will be allowed to monitor the situation of returnees, who will not be punished or discriminated against. The Mozambican government has agreed to make land available for cultivation and settlement. Separate tripartite agreements are also being negotiated between the governments of each of the asylum countries, Mozambique and UNHCR.

The pre-departure phase of the plan has also included practical measures such as the registration of those wishing to return, vaccination and health screening programmes and the provision of information to refugees about the situation in Mozambique. As the estimated two million mines scattered around the country pose a particular danger to returnees, great emphasis has been placed on the development of an effective mine awareness campaign. In Mozambique itself, surveys are being undertaken in districts likely to receive large numbers of returnees, and steps have been taken to repair roads, rehabilitate water supplies and health facilities and stockpile a limited quantity of relief supplies.

To organize transportation for 1.3 million people would be a mammoth and indeed unnecessary task. In planning the “movement phase” of the operation, emphasis was placed on assisting refugees to organize their own return. UNHCR will only provide transport for refugees in areas where commercial transport is unavailable, as well as for vulnerable groups including invalids, unaccompanied minors, the elderly and single parents with dependent children.

The success of this repatriation, like many others, will depend on the creation of sufficiently stable conditions for the refugees to re-establish themselves in their home country. In the "reintegration phase" of the plan, therefore, the emphasis is on food production, the restoration of basic water supplies, health care, education, the repair of basic infrastructure such as roads and bridges and the promotion of income-generating activities.

Quick Impact Projects (QUIPs) are expected to play a key role. Along the lines of those pioneered in Central America and Cambodia (see Box 6.4), the Mozambican QUIPs are being designed to create basic infrastructure capable of absorbing the returning refugees, and to help them become self-sufficient. The projects are also intended to benefit other groups in returnee areas, such as internally displaced people and demobilized soldiers and their families.

The overall rehabilitation of returnee areas will require far more than immediate reintegration assistance for returning refugees. Further political initiatives are needed to consolidate the peace process; and the destruction caused by the years of war will only be remedied by substantial development aid. The repatriation plan underlines the need to dovetail reintegration assistance provided by UNHCR with United Nations peace-building efforts, as well as with long-term reconstruction and development programmes by agencies such as UNDP, FAO and the World Bank. Without a concerted and sustained effort by the international community to provide the urgent and comprehensive aid needed by Mozambique, the fragile process of reconciliation could easily be jeopardized and with it the resolution of one of Africa's largest and longest-standing refugee problems.

### ***Box 6.3 De-mining Afghanistan***

In Afghanistan – as in many other parts of the world, such as Angola, Cambodia and Mozambique – refugees are returning to a devastated country littered with land mines. It is thought that about two million Afghans are disabled, an average of one person in every family. Twenty per cent of them are believed to have been victims of mines or other explosive devices. Ordinary Afghans going about their daily lives in the affected areas are in constant danger.

No one knows how many mines there are. According to widely varying estimates, between two and ten million mines of different types have been scattered individually, dropped at random from the air or sown in concentrated minefields. The vast majority have not been recorded nor are they laid in predictable patterns. They are virtually ubiquitous in places which have seen heavy fighting, lying in deadly ambush in fields, villages, roads, tracks, creeks and canals.

De-mining is a slow, laborious and costly process. Most mine-clearance is carried out manually. UNOCHA, the UN agency responsible for co-ordinating humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, employs nearly 2,000 Afghans who have been trained by international experts in de-mining. With the present capacity, about 10 square kilometres can be cleared per year. By early 1993, more than 60,000 explosive devices had been removed from 25 square kilometres of land. UNOCHA estimates that priority areas (such as roads, canals and agricultural land) covering a total of about 60 square kilometres could be cleared within three to five years if adequate financial resources are made available.

The dangers involved in de-mining are acute. In 1992, nine Afghan and two international mine-clearers died from injuries after de-mining accidents, 16 had to undergo amputations, six were blinded and a further 43 suffered minor injuries.

Under the UNOCHA programme, refugees returning from Pakistan receive mine-awareness training before going home. Even so, the numbers of mine-related casualties treated in ICRC clinics in Kabul and the border area of Pakistan have increased dramatically since April 1992. Many other victims die before reaching a clinic.

In order to limit the number of casualties, UNOCHA was planning to provide mine-awareness

training for 330,000 Afghans in 1993, particularly in provinces expecting large numbers of returnees. There is clearly an urgent need for the training of refugees repatriating from Pakistan to be reinforced, and for it to be introduced for those returning from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Otherwise people will continue to be maimed and killed needlessly, perhaps for many years to come.

### ***Box 6.4 Quick Impact Projects***

Traditionally, returning refugees were provided with a modest package of food and relief items, sometimes dismissively referred to as “a cooking pot and a handshake”. Occasionally, short-term projects were implemented in returnee areas, but often returnees and the resident population were left largely to fend for themselves.

The assistance programme developed by UNHCR, known as the Quick Impact Project (QUIP) initiative, was first applied in Nicaragua. QUIPs are simple, small-scale projects located in areas where returnees and displaced people are concentrated. They can be implemented rapidly and at low cost, making maximum use of local resources. Wherever possible, QUIPs are based on proposals drawn up by the communities concerned, and actively involve the returnees themselves and other local residents.

Although QUIPs aim to address the immediate reintegration needs of returnees, they also aim to be sustainable. By filling the gap which has traditionally existed between returnee relief operations and longer-term reconstruction efforts, QUIPs have become known as a “bridge to development”.

There is no such thing as a typical QUIP. In Nicaragua, UNHCR's two-year \$12 million reintegration programme has been used for a wide variety of purposes: repairing and reconstructing facilities such as schools, health centres, roads and bridges; boosting the agricultural sector through the provision of livestock, seeds, processing machinery and transport; and establishing co-operatives and small businesses, in both rural and urban areas. A number of QUIPs were tailored to meet the specific needs of women and other special groups.

On the Tuapi river in north-eastern Nicaragua, a bridge has been constructed with UNHCR funding. Under the management of a local NGO, members of the community provided the labour required to erect the bridge, and they now maintain it on a voluntary basis. Costing just \$16,000 to complete, the bridge saves local farmers and traders a 20-kilometre walk to the next river crossing, thereby stimulating agricultural production and boosting the local economy.

In some areas of Nicaragua, QUIPs have been planned and implemented in clusters, in order to maximize their effect. In the Rio Coco region for example, rice production has been constrained by the inability of farmers to transport, process and market their harvest. QUIPs have been used to open up a disused jungle path, provide local communities with oxen, boats, trucks and threshing machinery and establish training courses designed to help the beneficiaries maintain and manage these resources.

According to a recent evaluation of the programme, the 300 QUIPs implemented in Nicaragua have produced valuable results. As well as expanding economic production and providing amenities that the government was unable to finance, the QUIPs have encouraged returnees, displaced people and the resident population to work together, promoting reconciliation in divided communities. At the same time the projects have strengthened the capacity of local organizations and enterprises, and have made it easier for returnees to make a living in rural areas instead of drifting into the towns in search of work.

While the Nicaraguan QUIPs have proved effective, it may not be easy to replicate this type of programme elsewhere. The repatriation to Nicaragua involved only 70,000 refugees – a small number compared to countries such as Afghanistan and Mozambique, where the numbers will run into millions. The Nicaraguan repatriation followed a definitive peace settlement and

change of government, and was organized by UNHCR. In other countries, repatriation is likely to take place in less stable circumstances. Although Nicaragua has been severely affected by a decade of war, the country remains more developed, both in institutional and economic terms, than most of the other states where large-scale repatriations are anticipated. Moreover, the commitment of aid donors to the Nicaraguan peace process has provided much greater financial support than may be available in other parts of the world.

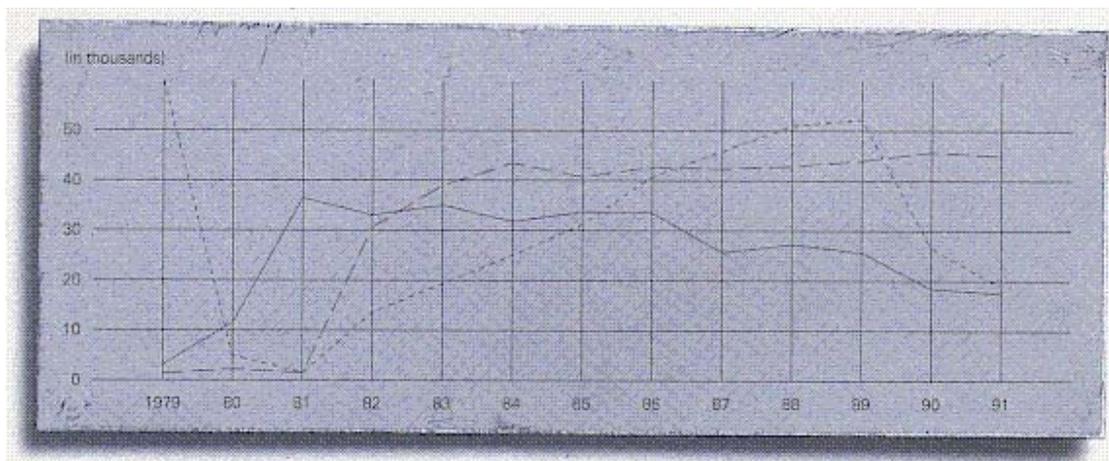
Despite these potential limitations, QUIPs provide an important link between the returnee relief operations implemented by UNHCR and the longer-term reconstruction efforts of national governments and development agencies. QUIPs cannot, by themselves, rebuild countries and economies seriously damaged by long periods of armed conflict. They can, however, become an important component of a broader rehabilitation strategy.

### **Box 6.5 Central America at the Crossroads**

Central America has seen a marked reduction in conflict and tension over the past few years. From being a virtual synonym for violence and instability, it has become something of a model for future efforts by the international community to consolidate peace, development and democracy by means of a comprehensive regional approach. In 1989, it was estimated that as many as two million people had been uprooted over the previous decade, of whom 165,000 were recognized as refugees.

By June 1993, more than half of these had returned home, while local integration schemes were well under way for the approximately 40,000 Nicaraguan and Salvadorian refugees remaining outside their home countries. The only significant refugee population in the region for whom a firm solution has still to be found is the 43,000 Guatemalans in Mexico.

**Fig 6.A**  
**Evolution of Assisted refugee Caseloads in Central America, Mexico and Belize: 1979-1991**



**Salvadorians ( ——— )**

1979: 3,000	1982: 33,166	1985: 34,440	1988: 27,068	1991: 16,979
1980: 12,000	1983: 35,256	1986: 33,913	1989: 25,798	
1981: 37,381	1984: 32,273	1987: 25,737	1990: 18,537	

**Nicaraguans ( ----- )**

1979: 60,000	1982: 13,900	1985: 31,813	1988: 51,358	1991: 18,995
1980: 5,000	1983: 19,402	1986: 40,710	1989: 52,890	
1981: 1,760	1984: 25,228	1987: 45,816	1990: 26,819	

**Guatemalans ( - - - - )**

1979: 1,000	1982: 30,600	1985: 40,656	1988: 42,831	1991: 45,007
1980: 2,000	1983: 39,071	1986: 42,732	1989: 44,047	
1981: 1,475	1984: 43,623	1987: 42,276	1990: 45,354	

Throughout most of the 1980s, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala were caught in a web of guerrilla warfare, sweeping counter-insurgency operations, widespread political and social unrest and sharp economic decline. Individual and collective persecution was rife. Atrocities and massacres took place in Guatemala and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, indigenous peoples were forcibly relocated. By the mid-1980s, with the stakes raised by superpower involvement, the hostilities in Central America were threatening to engulf the entire region.

While some 80 per cent of those fleeing Central American countries during this period headed north to the United States, large numbers of impoverished refugees from rural areas fled across the nearest border. Salvadorians sought refuge in Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. While some Guatemalans also entered Belize, most crossed into Mexico. Indigenous Nicaraguans from the north flooded across the Rio Coco to Honduras, while those from the south of the country fled to Costa Rica.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Central American crisis has been the way that humanitarian initiatives have helped stimulate political processes which have in turn led to a widespread, though by no means complete, restoration of peace and democracy. Another notable feature has been the decisive role the refugees themselves have played at both political and humanitarian levels.

Attempts to restore peace and stem the refugee flows started early, although several years passed before they began to make an impact. The critical problems of protection arising from the conduct of the wars led UNHCR to mount a major campaign to promote awareness of refugee law and fundamental human rights. This resulted in the Cartagena Declaration of November 1984 which recommended that the refugee definition in Central America be broadened explicitly to include victims of conflict and of massive violations of human rights.

Intensified efforts by the Central American presidents to reach a peaceful, negotiated settlement culminated in the Esquipulas II Accords of August 1987. The peace plan included a range of principles and commitments which provided the foundation for future refugee-related diplomatic efforts, among them the conviction that peace and development were inseparable and that there could be no lasting peace unless the plight of refugees and displaced people was resolved.

As the peace process gathered momentum, the impetus gradually changed from flight to repatriation, but people were often returning to fragile or dangerous circumstances. The decision of many Central American refugees to return some during continuing conflict, and at great physical risk, was an extremely complex phenomenon.

The conclusion of a 1987 agreement granting limited autonomy for indigenous peoples in Nicaragua resulted in the return of several thousand refugees from Honduras that year. During the same period, opposition forces in El Salvador initiated a policy of re-populating areas of conflict in order to broaden their base of popular support. Both internally displaced people and refugees from camps in Honduras became involved in this strategy. Despite the highly confrontational and controversial nature of their return, their stated objective, inspired by the regional peace agreement, was to "build peace".

As the United Nations launched an ambitious plan of economic and social development in support of the Esquipulas Accords, it became clear that greatly increased international assistance would be required to resolve the problem of uprooted populations. To this end, the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) was convened by the UN Secretary-General in May 1989 in Guatemala City.

Of the estimated two million people uprooted since 1979, only a fraction – some 150,000 – were benefiting from UNHCR protection and assistance. An additional 900,000 undocumented Central Americans were scattered throughout the region, living in permanent fear of expulsion. An even greater number were displaced inside their own countries without any form of international protection or assistance.

To respond to this challenge, the CIREFCA Conference adopted a “Concerted Plan of Action” with an initial time-frame of three years. The plan embodied a set of commitments based on fundamental principles of humanitarian and refugee law. It outlined specific strategies to achieve durable solutions, either through voluntary repatriation or local integration for all four categories of people displaced during the years of conflict: refugees, returnees, internally displaced and “externally displaced” (a category of people who were outside their countries but had not registered as refugees, and were therefore undocumented). UNHCR and UNDP were given a joint mandate to implement CIREFCA’s decision to link humanitarian activities with broader development programmes.

At two international follow-up meetings of CIREFCA, in June 1990 and April 1992, the international community continued to give strong political and financial support for the process. By 31 January 1993, over \$240 million had been allocated to CIREFCA projects in seven countries. The flexibility of the CIREFCA process was demonstrated as funding priorities were adjusted in the light of experience on the ground. At the 1992 meeting in San Salvador, the Plan of Action was extended for an additional two years, by which time it is hoped that the refugee crisis will have been largely resolved.

Since the first CIREFCA Conference in 1989, the situation of Central American refugees has changed considerably. The 1990 change of government in Nicaragua led to a mass repatriation of 70,000 Nicaraguan refugees and former combatants from Honduras and Costa Rica. Greater emphasis was placed on returnee programmes thereafter. The socio-economic devastation which faced the returning refugees spurred UNHCR to go beyond its traditionally limited returnee assistance “package” and launch an ambitious programme of Quick Impact Projects (QUIPs) in an attempt to turn the voluntary repatriation into a truly durable solution.

The repatriation of Nicaraguans and, later, of Salvadorians made it possible to close all the refugee camps in Costa Rica and Honduras by the end of 1991. Attempts to consolidate the local integration of those refugees not wishing to repatriate are progressing, especially in Belize and Costa Rica. Some 25,000 Nicaraguans, for example, will probably remain in Costa Rica where they are expected to achieve complete social, economic and legal integration with the help of an ambitious programme of CIREFCA projects and parallel legal measures that are being taken to regularize their status.

In 20 January 1993, the first mass repatriation of Guatemalan refugees – the largest refugee group remaining in Central America – took place after lengthy and sometimes heated negotiations between the Guatemalan government and refugee representatives. In a scenario remarkably similar to that surrounding the earlier Salvadorian repatriation from Honduras, 2,473 refugees seized the initiative and staged a mass return to a conflict zone, in spite of serious concerns about security and a lack of available land. If successful, their reintegration could pave the way for the return of the remaining 43,000 Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. The difficult task of ensuring safe conditions for the returnees has once again led to UNHCR involvement in monitoring protection and security within the country of origin.

The positive evolution of the refugee situation in Central America has taken place against the background of profound political changes, hastened by the end of the Cold-War era. Civilian governments are now in place throughout the region. In El Salvador, verification of compliance with the UN-sponsored peace agreement has done much to reinforce the peace process which, despite setbacks, has held firm. In Guatemala, peace negotiations between opposing sides are scheduled to resume, raising hopes that this 30-year internal conflict – the

oldest in Latin America – may finally be resolved.

The major challenge now facing the international community is to consolidate the region's fragile peace. This will involve strengthening respect for fundamental human rights, and establishing effective development programmes to rebuild national economies as well as to provide basic services to areas devastated by war. As former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar said, in May 1989, "CIREFCA is not an end in itself but merely a milestone along the way to development, stability and peace in Central America".

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<sup>1</sup> See Hiram A. Ruiz, *El Retorno: Guatemalans' Risky Repatriation Begins*. Washington DC: US Committee for Refugees, February 1993.