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Solidarity and Sanctuary

The Guatemalan Exodus and the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of sanctuary, the Church offering a safe haven for those forced to migrate, has been reinvigorated in the early 1980s in light of the Central American refugee crisis. The Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas was one of the key actors in support and defence of Guatemalan refugees who fled the genocidal violence in the last years of civil war. When the Mexican government decided to relocate the refugee camps from Chiapas to the Yucatan peninsula, the refugees and the Diocese mobilized against the resettlement, scrutinizing and challenging Mexico's asylum policy. Situated at the nexus of theology and forced migration, *Solidarity and Sanctuary* seeks to historicize the 1984-85 relocation as a watershed moment for the Guatemalan exile in Mexico. Based on archival research in Mexico and Geneva, this thesis examines how the governmental and ecclesiastical discourses influenced the controversy surrounding the resettlement of the refugees. Moreover, it analyzes how these discourses were both shaping and being shaped by the refugees' standpoint. In doing so, this thesis challenges both the prevalent narrative portraying the refugees as an embodiment of victimhood and – as a result thereof – their marginalization in the history of forced migration.

Key words: Forced Migration, Refugee Aid, Sanctuary, Mexico, Catholic Church, Liberation Theology, Solidarity.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACNUR	Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados <i>(span. UNHCR)</i>
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación <i>General Archive of the Nation, Mexico</i>
AHDSC	Archivo Histórico de la Diócesis de San Cristobal de las Casas <i>Historic Archives of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas</i>
CCS	Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad <i>Christian Committee of Solidarity</i>
CEH	Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico <i>Historical Clarification Commission, Guatemala</i>
COMAR	Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados <i>Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid</i>
GNIB	Guatemalan News and Information Bureau
SEDENA	Secretaría de Defensa Nacional <i>Mexican Ministry of National Defense</i>
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Pontifical Council *Cor Onum* issued a guideline entitled “Refugees, a Challenge to Solidarity”, underlining the necessity of the Church¹ to help those being forced to migrate. The principle of solidarity in this context refers to the commitment to, and responsibility for, the common good of all people, a core value defended by Christian aid organizations.² Pursuant to the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council, the guideline portrays the role of the Church as an instrument of the union between God and humankind, destined to offer unconditional aid to all refugees³. “Christians, strong in the certainty of their faith, [...] are aware that God, who walked with the refugees of the Exodus in search of a land free of any slavery is still walking with today’s refugees in order to accomplish his loving plan together with them”.⁴ The parallels drawn between the biblical *Exodus* and contemporary forced migration flows illustrate how the Church reinterprets its solidarity in the name of the Bible. At the same time, it raises the question to what extent religious solidarity remains an alternative form of charity. In other words, how does ecclesiastical and secular aid interact in contexts of forced migration?

These questions are as relevant today as they were in the early 1980s, when more than 50 000 Guatemalans crossed the Mexican border in light of the genocidal violence in the final years of the Guatemalan civil war. The Guatemalan exodus in neighboring Chiapas, like any forced migratory movement, had a threefold impact, affecting the communities of origin, the migrants, and the host communities in Mexico’s southernmost state. Besides the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its Mexican homologue *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a los Refugiados* (COMAR), the Catholic Church of San Cristobal de las Casas was a protagonist in attending to the Guatemalan refugees after their initial arrival in late 1981. Influenced by liberation theology, notably the preferential option for the poor, the San Cristobal Diocese developed a discourse of solidarity vis-à-vis the refugees when providing food, moral and educational support to the Guatemalans settling alongside the border. In doing so, the ecclesiastical activism in support and defense of the refugees drew on the tradition of *sanctuary*, the Church providing a safe haven where vulnerable people could seek refuge. In light of the increasing number of Central American asylum-seekers, religious congregations in both Mexico and the United States reinvigorated this tradition in the early 1980s by scrutinizing and shaping public discourses surrounding asylum

¹ Unless otherwise specified, the term ‘Church’ refers to the Catholic Church as a religious institution headed by the Vatican. This thesis will use ‘Diocese’ or ‘San Cristobal Church’ as interchangeable synonyms, both referring to the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas.

² A. Paras & J. Gross Stein, “Bridging the Sacred and the Profane in Humanitarian Life”, in M. Barnett & J. Gross Stein (eds.), *Sacred Aid – Faith and Humanitarianism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, 218.

³ The term ‘refugee’ will be further explained in the upcoming section on terminology.

⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 1174, Expediente 1, Pontificio Consejo „Cor Unum“, *Los Refugiados, un desafío a la solidaridad*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Ciudad del Vaticano, 1992. [Translation taken from the Pontifical Council’s website]

policies.⁵ In a 1984 interview, Samuel Ruiz García, bishop of San Cristobal, described the difficulty of the Diocese dealing with the temporal integration of the refugees:

In the beginning, it was a temptation to have Mexican communities opening up their halls to the refugees. However, this did not take place, as I feel it would have been an involuntarily destructive process for their own ethnic identity [...] They did not want to assimilate to Mexican communities, not because of rejection, but for not wanting to renounce their own identity.⁶

The interview entitled “Respect their cultural nature” underlines the Ruiz Garcia’s position regarding the assimilation process the refugees might be subjected to. According to the bishop, the Diocese’s rejection of an acculturation – or “mexicanization” – of the refugees simply responded to the latter’s desire to return to Guatemala as soon as circumstances permitted.⁷

The continuous Guatemalan army raids into refugee camps and emerging security concerns for the southern frontier challenged the spatial organization of the settlements, most of them situated close to the border to facilitate continuous trans-border contact and a rapid return after the end of conflict. Considering the remaining of the refugees in the border region as a threat to national security, the Mexican government decided in early 1984 to relocate them to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, located on the Yucatan peninsula. Since the new camps were situated far away from Guatemala, the relocation challenged the very idea of the ‘respect for the cultural nature’ and the non-mexicanization of the refugees, who were opposed to any displacement further away from their home communities. The active opposition of the refugees, including petitioning, writing letters and the establishment of new camps further inland, not only challenged the government’s relocation policy but also the dominant narrative of reducing the refugees to passive victims, reactive to political and social circumstances rather than proactively shaping them. Apart from the increasingly contesting roles of the Mexican government and the San Cristobal Church, respectively defending a discourse of national security and solidarity, the refugees thus emerged as an actor that scrutinized and challenged the Mexican asylum policy. Put differently, the resistance of the concerned refugee population to the resettlement provoked a

⁵ P. Marleet, “Understanding ‘Sanctuary’: Faith and Traditions of Asylum”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(3), 2011, 449–451.

⁶ R. Castillo, “Respeto a su naturaleza cultural: Entrevista a Monseñor Samuel Ruiz”, *Estudios Ecueménicos*, Segunda Época (1), 1984, 15. [Author’s translation]

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

public debate on refugee identity and the controversial role of what the conservative journal *Impacto* qualified as “the communist clergy setting Chiapas on fire.”⁸

1.1. Research questions

Considering the 1984-85 resettlement to Campeche and Quintana Roo as a watershed moment for the Guatemalan exile in Mexico, the aim of the upcoming thesis is twofold. First, to interrogate how the relocation can be situated within the complex relation between the San Cristobal Church and the refugees, including the latter’s struggle to avoid acculturation. Secondly, to analyze the agency of the refugees in terms of their influence on the public discourses, notably defended by the Diocese and the Mexican government, surrounding their relocation. In line with these aims, there are two central questions that this thesis will attempt to answer:

1. How did the discourses of solidarity and national security, respectively defended by the Diocese and the Mexican government, impact the controversy surrounding the relocation of the refugees? And to what extent did these discourses create a division among ecclesiastical and governmental stakeholders with regards to their action in Chiapas?
2. Contrariwise, how did the refugees accommodate these discourses in their opposition against the resettlement? And what role did their relations with the Diocese and host communities play in the refugees’ struggle to maintain their distinct cultural identity in exile?

Answering these questions, this thesis will argue that:

The discourses surrounding the Guatemalan exodus in general, and the relocation in particular, were both shaping and being shaped by the refugees’ standpoint, the latter’s opinion being used and abused by the Diocese and the Mexican government in order to respectively defend their ideological and political agenda in Chiapas.

⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 762, Expediente 2, Eduardo Ruiz Healy, “Cuidado: Incendian a Chiapas”, *Impacto*, 19.05.1983, 58.

1.2. Terminology

The term ‘refugee’ is often used to describe a type-figure universalizing the experience of migration and exile, overshadowing the complex realities and individual experiences inherently present in forced displacement movements. What Liisa Malkki frames as the “humanistic universalization of the refugee” has caused refugees to be seen as the very embodiment of humanity and victimhood, stripped of the specificity of culture, place and history.⁹ In light of the apparent dispossession of individual identity, the only specific attribution refugees have in common is their refugeehood, a legal status based on a paragraph in the 1951 UNHCR convention:

Any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling [...] to return to it.¹⁰

In *The Law’s Construction of the Refugee*, Patricia Tuitt argues that by seeking to portray the refugee as reducible to its definition in the Geneva Convention, refugee law constructed an official identity of the refugee, suiting the interests of the primary authors of the legal regime.¹¹ Since international law has both directly and indirectly shaped the discourse and understanding of refugees, it is of no surprise that refugees are still seen as a “constrained legal concept” or “a mass of undifferentiated miserable humans.”¹²

From a historic viewpoint, the concept of refugeehood was not only shaped by a changing legal doctrine throughout the 20th century, but also in accordance with regional and temporal circumstances.¹³ The perception of and approach towards refugees can be seen as a mirror of the relations existing between migrants and host communities, between refugees and non-refugees. Underlining the arbitrariness of the refugee label, Roger Zetter states that “refugeehood, contingent on accepting a bureaucratized delivery of basic and familiar needs, may not differ from the experience of non-refugee groups.”¹⁴ Whereas clear conceptual definitions have been set by the UNHCR and other governmental and non-governmental organizations, the opposite can be said for the Diocese of San Cristobal, let alone the Guatemalans concerned. Therefore, this analysis will make use of the term refugee as a

⁹ L.H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, 12.

¹⁰ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 UNTS 150, 28 Jul. 1951 (entry into force: 22 Apr. 1954), Art. 1A.

¹¹ P. Tuitt, *False Imagines – Law’s Construction of the Refugee*, London, Pluto Press, 1996, 14, 16.

¹² T. Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006, 44.

¹³ P. Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 7.

¹⁴ R. Zetter, “Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4(1), 1991, 59.

term applying to Guatemalans who have been labeled as such by the respective actors in question, no matter whether the label is based on a legal, political or theological approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Given the complexity of the theme this dissertation seeks to address, the literature review cannot only consider publications on Central American refugee flows, few of which are historical studies. Rather, the review will be divided in three different thematic chapters, respectively dealing with the history of conflict in Guatemala, the Mexican exile and the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. The historiographical discussion of these topics allows one to comprehensively address the scholarly portrayal and analysis of the agency of the key protagonists, both the Guatemalan refugees and the San Cristobal Church. A non-exhaustive overview of literature on the three topics moreover serves both as a more detailed introduction to the upcoming research and as an outline of how this thesis seeks to respond to the gaps in current scholarship. At the same time, the discussion of methodological merits and shortcomings permits to put forward a coherent methodology making use of both primary and secondary sources. The final section addresses the archival research upon which this thesis is based, focusing notably on the sources stemming from the Archives of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas.

2.1. Conflict and testimonial memory in Guatemala

In light of their similarity in spatial and temporal terms, the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua in the late 1970s and early 1980s have often been subject to comparative studies. In *Genèse des Guerres Internes en Amérique Centrale*, Gilles Bataillon retraces how processes of “mobilization and modernization” in the 1960s and 1970s led to mounting tensions that, despite the same pattern of confrontation involving US-backed governments and Marxist-Leninist guerillas, resulted in civil conflicts inscribed in the respective domestic circumstances.¹⁵ In the same vein, Alain Rouquié interprets conflict in Central America, framed as “revolutions and counter-revolutions”, as a laboratory for diametrical relations between North and South, East and West.¹⁶ Interestingly, both authors use a different terminology when describing civil strife in Guatemala. Whereas Rouquié prefers the term “counter-insurgency policy” to civil war, Bataillon describes the violent confrontations as “state terrorism”.¹⁷ Both terms imply that not all of Guatemalan society, despite its unprecedented militarization, had been equally affected by armed violence. Indeed, Bataillon and Rouquié stress the fact that the scorched earth policy conducted by President Lucas García and intensified under Ríos Montt particularly targeted the rural zones in the Northern departments with a high concentration of indigenous populations.¹⁸

¹⁵ G. Bataillon, *Genèse des Guerres Internes en Amérique Centrale*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2003, 242–243.

¹⁶ A. Rouquié, *Guerre et paix en Amérique Centrale*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1992, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁸ G. Bataillon, *Genèse des Guerres Internes*, 312–313; Rouquié, *Guerre et paix en Amérique Centrale*, 268–269.

The racial dimension of conflict in Guatemala raises the question to what extent state violence can be framed as genocide. Some academics, like Roquié and Bataillon, avoid the debate by respectively avoiding the question or describing it as the “*nouvelle destruction des Indes*”, probably related to the idea that genocide is both too emotionally charged and legally constrained.¹⁹ Other scholars, like Eglá Martínez, have argued that genocide has been used in Guatemala in order to eliminate the racially and politically undesirable in the last years of the almost four decade-long armed conflict.²⁰ Adopting a more differentiated approach, Carlos Figueroa Ibarra argues that the massacres in Guatemala can be described as genocide not because of the particular targeting of certain ethnic groups, but a combination of a targeted group and a subjective construct of them. In other words, the negative otherness constructed around communists and indigenous people was also applied to many individuals and social groups who could hardly be described as such.²¹ In his analysis of the massacres in the Ixcán province, Ricardo Falla comes to the same conclusion by stating that “racism is a specific trait of counterinsurgency in Guatemala, but it is not the main motivation for it.”²²

The final report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) concludes that acts of genocide have been carried out against the Mayan population based on thousands of testimonies collected from the over 600 villages. The title of the report, *Memory of Silence*, evokes the debatable idea that there existed collective memorialization processes among victims used to support the Commission’s claim to write “an authentic chapter in Guatemala’s history.”²³ Using testimonies for memorialization purposes is however not unique to the Commission in the aftermath of *la violencia* in Guatemala, covering the period between 1979 and 1983. Probably the most famous example of testimony is Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú’s autobiography, subtitled “one life and one voice.”²⁴ Other recollections of testimonies also focus on the themes of conflict and violence, Victor Montejo for instance arguing that the voices of the victims and survivors have to be given more importance than “sterile rhetorical debates” in order to understand conflict in Guatemala.²⁵ Regarding the structural relationships between terror, memory and history in Guatemala, Victoria Sanford raises the question “what new ways might we find to theorize agency and memory if we bring the subaltern and *testimonio* literatures into dialogue with cultures of violence and structures

¹⁹ Bataillon, *Genèse des Guerres Internes*, 313.

²⁰ E. Martínez Salazar, *Global Coloniality of Power in Guatemala : Racism, Genocide, Citizenship*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2002, 101.

²¹ C. Figueroa Ibarra, “Genocide and State Terrorism in Guatemala, 1954–1996: An Interpretation”, *Bulletin of Latin America Research*, 32(1), 2013, 171.

²² R. Falla, *Masacres de la selva Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975-1982*, Guatemala, Editorial Universitaria, 1993, 186.

²³ Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), *Guatemala: Memory of Silence: Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification Conclusions and Recommendations*, CEH, 1999, 12.

²⁴ R. Menchú & E. Burgos, *Moi, Rigoberta Menchú*, Collection Témoins, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

²⁵ V. Montejo & Q. Akab’, *Brevisima Relacion Testimonial de la Continua Destrucción del Mayab (Guatemala)*, Providence, RI, Guatemala Scholars Network, 1992, 3. See also V. Montejo, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*, Willimantic, CT, Curbstone Press, 1987.

of history?”²⁶ According to her discussion of survivor testimonies, the latter’s inclusion in academic analysis should not serve as a descriptive contextualization but as lived experiences that provide interpretation of the very structures of violence.²⁷

John Beverley further problematizes the use of testimonies, arguing that one has to distinguish between what he frames as *testimonio*, novella-length like Menchú’s autobiography, and testimony from simply recorded participant narrative or oral history, following Montejo’s example. According to his interpretation, whereas in oral history the intentionality of the recorder is dominant, in *testimonio* it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount.²⁸ Yet, the emphasis placed upon the intentionality seems to obscure the fact that the definition of testimony, a first-person narrative of an event or a life experience, remains the same. In line with Foucault’s idea that truth-telling is risky, presupposing a duty to speak as well as courage to face criticism, testimony of violence can be interpreted as a dissent to public discourses and narratives in times of repression.²⁹ In this regard, *Memory of Silence*, rather than reflecting the alleged authenticity of history, arguably constitutes an attempt to collect testimony of dissent with the regime of *la violencia*, hereby seeking to retrospectively break the silence of these voices during conflict.

2.2. Guatemalans in Mexico: A refugee’s history?

A historiographical debate, launched by British scholars in refugee studies, has significantly enriched our understanding of the problematic relations between forced displacement and history during the past decade. In *Remembering Refugees*, Tony Kushner questions the role of refugees as the ‘forgotten of history’ by critically assessing how and why refugees are being remembered. Given the dehumanizing narratives, he claims that historians have failed to challenge the prevalent discourses generated by law depicting refugees as passive victims without individuality.³⁰ In a similar way, Peter Gatrell’s *The Making of the Modern Refugee* raises the question “what does history have to say about refugees, and to refugees?”³¹ By analyzing how the history of contemporary forced displacement is written, Gatrell argues that refugees have only been allowed a walk-on part in scholarship on the 20th century, delegated to the margins instead of the mainstream of history writing.³² The marginality of refugees in the historic discipline, notably in comparison to juridical and anthropological studies, is also reflected in quantitative terms. For instance, during the first 13 years of existence of the

²⁶ V. Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 25.

²⁷ Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, 181.

²⁸ J. Beverley, “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative)”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35(1), 1989, 14.

²⁹ M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Los Angeles, Semiotext, 2011, 13–19; Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, 181.

³⁰ Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, 44.

³¹ Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 283.

Journal of Refugee Studies, only 11 articles or four percent of the published essays were historic analyses.³³ The apparent disinterest among historians in refugee matters however only reflects one side of a dual problem. As noted by Philip Marfleet, there also exists an “aversion among specialist in forced migration vis-à-vis history”, manifesting in an ahistorical and policy-dominated approach to refugee matters.³⁴

Mexican scholarship on refugees of the early to mid-1980s reflects a recurring pattern of asking *why* Guatemalans decided to seek asylum rather than *how* they experienced the Mexican exile. Both Sergio Aguayo’s *El Exodo Centroamericano* and Michael Messmacher’s *La Dinámica Maya* for instance respectively aim at understanding “why do they come?” or the “problem that constitute the presence in our territory of about 50’000 Guatemalan refugees.”³⁵ While applauding the Mexican tradition of granting political asylum, both publications underline that the significant influx of Central Americans is manifestly distinct to the other 20th century exiles in Mexico. Put differently, the arrival of mostly illiterate indigenous Guatemalans is considered highly problematic in comparison to the exile of Spanish and Latin American intelligentsia fleeing from regime change.³⁶ Despite the fact that other publications have increasingly focused on transnational contact along the Mexico-Guatemala frontier, critical discussions about the 1984 relocation remain scarce in early Mexican scholarship.³⁷ The reticence of domestic academia to address the public debate and the refugees’ mobilization surrounding the 1984 relocation thus stands in sharp contrast to the claim to portray the “indigenous voice” or the actual “refugee experience” in Chiapas.³⁸ At the same time, it is revelatory to what extent the discussions in national academia were, like refugee studies in general, both policy-oriented and perpetuating the refugees’ status as passive victims.

Acknowledging the marginality of refugees in contemporary scholarship, the question persists how history can approach refugees as subjects, rather than objects, of analysis. As previously stated, the simple humanization of refugees through the study of the experiences of flight and exile still reproduces the refugees’ apparent victimhood. Opposing the so-far dominating narrative, both Gatrell and Kushner promote the idea that refugees need to be ‘put back into history’ through the analysis of their own agency. According to Gatrell, “there

³³ R. Zetter, “Refugees and Refugee Studies – a Valedictory Editorial”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 13(4), 2000, 352; Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, 222–223.

³⁴ P. Marfleet, “Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 26(3), 2007, 136–137.

³⁵ M. Messmacher, “Introduction”, in M. Messmacher (ed.), *La Dinámica Maya – Los Refugiados Guatemaltecos*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986, 9 ; S. Aguayo, *El Exodo Centroamericano*, Mexico, Secretaria de Educación Pública, 1985, 118–119.

³⁶ Messmacher, *La Dinámica Maya*, 8; Aguayo, *El Exodo Centroamericano*, 84–85.

³⁷ Only Hernández Castillo briefly examines the 1984 relocation in a critical light, underlining the massive pressure exerted on refugees. See R.A. Hernández Castillo, *La Experiencia de Refugio en Chiapas*, Mexico, Academia de Derechos Humanos, CIESAS, 1993, 62–3.

³⁸ F. Martínez Rivas, “Introduction”, in G. Freyermuth Enciso & R.A. Hernández Castillo (eds.), *Una década de Refugio – Los Refugiados guatemaltecos y los derechos humanos*, Mexico, CIESAS, 1992, 12–13; R.A. Hernández Castillo, *La experiencia de refugio en Chiapas*, 7.

needs to be a history of refugee activism, whether it be petitioning, hustling, self-defense or other forms of expression”.³⁹ In other words, focusing on refugees’ agency can help to fully understand their own resourcefulness and overcome far-reaching *lacunae* in the history of forced displacement.

In fact, there are two notable examples in terms of their portrayal of the refugees’ agency that inspired this thesis. Edith Kauffer’s *Les réfugiés guatemaltèques au Chiapas* is probably the most comprehensive study so far published on the topic. Focusing in particular on the political mobilization among refugees, Kauffer examines the creation and evolution of the Permanent Representative Commissions as well as their influence on the eventual repatriation to Guatemala.⁴⁰ In one of the few historical studies on the topic, Cristina Maria García traces back the history of Central American asylum seekers in North America. In her chapter dedicated to Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, the author discusses the relocation as the key challenge for the exile in Chiapas, highlighting the refugees’ resistance towards the removal and transfer of their camps.⁴¹ Both authors furthermore acknowledge the role of the Diocese of San Cristobal and its humanitarian organization, the *Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad*. Kauffer describes the Committee as “*un des principaux et premiers acteurs humanitaires presents*”, whose work went well beyond spiritual and refugee aid and whose “*influence idéologique [...] est prépondérante en comparaison avec les autres acteurs*”.⁴² García on the other hand particularly highlights the personal leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, calling him “the most visible defender of refugee rights” who managed to challenge the official state discourse about refugees.⁴³

Similar to the aftermath of civil strife in Guatemala, testimony also played a major role in the reconstruction of the experience of the Guatemalan exile in Mexico. For instance, Jan de Vos retraces the biography of Roselia Garcia, one of the leaders of the women’s refugee movement⁴⁴, through the combination of testimony and secondary sources on Guatemalan refugees.⁴⁵ Himself a former Guatemalan refugee, Victor Montejo’s work *Voices from the Exile* is also based on a combination of history, political analysis and testimonial narratives. Yet, the methodology used by two authors is different. While Montejo used anthropological fieldwork, the analysis of De Vos is based on already published collections of testimonies.

³⁹ Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 296.

⁴⁰ E. Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatemaltèques au Chiapas: Le Retour du Peuple du Maïs*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2000, 9.

⁴¹ C.M. Garcia, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States and Canada*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, 60–64. The title of this thesis partly draws on her subchapter “Solidarity and Sanctuary: Defending the Rights of Refugees”, 69.

⁴² Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatemaltèques*, 201–202.

⁴³ Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 70, 72.

⁴⁴ See also E.K. Baines, “Refuge and Return: The Challenges of Transition for Guatemalan Women’s Organizations”, *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19(2), 2007; S. Masson, “La lutte des femmes indiennes en exil et de retour au Guatemala en ‘post-guerre’”, *Nouvelle Questions Féministes*, 21(2), 2002.

⁴⁵ J. De Vos, *Una Tierra para sembrar sueños; Historia reciente de la Selva Lacandona*, Mexico, CIESAS, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002, 289.

The author himself acknowledges that the experience of exile was partly reproduced through the collection of testimonies, notably the two volumes *Nosotros conocemos nuestra historia* and *Nuestra historia del Refugio* respectively published in 1986 and 1995. Whereas the first aims at reproducing the “historic memory” and the “collective conscience” of the concerned refugee population, the latter is more humble by acknowledging that the testimonies are personal and limited in both space and time.⁴⁶ The common emphasis placed on *our history*, however, clearly distinguishes these publications from academic or policy studies, underlining the idea that testimony reproduces *their* history in the refugees’ own words.

2.3. San Cristobal Church: Defender of the poor and oppressed?

The recent history of the Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas is marked by the presence and leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, who was responsible for the largest Chiapanec diocese for over four decades (1959–1999). Put differently, personal agency is a key element in the literature on the Diocese history, composed of either biographies of its famous bishop or, more recently, historical works on the evolution of the Diocese during the second half of the 20th century.

Throughout the past five decades, the San Cristobal Diocese has been intrinsically linked to the emergence and spread of liberation theologies. In order to comprehend the radical changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin Conference in Chiapas, most scholars critically assess the influence of Gustavo Gutierrez, who is considered the ideological godfather of liberation in the Latin American Church. In Gutierrez’ view, “only a total break with the unjust order to which it [the Church] is bound in a thousand conscious or unconscious ways, and a forthright commitment to a new society, will make men in Latin America believe the message of love it bears.”⁴⁷ In other words, liberation consists of the emancipation of men and women from social, political and economic dependence, with the Church being a key social actor having a role to play in contributing to the liberation of the oppressed and dominated.⁴⁸ As acknowledged by Julio Rios Figueroa, the preferential option for the poor in Chiapas largely concerned the indigenous population, majoritarian yet highly marginalized and impoverished in the San Cristobal Diocese. In his analysis of the period framed as the “resurrection” of the Catholic Church in Chiapas, the author focuses in particular on how Bishop Ruiz Garcia’s approach towards the indigenous population developed over time and led to the growth of the Diocese after several decades of decline in pastoral activity and membership. In fact, Rios Figueroa claims that the image of

⁴⁶ Iglesia de Guatemala en Exilio, *Nosotros Conocemos Nuestra Historia*, México, 1986, 6–7; Equipo SEFCA Costa Rica, *Nuestra Historia del Refugio: Por niños guatemaltecos refugiados en México*, San José de Costa Rica: Editorial Saqil Tzi, 1995, 11.

⁴⁷ G. Gutierrez, “Notes for a Theology of Liberation”, *Theological Studies*, 31(2), 1970, 260.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

the indigenous population changed from being a *problem*, in the initial years, to one of *hope*, under the influence of the Second Vatican Council, to one of *victim*, in the years of before and during the refugee influx.⁴⁹ The author hereby underlines that the Diocese's militancy for indigenous rights was largely based on the idea that "since the Indigenous is a *victim*, he has to be *saved*."⁵⁰

The 1994 biography published by Carlos Fazio, titled after Ruiz Garcia's nickname *El Caminante*, also retraces the evolution of his doctrine, yet notably in terms of his relation with the Catholic Church in Mexico. The author particularly emphasizes how the emergence of liberation theologies impacted Ruiz Garcia who, by his upbringing in Northern Mexico, was initially part of the highly conservative Catholic elite. With regards to the Guatemalan exodus in Chiapas, Fazio defends the same claim as Rios Figueroa, stating that the refugees not only taught the bishop solidarity with those suffering from oppression and marginalization but also fostered his role as defender of those he considered victims of injustice.⁵¹ Even though of critical nature, the common portrayal of Ruiz as a defender for the indigenous population in general and the refugees in particular puts to the forefront a vertical relation existing between, to simplify, the savior and those he pretends to save. In other words, the overemphasis on the personal agency of Samuel Ruiz is to the detriment of the agency of those at the bottom of that hierarchy, repeating the victimization pattern also present in refugee studies.

Other scholars have more openly criticized the focus on the agency of *Don Samuel*. Jean Meyer, for instance, argues that Ruiz' work was partly driven by the increasing success of Evangelical Churches in Chiapas and lacked originality in its theological reflections, mostly based on the doctrine derived from the Second Vatican Council as well as the Medellin Conference.⁵² The underlying criticism refers back to the author's initial question, "How much is attributable to the person [Bishop Ruiz] and how much to historical circumstances or accidents?", emphasizing that one needs to be cautious not to excessively stress the bishop's personal agency.⁵³ In the same vein, Marco Estrada Saavedra claims that even if the San Cristobal Diocese is known for its progressive and left-leaning tendencies, there still existed theological and ideological diversity within the San Cristobal Church that did not support Ruiz Garcia's liberationist doctrine.⁵⁴ In his 2005 monograph *Entre Asperos Caminos Llanos*, Jesús Bermudez Morales also warns about the potential anachronistic distortion stemming from the admiration of both Bishop Ruiz Garcia and the 1994 uprising of the

⁴⁹ J. Rios Figueroa, *Siglo XX: Muerte y Resurrección de la Iglesia Católica en Chiapas: dos estudios históricos*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2002, 132–133.

⁵⁰ Rios Figueroa, *Siglo XX: Muerte y Resurrección*, 185. [Author's translation].

⁵¹ C. Fazio, *Samuel Ruiz: El Caminante*, Mexico, Espasa Calpe, 1994, 164.

⁵² J. Meyer Barth, *Samuel Ruiz en San Cristobal, 1960–2000*, Mexico, Tusquets, 2000, 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11 [Author's translation].

⁵⁴ M. Estrada Saavedra, "Construyendo el Reino de Dios en la tierra: pastoral y catequesis en las Cañadas Tojolabales de la Selva Lacandona (1960–1980)", *Sociológica*, 19(55), 2004, 214.

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN).⁵⁵ Given his former employment at the Diocese, it is no surprise that Bermudez Morales' work is the most insightful and comprehensive publication regarding the recent history of the Catholic Church in San Cristobal. Notwithstanding its merits, the author, like his peers dealing with the history of the Diocese, largely remains quiet on the issue of Guatemalan refugees. This silence is surprising not only in light of the magnitude of the aid provided, acknowledged by most scholars, but most of all because of the Diocese's state-like hegemony in the social and political sphere within its territory. Estrada Seevadra, for instance, frames the Diocese's influence in the *Selva Lacandona*, the tropical region in South-Eastern Chiapas hosting a large percentage of the Guatemalan refugee camps, as theopolitics. In light of the "precarious, irregular, inefficient and uncoordinated presence of the state", he argues that the San Cristobal Church managed to contest the hegemony of the Mexican government by impacting the social, political and spiritual life in the region, both before and during the Guatemalan exodus.⁵⁶

The lacuna in scholarship regarding the activism of the *Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad* stands in sharp contrast to the recent academic interest in the interrelation between faith, migration and humanitarianism – a nexus this thesis seeks to further explore.⁵⁷ In one of the few historical studies on the Church and forced migration, Philip Marfleet argues that the ancient tradition of *sanctuary* has been revitalized in the late 20th century as religious activists emphasized values of empathy and solidarity in the face of forced migration movements. Even though the author focuses on the US-based Sanctuary Movement, it is striking to see that that faith-based activism emerged simultaneously at Mexico's and the United States' southern borders in light of the influx of Central American refugees.⁵⁸ With regards to the overemphasis on Bishop Ruiz, it is thus important to keep in mind that what this thesis will frame as *sanctuary activism*, faith-based social movements in support and defense of forced migrants, was not unique to the Diocese of San Cristobal but also present in various religious congregations throughout North America.

2.4. Plan and methodology: The refugee as a subject of history

In response to the prevalent gaps in literature, this thesis analyzes the relations between two principal actors, the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas and the Guatemalan refugees,

⁵⁵ J. Bermudez Morales, *Entre ásperos caminos llanos: la diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas, 1950–1995*, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Consejo de Ciencia y Tecnología del Estado de Chiapas, 2005, 9–10.

⁵⁶ M. Estrada Saveedra, "Teocracia para la liberación: la disputa por la hegemonía estatal desde la experiencia de la diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas y el pueblo creyente en la selva lacandona", in M. Estrada Saveedra & A. Agudo Sanchiz (eds.), *(Trans)formaciones del Estado en los Márgenes de Latinoamérica*, Mexico, Colegio de México, 2011, 103.

⁵⁷ See among others the trilogy by E. Padilla and P.C. Pahn, including the collections *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology* (2003), *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions* (2014) and *Christianities in Migration: The Global Perspective* (2015), London, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵⁸ Marfleet, "Understanding 'Sanctuary'", 452.

focusing in particular on the agency of the latter. Instead of examining the entire relocation process, that took place between May 1984 and December 1985, this thesis mainly consists of an analysis of the discourses and debates surrounding the resettlement. The first chapter introduces the context of the Guatemalan exile as well as the network of humanitarian actors operating in southern Chiapas, notably putting forward the position of the *Comité Cristiano*, COMAR and the UNHCR. After a brief analysis of the local integration of Guatemalan refugees, the second chapter discusses the 1984 relocation and the debate surrounding it in more detail. The subsequent two chapters place the refugees at the center of analysis. The third chapter concentrates on the refugees' discourse against forced resettlement, underlining their understanding of and agency in the relocation process. In the fourth and final chapter, this thesis focuses on the confrontation between the San Cristobal Diocese and the Mexican government as well as their respective claims to act on behalf and in the best interest of the refugees. In particular, the chapter analyzes to what extent the refugee voices were being used and abused for political or ideological purposes.

Besides the analysis of the principal institutional actors, this thesis seeks to highlight the agency of the refugees, putting forward their voices through the usage of reports, letters and testimonies. These narratives will promote a greater appreciation of the diversity of experience involved in forced migration and permit an in-depth understanding beyond the universalizing refugee identity or the savior-victim dichotomy.⁵⁹ In doing so, however, the upcoming analysis does not aim at drawing generalizing conclusions out of individual experiences. On the contrary, the collection of refugee voices, used in combination with a variety of primary and secondary sources, serves as a basis for the analysis of the refugees' individual and collective resourcefulness in their interactions with public authorities and the San Cristobal Church. Regarding the usage of these voices, Kushner claims that "it is in refugee self-expression that the contrast between outer perception and inner experiences is made blatantly clear."⁶⁰ Even more explicitly, William Westman argues that "testimony is about people rising from a condition of being victims, objects of history, and taking charge of their history, becoming subjects, actors in it."⁶¹

While testimony is essential to introduce refugee experiences to current research, there is no doubt that the usage of these voices also poses methodological problems. Given the unavoidable tensions between experience and expression, the usage of testimony has been criticized both in terms of its veracity and the difficulty to reach generalizable conclusions stemming from individual testimony. Helen Taylor, in her study on testimonies

⁵⁹ M. Eastmond, "Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 2007, 253.

⁶⁰ Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, 44.

⁶¹ W. Westerman, "Central American Refugee Testimony and Performed Life Histories in the Sanctuary Movement" in R. Perks & A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998, 230.

from Greek-Cypriot refugees, rebuts both methodological critiques. In her view, individual refugee narratives are far more insightful than quantitative data as they provide “greater insight into the larger social context of exile, telling us about events that happened in the past and how those events are now viewed by individuals and the community.”⁶²

Since this thesis works with previously collected testimony rather than with oral history, the critical analysis of these refugee voices should further advance our comprehension of the context in which they were collected, raising the question by whom, why and in what way they were published. Not surprisingly, this thesis will mostly draw on testimony collected by the Diocese of San Cristobal, but also other religious and political organizations such as the Guatemalan Church in Exile. Whereas scholars have argued that the publication of refugee testimony by the Sanctuary Movement in the United States was used to alter public opinion in favor of a more welcoming asylum policy⁶³, the upcoming analysis seeks to address to what extent these voices were also being used and abused in the Chiapanec context for the political and ideological agenda of the respective actors. At this stage is important to highlight that the testimony used for this research did not serve any official purpose – for instance the determination of asylum status – which could have significantly altered these narratives and thus biased the interpretation thereof.

Apart from recorded statements, this thesis will most of all make use of other written records containing testimonial narrative, notably an important number of letters sent to a variety of local and national authorities regarding the 1984 relocation. These letters will be of paramount importance for the analysis of the confrontation between the refugees and the Mexican government in the third chapter of this thesis. Similar to the first-person testimonies, the letters include a life experience narrative that needs to be analyzed in its own context. According to Mikhail Bakhtin’s principle of *dialogism*, every word is directly oriented towards a future answer-word. Put differently, all rhetorical forms, both oral and written, are directed towards the listener and his answer, the word thus entering in a dialogical relationship between speaker and receiver, ego and alter.⁶⁴ Framing the relations between past, present and future discourses as *intertextualité*, Tzvetan Todorov affirms that even in cases of absence of direct exchange or a monolog there persists an intertextual dimension.⁶⁵ In other words, the dialogical nature of expression is not limited to an actual exchange of words, but refers to the contextual influence on the interlocutor. For this case study, the analysis of testimony as well as both letters and public discourses is thus based on the dialogical nature and social context they are situated in: To whom are they directed? And how does the social

⁶² H. Taylor, “‘You don’t believe me?’ Truth and Testimony in Cypriot Refugee Narratives”, in N. Adler (ed.), *Tapestry of Memory – Evidence and Testimony in Life-Story Narratives*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2013, 40.

⁶³ Westerman, “Central American Refugee Testimony”, 225–227; Taylor, “‘You don’t believe me?’”, 46.

⁶⁴ M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination – 4 Essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2011, 280–281.

⁶⁵ T. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine – Le Principe Dialogique*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1981, 95, 99.

context as well as the relationship with the receiver shape the speaker's expression? In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the dialogical exchange can take place in a variety of rhetoric channels, the letters for instance responding to or being shaped by public discourses and vice-versa.

2.5. A personal note on archival research and sources

The main research for this thesis was conducted in the *Archivo Histórico de la Diócesis de San Cristobal de las Casas* (AHDSC), which includes fonds on Guatemalan Refugees (*Fondo Refugiados Guatemaltecos*) that have been disclosed for academic research in 2012. The archive is currently being renovated and digitalized under the lead of Professor Viqueira Alban, the mentor for my research during my exchange semester at *El Colegio de México*. Already when entering the archives, located behind a small wooden door in the backyard of the San Cristobal Cathedral, I realized that the research experience in Chiapas would be completely different from what I am familiar with in Switzerland. Indeed, the *Fondo Refugiados Guatemaltecos*, researched for the first time in its entirety for the purpose of this study, was highly disorganized despite previous attempts for cataloging. Since there was neither a chronological nor a thematic order, my task was to proceed box by box, looking at over 16 meters of archival files divided in 1350 folders. The content of these files is highly diverse, ranging from birth certificates, schoolbooks and migration visas to camp photography and bills for food provision – not to mention all the material that had no obvious link to the refugee theme. Unfortunately, a lot of documents lack an indication of date or author, for which reason this information had, if possible, to be read out of context. In contrast to Geneva-based archives like the UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross, I was surprised to see that personal information and data was fully accessible and no visible censorship had taken place. In line with the discussion on methodology, this thesis will therefore draw on more than 120 letters written by refugees as well as numerous testimonies collected by the Diocese.

Whereas the abundance of primary source material is one of the merits of this research, there are some shortcomings with regards to the archival material. Due to the large size of the archives and the limited time to conduct research, my research was from the very beginning highly focused on the 1984-85 relocation and the time frame surrounding it, thus not taking into account the larger context such as the Guatemalan conflict or the repatriation of the refugees in the early 1990s. For the same reason, it is also inevitable that some relevant documents could not have been collected, notably because they were stored in a different fond or undiscoverable among the miscellaneous files. The dependency of this thesis on one single archive also underlines the limits of the source base. Since the Diocese is responsible for both the collection and conservation of archival material, there is no doubt

that there can exist archival bias in its favor. In order to limit the potential distortion and diversify the source base, the thesis also makes use of three other archives containing important funds on the Guatemalan exodus to Mexico. First, the *Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB)*⁶⁶, a US-based activist network who collected a high number of written material on the Guatemalan civil war and its consequences, including but not limited to forced migration movements towards Mexico. Furthermore, the archives of the UNHCR also host an important collection of relevant archival files, mainly dealing with the work of UN agencies, COMAR, and the Mexican government. Thirdly, this thesis also draws on archival files stemming from the *Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)*, especially regarding the Secretary of Defense's reflections underlying the relocation policy. In addition, an important number of newspaper articles and media reports have been collected in these archives, which will be used to illustrate the public debate before and during the resettlement process.

Regarding the usage of sources in multiple languages, this thesis will use quotes in English and French, translating Spanish quotes unless they form part of a refugee testimony or letters. The decision not to translate block quotations is based on the idea that reproducing the refugees' self-expression in another language would significantly distort both its style and content. A translation of these quotes will however be provided in the footnotes.

⁶⁶ The archives of the GNIB have been digitalized by Princeton University in 2010 and are freely available online.

3. SOLIDARITY IN THE FACE OF THE GUATEMALAN EXODUS

The time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And at the at the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.
-Exodus, 12: 40–41.

In August 1982, the *Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad* sent out a circular letter criticizing the lack of aid towards the Guatemalan refugees and calling for more financial support. According to the *Comité*, the Diocese had so far been the principal source of aid, be it for the provision of food, clothing, shelter, jobs or the organization of the refugee communities.⁶⁷ In reaction to this statement, the office of the High Commissioner contacted the bishop in order to “remind him that a cardinal Christian virtue is sincerity and by not mentioning either COMAR or UNHCR such virtue is lacking in the report.”⁶⁸ Without commenting on the content of the accusations, the circular letter and the response by the UNHCR clearly reflect that both actors claim their role as protagonists in refugee support, for which reason they have been singled out for a more detailed analysis of the network of humanitarian actors. Setting the stage for the upcoming analysis, this chapter particularly discusses the common grounds and differences in terms of ideological background and interests defended by both the sanctuary activists and the international and domestic refugee agencies. At the same time, a contextual introduction to the arrival and spatial organization of Guatemalan refugees provides a more comprehensive understanding of the Mexican exile.

3.1. Refuge in Southern Chiapas

The escalating scale of destruction in Northern Guatemala in the early 1980s gave rise to increasing population movements, both domestically and internationally. According to Beatrice Manz, “a typical rural pattern was first escaping to nearby mountains or forests, expecting to return home after the army had passed.”⁶⁹ Yet, once it became obvious that an early return was not possible, the concerned population faced the options to either leave the country for safety, turn themselves over to the military and live in closed garrison towns, so-called ‘model villages’, or hide in urban areas.⁷⁰ Even though seeking refuge in Mexico mostly concerned those communities living in the close-by border regions, especially in the departments of Quiché and Huehuetenango, the experience of flight was a straining and difficult one. The testimonies collected by the Ecumenical Services in Central America of the

⁶⁷ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GUA Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 1, Folio 32: Pierre Jambor, “Situation of Guatemalan refugees according to church groups”, 07.09.1982.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ B. Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War – The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988, 145.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

by-then Guatemalan refugee children illustrate the difficulties those who had escaped were struggling with, often staying for weeks hidden in the mountains without adequate sources of food and drinking water, let alone any medicine.⁷¹ The same experience was also shared by those testifying to the Diocese about the ordeal they went through when deciding to escape, for instance the inhabitants of the Santa Marta de Rio Seco camp:

Al ver todo esto, no tuvimos más que salir huyendo, mejor preferimos abandonar nuestra tierra, nuestras casitas y nuestra casa. Y salir sin nada. Salir sólo con lo que teníamos puesto, con nuestra familia y nuestros niños. Salimos y sufrimos, frío, sed, hambre en el monte. Cuando vimos que no aguantábamos más, allí en el monte, mejor venimos a buscarlos a pedir auxilio a ustedes hermanos.⁷²

In the final report of the CEH, the flight experience is also touched upon as one of the consequences of the violence inflicted on the local population. Reproducing an interview with a Mexican doctor present during the arrival of the initial refugee waves, *Memoria del Silencio* corroborates these testimonies by stating that most Guatemalans were in a terrible health condition after the march to the Northern frontier, which took between four days to several months.⁷³

Most of the refugees arriving in Mexico between 1981 and 1983 settled in proximity of the border, hoping to return to their respective home communities as soon as the political conditions in Guatemala would permit. The four regions (Map 1) within the San Cristobal Diocese most affected by the refugee influx were Marqués de Comillas, las Margaritas, la Trinitaria (Tziscaco) and Comalpa (Paso Hondo).⁷⁴ Despite the close vicinity of the refugee camps, the actual process of building the camps varied significantly. Whereas some refugees settled on Mexican *ejidos*, a communally managed territory issue of the land reform, alongside the Lacantún river, others settled in more isolated areas, difficult to access due to the almost complete lack of transport infrastructure.⁷⁵ A writing exercise under the guidance of the Diocese, asking refugee communities how their respective camp was formed, reveals how the contact with Migration services was determining for the establishment of the camps. In fact, the mostly informal settlements initially set up were converted into camps, either within or outside of the Mexican *colonias*, once Guatemalans

⁷¹ Equipo SEFCA Costa Rica, *Nuestra Historia del Refugio*, Capítulo 3 „El Penoso Camino del Refugio“, 34–45.

⁷² AHDSC, Carpeta 62, Exp. 1, Testimonio de Refugiados, Refugiados en Santa Maria de Rio Seco. [Trans: “Seeing all of the violence, we had to leave fleeing, we preferred to leave our lands, our houses, our home. We left without anything, only what we had on, our family and our children. We suffered cold, thirst and hunger in the mountains. When we realized we could not support it any longer up there, we came to ask you for help, brothers”]

⁷³ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, Guatemala, Oficina para Proyectos de las Naciones Unidas, 1999, Tomo VI, 371.

⁷⁴ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatémaltèques*, 55.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

obtained refugee status and were no longer afraid of expulsions. Furthermore, the refugee status accorded by Migration services also led to the provision of aid in the camps, be it by COMAR, the parish or the hospital in the closest town, Comitán.⁷⁶

Map 1: Refugee Settlement in the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas



Source: Iglesia Guatemalteca en Exilio, *Nosotros Conocemos Nuestra Historia*, 74.

A report on the UNHCR's first mission to Chiapas in July 1982, aimed at surveying the presence of Guatemalan refugees and the work performed by COMAR, provides further detail about the situation in the refugee camps. The High Commissioner noted that almost everywhere in Trinitaria refugees had been documented and found "hospitality, solidarity and good will from the Mexican peasants who are often as poor as they are."⁷⁷ While acknowledging the fact that refugees still depended on deliveries of elementary assistance and construction material, the report particularly emphasized the difficult accessibility of some of the camps, comparing the hostile environmental conditions to "the Amazon before the rubber boom."⁷⁸ Moreover, the 1982 report already criticized the proximity of the camps to the border, sometimes of a distance of just one kilometre, mentioning the necessity to displace the camps further inland in order to guarantee the safety of the refugees.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 176, Exp. 1, Testimonio de Refugiados; Carpeta 180, Exp. 1, Testimonio de Refugiados; Carpeta 187, Exp. 1, Testimonio de Refugiados; Carpeta 191, Exp. 1, Testimonio de Refugiados.

⁷⁷ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GUA Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 1, Folio 27: Alfredo Witschi-Cestari, "Report on Mission 15-23 July 1982".

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

3.2. The politico-religious nexus

The *Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de la Diócesis de San Cristobal*, founded in early 1980 under the impulse of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, was an organization of Christian inspiration aiming at channelling relief to those suffering from conflict in Central America. A list of the principal international agencies contributing to the funding of the *Comité*⁸⁰ leaves no doubt about the Christian inspiration of the latter. In fact, all principal donors except for one, the Swedish Save the Children, were religious charity organizations, both Catholic and Protestant, based in Western Europe and New York.⁸¹ Yet, given the paramount impact of liberation theology, it is important to underline that the *Comité*, as an integral part of the Diocese of San Cristobal, situated itself at a politico-religious nexus as a social actor committed to the liberation of the refugees. The initial motivation of the *Comité* already reflected this commitment:

The personal and institutional disinterest, the growing conscience about the historic processes we are living through as well as the daily experience of suffering from our brothers, dispossessed even of their homeland, are important factors that pushed the work of the *Comité*.⁸²

The emphasis placed on the historic processes and the experiences of suffering mirrors Gutiérrez' idea of a Church fighting for the liberation of men and women from oppression, considered the root cause of forced migration towards Mexico. According to Gutiérrez, the principle of solidarity reflects the Church's assumption of its responsibility vis-à-vis the situation of injustice to which it contributed through its alignment with the ruling elites.⁸³ In the same vein, Pablo Iribarren, by that time a local priest in Chiapas, argues in his diaries that solidarity "is a radical process and a continuous Christian conversion that [...] urges to repent the sin of omission, individualism, fear and the coward silence towards the suffering of the poor."⁸⁴ With regards to the sudden arrival of Guatemalan refugees, Iribarren stated that the Diocese had no problems in offering its unconditional aid to the latter because, in light of its preferential option for the poor, the San Cristobal Church saw the persecuted as "objects of its preference."⁸⁵ Therefore, approaching the aid to refugees from the viewpoint of solidarity did imply a political process entrenched in liberationist theology, in particular the Diocese's

⁸⁰ According to 1984 estimates by Americas Watch, the *Comité Cristiano*, together with its sister organization of the Diocese of Tapachula, *Comité De Ayuda a Inmigrantes Fronterizos*, provided over 1 million US Dollar of assistance in that year. See Americas Watch, *Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico 1980–1984*, New York, 1984, 25.

⁸¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 177, Exp. 1, Diócesis de San Cristobal, "Direcciones de las principales agencias que apoyan económicamente al Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad".

⁸² AHDSC, Carpeta 762, Exp. 1, Diócesis de San Cristobal, "Modo de Trabajo del Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad". [Author's translation]

⁸³ G. Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación – Perspectivas*, Salamanca, Ediciones Sigueme, 1975, 148–149.

⁸⁴ Fray P. Iribarren Pascal, „Experiencia: Proceso de la Diócesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. Mexico“, 29.04.1985, 81. [Author's translation].

⁸⁵ Iribarren Pascal, „Experiencia: Proceso de la Diócesis de San Cristobal“, 80. [Author's translation].

preferential option for the poor. The January 1985 edition of the monthly newsletter *Caminante* summarized the position of the San Cristobal Church. “Our Church, moved by humanitarian interest (Charity), has managed to maintain a stable and coherent position facing the refugee issue since the Church is not following changing political interests, but its preferential option for the poor”.⁸⁶ The process of liberation, as manifested by Gutiérrez, cannot be imposed from the top of the hierarchy, but requires the active participation of those who suffer oppression.⁸⁷ Bishop Samuel Ruiz for instance claimed in a 1984 interview that the Diocese placed particular importance on the idea that the refugees themselves take responsibility for their education and communal organization, making use of their own capabilities and resources.⁸⁸ Beyond the first stage of aid, a relief program responding to emergency situations, the Diocese therefore focused on supporting programs for auto-administration and auto-sufficiency at a second stage.⁸⁹ According to Kauffer, in this way the Diocese’s solidarity went well beyond humanitarian aid, notably by placing the emphasis on the promotion of political and social organization of the refugee communities. Even if the “golden age of political mobilization” among refugees only took place in the late 1980s, the latter already possessed an internal organization in the first half of the decade, including for instance a representative in charge of the contact with government officials and aid organizations.⁹⁰ Describing the interaction between faith and politics, the Diocese stated that it “raise[d] its voice and primarily orients its action seeking, not the applause or a political position, but the defence of human rights and human dignity.” Rather than to engage in the strictly political realm, however, the Diocese proclaimed not to act on behalf of, but in support of those who seek to overcome oppression and injustice, considering them “the primary actors and promoters of social and economic development.”⁹¹

Both the liberation process in general and the political mobilization in particular however presume that there existed awareness among the refugees about the oppression and injustice they were victims of. Besides the teachings on liberation, another axis of theological themes developed by the *Comité* was the critical understanding of the biblical interpretation of exile.⁹² In one of the workshops held with the refugee communities, the Committee’s Educational Commission sought to reflect on a comparison between the experiences of the people of Guatemala with the writings in the Bible. The transcript of the workshop entitled “*Nuestra experiencia como pueblo de Guatemala, experiencia del pueblo*

⁸⁶ GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, “Caminante – Informaciones”, Enero 1985, 7. [Author’s translation]

⁸⁷ Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación*, 160.

⁸⁸ Castillo, “Respeto a su naturaleza cultural”, 14.

⁸⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 1192, Exp. 1, Comité de Solidaridad, “Comisión de Educación y Pastoral”, 04.04.1983.

⁹⁰ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatémaltèques*, 98, 202, 205.

⁹¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 782, Exp. 1, Diocesis de San Cristobal, “Comentario e Informes de la Diócesis de San Cristobal de las Casas”, November 1983, 13. [Author’s translation]

⁹² AHDSC, Carpeta 1192, Exp. 1, Comité de Solidaridad, “Acta de Reunión de la Comisión de Educación y Pastoral”, 04.04.1983.

de Dios” reveals how the exit of Guatemala has been described using a biblical quote from Exodus.⁹³ As highlighted by Grau, the Exodus narrative is often read as a “myth of liberation guided by a divine power” in contexts of contemporary migration. The same narrative had already been used by the Diocese, for instance, when Mexican settlers colonized the Lacandona rainforest in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹⁴ However, in contrast to a context where the rainforest was seen as land of liberation for landless peasants, the passage from Guatemala to Mexico can hardly be interpreted as a passage from oppression to the Promised Land. Rather, in a class entitled “A Mission for the Refugees” the above-mentioned Commission argues that the salvation of the Guatemalans also charges them with the mission to help to construct their own Promised Land, a new Guatemala. “[We] the participants will see our story through the lens of faith, based on a piece of history of the people of Israel, and we will try to see how God calls upon us to be his people and how we have to complete his mission”.⁹⁵ According to Raphaël Draï, the exit out of Egypt, framed as “*l’invention de la liberté*”, has both a negative connotation, the rejection of the Pharaoh’s oppression, and a positive one, the construction of a new, different civilization.⁹⁶ Similarly, the parallels drawn between the (Jewish) Exodus and the Guatemalan exodus are not only based on the experience of flight from oppression, but also on the mission the refugees are charged with regarding the construction of *la Nueva Guatemala*. The Exodus – framed as the invention of liberty – was thus seen as a process of reorganization and future transformation of Guatemalan society, evoking the need for refugees to mobilize themselves in defence of their rights and dignity as well as to prepare their return as liberated people to Guatemala.

While it is difficult to assess the impact of the so-called ‘theology of Exodus’, the ideological influence of the Diocese on the political organization of the refugee communities has been well documented. For example, in a 1982 report on a visit to the camps in Chiapas, the Mexican Quakers noted that the work of orientation and counselling of the *Comité* was a particularly relevant aspect of its work, aimed at supporting the refugees in their claim to have their rights and legal status protected.⁹⁷ In the same vein, the High Commissioner’s office acknowledged that the Diocese’s “moral presence” was “recognized by all official and non-official institutions” working with refugees.⁹⁸ Particularly focusing on the usage and promotion of a critical lecture of the Exodus narrative, Kauffer underlines that the biblical

⁹³ AHDSC, Carpeta 973, Exp. 1, Tercer Día – “Nuestra Experiencia como Pueblo de Guatemala, Experiencia del Pueblo de Dios”.

⁹⁴ M. Grau, “Circumambulating Exodus-Migration-Conquest: A Theological Hermeneutics of Migratory Narrativity”, in E. Padilla & P. Phan (eds.), *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 12; Bermudez Morales, *Entre ásperos caminos llanos*, 227.

⁹⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 626.1, Exp. 1, Comité de Solidaridad, “Comisión de Educación y Pastoral -La Misión del Pueblo de México.” [Author’s translation]

⁹⁶ R. Draï, *La Sortie de l’Égypte – L’Invention de la Liberté*, Paris, Arthème Fayard, 1986, 13.

⁹⁷ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GUA Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 1, Folio 27: Comité De Servicio de los Amigos, “Report de la Visita en Chiapas”, 14.06.1982.

⁹⁸ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 110.MEX Programming in Mexico Vol. 4, Folio 81: Report on UNHCR Activities in 1983–84 and Programming for 1984–85.

interpretation served as a means to raise hope for the transformation of Guatemalan society. According to the author, the consideration of “*le refuge comme un moment privilégié d’organisation contre l’opresseur*” hereby also attributed a positive meaning to the experience of exile.⁹⁹

The discourses of Exodus on the one hand and solidarity on the other hand are highly intriguing not only in terms of their liberationist ideology but also in terms of how these discourses shaped the Diocese’s sanctuary activism. In his analysis of the relation between the interpretation of Exodus and the Church as an actor of liberation, theologian José Severino Croatto raises the question “If freedom is one of the intrinsic human values, if the message of Exodus represents it as a people’s essential vocation, then why is there any hesitation to be open to freedom?” In other words, the history of Exodus is interpreted as one of the key lessons for the Church to act upon, especially since it clearly “points up to path to liberation.”¹⁰⁰ The same reasoning also applies to the discourse of solidarity, calling for the Church to support and empower those suffering from injustice and oppression. The use of both discourses thus not only preconditioned the Diocese’s activism in support of the refugees, but also determined its ideological and, to a lesser extent, political agenda in response to the refugee influx.

3.3. The tale of a difficult relationship

The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance was created by a Presidential decree from 22nd July 1980 in light of the increasing presence of Central American refugees on Mexican territory. As an inter-ministerial agency, COMAR was presided by the Ministry of Interior in cooperation with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs as well as Social Welfare.¹⁰¹ According to Garcia, each of these secretaries “had its own agenda and maintained contradictory policies that were impossible to coordinate.”¹⁰² The variety of interests by the different ministries was, for example, reflected in the mission of COMAR. Besides the study of the necessities of the refugees, the Refugee Commission was also charged with the institutional linkages to other aid agencies, the search for permanent solutions as well as the expansion of the legislation and asylum policy.¹⁰³ Since COMAR was the principal implementation partner of the UNHCR, reflecting the Mexican government’s decision to treat the refugee matter both as low-key and bilaterally¹⁰⁴, both actors were closely interlinked and thus analyzed together for

⁹⁹ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatémaltèques*, 203.

¹⁰⁰ J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus – A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, New York, Orbis Books, 1981, 29.

¹⁰¹ Diario Oficial de la Federación, “Acuerdo por el que se crea con carácter permanente una Comisión Intersecretarial para estudiar las necesidades de los refugiados extranjeros en el Territorio Nacional”, Primera Sección, Poder Ejecutivo, 22.07.1980, 4.

¹⁰² Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 49.

¹⁰³ Diario Oficial de la Federación, “Acuerdo por el que se crea con carácter permanente una Comisión”, 4.

¹⁰⁴ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600. MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 4, Folio 240: Pierre Jambor, “Situation at the Mexico-Guatemala border”, 09.09.1982.

this study. In the collective volume “*Una década de refugio en México*”, Jorge Santistevan, representing the UNHCR Headquarters, underlines that the establishment of a relationship of confidence and cooperation between the High Commissioner and its Mexican homologue was one of its key priorities. A decade after the establishment of the first UNHCR office in Mexico in October 1982, this task was considered achieved, even though Santistevan acknowledges that divergences between the two refugee agencies still occur. In case of discord, “the UNHCR, naturally, situates itself on the side of the refugees and their representative organizations.”¹⁰⁵

In sharp contrast to what the 10 year anniversary publication suggests, the UNHCR archives reveal that the relations with the Mexican government and COMAR were particularly difficult in the initial four years. Already in July 1981, after the first waves of expulsion of Guatemalan asylum-seekers by the Mexican Migration services, a report by the High Commissioner stated that “*la lune de miel entre le HCR et le Mexique avait pris fin.*”¹⁰⁶ The subsequent intervention by the Commissioner’s Representative in Spain, Guy Prim, led to the assurance that refugees’ asylum status would be recognized even though Mexico was not part of the 1951 UN Convention or its additional protocols. Despite the successful shift away from what Prim considered an “elitist tradition of asylum”, the internal problems of COMAR, notably its dependency on the three different ministries in charge, remained.¹⁰⁷ In the subsequent two years, reports elaborated by the High Commissioner came to contrasting results regarding both the efficiency of COMAR in providing aid as well as the relations entertained with the Geneva Headquarters or the Mexico City branch office. In July 1982 for instance, the UNHCR representative Witschi acknowledged the increasing credibility of COMAR as a well-established government agency while he also criticized that “its team is too small and still lacks any sort of planning”, reason for which “it merely reacts to situations and fills the gaps one by one but without any sort of system.”¹⁰⁸ Given their significantly varying judgements, interpreting the assessments of COMAR’s activity in Chiapas remains inconclusive. For example, two further reports published in late 1982 and early 1983, one by the United States Department of State and one by the High Commissioner, come to different conclusions by respectively judging COMAR for having a “not very notorious” presence or praising its staff to be doing “an excellent job.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ J. Santistevan, “La Experiencia del ACNUR con los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en el Sureste de México”, in G. Freyermuth Enciso & R.A. Hernández Castillo (eds.), *Una Decada de Refugio en México – Los refugiados guatemaltecos y los derechos humanos*, Mexico, CIESAS, 1992, 26. [Author’s translation]

¹⁰⁶ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GEN Refugees in Mexico General Vol. 2, Folio 100: Guy Prim, “Rapport de Mission au Mexique”, 10.12.1981.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GUA Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 1, Folio 27: Alfredo Witschi-Cestari, “Report on Mission 15–23 July 1982.”

¹⁰⁹ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GEN Refugees in Mexico General Vol. 3, Folio 109: Alfredo Witschi Cestani, “U.S. State Department Mission to Chiapas”, 8.10.1982; UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600. MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 5, Folio 340, Pierre Jambor, “Mission Report (21 – 25 April 1983)”, 26.04.1983.

The difficulties experienced in southern Chiapas, however, went well beyond the debatable efficiency of staff members or the planning of aid deliveries. Most notably, the UNHCR mandate as well as the acceptance of the term ‘refugee’ was still not fully absorbed by the Ministry of Interior in late 1983, resulting in a slowed process regarding both the determination of asylum status and the implementation of local settlement and supplementary aid projects.¹¹⁰ An article published in the newspaper *Proceso* in October 1983 described the clash between the two concepts of refugeehood, the UNHCR defining the issue as a humanitarian one while the government considering it a national security problem. Focusing on the tensions within the government rather than just those with the UNHCR, the author summarized the dispute between *Gobernación* (Interior Ministry) and the Foreign Ministry regarding the “refugee problem” the following way. “There have been arguments that in the treatment of the problem over the last two years there existed two intrinsically opposed Mexican policies: a humanitarian and a repressive policy, one from External Relations and one from *Gobernación*”.¹¹¹ The Ministry of Interior, as the responsible institution for migration and asylum policy, dominated the Mexican government’s approach towards the Guatemalan refugees.¹¹² COMAR, being factually dependent of *Gobernación*, thus situated itself in an area of conflict that obviously had repercussions on its own policy orientation and efficiency.¹¹³ The replacement of the Commission’s chairman in 1983 by the responsible of Migratory Services, which formed integral part of the Interior Ministry, can be seen as an exemplary case of these internal tensions. Even though it is a difficult task to assess the impact of the change in leadership, the double positioning of Mario Vallejo Hinojosa at the head of both Migratory Services and COMAR was considered intrinsically problematic.¹¹⁴ When the former area responsible from the Commission switched to Migratory Services in the same year, the UNHCR commented that “the sheep has turned wolf”, favouring a “policy which he strongly opposed in his past capacity”, highlighting the diametrically opposed interests of these agencies.¹¹⁵ Contrariwise, the question emerges to what extent Vallejo Hinojosa’s new position as head of COMAR made the wolf turn into a sheep? In the opinion of the High Commissioner’s office in Geneva, this transition unfortunately did not take place. On the contrary, the new appointment “created an increasingly difficult, harsh and discontinuous relationship” between the UNHCR and the

¹¹⁰ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GEN Refugees in Mexico General Vol. 3, Folio 137: Georges Koulisher, “Note for the File: Mission to Mexico 10 - 13.10.1983”, 21.10.1983.

¹¹¹ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 7, Folio 457: C. Fazio, “Gobernación no reconoce refugiados y su rechazo provoca conflicto con ACNUR”, *Proceso*, No. 364, 24.10.1983. [Author’s translation]

¹¹² In light of its predominance in refugee matters, the term ‘Mexican Government’ thus implicitly refers to the responsible ministry (Ministry of Interior / *Gobernación*).

¹¹³ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatémaltèques*, 197.

¹¹⁴ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 110.MEX Programming in Mexico, Vol. 4, Folio 81: Report on UNHCR Activities in 1983–84 and Programming for 1984–85.

¹¹⁵ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection Vol. 5, Folio 340: Pierre Jambor, “Mission Report (21–25 April 1983)”, 26.04.1983.

COMAR Coordinator, lasting between his appointment in early 1983 until he was replaced by a new Coordinator in February 1984.¹¹⁶ In the same period, financial mismanagement was another issue straining the relations between the two actors. A year after the High Commissioner raised its initial doubts, the former COMAR head of mission in Chiapas as well as some of his employees were sentenced in July 1984 for mismanagement of UNHCR aid funds of 154 million pesos or, by the time, 900 000 US-Dollars.¹¹⁷

Summing up the difficulties COMAR experienced in its asylum policy, Kauffer frames the period from 1982 up until 1988 as one of “internal contradictions.”¹¹⁸ In line with her argument, the frequent changes in staff can be considered a symptom rather than the origin of the lack of coherence in Mexico’s asylum policy. Even though the internal contradictions and ambiguities of COMAR should not overshadow its humanitarian work in Chiapas, the discussion of the existing tensions, both within and outside of the Commission, are revelatory for the understanding of the difficult relations with the UNHCR. Moreover, these internal contradictions also reveal the extent to which the Commission and the *Comité Cristiano* followed different approaches in their work with the refugees, COMAR’s dependency upon various ministries and a UNHCR ad-hoc mandate arguably making its position less coherent than the Diocese’s already established preferential option for the poor.

3.4. Liberation versus domination

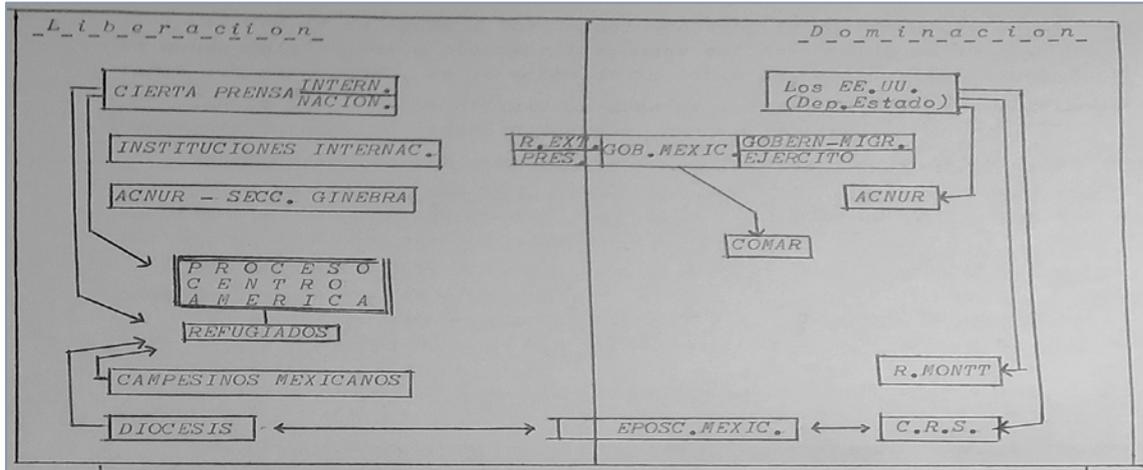
In order to fully understand the connection between the *Comité* and COMAR, further attention needs to be paid to the institutional environment they found themselves in. The dichotomy between liberation and domination, as put forward by the Diocese, went well beyond the reinterpretation of the biblical Exodus in order to promote the political mobilization of the refugees. The *Comité* also entertained the same dichotomy with regards to the actors involved in the process of liberation of Central America in general and the humanitarian actors active in the provision of aid to the refugees settling alongside the border in particular. This almost bi-polar outlook distinguishes between those actors the Diocese considered either responsible for the liberation or the oppression of Central America and the refugees as a result thereof:

¹¹⁶ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 110.MEX Programming in Mexico Vol. 4, Folio 81: Report on UNHCR Activities in 1983–84 and Programming for 1984–85.

¹¹⁷ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, Official Visit to Mexico 11 – 15.02.1985, Mismanagement of UNHCR Funds by the previous COMAR Team, 04.02.1985.

¹¹⁸ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatémaltèques*, 197.

Image 1: The actors involved in the process of liberation of Central America



Source: AHDSC, Carpeta 805, Exp. 1, Acta de Reunión del Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, 08.11.1982.

The table, summarizing the conclusions approved during the meeting of the *Comité* in November 1982, is revealing in terms of the understanding of the institutional context the Diocese situated itself and other actors in. According to the caption, the United States State Department – defending the “dominant empire” – was prohibiting any liberation process in Central America, for which reason it contributed, together with associated actors such as the UNHCR (*span.* ACNUR), the Presidency of Guatemala and the Catholic Relief Services, to the oppression of Central Americans.¹¹⁹ The same applies to the Mexican Government, its UNHCR-homologue COMAR and the Episcopal Conference, even though a minority of bishops as well as the Mexican Foreign Relations department and the Presidency were among the ‘liberators’. Furthermore, the Diocese, Mexican peasants, some international and domestic press outlets as well as the UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva were also counted among those defending the liberation of the refugees.¹²⁰

There is no doubt that a critical assessment of the *Comité’s* interpretation of the institutional setting would bring to the fore some contradictions, notably the distinction between the UNHCR and its Headquarters in Geneva. Yet, even though the table draws an oversimplified picture of the institutional environment, the dichotomy between domination and liberation was still relevant when focusing on the Mexican government. Interestingly, the previously discussed differences between *Gobernación* and the Foreign Ministry, as well as their respective role as head ministries of COMAR, are also reflected in the table, the latter belonging to the liberation camp while the former was regarded as an ‘oppressor’.¹²¹ The *Comité* itself framed these internal contradictions as “the traditional Mexican policy of the two

¹¹⁹ AHDSC, Fondo Refugiados Guatemaltecos, Carpeta 805, Exp. 1, CCS, Acta de Reunión del Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, 08.11.1982.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

faces”, the discourse of defence of human rights coexisting with the repression against the refugees.¹²² As such, the dichotomy could as well have been replaced by ‘humanitarian/solidarity’ and ‘national security’, the respective actors following an agenda that either approached the refugees as a result or a cause of insecurity and violence.

Given its limited accuracy, it remains questionable to what extent this categorization had an actual impact on the institutional relations. Despite the absence of official ties for instance, the Diocese entertained multiple contacts with COMAR and established a *de-facto* cooperation with the latter for the provision of aid to Guatemalan refugees. According to a report of the High Commissioner, the Church had strengthened its presence while simultaneously reducing its relief efforts throughout 1983. This paradoxical evolution is based on the San Cristobal Church’s belief “that COMAR provides refugees with enough relief and adequate medical attention”, the *Comité* thus giving priority to other specific tasks, such as the setting up of workshops.¹²³ In other words, the ‘oppressor’ and ‘liberator’ partly complemented each other in their respective efforts to help refugees, focusing on either the provision of emergency relief or the political and socio-economic empowerment.

The Mexican Dioceses of the pastoral region Southern Pacific already declared their ambitions to cooperate with other aid organizations in a 1982 letter stating that “we offer our collaboration and cooperation to other aid committees, be it domestic or international, official or unofficial ones.”¹²⁴ At the same time, the bishops cautioned against the potential abuses of the situation for political, ideological or even economic purposes:

We firmly believe that the aid we are obliged to give should be absolutely disinterested. And not, like it happened in other contexts and occasions, an opportunity to look for prestigious egoism or take the occasion for ideological, political or economic manipulation, be it from domestic or international actors.¹²⁵

In line with the argument of this thesis, the question arises to what extent the aid provided in Chiapas was, in terms of the bishop, disinterested? More specifically, what discourses did the Diocese and the Mexican government, whose agendas were arguably politically charged, defend when respectively opposing or promoting the relocation policy? These questions will be addressed in the next chapter dealing with the changing context in spring and summer 1984, when the predominantly harmonious environment radically changed and the refugees

¹²² *Ibid.* [Author’s translation]

¹²³ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 110.MEX Programming in Mexico Vol. 4, Folio 81: Report on UNHCR Activities in 1983–84 and Programming for 1984–85.

¹²⁴ GNIB, Comunicado de algunos Obispos de la region pastoral Pacífico Sur, “Refugiados Guatemaltecos en Chiapas”, San Cristobal de las Casas, 27.02.1982.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* [Author’s translation]

were at the center of a dispute between the self-proclaimed liberators and those considered to be responsible for oppression and domination.

4. REFUGEES WITHOUT A REFUGE

Mais, en dehors de tout cela, reste l'avis des réfugiés qui, du nord, qui du sud, qui 'privilégiés' ou bien portants, qui vivant dans les pires conditions, ne veulent plus entendre parler d'exode ou de migration en d'autres termes que ceux du retour tant souhaité sur leur terre natale. Combien de fois ai-je entendu parmi la population des camps que je fréquentais, cette question chargée d'émoi: „vous pensez qu'on va être obligé de partir nous aussi?“

-Vincent Coudert, *Refugee, Réfugiés*, 118.

On 30th April 1984, unidentified gunmen, allegedly part of the Guatemalan army, attacked the refugee camp *El Chupadero*, killing six refugees and injuring another six. The *Chupadero* incident can be considered as the culmination of the reoccurring threats and attacks against the refugee camps as well as the long-standing concerns about the proximity of the latter to the Guatemalan border. Just two days later, the Mexican government announced that the Guatemalan exiles would be moved to a yet unknown destination, probably in the South-East of the country.¹²⁶ The relocation of the refugee settlements to the Yucatan peninsula, 600 kilometres away from Chiapas, however, provoked significant opposition from the refugees as well as domestic and international actors supporting their petitions. Framing the resettlement process as a necessity, the conservative newspaper *Excelsior*, for instance, argued that for the sake of the prestige of Mexico it is incomprehensible “that there are those who seek to weaken the Mexican foreign policy or [...] create divisions in national unity over fundamental questions related to the autonomy, sovereignty and national security.”¹²⁷ This chapter seeks to analyze the relocation campaign and the debate surrounding it, framing the episode of relocation starting in mid-1984 as a period when existing sanctuary practices were scrutinized, challenged and reclaimed by the actors in cause. In order to understand the issue behind the spatial dynamics of the refugee settlements, a contextual emphasis will be placed on the local integration of the Guatemalan refugees in southern Chiapas.

4.1. “Once the poor starts believing in the poor, we can start singing liberation”¹²⁸

The *Comité de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos* (CARGUA), a solidarity organization based in San Cristobal, described the Mexican communities as the “best existing solidarity committee” in light of their daily efforts to support the Guatemalan refugees in need.¹²⁹ The friendly relations between refugees and host communities are often attributed to the fact that both are, by a large majority, indigenous Maya. Rather than simply underlining the common

¹²⁶ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection Vol. 7, Folio 575: “Mexico Will Move Guatemala Exiles”, *New York Times*, 03.05.1984.

¹²⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 1242, Exp. 3, Felicitas Pliego, “Contraproducente no Trasladar a Refugiados”, *Excelsior*, 03.05.1985, 5.

¹²⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 175, Exp. 1, Title of an invitation to a class for catechists led by the San Cristobal Diocese.

¹²⁹ GNIB, Comité de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos CARGUA, “Boletín 1”, April 1983.

ancestry of the inhabitants on each side of the Mexico-Guatemala border, however, this analysis seeks to move beyond an ethnocentric approach. The Diocese described the Mexico-Guatemalan border as a “zone of long-standing and rich exchange between peasants”, be it of economic, cultural or religious nature.¹³⁰ This description takes into account the reality of Mexico’s southern frontier which has been characterized as a “diffuse line lost in coniferous and tropical forests” up until the arrival of the first refugees.¹³¹ Whereas national borders and nationality were hardly considered important factors in mutual relations, the establishment of refugee communities and the repeated armed attacks in southern Chiapas caused a significant change in the relationship between Mexican and Guatemalan communities. As stated by Hernández, “because of the incursions of the Guatemalan army in the border region, the Indigenous Mexicans felt the need to reaffirm their nationality and to mark the difference with the refugees.”¹³² Hence, belonging to the Mexican nation was seen as a guarantor for security for those communities who felt threatened by a potential spread of violent conflict. According to Kauffer, the affirmation of the Guatemalan identity also became an integral part of the discourse of the refugees, who hereby not only claimed their belonging to their home country but also manifested their role to play in post-conflict Guatemalan society.¹³³

Starting in 1985, this reaffirmation of national identities was also reflected in the implementation of a “bi-cultural educational program” by COMAR and the UNHCR, including teaching material on both Guatemala and Mexico. The second-degree schoolbook, for instance, particularly emphasized the importance of maintaining a Guatemalan identity: “We have a culture we cannot lose. Even if we don’t recall well how our country was, we have to learn and get to know Guatemala.”¹³⁴ According to the schoolbook, living in close-knit communities in exile allowed the conservation of “customs, idioms, ways of being” as well as the memory of the refugees’ homeland.¹³⁵ The concern to foster a distinctive cultural identity in this context not only manifested the refugees’ own interests, but arguably also the intention of the Mexican government to facilitate and promote an early repatriation of the refugees. The affirmation of differences based on their respective nationalities, however, did not lead to heightened tensions or hostility between Mexicans and Guatemalans. Since a majority of the refugees settled on *ejido* territories, the contact between refugees and host communities was from the very initial stage marked by their coexistence on a confined space. According to the

¹³⁰ AHDSC, Carpeta 524, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, “Resultado del sentir de los refugiados guatemaltecos en la frontera”, 2. [Author’s translation]

¹³¹ R.A. Hernández Castillo, “Los refugiados guatemaltecos y la dinámica fronteriza en Chiapas”, in G. Freyermuth Enciso & R.A. Hernández Castillo (eds.), *Una Decada de Refugio en México*, Mexico, CIESAS, 1992, 94.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatemaltèques*, 97, 146.

¹³⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 1, Exp. 1, COMAR, UNHCR, “Programa de Educación Primaria Bicultural para Niños Guatemaltecos Refugiados en México”, 2º Estudios Sociales, 29. [Author’s translation]

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

statistics kept by the Diocese, the relation not only covered the leasing of cultivable land but also the common work in harvest and infrastructural projects, refugee and host communities working together for up to several months a year.¹³⁶

In its publications and discourses, the Diocese consistently emphasized the solidarity of the local communities, sharing their very limited resources with the refugees in need. In the Diocesan Assembly of 1983, the San Cristobal Church stressed the importance of the solidarity with refugees in order to support the Guatemalan people fighting for their liberation from oppression.¹³⁷ Two years later, Bishop Ruiz praised the Mexican peasants for their efforts in aiding their Guatemalan brothers and sisters, arguing that the relations were mutually benefitting in religious and economic terms:

The presence of the refugees provoked a new dynamic in Christian and cultural terms, through the rebirth of many traditions. There was also an increase in economic activity, increase in pastoral visits and important ecumenical relations, marked by the respect for the efforts of the Catholic Church.¹³⁸

Testimonies by Mexican communities and Guatemalan refugees, which were reproduced in the the newsletters of the Diocese, *Caminante*, and of the *Comité, El Refugiado*, further promoted the harmonious relationship between refugee and host communities. In particular after the launch of the relocation process, *El Refugiado* started publishing numerous letters by Mexican peasants expressing their solidarity with their Guatemalan *hermanos* in light of the increasingly hostile environment in Chiapas. A letter from 19th September 1984, for instance, reads: “But be blessed on behalf of us, the Mexicans who are with you and will pray to God that you will remain free from want wherever you are.”¹³⁹ Accompanied by a financial donation, these letters mirrored solidarity not as a mere discourse held by the Church but as an everyday action carried out by those who were most affected by the refugee influx. At the same time, the publication of these letters emphasized to what extent the resettlement would entail not only the loss of existing livelihoods and agricultural projects, but also the end of the cooperation with the Mexican community. An image the CCS published in its September 1984 newsletter is illustrative in this regard.

¹³⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 531, Exp. 1, Untitled Map; Carpeta 172, Exp. 1, CCS, “Datos para la Sistematización y Evaluación 1989–1990”.

¹³⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 503, Exp. 1, Diocesis de San Cristobal, “Asamblea Diocesana 1983, Reflexión teológica de los Equipos Zonales”.

¹³⁸ GNIB, Coordinadora de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, “Secretaría General”, No. 10, April 1985, 9. [Author’s translation]

¹³⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 750, Exp. 4, CCS, „El Refugiado“ 7, September 1984, 11. [Author’s translation]

Image 2: The Refugees in our Diocese



Source: AHDSC, Carpeta 750, Exp, 4, Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, "El Refugiado" 7, Septiembre 1984.

The cartoon depicts the narrative the Diocese was conveying in its discourses, notably the solidarity by Mexican peasants as well as the thriving cooperation in the settlements, the third drawing depicting a school, a clinic and a grocery store. The refugees were hence portrayed as being both well established and integrated in Chiapas.

Comparing the publications of the Diocese with secondary sources and collections of testimonies, a more differentiated picture emerges. Hernández, for instance, claims that "indigenous refugees worked for very low wages in exchange for a piece of land to build their huts and *milpas*", arguing that the refugees were also considered a source of cheap labour. Moreover, an article published by the German journal *Stern* in March 1983 illustrates the abuses in one of the largest refugee camps, *Puerto Rico*, by revealing how part of the aid was diverted by a local chief.¹⁴⁰ Summing up these tensions, one of the testimonies published in *Historia de nuestro refugio* states: "En general, los mexicanos han sido muy solidarios con nosotros, sobre todo al principio; pero después, en algunos lugares, buscaron el modo de aprovecharse de nuestra situación, olvidándose de que también ellos son pobres".¹⁴¹ Be it underpaid labour, excessive rents for cultivable land or the diversion of aid funds, these sources reflect a different reality to what the Diocese portrayed. In fact, besides a February 1984 article in *Caminante* where the abuse of refugees as forced labour in the *Reforma Agraria* camp is documented, the San Cristobal Church made no other reference to the less harmonious relationships between refugees and host communities.¹⁴² Whereas even the above-mentioned critics acknowledged that the phenomena of abuses were not majoritarian, it is revelatory to see to what extent the Diocese's discourses of solidarity

¹⁴⁰ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.GUA. MEX Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico Vol. 3, Helmut Frenz, "Flucht in die Hölle", *Stern* Nr. 10 / 83, 03.03.1983.

¹⁴¹ Equipo SEFCA Costa Rica, *Nuestra Historia del Refugio*, 94. [Trans: In general, the Mexicans have shown solidarity towards us, most of all at the beginning; but later, in some places, they tried to benefit from our situation, forgetting that they also were poor.]

¹⁴² GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, "Caminante", No. 31, February 1984, 10.

simplified the sometimes more complex relations between refugee and host communities. At the same time, given the potential contradictions of its discourse, it is of little surprise that no critical voices are to be found in the Diocesan publications. Instead, the Diocese re-emphasized the discourse of solidarity in opposition to the relocation, underlining that “the Mexicans and Guatemalans of the borderlands constitute a grand community above any political divisions of the two nations”, which is why they should not be separated by force.¹⁴³

4.2. A brave and patriotic decision

From December 1980 until September 1983, Sergio Aguayo documents 68 incursions of the Guatemalan army into Mexican territory, leaving nine refugees and seven Mexican peasants dead.¹⁴⁴ Whereas the proximity of the refugee camps to the border was already criticized in 1982, the relocation plans were only acted upon after the *Chupadero* incident, marking the deadliest attack to Guatemalan refugees in Mexican exile. As argued by journalist Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, the continuous army incursions permitted Mexico to gain domestic applause by selling the relocation as a “generous and humanitarian act that permitted those disgraceful beings a peaceful life away from the border.”¹⁴⁵ Despite the favourable timing the decision to relocate the refugees to the Yucatan peninsula provoked a national controversy. As the last drawing of the cartoon (Image 2) illustrates, this debate not only challenged the justification of the relocation, but also the destination thereof.

The archival files stemming from the Mexican Ministry of Defence (SEDENA) illustrate how the government’s decision to relocate the refugees constituted a compromise favouring both internal and external interests. Regarding the position of the United States and Guatemala, SEDENA assumed that the relocation would be favourably perceived, as it would eliminate a potential source of refugee-based insurgency. Moreover, the relocation would secure the frontier and thus also strengthen the stability of the right-wing regime in Guatemala, Mexico’s southern and northern neighbours being closely allied in their fight against Cuban-inspired liberation movements in the last years of the Cold War.¹⁴⁶ What appeared to be a beneficial decision in terms of foreign politics revealed to be more problematic on the domestic level. Among others, SEDENA was apprehensive of the potential opposition by the refugees as well as unfavorable reception by the domestic and international public opinion. Well aware of the sanctuary activism by the Diocese and its *Comité Cristiano*, the officials also feared an “increase in agitation” by the clergy when

¹⁴³ GNIB, Obispos de la región pastoral Pacífico Sur, “Documento 2: Sobre la situación de los refugiados”, 23.05.1984. [Author’s translation].

¹⁴⁴ Aguayo, *El Éxodo Centroamericano*, 78.

¹⁴⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, “En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción”, *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15. [Author’s translation]

¹⁴⁶ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 608, May 1984.

implementing the resettlement plan.¹⁴⁷ However, the domestic and international support for relocation provoked by the *Chupadero* incident arguably outweighed considerations about repercussions by either the clergy or the refugees.

The SEDENA reports place a particular emphasis on the potential abuse of refugee camps as a basis for guerrilla forces. Already when the US State Department visited the refugee camps in October 1982, U.S. officers claimed that there were insurgents among the refugees. According to the report, the two Mexican migration officials accompanying the mission supported these claims by stating that they could “recognise guerrilla members among refugees” – however without providing proof for the allegations made.¹⁴⁸ Based on the idea that refugee camps served as an operating and recruiting basis for *guerrilleros*, SEDENA considered that the relocation process would bring to the fore the division between those refugees seeking sanctuary and those claiming to do so for insurgency purposes:

The refugee population is divided between those who support the relocation initiated by the government, who can be considered as those who really fled their country to protect their lives, and those who disagree with the government [...] supposedly maintaining relations with the insurgency or members of the rebellion.¹⁴⁹

Similar to the dichotomy between economic migrants and political refugees, a debate that took place after the initial arrival of Guatemalan refugees¹⁵⁰, the Secretary of Defence made a division between ‘real refugees’ and those abusing the status based on their respective reaction to the relocation program. An examination of the language used in the SEDENA reports in more detail, including formulations such as “a very likely presence” of guerrillas or their “supposed contribution” to subversive forces, however, leaves doubts about whether the claims had any evidential support beyond the accusations made by the Guatemalan army.¹⁵¹ The *Comité* criticized the decision as a reaction to the pressure exercised by the Guatemalan government, affirming that refugees were in no way affiliated to the guerrilla forces. Rather, quoting an interview with Aguilar Zinser, the *Comité* asserted that refugees were the living testimony for the repression in Guatemala, their relocation thus only serving to improve the reputation of Mexico’s southern neighbour.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.MEX.GEN Refugees in Mexico General Vol. 3, Folio 109: Alfredo Witschi Cestani, “U.S. State Department Mission to Chiapas”, 08.10.1982.

¹⁴⁹ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 495, “Problemática Existente en el Sureste del País”, 11.07.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁵⁰ The Diocese in particular criticized the Ministry of Interior for questioning whether the Central Americans migrating to Mexico were economic migrants or political refugees. GNIB, Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas, “Caminante”, No. 33, May 1984, 7.

¹⁵¹ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hojas 605–625, May 1984 ; Hoja 495, “Problemática Existente en el Sureste del País”, 11.07.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁵² AHDSC, Carpeta 750, Exp. 2, CCS, „El Refugiado“ 4, August 1984, 1–2.

The framing of the relocation within the national security paradigm was thus based on both the fear of hosting insurgents on its national territory as well as the continuous incursions of the Guatemalan army. The resettlement was sold as a brave and patriotic decision to the public; not only did the resettlement resolve national security concerns, but it also significantly improved the security of the Guatemalan refugees.¹⁵³ In the eyes of the critics, all of these conditions could have been satisfied within the state of Chiapas, the question thus emerging why the Interior Ministry decided to relocate the refugees up to 600 kilometres away from their initial settlements.

Map 2: Relocation of Refugee Camps to Campeche and Quintana Roo



Source: S. Aguayo et al. (eds.), *Los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en Campeche y Quintana Roo*, Mexico, UNRISD, El Colegio de México, 1987, 30.

According to the Defense Ministry, the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo were chosen to avoid the potential infiltration of insurgents as well as a contagion of conflict, Chiapas as the poorest Mexican state being considered particularly prone to develop “subversive processes.”¹⁵⁴ In addition to the argument linked to the national security paradigm, the fact that both land and work was available on the sparsely populated Yucatan peninsula appeared to allow a better socio-economic integration of the refugees.¹⁵⁵ According to Garcia, Campeche and Quintana Roo were also attractive since they were of less strategic importance and politically conservative, reducing the risk for any contagion of conflict to take

¹⁵³ AHDSO, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, “En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción”, *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15.

¹⁵⁴ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 613, May 1984.

¹⁵⁵ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatemalteques*, 62.

place. Moreover, the Catholic Church was more conservative in both states, “a welcome change from the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas.”¹⁵⁶

4.3. The second exodus

The announcement of the government plans on the 9th May 1984 left the Guatemalan refugees with two choices. Either they would accept the relocation to the Yucatan peninsula, or they would repatriate to Guatemala.¹⁵⁷ The first refugee community to be relocated in its entirety was, without surprise, the former inhabitants of *Chupadero* camp, now dispersed in *Las Delicias*. As highlighted in one of the reports by the Diocese, the decision to relocate was largely met with surprise and perplexity by the refugees:

At the beginning the refugees did not know what to think. 99.9% of them did not even know there existed a place called Campeche, even less where or how it was. They started to ask for information. With all prudence, they said they could not make a decision about the relocation to Campeche as long as they did not know the place. They demanded that some community representatives would go see the place in order to have an idea about what to decide on.¹⁵⁸

After 16 hours of travels, a refugee delegation from *Las Delicias* arrived in the *Valle de Etzná*, Campeche, where they only had a few hours to explore the local surroundings and experience the climate. The refugee community expressed several criticisms, notably regarding the hostile climate, the unproductive land and the insufficient water supply. After long deliberations following their return to Chiapas, the refugee community thus decided that they opposed the resettlement. As highlighted by Aguilar Zinser, the failure of the visit obliged COMAR officials to change their strategy, as “it was necessary to pass from persuasion and conviction to dissuasion and political pressure.”¹⁵⁹ For example, the Diocese documented how refugees were intimidated by false alarms about the arrival of Guatemalan army forces, or, after several unsuccessful rounds of negotiations, deprived of food and medical assistance. The “dialogue”, as COMAR framed the negotiations between its officials and refugee representative, was eventually closed on 19th June 1984 after the refugees

¹⁵⁶ García, *Seeking Refuge*, 63.

¹⁵⁷ GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, “Caminante”, No. 33, May 1984, 5.

¹⁵⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 579, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, “El Chupadero, Las Delicias y la Gloria de San Caramalampio”, 2. [Author’s translation]

¹⁵⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, “En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción”, *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15.

unanimously declared their refusal to relocate to the coordinator of the Refugee Commission.¹⁶⁰

Despite its status as the first community to be relocated, the history of the *Chupadero* community is illustrative of the relocation processes taking place in other locations. According to Aguilar Zinser, the *Chupadero* community's opposition to relocate after their initial visit to Campeche was a path-breaking decision that in all likelihood inspired other refugee communities to start writing letters opposing their relocation. "The negative reaction of the Chupadero camp to transfer to a place this far away was not an isolated event, [...] as from all camps, even the most isolated, letters reached the Mexican Presidency asking to reconsider the relocation out of Chiapas".¹⁶¹ In fact, COMAR only managed to convince 725 Guatemalans to relocate to Guatemala in the first month, stressing the necessity to implement new strategies for mobilization. Pursuant to a cable from the High Commissioner, the implementation of the refugee transfer considerably improved in June and was mostly taking place in an organized and calm manner. At the same time, the UNHCR was alert about the situation in *Puerto Rico* camp, one of the largest refugee settlements, where the government decided to militarize its operations after the refugees did not accept the relocation plans.¹⁶² As reported by the Diocese, on 27th June 1984, refugees from *Puerto Rico* started leaving the camp and crossing the Lacantún river in order to avoid transferal. In the following days, three collaborators of the Diocese, two nuns and a medical doctor, were taken hostage and interrogated by the military, the camp henceforth being closed for anyone to enter apart from COMAR and the armed forces. Since the negotiations with the refugee communities were still not successful one week after the partial abandonment of *Puerto Rico*, the military decided to evacuate the remaining inhabitants and destroy the camp.¹⁶³ A testimony collected by the Diocese illustrates how the refugees were reminded of conflict in Guatemala when assisting the burning of their camp:

En este día fue la gran destrucción y la gran temor, nos sentimos amargamente, en nuestros corazones una vida de tristeza. Los marinos empezaron quemar las casas, casas de laminas que nos han dado el dioses de San Cristoval. [...] Hay algunos hermanos se empezaron a llorar, por que la quemazón de las casas y le dijimos [...]

¹⁶⁰ AHDSC, Carpeta 579, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, "El Chupadero, Las Delicias y la Gloria de San Caramalampio", 5–6.

¹⁶¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, "En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción" *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15. [Author's translation]

¹⁶² UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.GUA.MEX Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 7, Folio 378: Incoming Cable Dispatched from Mexico, 16.07.1984.

¹⁶³ AHDSC Carpeta 522, Exp. 1, Diocesis de San Cristobal, "¿Qué está pasando con los refugiados guatemaltecos en Chiapas?", 2.

ya no tenemos vida, ni por dónde, estos ejércitos han vuelto como ejércitos guatemaltecos, porque ya están hacienda igual como nos han hecho en Guate.¹⁶⁴

In an internal cable, the High Commissioner's office in Mexico described the burning of the *Puerto Rico* camp as "most unfortunate", notably since it "brings back sad memories of persecution in the country of origin."¹⁶⁵ Despite the closing of the area to all outside personnel, including NGOs and the media, the destruction of the camp became a matter of public attention. A testimony of the destruction of the *Puerto Rico* camp, entitled "*Un grito a la solidaridad*" was published by the Diocese two weeks later and spread "profusely in the exterior", informing domestic and international media about the refugees' objection to the transferal.¹⁶⁶

Throughout the month of July, other camps in the Marquez de Comillas region were also targeted for the relocation plans, yet only two other camps were partially burned down during the process. Given the use of coercive methods, ranging from threats to the burning of the camps, the relocation, or in Kauffer's words, "*le deuxième exode*", was marked by violent tensions.¹⁶⁷ As reported by the Diocese's newsletter *El Refugiado*, the reaction in these camps was mostly divided as parts of the community were persuaded to relocate while other families decided to remain in Chiapas.¹⁶⁸ On 24th August 1984, an article in *Proceso* claimed that the relocation process had been halted in light of reoccurring difficulties, even if the Subsecretary of *Gobernación* affirmed that "only a small minority of refugees opposes relocation."¹⁶⁹ The numbers, however, tell a different story, as in total only about 18 000, considerably less than half of those official registered, were transferred between 1984 and 1986.¹⁷⁰ In fact, the relocation plans provoked increasing mobility among the refugee camps, a lot of settlements being abandoned for locations further inland, considered less threatened by the resettlement program.¹⁷¹ In a letter dated 16th May 1984, for instance, refugees from

¹⁶⁴ AHDSC Carpeta 1182, Exp. 1, Testimonio, "La Gran Destrucción en Puerto Rico", 1984. [Trans: That day was a day of destruction and fear, we felt bitterly, in our hearts a life of sadness. The marine started to burn down houses provided by the Diocese of San Cristobal. Some brothers started crying because the burning down of the houses meant that we did not have a life anymore, the Mexican military became like the Guatemalan military, as they are doing the same as they did to us in Guatemala.]

¹⁶⁵ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.GUA.MEX Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 7, Folio 378, Incoming Cable Dispatched from Mexico, 16.07.1984.

¹⁶⁶ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 9, Folio 612, C. Fazio, "Se detuvo el traslado a Campeche; los guatemaltecos denuncian medidas de terror" *Proceso Nacional*, 24.08.1984; GNIB, Refugiados de la Selva Chiapaneca, "Un Grito a la Solidaridad: Carta de los Refugiados de la Selva Chiapaneca", 15.07.1984.

¹⁶⁷ Kauffer, *Les Réfugiés Guatemaltèques*, 63.

¹⁶⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 750, Exp. 2, CCS, "El Refugiado" 4, August 1984, 5–6.

¹⁶⁹ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 9, Folio 612: C. Fazio, "Se detuvo el traslado a Campeche; los guatemaltecos denuncian medidas de terror", *Proceso Nacional*, 24.08.1984. [Author's translation]

¹⁷⁰ Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 64.

¹⁷¹ AHDSC Carpeta 356, Exp. 1, CCS, "Informe del Proyecto de Esucalas Realizado entre los Refugiados Guatemaltecos de la Zona de Tzisco", 2.

the camp *Ixcán* ask the Lacandon communities to offer them a piece of land in order to avoid transferal to the Yucatan peninsula:

El gobierno mexicano ha publicado que nuestro campamento lo trasladarán al Estado de Campeche y si esto sucede, nuestra patria se quedará muy lejos y lo que queremos que por media de ustedes no dieran un pedazo de tierra para trabajar y poder vivir.¹⁷²

The displacement of some camps further away from the border was thus considered a third option for those who neither wanted to relocate nor repatriate, the refugees hereby manifesting their desire to remain in Chiapas.

4.4. An emerging public debate

The announcement of the relocation plans as well as the first transferrals of refugee settlements provoked mixed reactions by public and private actors. Analysing the “contradictions of a decision”, the San Cristobal Diocese noticed that the reactions of important non-governmental organizations such as the *Movimiento Mexicana de Solidaridad con el Pueblo de Guatemala*, the *Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala* and the Mexican Episcopal Conference were mostly positive, even though all three actors emphasized the necessity to maintain an open border for further arrivals of Central Americans seeking refuge.¹⁷³ The office of the UN High Commissioner also welcomed the decision, as it corresponded to the UNCHR policy “to place refugees far away enough from the border of their country of origin where their presence may exacerbate international tension.”¹⁷⁴ Although in theory the relocation was welcomed by Geneva, the violent transferal practices were less so. In a letter dated 30th August 1984, the then High Commissioner Paul Hartling advised the Mexican President de la Madrid to avoid any use of coercive methods:

I have heard that a significant number of refugees are rejecting the transferal to Campeche for a number of reasons. The solution to this problem, in my opinion, has to be found through dialogue and persuasion, avoiding any use of force since the latter would imply a decision incompatible with humanitarian principles upon which

¹⁷² AHDSC Carpeta 60, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Ixcán al Agente Municipal de Lacandón, 16.05.1984. [Trans: The Mexican government stated that our camp will have to be moved to the state of Campeche, and if this happens, our homeland will be far away, so we would like to ask you whether we could obtain a piece of land to work and to live]

¹⁷³ GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, “Caminante”, Nr. 33, May 1984, 6–8.

¹⁷⁴ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.GUA.MEX Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 8, Folio 399: UNHCR Americas Section, Cable, 15.08.1984.

the protection of refugees is based and my office could in no way be associated therewith.¹⁷⁵

Equally polite, Hartling also underlined the necessity to keep providing medical and alimentary assistance to the refugees even if they refused relocation.¹⁷⁶ In the same vein, Amnesty International sent out a letter to the Mexican Vice-Secretary of Foreign Affairs in mid-August, criticizing the excessive use of violence in the relocation process. Moreover, the organization also called for the admission of national and international organizations to be present during the relocation, responding to the closing of the camps by the Mexican military.¹⁷⁷

The Diocese of San Cristobal reacted publicly in collaboration with other bishops of the episcopal region Southern Pacific. On 23rd May 1984, they released a circular letter summarizing the context as well as the theological reflexions underlying their position. With regards to the relocation, the bishops clearly expressed their objection to the transferal to the Yucatan peninsula based on their previous solidarity work with the refugees in question:

Given our pastoral experience with refugees for years, the direct knowledge of their preoccupations and expectations, as well as the conditions and consequences of displacement for them and the negative reactions the latter has provoked in other countries, and without doubt would be provoked against our country, in the domestic and international public opinion, we consider the relocation of the refugees towards the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo to be inappropriate.¹⁷⁸

Notwithstanding the respect of the will of the refugees regarding the relocation, the bishops called upon the Mexican government to ensure the safety of the latter as well as respect “their ethnic and cultural values, as well as their ecological and human ties that unite them with the environment and the population of the state of Chiapas.”¹⁷⁹ Put differently, the heads of the episcopal region advocated for relocation within Chiapas, a compromise that would satisfy governmental concerns and the petitions of the refugees without resettling them from their familiar environment. Whereas the argumentation was largely based on the defense of the refugees’ voices, the bishops also warned about the negative impact of the relocation on

¹⁷⁵ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 9, Folio 613a: UN High Commissioner Paul Hartling, Letter to the President of Mexico, Miguel de la Madrid, 30.08.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁷⁶ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 9, Folio 613a: UN High Commissioner Paul Hartling, Letter to the President of Mexico, Miguel de la Madrid, 30.08.1984.

¹⁷⁷ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 100.GUA.MEX Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, Vol. 8, Folio 414: Amnesty International Secretariat London, Letter to to Subsecretary of Foreign Affairs, Vicor Flores Olea, 16.08.1984.

¹⁷⁸ GNIB, Obispos de la región pastoral Pacifico Sur, “Documento 2: Sobre la situación de los refugiados”, 23.05.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* [Author’s translation]

Mexico's reputation, probably well aware that their own publications were among the most critical in this regard. For instance, a *New York Times* article entitled "Mexican Army Accused on Guatemala Exiles" published in July 1984 was based on a document signed by the Diocese of San Cristobal criticizing the violence during the relocation process. A top government official, contacted by the newspaper to reply to the accusations, stated that Bishop Ruiz was "a leftist and us[ed] the Government's transfer of refugees for his political gain."¹⁸⁰ A month later, the *Miami Herald* titled "Bishop defender of the Mayas criticizes methods of transferal", comparing the role of Samuel Ruiz with Bartolomé de las Casas, famous defender of indigenous rights in the mid-16th century.¹⁸¹ As both articles illustrate, the Diocese of San Cristobal and in particular its Bishop Ruiz Garcia positioned themselves most visibly against the relocation, raising the question to what extent their activism was empowering or abusive of the agency of the refugees. Through the analysis of refugee voices as well as the use and abuse thereof by the main actors in cause, the next two chapters place those at the center of the debate who actually belong there – the Guatemalan refugees.

¹⁸⁰ "Mexican Army Accused on Guatemala Exiles", *New York Times*, 13 Jul. 1984, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/13/world/mexican-army-accused-on-guatemala-exiles.html> (last visited 21 Apr. 2016).

¹⁸¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 1201, Exp. 1, Sam Dillon, "Obispo defensor de mayas critica métodos de traslado", *El Miamo Harold*, 19.08.1984. [Author's translation]

5. ACTORS OF THEIR OWN FAITH

Je suis allée en différents endroits du Mexique, et là, c'est bien vrai que je ne savais pas quoi faire. Nous autres les pauvres nous n'avons jamais rêvé d'un voyage à l'étranger, nous n'avons même jamais rêvé d'une promenade.

- Rigoberta Menchu, *Une vie, une voix*, 313.

In December 1986, *La Jornada* published a column entitled “The Voice of the Guatemalan Refugees”, which critically discussed the sources of information regarding the refugee presence in Mexico:

In almost all occasions, this information stemmed from international institutions implied in the problem, such as the UNHCR; In others, the information stemmed from the Mexican government, through the public officials attending the delicate situation; a lot of times we have heard the prophetic voice of the pastors of the Church who – in a fraternal gesture of Christian solidarity – made theirs the suffering of the refugees.¹⁸²

Be it through the UN High Commissioner, the Mexican government or the San Cristobal Church, the Mexican public constantly received updates about the fate of Guatemalan refugees located on its territory. The first two chapters of this thesis, covering the period from the initial refugee influx until the launch of the relocation program, are also largely based on information provided by these institutions. Contrasting the tendency to rely upon the information monopoly established by the Mexican government and the Diocese, the author of the column observed that the voice of the “principal actors of the drama”, namely the refugees, had hardly been heard by the Mexican public.¹⁸³ The portrayal of the refugees as voice-less arguably undermined their own agency and impacted their representation in national media, even in times when they were at the center of public debate. Rather than to adhere to a narrative that reduces refugees to the victims they may or may not be, this chapter analyzes the refugees' opposition against the relocation by putting forward their own voices.

5.1. Unequal interlocutors

As illustrated in the previous chapter, resistance of refugee communities against the resettlement plans surged simultaneously with the launch of the relocation campaign in the weeks after the *Chupadero* incident. In fact, refugee communities in all four corners of the

¹⁸² AHDSC, Carpeta 52, Exp. 1, Miguel Concha, “La Voz de los Refugiados de Guatemala”, *La Jornada*, 06.12.1986. [Author's translation]

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* [Author's translation]

region, not only those camps situated close to the border, started sending letters to the authorities asking to reconsider the relocation to the Yucatán peninsula.¹⁸⁴ These letters are of particular interest for the following analysis, as they provide a unique insight into the mobilization of the refugees against the forced resettlement from their own perspective. The Archives of the Diocese of San Cristobal collected more than 120 of these letters written in summer 1984, addressed primarily to the President of the Mexican Republic, Miguel de la Madrid, but also to the UN High Commissioner, COMAR and the bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas.

The analysis of the content of the letters is considerably complicated by the anonymity of the addresser. Some letters were simply signed by the camp, that is to say a collective of the refugee community, while other letters were signed by the community representatives or by the entire camp population, including up to seven pages of signatures and – for those not knowing how to sign – fingerprints. Yet, the structure of the letters is very similar. In line with the teaching material used by the *Comité* in the late 1980s, all letters start with formal compliments, followed by the actual message and a valediction.¹⁸⁵ Given the elevated percentage of illiteracy and monolinguals among adult refugees, it is not surprising that the language used in the letters varies significantly. While some of the writings reflect the refugees' elementary knowledge of Spanish, other letters are more eloquent in their use of words and arguments to convince the respective addressee. Taking into account the condition of the two interlocutors, the refugees on one side and public authorities on the other, the letters will be analyzed both in terms of the context the refugees found themselves in and in terms of their agency regarding the opposition to the relocation. Put differently, in line with Todorov's emphasis on *intertextualité*, it will be revealing not only to understand *why* the refugees reject their resettlement, but also *how* the contextual circumstances influenced their reasoning.

The refugees' perception of the Mexican asylum policy was one of the key elements of its correspondence with public authorities. On the one hand, the letters affirmed the gratitude of the refugees for the hospitality and the aid provided during their stay in Chiapas, the *Agua Azul* community claiming for instance that the reputation of Mexico would improve significantly for the reception of Guatemalan refugees.¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, refugees would also express their expectancies vis-à-vis their country of asylum in light of their opposition to the relocation policy. "Por eso nos gustaría que nos dejen aquí, por todo lo que hemos explicado, esperamos su buena atención, como México es un país democrático. Creemos

¹⁸⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, "En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción", *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15.

¹⁸⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 1234, Exp. 1, CCS, „Estos son los datos que debe contener una carta”.

¹⁸⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Santa Margarita Agua Azul dirigida al Presidente de México, 28.05.1984.

que también nosotros los refugiados podemos disfrutar igual que los mexicanos”.¹⁸⁷ The 144 refugees from *Santa Rosa* hence claimed their rights to benefit from the democracy reigning in Mexico, probably unaware of the six decade long one-party-rule of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)*. Even more explicitly, “27 adult and educated Guatemalans” from the *Cueva del Arco* community argued that “if we came to seek refuge in this country, it is because we were confident that the dignity of all humans would be respected here.”¹⁸⁸ In other words, the refugees did not only voice their disappointment regarding their initial expectancies, but also reminded the actors in charge that democracy and dignity were values to be upheld in the process of the relocation. The Mexican Presidency was however not the only actor to be criticized, as most often similar letters were sent out to COMAR, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or the Secretary General. In one of the letters directed to the UNHCR, the delegation from *Nuevo México* camp also demanded respect for their own dignity, seeking to avoid the only example they were aware of, namely “the Salvadorian brothers in Honduras that were forced into concentration camps.”¹⁸⁹

Whereas most of the letters were written in reaction to the announcement of the relocation, correspondence on behalf of the refugee community gained a new momentum with the *Puerto Rico* incident in early July 1984. The above-mentioned *Santa Rosa* camp for instance cautioned the government against the use of force in light of the experience of violent conflict in Guatemala:

Como lo que está sucediendo en el campamento de Puerto Rico, según se sabe a través del *Unomásuno*, que estos compañeros tuvieron que salir a la selva por la intervención del Ejército mexicano, no sabemos cual es propósito, aunque creemos que puede ser con el fin de cuidarnos pero si es así, deben avisarnos antes, y no sorprendernos ya que estamos muy asustados por el ejército guatemalteco.¹⁹⁰

Based on the information obtained from the Mexican newspaper *Unomásuno*, the refugees knew about the violent incidents at *Puerto Rico* camp, even though they were probably not

¹⁸⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Santa Rosa al Presidente de México, ACNUR y COMAR, 19.05.1984. [Trans: That’s why we would like you to leave us here, as we have explained, we hope to receive your attention given that Mexico is a democratic country. We believe that we Guatemalan refugees can enjoy [it] equally as the Mexicans.]

¹⁸⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Cueva del Arco dirigida al Presidente de México, ACNUR y COMAR, 18.05.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁸⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Nuevo México dirigida a ACNUR, 20.05.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁹⁰ AHDSC, Carpeta 415, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Nanzalito dirigida a ACNUR, 12.07.1984. [Author’s translation: Like what is happening in Puerto Rico Camp, from what is known from *Unomásuno*, our colleagues had to flee to the forest because of the intervention of the Mexican army, we don’t know the goal, but we think it was with the intention to take care of us, but if it’s like that they have to warn us before so that we will not be surprised since we are very much afraid of the Guatemalan army.]

aware of the objectives of the Mexican military. One day later, a letter from *Nanzalito* camp stated that the refugees were not willing to suffer the same way in Mexico as they did in Guatemala, seeking refuge in order to live in a democratic order.¹⁹¹ Beyond the military intervention, some refugees also expressed their outrage about the practices of holding back food and medical aid in order to force refugees from *Puerto Rico* and *Ixcán* camps to relocate.¹⁹² The criticism directed at the public officials did arguably not only reflect the refugees' desire to have their voice heard, but also their frustration for not having been involved neither in the drafting nor the implementation of the resettlement program. Rather, they were obliged to abide by a decision that they considered to be imposed and undemocratic, reflecting their position at the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy regarding their spatial installation in Mexico.

5.2. The construction of Campeche

Once the decision to relocate the refugees was taken, they reacted with perplexity to what was then presented as a *fait accompli* they had to respect. Probably even more surprising than the relocation process itself was the destination of the resettlement, the state of Campeche.¹⁹³ The refugees, who settled outside of Guatemala for the first time when seeking refuge in Chiapas, did not know the Yucatán peninsula, let alone the existence of Campeche, its location or its climate.¹⁹⁴ Given the lack of knowledge, Campeche, beyond its status as a far-away Mexican state, became a mystified symbol of the relocation, despised yet unseen by the majority of the refugee communities.

In a letter dated 20th May 1984, the *Chupadero* community asked the President to consider relocating them within the state of Chiapas rather than to Campeche. During the first visit to the camps on the Yucatán peninsula, the 15 refugees from the former *Chupadero* camp were accompanied by 13 public officials, ranging from COMAR employees to delegates of Migration services. Neither the Diocese nor the staff of the Comitán hospital were however allowed to accompany the excursion. Once returned to *Las Delicias*, the refugees summarized their position as follows:

El viaje, muy largo y pesado, por motivos de los niños, mujeres embarazadas y los ancianos [...] el traslado en estas condiciones sería mortal para muchos. Hace 20

¹⁹¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 415, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Santa Rosa dirigida al Presidente de México, ACNUR y COMAR, 11.07.1984.

¹⁹² AHDSC, Carpeta 415, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Santa Apolonia El Cuadro dirigida al Presidente de México, ACNUR y COMAR y El Pueblo Mexicano en General, 14.07.1984; AHDSC, Carpeta 415, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Cuernavaca dirigida a ACNUR, 14.07.1984.

¹⁹³ Since the initial relocation was primarily directed towards Campeche, this chapter will not explicitly mention the camps in Quintana Roo.

¹⁹⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 579, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, "El Chupadero, Las Delicias y la Gloria San Caramalampio", 2.

días que estamos sufriendo el desalojo, la tristeza y la pena de no saber de nuestro destino. Por este motivo y otros que le vamos a contar, queremos quedarnos en el estado de Chiapas. [...] Allí nos dimos cuenta que sólo hay terreno para hacer el campamento, para trabajar no hay terreno, no hay agua y las condiciones de vida serían igual que las de aquí, pero no tenemos nuestro trabajito como telares, carpinterías, artesanías y algunos animalitos.¹⁹⁵

Even though the refugees completed the 16 hour journey in a special bus, they considered the travels to Campeche as potentially lethal for certain members of the community, especially those weakened by the flight from *Chupadero* camp. At the same time, the lack of cultivable land, water supply as well as employment opportunities would not justify the transferal to a location where the circumstances were, in their view, worse than in Chiapas.¹⁹⁶

The fear of travelling large distances surfaces in numerous letters, most of which refer to the previous experience of flight from Guatemala or the displacement from other camps. These experiences of mobility are associated with the hardship faced when constructing a new camp and adapting to a new climate. The less moderate climate on the peninsula, prone to tropical storms, was considered a health danger for children, women and elder members of the community. In a letter to the Mexican President, for instance, refugees from *Santa Rosa* camp argue:

Como hemos oído las noticias por radio y televisión que nos van a sacar de Chiapas y nos van a llevar a Campeche, queremos suplicarles que nos dejen en este lugar de Santa Rosa, pues ya nos acostumbramos al clima, los ancianos nos dicen que con este cambio de climas se van a morir los niños, lo mismo, pues ya tenemos el ejemplo con los traslados que nos hicieron del campamento Dolores a Nuevo México y el otro de Nuevo México a Santa Rosa.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Las Delicias (Chupadero) dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 20.05.1984. [Trans: The journey was long and tiring, for the children, pregnant women and old people the transferal would be mortal in these conditions. 20 days ago we already suffered a relocation, the sadness not where to go with our destiny. For that reason and others, we want to remain in Chiapas. Over there we realized that there is only land to build the camps, not to work, there's no water and the conditions of life would be the same as here, but here we have work and artisanal production.]

¹⁹⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Las Delicias (Chupadero) dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 20.05.1984.

¹⁹⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Santa Rosa dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 19.05.1984. [Trans: As we heard from the news through radio and television, they will transfer us from Chiapas to Campeche, we would like to ask you to leave us in Santa Rosa, as we are already adapted to the climate, and the elders tell us that with a changing climate the children would die, and we already have the experience of relocating from Dolores to Nuevo México and from Nuevo México to Santa Rosa.]

The objection to travelling long distances is however also associated with the absence of knowledge or experience regarding the means of communication. Since the camps in Campeche were located more than 600 kilometres away from those in Chiapas, the relocation had to be organized using special buses, boats or even airplanes in those areas inaccessible by road. A letter from *Loma Bonita* camp explicitly underlined the risk of the journey, stating that the refugees “do not know how to travel by boat or by plane.”¹⁹⁸ In other words, the large-distance journey to Campeche was perceived as potentially dangerous, be it for the previous negative experiences of flight or for the fear of travelling to an unknown destination by unfamiliar means of transport.

Whereas only a few refugees had the chance to actually visit Campeche, it remains debatable to what extent the refugees were aware about the conditions in the Yucatán camps. For instance, the *Santa Rosa* community claimed that they “heard from the news that there is no water, but many mosquitos and flies.”¹⁹⁹ Beyond the apparent presence of insects, a letter from *Cueva del Arco* camp dated one day earlier argued that “as one knows, the place where we should be translated to is a wretched and unhealthy place.”²⁰⁰ Besides the heat and the presence of insects, a letter from *Nuevo México* camp also mentioned that Campeche is bordering with the Guatemalan *departamento* of Petén, the location thus not forcibly being safer than the state of Chiapas.²⁰¹ While these letters did not specify the source of information, they hint at the circulation of rumors and news among the refugees regarding the circumstances reigning in Campeche. Some correspondence suggests that Mexican communities hosting the refugees shared their knowledge about the climate conditions on the Yucatán peninsula.²⁰² In a letter addressed to the president, the *Nueva Libertad* camp asserted that: “Según nos han contado algunos mexicanos que conocen esa región que el clima es bastante caluroso, en donde hay muchos insectos dañinos y escases de agua, que es lo más importante para poder vivir”.²⁰³ Archival files from the Diocese support the idea that most information on Campeche actually stemmed from the Mexican peasants. According to the Diocese, this information was objective as most of these peasants had settled in the Yucatán before colonizing the rainforest in Chiapas. “The information given by the Mexican peasants is of importance, since it is not only the point of

¹⁹⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Loma Bonita dirigida a los Hermanos de las Organizaciones Campesinas, 15.05.1984. [Author’s translation]

¹⁹⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Santa Rosa dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 19.05.1984.

²⁰⁰ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Cueva del Arco dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 18.05.1984. [Author’s translation]

²⁰¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Nuevo México dirigida al ACNUR, 20.05.1984.

²⁰² AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Benemerito de las Americas dirigida a la Madre Margarita, 16.05.1984.

²⁰³ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Nueva Libertad dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 19.05.1984. [Translation: From what the Mexicans who know the region told us, the climate is very hot, there are dangerous insects and water is scarce, which is crucial to live.]

view of the writer, but of the one who had a concrete experience and can see the things from the same perspective. This is what interests the refugees”.²⁰⁴

Whereas the first-hand information might have indeed been of particular interest for the refugees, the idea that the information obtained from the Mexican settlers is neutral remains questionable. Assuming that they left Campeche because they considered the conditions in Chiapas to be better, their opinion on the former settlement in the Yucatán was unsurprisingly negative when compared to their current installations. At the same time, the question to what extent the circumstances in the Yucatán camps were superior or inferior to the ones in Chiapas remained debatable throughout the relocation process, that is to say until the end of the year 1985. Underlining the subjectivity of the “sterile comparisons”, Sergio Aguayo stated in a May 1985 article that “neither is Chiapas a paradise, nor is Campeche a concentration camp.”²⁰⁵

Be it for the long journey, the lack of water, the insects or the climate, the camps in Campeche were constructed as a hostile environment for refugees to settle in. Arguably, the failure of the first visit to the Yucatán peninsula by the *Chupadero* community, acknowledged in the files of the Defense Secretary, had a strong impact on those refugees who were previously undecided or unaware of the existence of settlements in Campeche.²⁰⁶ At the same time, the fact that most refugees obtained the information about the resettlement from the Diocese and national media rather than from COMAR officials also shows that the governmental propaganda that promoted the resettlement did not yet reach all camps in the first month of the relocation. Rather, the construction of Campeche as a “living hell without any fertile land” was based on the limited information available, which was – according to a government refugee official quoted by the *Washington Post* – further biased by the San Cristobal Church’s opposition to the resettlement plans.²⁰⁷

5.3. A second home in Chiapas

The negative construction of Campeche as a hostile environment for refugees to settle in was closely related to the relationships the refugees entertained with the people and environment of Chiapas, the only point of comparison the refugees could draw on. The aspect of the local integration is particularly revelatory, as it partly reflects the discourse of solidarity used by the San Cristobal Church when opposing the relocation plans. Four months after the launch of the resettlement process, in September 1984, the *Comité*

²⁰⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 522, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, La Reubicación Vista por los mismos refugiados, 2. [Author’s translation]

²⁰⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 44, Exp. 1, Sergio Auayo Quezada, „Refugiados, una prueba para el sistema político mexicano“, *Perfil de la Jornada*, 23.05.1985. [Author’s translation]

²⁰⁶ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 495, “Problemática Existente en el Sureste del País”, 11.07.1984.

²⁰⁷ W.A. Orme, “Rumors, Conflicts Complicate Mexico’s Relocations of Refugees”, *Washington Post*, 15 Jul. 1984, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/07/15/rumors-conflicts-complicate-mexicos-relocation-of-refugees/e9774890-05dd-48d0-aabb-9a32b14dc670/?utm_term=.91601fde3066 (last visited 10 Apr. 2016).

published a cartoon reemphasizing the solidarious relations between Guatemalans and Mexicans in southern Chiapas. The ecclesiastical support, illustrated by the crucifix handed to the Mexican peasants, appears as a central element in the relations between host and refugees communities:

Image 3: Solidarious Relations between Mexican peasants and Refugees



Source: AHDSC, Carpeta 554, Exp. 1, Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, "El Refugiado" 6, Septiembre 1984.

A letter from *Paso Hondo* for instance underlined both the relations with the Mexican peasants and the adaptation to the local climate as reasons to oppose a renewed displacement:

Siendo nosotros todos los refugiados en este campamento suplicamos de manera más digna nos tomen en consideración y nos permitan quedarnos como o donde estamos; ya que aquí nos encontramos sin ningún problema, nos hemos conducido muy bien con los hermanos mexicanos, hay familiaridad entre ellos y nosotros, nos hemos adaptado al ambiente del lugar y nuestros niños están contentos.²⁰⁸

Interestingly, in a letter to the Mexican President, refugees from *Las Cruces* camp argued that in Campeche there were no Mexicans who could serve as witnesses in case atrocities were committed against them.²⁰⁹ Put differently, the presence of Mexicans was not only considered a source of support and solidarity, but also a guarantor of security. Since most refugees settled on Mexican *ejidos*, cohabitating with those who were not targeted by the

²⁰⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Paso Hondo dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 19.05.1984. [Trans: Being all the refugees of this camp we ask you in the most polite way to take our position into consideration and to allow us to remain where we are; since we have no problems here, we have good relations with the Mexican brothers, there is familiarity between us, we have adapted to the environment and our children are happy.]

²⁰⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Las Cruces dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 20.05.1984. [Author's translation]

Guatemalan army not only improved the safety of the refugees but also provided testimony in case any atrocities or human rights abuses were committed.

Rather than simply emphasizing the emotional loss, in terms of the existing solidarity and friendship ties in Chiapas, most letters also focused on the potential material loss of the relocation. Among others, refugee representatives from *Pico de Oro* claimed that over 4.4 million pesos had been invested to build the installations in the camp, which should not be abandoned since it was located 45 kilometers away from the border.²¹⁰ In the same vein, a letter from *Boca de Chajul* camp to the influential Mexican bishop, Mendez Arceo, emphasized the sacrifices made for “building houses, schools, a clinic, a bodega as well as access to potable water”, a communal effort for the refugees of each camp.²¹¹ The refugees feared that the hardship they had faced when constructing the camp infrastructure was not only in vain, but would have to be repeated once relocated to Campeche. Instead of paying a relocation campaign that, in the view of the refugees, did not offer any benefits, the *Boca de Chajul* community suggested in an earlier letter to invest the money differently. “Además, que al pensar que una movilización se gastaría millones de pesos por el transporte, pues la opinión de nosotros es de que en vez de gastarlo en transporte, mejor se gaste en alimentos y medicamentos, ropa, calzado, trastos”.²¹² Be it food, medicine or clothing, the refugees considered that there were more urgent necessities than displacing them from a location they considered safe. At the same time, they seemed unaware that the infrastructure on the Yucatán peninsula was mostly government-built, thus already being in place for those who decided to relocate.²¹³ In line with the negative image about conditions in Campeche, the lack of information thus biased the refugees’ opinion regarding the material loss of the relocation campaign.

Beyond the local integration, a positive attribute to the settlements in Chiapas, the refugees notably rejected relocation because of fear for the loss of ties with their home country. A letter from *Monteflor* camp to the UN Secretary General for instance insisted on the refugees’ cultural identity as indigenous Guatemalan peasants. “El irnos al Estado de Campeche representa integrarnos a la Sociedad Mexicana y eso no es nuestro pensamiento, ni nuestra voluntad, por que bien sabemos que somos guatemaltecos.

²¹⁰ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Pico de Oro dirigida a la Parroquia de Ocosingo, 16.05.1984.

²¹¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Boca de Chajul dirigida al Monseñor Sergio Mendez Arceo, 25.05.1984. [Author’s translation]

²¹² AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Boca de Chajul dirigida al Presidente de la Republica Mexicana, 24.05.1984. [Trans: Moreover, thinking about the fact that the relocation costs millions of pesos for transportation, our opinion is not to spend it for transport, but to spend it for food, medicine and clothes.]

²¹³ S. Aguayo et al., *Los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en Campeche y Quintana Roo*, Mexico, UNRISD, El Colegio de México, 1987, 30–31.

Trabajadores, campesinos indígenas”.²¹⁴ In fact, the refugees put forward their nationality, ethnicity and occupation as key facets to their identity in most of the letters. Hence, they refer to themselves either as indigenous Guatemalans, or simply, *campesinos*. Even if all camps were located on Mexican territory, the degree of integration in Mexican society depended – in view of the refugee representatives from *Monteflor* – on the location of the settlement. Since most refugee camps in Chiapas were in close proximity to the Guatemalan-Mexican border, the claim to avoid any acculturation was thus related to the distance of the refugee camps from their respective home communities. In a letter asking Bishop Ruiz Garcia for support, the *Boca de Chajul* community, possibly the most eager epistlers among the camps, stated that “we don’t want to be retrieved further from our home country [...] as we are tied to our lands and wish to go back to Guatemala.”²¹⁵ The fear of losing ties with their home country was of particular importance to the refugees because of existing communal structures among them, the relocation affecting entire communities rather than individual inhabitants of the camps. Those who managed to regroup in Mexican exile thus faced the uncertainty of not knowing to what extent they could maintain their ties to Guatemala, both in light of the prolonged exile and the spatial dynamics pushing them away from their villages of origin. Vincent Coudert, who conducted anthropological fieldwork in five refugee camps in early 1984, framed the proximity of the refugees’ home as a *‘toile de fonds’* which constituted “*le symbole de l’espoir qui anime et maintient les réfugiés dans la pénible attente*” for their eventual return.²¹⁶

5.4. The struggle against disintegration

Summarizing the petitioning of the refugees, especially the writing of the over 200 letters that remained unanswered, the San Cristobal Diocese states that:

The petitions and alternatives presented by the refugees are well-funded. Their petitions for solidarity are far away from irrationality. That is why they ask to be taken into consideration and that these measures are discussed with them. They ask to be heard, that commissions will be formed that analyze their situation. When writing to the Mexican President, they affirm that Mexico is a democratic country, so they cannot hope more than attention to their petitions.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Monteflor dirigida al Secretario general de la ONU, 16.05.1984. [Translation: Moving to Campeche equals integrating into Mexican Society, and that’s not our thought nor our will, as we know that we are Guatemalans, hard-working, indigenous farmers.]

²¹⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 411, Exp. 1, Carta del Campamento Boca de Chajul dirigida al Obispo Samuel Ruiz, 25.05.1984.

²¹⁶ V. Coudert, *Refuge, Réfugiés – des guatemalèques sur terre mexicaine*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1987, 118.

²¹⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 522, Exp. 2, La Reubicación Vista por los mismos refugiados, 6. [Author’s translation]

While the claims made by the refugees are arguably far from being irrational, it remains open to debate to what extent some arguments were well-funded. On the one hand, especially regarding the actual transferal and circumstances in Campeche, disinformation prevailed among the refugees and inhibited a more objective decision-making process. On the other hand, the opposition towards the relocation cannot be understood on purely rational or material grounds. Simply put, the camps on the Yucatán peninsula could in no way substitute the refugees' familiarity with the human and climatic environment in Chiapas as well as the proximity to their home communities on the other side of the border. In a March 1986 interview, the general coordinator of COMAR Oscar Gonzalez claimed that the relocation aimed at settling the refugees "in a zone equivalent of their places of origin, namely the *Maya Zone* of Campeche and Quintana Roo."²¹⁸ Instead of justifying the transferal, the statement reflects a profound misunderstanding of the circumstances of exile by abusing an ethnic construction that, to simplify, claims that all of Mesoamerica can be considered equivalent to the home communities of the refugees.

The essence of the debate thus focused on the idea that any relocation of the refugees outside of the states of Chiapas would lead to a loss of their distinct cultural identity as indigenous Guatemalan peasants. In line with these fears, the Diocese framed the relocation as a potential "ethnocide", stating that "the dispersion and disintegration of communities on Mexican territories would lead to the loss of autochthonous cultural heritage."²¹⁹ Based on his experience of visiting the refugee camps situated alongside the border, Coudert criticizes an oversimplified understanding of the acculturation of refugee communities:

Lorsque l'on parle de déracinement, on comprend souvent à tort à mon avis, une perte de racines. Arrêtons-nous donc un instant sur ces racines. Quelles sont-elles dans le cas présent ? [...] Ces familles se sont installées dans les camps en emportant avec elles un certain bagage qui, bien qu'impalpable, est précisément riche d'un certain nombre de racines. Les racines ne se limitent pas à un contenu matériel, il y aussi, bien entendu, les traditions et tout l'héritage commun que l'on nomme aussi patrimoine culturel que véhicule la mémoire collective.²²⁰

In other words, the author rejects the position by the Church that a change of location, that is to say the material environment the refugees settle in, would lead to an ethnocide. Rather, he

²¹⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 37, Exp. 1, Claudio Amador Acuña, "Entrevista a Oscar González, coordinador general de la Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados" *El Día*, 10.03.1986.

²¹⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 524, Exp. 2, Resultados del sentir de los refugiados en la frontera, ante la consulta hecha por la Diócesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, 7. [Author's translation]

²²⁰ Coudert, *Refuge, Réfugiés*, 120–121.

framed the refugee community as “*un group d’attente*”, as the hope to return to Guatemala underlies the refugees’ fight against disintegration.²²¹ Given the large distance between Guatemala and the Yucatán peninsula, the question remains how the refugees manage to maintain their unity as a *group d’attente* in Campeche. However, both arguments align when considering the refugee groups initially agreeing to their relocation. As observed by the Diocese, the first Guatemalans in Campeche were “the most uprooted from their community, people influenced by occidental society who have become individualized and alienated by their indigenous cultures.”²²² Put differently, the refugees who voluntarily decided to relocate were neither losing any autochthonous cultural heritage, nor, based on their individual choices, formed part of a communitarian *groupe d’attente* for their return to Guatemala. Therefore, it is not surprising that, according to Garcia, refugees from Campeche were less likely to repatriate in the late 1990s than their counterparts who remained in Chiapas.²²³

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 131–132.

²²² AHDSC, Carpeta 524, Exp. 2, Resolutados del sentir de los refugiados en la frontera, ante la consulta hecha por la Diócesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, 3.

²²³ Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 65.

6. AN (UN-)HOLY ALLIANCE: USES AND ABUSES OF REFUGEE VOICES AND PORTRAYALS

Even if we live through a period of deteriorating relations between the state and its people, the [San Cristobal] Church always supported the position that the people have a right to participate in the decisions that affect their existence.

-Samuel Ruiz, *Mi Trabajo Pastoral*, 80.

In an extended report by *La Jornada* entitled “Refugees, a Challenge for the Mexican Political System”, Sergio Aguayo discussed the deadlock of the relocation process as of May 1985. Regarding the complicated relationship between the Diocese and the Mexican government, the author notes that:

There is no doubt that the Diocese has been the most critical and constant voice facing the state policies in this regard. Notwithstanding, it has also been recognized that COMAR attempted to establish a more positive relationship with the refugees in order to manifest the good will of the Mexican government.²²⁴

Rather than a direct confrontation between both actors, the debate largely took place at the expense of the Guatemalan refugees, whose interest the San Cristobal Church and COMAR claimed to defend. Whereas both actors sought to establish or maintain a relation of confidence with the refugees, it is intriguing to examine how these relations of confidence were used to reproduce and instrumentalize refugee voices. In line with Aguayo’s observation that “in the debate over the relocation, the discourses of each actors have their own merits and logics”, the question emerges to what extent the respective actors made use of misinformation and propaganda in order to influence the public portrayal of the refugees.²²⁵ This final chapter thus seeks to analyze the uses and abuses of the refugee voices by the Diocese and the Mexican government, examining to what extent not only the representation, but also the production of these voices were biased in favour of either the advocates or the opponents of the relocation.

6.1. Promotion, propaganda and national television

Already in May 1984, after the overmodest success of the relocation campaign in its first month, the Secretary of Defence noticed that a “propaganda campaign” among the refugees would be necessary. As a result of the propaganda, SEDENA hoped, “refugees would accept

²²⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 44, Exp. 1, Sergio Auayo Quezada, „Refugiados, una prueba para el sistema político mexicano“, Perfil de la Jornada, 23.05.1985. [Author’s translation]

²²⁵ *Ibid.* [Author’s translation]

relocation with pleasure and sympathy, thanking the Mexican government for its preoccupation for their safety and well-being.”²²⁶ However, in light of their discord with the relocation policy and organizational changes, all of COMAR’s personnel working along the Mexico’s southern border resigned the same month, which further “accentuat[ed] COMAR’s identity crisis.”²²⁷ For the “work of convincing”, the COMAR coordinator thus employed a new multidisciplinary team of up to 33 members, notably medical doctors, sociologists, anthropologists and economists.²²⁸ Among other goals, the campaign aimed at persuading the refugee population that the standard of living in Campeche and Quintana Roo was significantly superior to Chiapas, promising that large houses and cultivable lands would be expecting them on the Yucatán peninsula.²²⁹ In order to make their claims and promises more credible, COMAR had a song performed to the refugees, whose lyrics leave no doubt about the propagandistic content:

Transfer them to another state, where they can work, will not be bothered and where everyone can live in peace, that was the preoccupation, of those from the UNHCR and COMAR. The agents of the camps, with non-offensive words, conversed with the people, promoting the relocation, and already they are resettling, to the place where they rebuild their lives.²³⁰

In addition, the Refugee Commission also employed Guatemalans who would praise the resettlement in the refugees’ mother tongue. In a March 1985 article by *La Jornada*, a refugee woman testified that “they [local COMAR coordinators] brought Guatemalans we did not know who talked to us in our language telling us to leave [...] but they bought them.”²³¹ This raises significant doubts about the effectiveness of the more elaborate propaganda methods, as they still faced the difficulty of overcoming the refugees’ mistrust towards COMAR.

Promises including the distribution of television sets and mattresses unsurprisingly lead to high expectations of the refugees, who were disappointed once they were allowed to visit the camps on the Yucatán peninsula. When over 400 refugees organized in various commissions went to see the camps in Campeche and Quintana Roo in July 1985, a large

²²⁶ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 495, “Problemática Existente en el Sureste del País”, 11.07.1984. [Author’s translation]

²²⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, “En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción”, *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15. [Author’s translation]

²²⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 57, Exp. 1, Felicitas Pliego, “El Traslado de los Refugiados Alivió la Tensión en la Frontera México-Guatemala”, *Excelsior*, 04.10.2015.

²²⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 44, Exp. 1, Sergio Auayo Quezada, „Refugiados, una prueba para el sistema político mexicano”, *Perfil de la Jornada*, 23.05.1985. See also Equipo SEFCA Costa Rica, *Nuestra Historia del Refugio*, 68; Iglesia Guatemalteca en Exilio, *Nosotros Conocemos nuestra Historia*, 121.

²³⁰ AHDSC, Carpeta 909, Exp. 1, J. Isabel Luciano Aparicio, *Canto*, 16.01.1985. [Author’s translation]

²³¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 41, Exp. 1, Andrea Becerill, “Los Refugiados de Guatemala no son una carga para el Estado”, *La Jornada*, 23.02.1985.

majority decided that they remained opposed to transferal despite the apparent improvements made over the past year.²³² In a testimony, the delegations of the camps of *Zapotal* and *Sinaloa* do not hide the disappointment at what they considered to be false promises on behalf of COMAR:

También ofrecieron casas hechas y luz y agua pero todo lo que dicen todo es una mentira porque los ranchos o casas los mismos refugiados los están construyendo y la teja de las casas tampoco no es como lo ofresen porque dicen que no son casas de carton y ahora que fue la comisión se dio cuenta que las casas están en la misma condición porque las casas siempre son de carton.²³³

Besides the promotion of the relocation, coercive methods were still being used against the refugees after the *Puerto Rico* incident in July 1984. Aware of the negative repercussions of the use of force, however, governmental authorities were more careful not to make excessive use of violence or leave any traces thereof. Rather, the relocation process was being portrayed as calm and organized, presupposing that the refugees agreed to the procedure. As testified by residents of the *Chajul* camp, the process would be partially documented by camera, yet only when the circumstances were considered appropriate by COMAR. Put differently, “they only took pictures when they handed out gifts and when we were all seated in the boats [...]. But when they dragged us out of the camp and beat us, the camera remained unused.”²³⁴

As illustrated by the relocation of the *Chajul* camp, the governmental propaganda campaigns not only sought to convince the refugees to transfer to Campeche, arguably with somewhat modest success. Rather, the government also made use of these campaigns in order to justify the relocation to the Mexican public. In mid-July 1984, a television report entitled “Guatemalan Refugees” was broadcasted throughout the country:

From the 15th until the 19th of July, the Ministry of Interior, through Radio, Television and Cinematography (RTC) projected in all TV channels a report „Guatemalan Refugees“, made by Televisa star journalist Juan Ruiz Healy. Objective? Show the true situation of what is happening in Chiapas and Campeche. The program illustrated

²³² GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, „Caminante Informaciones“, August 1985, 2–3.

²³³ AHDSC, Carpeta 346, Exp. 5, Información de la Comisión del Campamento Zapotal y Sinaloa fue a Campeche – Quintana Roo. [Trans: They also offered us built houses with electricity and water, but it was all lies because the refugees themselves had to build the farms and houses and the roofs of the buildings are not how they promised either because they said they were not made out of carton, but the Commission realized that the houses were in the same condition, they are always made out of carton.]

²³⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 516, Exp. 1, La Reubicación de Chajul, Testimonio de los Refugiados, December 1984. [Author’s translation]

the point of view of the Mexican government through COMAR and the UN, [...] as both agreed about the necessity of the relocation.²³⁵

Whereas the original footage could not be consulted for this thesis, several secondary sources critically examine the content of the latter. According to an *Unomásuno* article published on 4th August 1984, the report particularly insisted on the “deplorable conditions of those who had to be helped immediately and placed further away from the border”, that is to say the refugees settled in Chiapas. Neither mentioning the pressure exercised on the refugees to relocate nor the *Puerto Rico* incident, the report focused on the apparent rainfalls, sickness and hunger that affected the refugee settlements. The author of the article, Pedro Mayorga, therefore accused the reporter Juan Ruiz Healy of producing a manipulative work commissioned by the state-owned television monopoly.²³⁶ In a similar way, an article that had been published two weeks earlier in *Proceso* framed the program as “government propaganda”, raising the question who the report sought to address:

To whom is Guatemalan Refugees, the documentary from the Television Institute, shown in all canals and made and interpreted by Jean Ruiz Healy, directed to? By far not to its most visible interlocutors, the Guatemalan peasants „who came to escape the situation of violence in their country.” They don’t have to be convinced, but their intransigence and their auto-destructive and resentful objection. Maybe the addressee is the public opinion, not to convince them about the necessity of the government policy, the relocation to Campeche of the refugees, but to inform them about a misunderstood generosity.²³⁷

In sum, the author claimed that the documentary aimed at informing the Mexican public about the ungratefulness of the refugees vis-à-vis the government’s generosity. According to *Proceso*, most of the footage as well as the interviews depicted a dramatic situation in the refugee camps, its inhabitants however being portrayed as unwilling to, maybe even incapable of, understanding that the relocation would significantly improve their situation. The author thus questioned the portrayal of the agency of the refugees in the documentary, reduced to ungrateful and unintelligible victims. “Why are only two minutes accorded to the refugees so they can argue in intermediary Spanish about the causes of their uprooting and

²³⁵ UNHCR, Series 2, Fonds 11, 600.MEX Programming and Protection, Vol. 9, Folio 612: C. Fazio, „Se detuvo el traslado a Campeche; los guatemaltecos denuncian medidas de terror“ *Proceso Nacional*, 24.08.1984. [Author’s translation]

²³⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 44, Exp. 1, Pedro Mayorga, „Los Refugiados, entre Ixcán y Televisa (un tema que nos interesa a todos)“, *Unomásuno*, 04.08.1984.

²³⁷ C. Monsiváis, „Propaganda Sermonera: „Hay que salvarlos! Hay que salvarlos de aquí!““, *Proceso*, 21.07.1984. [Author’s translation]

the remaining 43 minutes dedicated to convincing the public of the stupidity of these indigenous people?”²³⁸ One of the key messages repeated throughout the report, “We have to save them!”, not only mirrored the alleged generosity of the Mexican government, but the idea that refugees had to be saved from themselves. In a circular letter dated 20th June 1984, less than a month before the publication of the reportage, the *Comité Cristiano* criticized the work of the journalist Ruiz Healy, accusing him of producing the documentary for the Mexican authorities. Especially the lack of objectivity as well as the interrogatory style of interviews was denounced by the Diocese:

The lack of objectivity was obvious for those who got to observe their work. One example: In the camps located in the rainforest he filmed some huts and wooden constructions while he was claiming that these were made of pure mahogany. [...] His interviews had the character of police interrogation. They did not miss any opportunity to place affirmations in the mouth of the interviewees they never made.²³⁹

Fearing that the footage would probably lead to a misrepresentation of the refugees on national television, the *Comité* explicitly called upon all “Christians and honest people” not to be surprised by the biased and manipulated information presented by Ruiz Healy.²⁴⁰

Be it the propaganda among refugees or the use of manipulated documentaries, the government’s approach towards the refugees is highly revealing in terms of how the latter were portrayed in public. In both cases, the idea prevailed that the refugees did not know what lies at their best interest, their decision having to be guided by the government who portrayed itself as a ‘savior’ for those incapable of exiting the deplorable situation they found themselves in. The patronizing relations are further emphasized through a portrayal of the refugees as barely being able to articulate their arguments to remain in Chiapas, which stands in sharp contrast to the letters analyzed in the previous chapter. In line with this approach, COMAR initiated a campaign to inhibit the diffusion of the refugees’ opinion and started publishing informational bulletins implying that the opposition against relocation only concerned a minority of the refugee population.²⁴¹ Being one of the strongest critiques of Mexico’s asylum policy, journalist Aguilar Zinser argues that the authorities had never taken the refugees and their concerns seriously. “After all in the view of the public officials, the refugees are nothing more than scared and ignorant indigenous people, starving beings incapable of deciding for themselves, atavistic and archaic cultures, historically decimated

²³⁸ Monsiváis, „Propaganda Sermonera”, *Proceso*, 21.07.1984. [Author’s translation]

²³⁹ AHDSC, Carpeta 1176, Exp. 1, CCS, „Comunicado”, 20.06.1984. [Author’s translation]

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ AHDSC, Carpeta 579, Exp. 7, Laetitia Arguelles, „La reubicación de los refugiados, riesgo para nuestra política exterior”, *Punto*, 09.07.1984.

and manipulated”.²⁴² Rather than using the refugee voices to sustain its asylum policy, the government thus decided to delegitimize any voices raised against the relocation as voices of incomprehension, promoting the idea that the refugees did not understand to what extent the relocation would not only constitute an act of generosity but also be in their best interest.

6.2. Sanctuary activism and refugee testimony

The sanctuary activists were, just like the Mexican government, accused of using propaganda and spreading misinformation. While arguing for the implementation of a campaign to promote the relocation, the Ministry of Defense criticized the ‘progressive’ clergy for acting in diametrical opposition to the government’s interest with its own propaganda:

It is necessary to underline the action of the progressive clergy who continues its propaganda to raise awareness among the refugees not to be relocated, as they claim that the new areas are unhealthy and that they would be placed further away from their communities or origin.²⁴³

In the same vein, the conservative newspaper *Excelsior* highlighted in October 1985 that the “Church is blamed for the resistance to change”, notably since the *Comité Cristiano’s* unconditional aid to the refugees is considered “a deliberate action to negatively influence the Guatemalans’ attitude towards the relocation.” For instance, the newspaper mentioned the allegedly excessive donation of food aid, leading the refugees to sell the surplus on the local market or even feed it to the animals, despite the poverty reigning in Chiapas.²⁴⁴ Hence, the sanctuary activism was perceived not only detrimental to state policies but also causing frictions within the population of Chiapas by privileging refugees over Mexicans. The position of the Diocese towards the relocation, however, had been known a long time before. The San Cristobal Church already conducted a survey in August 1983 among the refugee population living in the borderlands of southern Chiapas. Focusing on the potential assimilation of the refugees through a suppression of the camp structures, the consultation highlighted that the maintaining of the camp in Chiapas would be the best option for both the Mexican government and the refugees, permitting the latter “to save their community, their culture, their race and their lives.”²⁴⁵ When two functionaries of the UNHCR consulted the *Comité* about potential resettlement plans outside of the state of Chiapas in April 1984, the

²⁴² AHDSC, Carpeta 738, Exp. 1, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, “En Campeche las Cámaras, En Chiapas la Acción”, *Unomásuno*, 14.07.1984, 15. [Author’s translation]

²⁴³ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 539, Estudio de Estado Mayor, 16.07.1984. [Author’s translation]

²⁴⁴ AHDSC, Carpeta 57, Exp. 1, Felicitas Pliego, “El Traslado de los Refugiados Alivió la Tensión en la Frontera México-Guatemala”, *Excelsior*, 04.10.1984.

²⁴⁵ AHDSC, Carpeta 524, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, Resultado del sentir de los refugiados guatemaltecos en la frontera, 13.08.1983, 10.

CCS explained that there was no need for such measures since the border region was not subject to agricultural or political conflicts within the state of Chiapas. Instead, the *Comité* suggested that a franc and open dialogue between the Mexican government and the refugees should take place, a suggestion that was not welcomed:

In fact, neither the UNHCR nor the Mexican authorities ever talked to the refugees about the matter. The observations of the CCS did not receive the required attention. They only served to accuse the Church of promoting the opposition when in reality it aimed at serving with loyalty, warning about the difficulties.²⁴⁶

Three months later, the Diocese published a document entitled “The Relocation as Seen by the Refugees”, which was entirely based on the refugee letters, considered to include “well-funded arguments that support their petition.”²⁴⁷ However, since the voices and views of the refugees had been ignored the decision-making process, the Diocese repeatedly demonstrated that it “was obliged to lend its voice to those who were given none, expressing its pain in light of the danger the refugee brothers were exposed to.”²⁴⁸ Put differently, the San Cristobal Church reaffirmed its role as a mouthpiece for the refugees who were silenced in a process that was arguably path breaking for their future in Mexican exile and return to Guatemala.

Image 4: The Diocese’s Role in the Opposition against the Relocation



Source: AHDSC, Carpeta 750, Exp. 2, Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad de San Cristobal, “El Refugiado” 4, Agosto 1984.

²⁴⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 522, Exp. 1, Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, „¿Qué está pasando con los refugiados guatemaltecos en Chiapas?“, 6. [Author’s translation]

²⁴⁷ AHDSC, Carpeta 522, Exp. 2, Diocesis de San Cristobal, „La Reubicación Vista por los mismos refugiados.“ [Author’s translation]

²⁴⁸ AHDSC, Carpeta 928, Exp. 1, Obispo Samuel Ruiz Garcia, “Comunicado de Prensa”, 27.03.1985. [Author’s translation]

The cartoon published in the August 1984 newsletter *El Refugiado* illustrates the logic behind the Diocese lending its voice to the refugees. In fact, it seems that the depicted public official is not aware of what is happening right outside his window: the destruction of the refugee camps by the Mexican army. Therefore, he seems to be surprised by the publication of the Diocese, exclaiming his perplexity despite his previous lecture of other newspapers. The latter arguably did not put forth the same information as the San Cristobal Church, in line with its distinctive standpoint in support of refugees whose voices were not heard at an official or public level.

Whereas any causal relationships between the publication of testimony and the impact of the Diocese's critique of the relocation campaign is impossible to prove, it is still revelatory to consider how these testimonies were used as a support of the Diocese's claims in defense of the refugees. Analyzing the publications of the Diocese and the *Comité* is particularly revealing in this regard. In 1983, the *Coordinadora de Ayuda a los Refugiados*, a consortium of the San Cristobal and other dioceses participating in sanctuary activism, for instance published an audiotape with refugee testimonies in order to raise awareness about the refugees' motivation to seek asylum and about their living conditions alongside the southern border of Mexico:

One objective that moves us to present them: to raise awareness about the reality the Guatemalan refugees live in their country and has motivated thousands of them to seek refuge in Mexican territory to save their lives. At the same time, raise awareness about their actual situation on Mexican territory.²⁴⁹

Similar to the technique employed by US Sanctuary activists, the diffusion of testimony was used as a means to alter the public opinion regarding the refugees' presence in Mexican territory.²⁵⁰ Rather than petitioning for open borders, however, the diffusion of refugee voices during the height of the debate on the relocation, mainly between April and September 1984, expressed the ecclesiastical criticism against the government. Both the Diocese's newsletter *Caminante* and the *Comité's* newsletter *El Refugiado* published extensive testimonies and letters concerning the forced resettlement of the refugees. According to Garcia, "the Diocese represented the refugees' interests through the documentation of their experiences [...] and by representing their interests in the news media and before public opinion."²⁵¹ In fact, *Caminante* was not only distributed throughout Mexico, but also translated to English in order to be distributed to the United States. For example, the English version of the July 1984

²⁴⁹ GNIB, Coordinadora de Ayuda a los Refugiados, „Testimonios de Refugiados Guatemaltecos en México“, April 1983. [Author's translation]

²⁵⁰ Westerman, "Central American Refugee Testimony", 225–227; Taylor, "“You don't believe me?”", 46.

²⁵¹ Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 71.

newsletter includes a 14-page testimony about the burning of *Puerto Rico* camp and an urgent appeal to international solidarity.²⁵² Beyond the representation of the refugees in its own publications, Pablo Iribarren argued in his diaries that the refugees have been put in direct contact with national and international actors, both media and politicians:

Through its relations, the Diocese furnished the news media in North America and Europe with information. There has also been a permanent relation with domestic media. Key politicians of certain countries had direct contact to the refugees through the Diocese.²⁵³

In other words, the Diocese acted as a channel of information and contact between refugees, politicians and the media. In this way, the San Cristobal Church had not only significant influence on the emergence of the public debate surrounding the relocation, but also on how the refugees and their voices were represented in domestic and international media.

When Iribarren claimed that the “Diocese put its capacity at the service of the refugees”, he considered the San Cristobal Church to be a disinterested intermediary between domestic and international actors and the refugees, whose interests it claimed to defend.²⁵⁴ Contrasting this discourse, the Ministry of Defense claimed in November 1984 that the sanctuary activism of the Diocese sought to “attract the refugees to its credo”, thus abusing the presence of the refugees in order to promote liberationist ideology and support the subversive forces in Guatemala.²⁵⁵ In contrast to either claim, the Diocese arguably adopted a more contrasted role. On the one hand, the use of testimonies and consultations among refugees could have been considered a source of legitimacy for the Diocese. Hence, the Diocese was the only actor who could claim to act both in defense and on behalf of the refugees. On the other hand, the Diocese established a quasi information monopoly of the refugee voices. The publication thereof raises questions to what extent the Diocese could hold up to its promises and not interfere in any political decision-making processes.²⁵⁶

The more fundamental difference between the Diocese and *Gobernación* however lies not in their portrayal of *what* the refugees want, but of *who* they are and *what* they are capable of. In a more elaborate way, the Diocese answered to these questions in a report published in June 1985:

²⁵² GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, “Caminante News Items”, July 1984.

²⁵³ Iribarren Pascal, „Experiencia: Proceso de la Diocesis de San Cristobal“, 80–81. [Author’s translation]

²⁵⁴ Iribarren Pascal, „Experiencia: Proceso de la Diocesis de San Cristobal“, 81.

²⁵⁵ AGN, SEDENA, Caja 19, Exp. 62, Hoja 545, Estudio de Estado Mayor, November 1984.

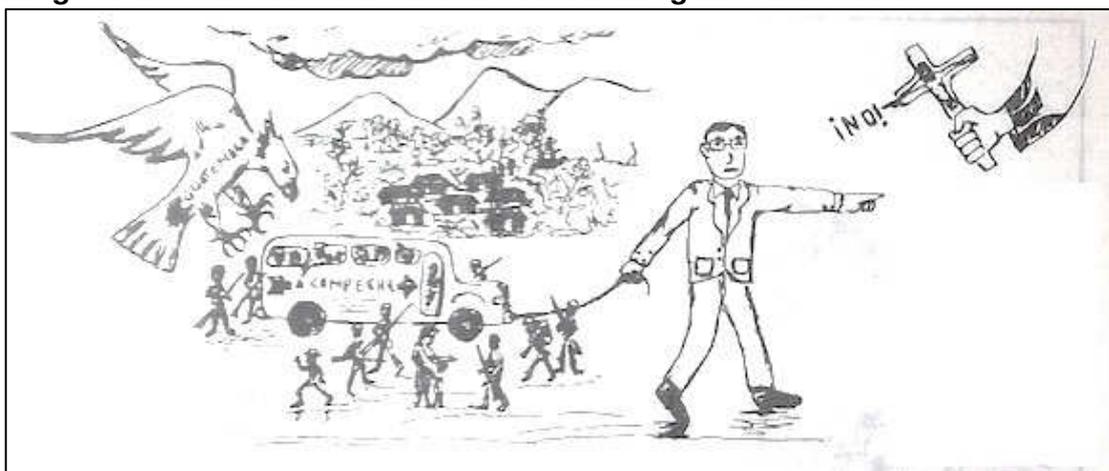
²⁵⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 544, Exp. 1, CCS, „Informe sobre la Coyuntura Actual“, June 1985, 7.

Leaving the people their own responsibilities, the Church discovered the intelligence and wisdom of the people, and in practice it realized the truth in what it prayed: The poor people are human, intelligent, wise, prudent, responsible and capable of choosing their own destiny. Following this idea, the Diocese does not claim to decide on behalf of the refugees on any matter that concern them. Like it did not decide about their arrival in Mexico, their communal organization or work, it cannot decide about their relocation either.²⁵⁷

In other words, the Diocese's approach was diametrically opposed to the one adopted by the Mexican government, who considered the refugees' victimhood was conditioned by their unwillingness to exit the circumstances they have seemingly put themselves in. In sharp contrast, the Diocese's liberationist discourse underlined the capacity of the refugees to decide their own destiny.

A cartoon published in the August 1984 newsletter *El Caminante* summarizes the conflict between the Diocese and the Mexican government regarding their defense of the refugees' interests. Somewhat God-like, the hand holding a crucifix representing the San Cristobal Church appears to be the only opposition to the on-going relocation process, exclaiming its hostility towards the forced resettlement. In other words, the Diocese positioned itself as a key actor to be dealt with in what primarily was a political battle between Guatemala, depicted as an eagle, and Mexico, embodied by the soldiers and the public official pulling the refugee bus. Based on the cartoon, it remains unknown to what extent either actor actually defended the refugees and respected the latter's will:

Image 5: The San Cristobal Church's Activism against Relocation



Source: AHDSC, Carpeta 750, Exp. 3, "El Refugiado" 5, August 1984, 2.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* [Author's translation]

The refugees' apparent lack of agency formed an integral part of the debate surrounding the forced resettlement. The domestic and international media hardly represented the refugees as protagonists in the dispute. Rather, the public opinion was being informed by voices that suited the Mexican government and the Diocese. They respectively portrayed the refugees, to simplify, as the ignorant and ungrateful indigenous peasants or the victims of oppression and marginalization. Even without assessing the veracity of these claims, the former arguably aimed at either manipulating or silencing the refugees' alleged voices of incomprehension while the latter sought to represent and defend their petitioning.

The mitigated success of the relocation campaign reveals that the opposing discourses and policies surrounding the resettlement process did not bring forth any winners. Whereas the Mexican government's asylum policy failed to be thoroughly implemented, the refugees found themselves divided between those communities remaining in Chiapas and those relocated to Campeche and Quintana Roo. According to the Diocese, international solidarity with the refugees contributed to the emergence of an opposition movement that was partly responsible for the failure of the Mexican government's resettlement policy:

Probably the lack of understanding of the lives and cultures of the refugees as well as an underevaluation of its importance for the international solidarity movement [...] led COMAR to try to accelerate the relocation process with means that caused great pain to the refugees and led to the emergence of a strong opposition movement.²⁵⁸

The San Cristobal Church was threatened and intimidated because of the way in which it headed and shaped the solidarity movement. The beforementioned abduction of *Comité* personnel during the *Puerto Rico* incident was one of the most noteworthy examples of the explicit targeting of sanctuary activists. Strong public criticism against the Diocese also gained momentum in light of the latter's public exposure in opposition to the government's asylum policies. Accusations against the "communist clergy" and "the red bishop", referring to the Diocese's alleged support of subversive processes in Chiapas, were indeed already common before Bishop Ruiz Garcia was blamed for the Zapatista insurgency which took place a decade later.²⁵⁹ Yet, the Diocese also received expressions of solidarity in light of its highly publicized sanctuary activism. Be it financial or moral support, the *Comité* was both contributor and beneficiary of what the Diocese considered an 'international solidarity movement'. Describing the solidarity processes of the mid-1980s, Iribarren states that "when Christian solidarity is offered unconditionally, the Holy Spirit awakens solidarity of other

²⁵⁸ GNIB, Diocesis de San Cristobal de las Casas, "Caminante: Informaciones", January 1985.

²⁵⁹ Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 173; Fazio, *Samuel Ruiz*, 166; AHDSC, Carpeta 762, Expediente 2, Eduardo Ruiz Healy, "Cuidado: Incendian a Chiapas", *Impacto*, 19.05.1983, 58.

people, both Churches and individuals, when one goes through suffering and despair.”²⁶⁰ If solidarity is indeed a contagious process, then the Diocese and the refugees were beyond doubt the ones who benefitted most from it.

²⁶⁰ Iribarren Pascal, „Experiencia: Proceso de la Diocesis de San Cristobal“, 81. [Author’s translation]

7. CONCLUSION

When Pope Francis visited San Cristobal de las Casas in February 2016, he visited the grave of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, who died in 2011, 10 years after his retirement from the head of the Diocese. In a speech held in front of the Cathedral to the indigenous communities, the Pope addressed the issue of oppression how it is reflected in the Exodus literature:

The Law of the Lord is perfect [...]: *reconforta el alma, hace sabio al sencillo, alegra el corazón, es luz para alumbrar el camino*. This is the law the people of Israel had received from Moses, a law that helped the people of God to live in the liberty they called for. Law that wanted to be a guiding light for their steps and accompany the pilgrimage of the people. A people that has experienced slavery and despotism of the Pharaoh, had experienced suffering and mistreatment until God said it was enough, he said “No more!”²⁶¹

The very idea that God says “no more!” to the abuses suffered by the people is illustratively reflected in the last cartoon (Image 5) used by the *Comité Cristiano*. Beyond the ‘theology of Exodus’, the *Pontifex’s* speech included other liberationist elements, stating that “a desire for land is inscribed in the heart and memory of many of our people, in a time when the devaluation will be surpassed by fraternity, injustice will be overcome with solidarity and violence will be replaced by peace.”²⁶² More than three decades after the arrival of the Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas and two decades after the publication of the *Cor Onum* guidelines “Refugees, A Challenge to Solidarity”, the ecclesiastical discourse in Chiapas appears to remain the same. So too, if not worse, is the humanitarian crisis provoked by the ever-growing migrant and refugee flows through Mexico. According to Amnesty International, the mostly Central American migrants and asylum-seekers are being subject to “mass abductions, extortion, disappearances and other abuses” by criminal gangs and public authorities during their journey towards the North.²⁶³ On a more positive note, sanctuary activists remain an important actor in support and defence of the refugees. In reaction to the worsening crisis, the bishops of southern Mexico launched an appeal in January 2015 entitled “*No a la indiferencia ante el drama de la migración!*”, calling upon Church, state and civil society to show solidarity to those brothers and sisters crossing the country.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Oficina de Prensa de la Santa Sede, “Homilía del Papa Francisco en San Cristóbal de las Casas”, 15 Feb. 2016, available at : <http://papafranciscoenmexico.org/visita/texto+omoiia+san+cristobal> (last visited 8 May 2016).

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Amnesty International, *Report 2015 / 16: Mexico*, London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2016, 252.

²⁶⁴ Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, “No a la indiferencia ante el drama de la migración”, Comunicado de Prensa, 30 Jan. 2015, available at: <http://www.cem.org.mx/contenido/557-no-a-la-indiferencia-ante-el-drama-de-la-migracion.html> (last visited 8 May 2016).

This thesis has analyzed the way in which the relocation can be situated in the complex relations between the San Cristobal Diocese and refugees on the one hand and the agency of the refugees in their opposition against the resettlement on the other. In doing so, the analysis has not sought to provide generalizable conclusions regarding past and current migratory crises in Mexico. Rather, a focus on the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas permitted to elaborate on a field of unresolved tensions between discourses of solidarity and national security that may still be relevant today. The spatial logics behind the resettlement towards the Yucatán peninsula arguably exacerbated the tensions in the triangular relationship between Diocese, state and refugees. In their letters and petitions, the refugees accommodated both the discourses of solidarity and national security, proposing a relocation within the state of Chiapas while calling for ecclesiastical support for their opposition against resettlement to Campeche and Quintana Roo. The refugees largely constructed a discourse of belonging to Guatemala, suggesting that any displacement within the Mexican territory would result in a permanent local integration, and therefore, a loss of cultural identity. Whereas the influence of the governmental and ecclesiastical discourses on the refugees and their standpoint is undeniable, this thesis also highlights how the refugee voices were increasingly instrumentalized in what became a public confrontation between the Diocese and the Mexican government. In sum, the outcome of the refugees' opposition was considerably successful, with less than half of the refugees being transferred away from Chiapas.

The relocation campaign brought to the fore the contentious spatial logics that underlie the establishment of refugee camps. By resettling the refugees domestically, the Mexican government decided to establish the camps where it was considered the most convenient in both socio-economic and political terms, at the risk of disrespecting the will of the refugees as well as complicating their future repatriation. Put differently, in a context where asylum seekers were considered a security threat, *raison d'État* justified exceptional measures that defied the refugees' human rights. Besides an example of the risks of a large-scale relocation campaign, the analysis of the Guatemalan Exile in Mexico is also revelatory in terms of the local integration of the refugees. After the end of the repatriation campaign, in June 1998, the Mexican government initiated a process of definite integration of those former refugees who wished to remain in Chiapas.²⁶⁵ In a more long-term perspective, the question thus emerges to what extent the refugees still managed to constitute a *groupe d'attente* after almost two decades in Mexican exile. Whereas it is known that refugees from Yucatán were less likely to repatriate than those from Chiapas, further studies on the impact of the resettlement on the processes of integration could reveal new insights regarding the spatial

²⁶⁵ R.A. Hernández Castillo, *Sur Profundo: identidades indígenas en la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala*, Mexico, CIESAC, 2012, 119–120.

nature of the politics of belonging as well as the perseverance of the discourses surrounding the maintenance of cultural identity in exile.

Beyond the focus on the relocation, this thesis has analyzed the approach of an *ad-hoc* refugee advocate. The sanctuary activism was largely based on a theological reflection, including but not limited to the reinterpretation of the Exodus literature. Given its preferential option for the poor and its legacy in the support of the oppressed and marginalized, it was of little surprise that the San Cristobal Diocese mobilized for the cause of the Guatemalan refugees. In a laudation to Bishop Samuel Ruiz's 25th anniversary as head of the Diocese, *Don Samuel* was compared to his most famous predecessor, Bartolomé de las Casas, the 'saviour of the Indians'. The author of the laudation considered the sanctuary activism "to clearly show the bishop's compromise with the poor and the persecuted."²⁶⁶ In line with the title of Las Casas and the personal cult surrounding the influence of Bishop Ruiz Garcia, the question arises to what extent the latter could be considered the 'saviour of the refugees'. While this thesis analyzed how the Diocese managed to challenge official state discourse on refugees and contributed to their opposition against the relocation, the question remains to what extent the alleged 'saviour' benefited from its public positioning; not only in terms of financial and political support but also in terms of its influence and increasing popularity in a state with the lowest adherence to the Catholic Church in Mexico.

This conclusion would be incomplete without mentioning the protagonists of this thesis, the Guatemalan refugees. Every migratory experience is inherently different, the analysis of a heterogeneous and anonymous actor thus poses significant methodological challenges. Without knowing *who* the refugees were nor *where* they came from or went, this thesis based its analysis on testimony and letters to lend a voice to those actors that, at first sight, seemed impossible to grasp. Hence, this thesis brought to the fore their agency independent from those actors who, in a more or less patronizing way, tried to act on behalf of them. In line with the theological teachings of the Diocese, for many refugees the Mexican exile constituted a moment of liberation from oppression and violence. At the same time, the Guatemalan exodus also implied a loss of community, family and home. Summing up these tensions, Coudert asks in his concluding remarks "*Est-ce là le prix du refuge? Faut-il presque tout perdre pour gagner le droit à la vie?*"²⁶⁷ In their struggle against forced resettlement, the refugees emphasized that they had not lost everything. On the contrary, they manifested their unwillingness to lose their cultural identity, especially their continuous attachment to Guatemala. In doing so, they did not only prove their own resourcefulness, but they also defied the 'universalization' of the refugee identity by reclaiming their own.

²⁶⁶ AHDSC, Carpeta 869, Exp. 1, "Don Samuel Ruiz Garcia, Un Nuevo Fray Bartolomé de las Casas."

²⁶⁷ Coudert, *Refuge, Réfugiés*, 138.

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