

Nicaraguan Refugees in Costa Rica: 1980-1993

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the Nicaraguan refugee situation in Costa Rica during the 1980s. It first considers the differing rates of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica during the 1980s, then describes the refugees' ethnic and locational origin and relates these to subsequent settlement patterns in Costa Rica. The paper concludes by discussing the status of Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica as of mid-year 1993. After a slow start in 1980-82, migrant numbers peaked in 1983 and fluctuated during the remainder of the decade. By 1989 over 75 percent of all refugees in Costa Rica were from Nicaragua. Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica during the 1980s occurred in a series of waves that were composed of migrants from different ethnic groups and places of origin; Miskitu Indians and Creoles from the Atlantic Coast, rural mestizos from the eastern border regions, and urban mestizos from Managua and other cities of the Central Depression. These groups tended to locate differently within Costa Rica. Miskitu Indians and Creoles were placed in refugee camps, rural mestizos relocated to rural areas near the Nicaraguan border, and migrants from urban areas sought refuge in San José and other cities of the Valle Central.

Key Words: *Nicaraguan refugees, Costa Rica, Miskitu Indians, refugee policy, Central American conflict*

The 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua triggered a chain of events that led to major transformations of the country. Among these transformations were large scale changes in the Nicaraguan land tenure and economic structure, which set off a counter-revolution led by Contra rebels, who were mainly former members of the Guardia Nacional. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration in Washington worked hard to destabilize the Sandinista regime by economic and military means. In the case of the former, Washington banned Nicaraguan exports from U.S. and other markets, limited the ability of Nicaragua to import goods from Western Bloc countries, and inhibited the ability of the Sandinista regime to obtain financial aid from multi-lateral sources. On the military front, the Reagan administration actively supported the Nicaraguan Contra forces in their war against the Sandinistas and engaged directly in covert sabotage activities.

The combination of economic problems and civil unrest set off large-scale migration to the United States and other countries. One of the major destinations of Nicaraguan migrants was the neighboring country of Costa Rica. By 1989, ten years after the Sandinista revolution, the Office for Refugee Migration in Costa Rica had registered about 43,000 refugees, 34,000 of them Nicaraguan (Baldizón 1989; Mesoamerica 1989) (Figure 1).

This paper discusses the Costa Rican response to this unprecedented influx of refugees from a neighboring country. It also describes the refugees' ethnic background and places of origin within Nicaragua and relates these to their subsequent settlement patterns in Costa Rica. The paper concludes with a postscript discussing what has happened to Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica through the summer of 1993.

PATTERNS OF MIGRATION The relatively large number of around 34,000 officially registered Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica played an important role in the degree and manner of their ultimate absorption into the national economy and society. At the global scale this number is but a mere handful compared with refugees in Asian and African nations. But within Central America, and especially within Costa Rica, the number is significant. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Costa Rica hosted more official refugees than any other Central American nation. After 1983, the vast majority of these refugees were Nicaraguans who had become disillusioned with the Sandinistas. Further, although the official number of Nicaraguan refugees registered in 1989 was 34,000, unofficial estimates were that an additional 100,000 to 200,000 Nicaraguans were living illegally within Costa Rica (Ferris 1987; Mesoamerica 1989b). **[end p. 67]**

It is important to note that the majority of Nicaraguans went into the United States (Figure 2). Those who migrated to Costa Rica, however, were less likely to be affluent compared with those who went to the United States (although by no means were all Nicaraguans who went to the U.S. wealthy) and, by comparison, had a higher percentage of rural people than United States-bound refugees.

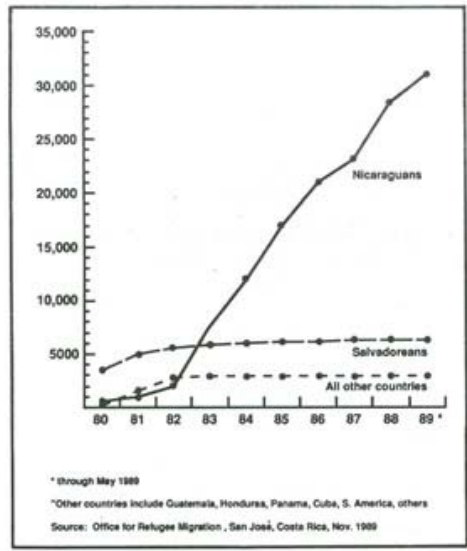


Figure 1. Registered refugees in Costa Rica, 1980-89.

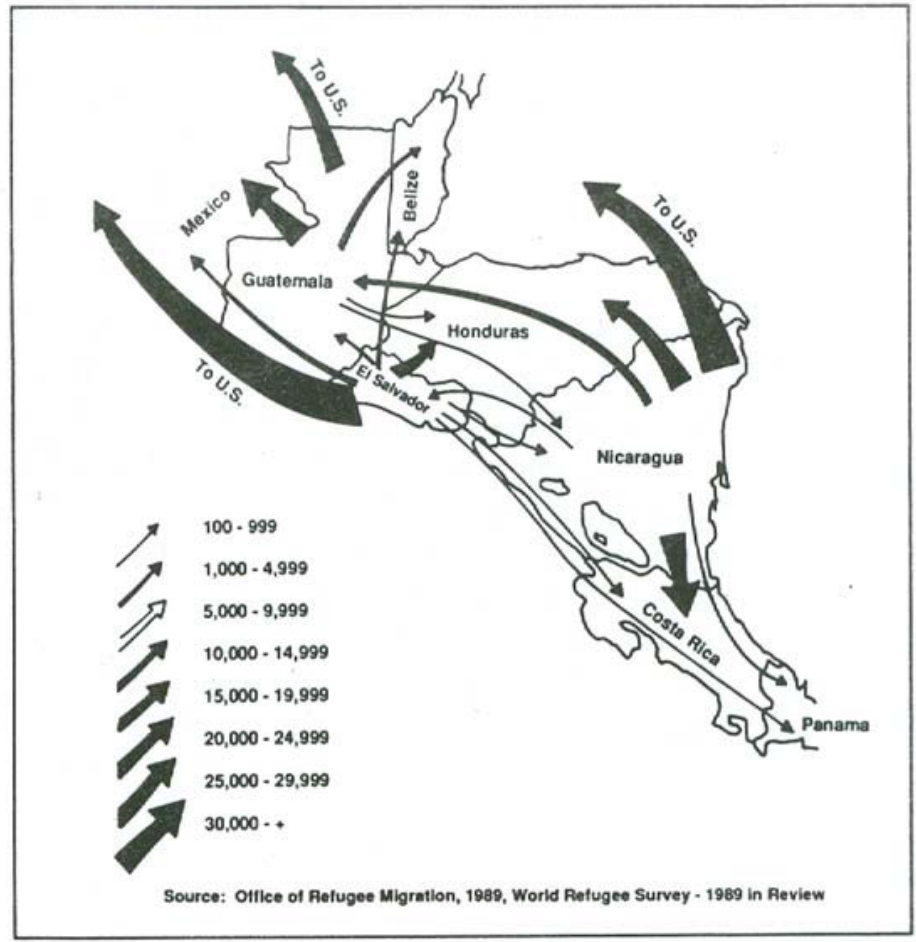


Figure 2. Central American refugee flows, 1980-1989.

The sources of data on numbers and characteristics of the Costa Rican refugee population vary greatly. This is due, in part, to the presence of a number of national and international organizations working within the country. For example, there were differing estimates from the Costa Rican government, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United States Department of State. Other sources included independent scholars, religious groups, and non-government humanitarian agencies inside and outside of Costa Rica. All these groups produced written reports on the refugees, and their estimates tended to differ (Peterson 1984; Torres-Rivas 1985; Oficina Internacional del Trabajo 1987; Fagen 1987; Universidad para la Paz y Universidad Nacional 1987; Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989; Zúñiga 1989).

Conflicting estimates are due in part to the definition of refugee used by various authors. Some definitions include all displaced people whether or not they are granted official recognition (Fagen 1987; Marmora 1988; Aguayo 1988). Others use only the official count given by the UNHCR and the Costa Rican government (Mesoamerica 1989a; Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989). And finally, some authors report various estimates (Torres-Rivas 1985; Weiss Fagen 1988).

Keeping refugee data current is made even more difficult when large numbers of refugees enter the host country on a daily basis from different entrance points. Although there were six primary controlled entrance points along the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border, there is a virtually un-patrolled 290 km (180 mi) border across which thousands of refugees slipped unnoticed. In addition, many Nicaraguans entered Costa Rica legally with passports and tourist visas. Once inside the country they allowed their visas to run out and simply did not return to Nicaragua. They often did not seek refugee status for several months, again making accurate counts nearly impossible to achieve. Further, after receiving refugee status [end p. 68] some refugees returned to their country without informing the international protection agencies or government organizations that arrange repatriation. Therefore, the official statistics may include some refugees who actually returned to their homeland and were no longer present in Costa Rica. Finally, time lags between writing and publishing render estimates on this constantly changing phenomenon inaccurate. After sorting through material available on the refugees and conducting research and interviews in Costa Rica at government and private offices as well as with the refugees in the *barrios*, I elected to use the UNHCR count and the Costa Rican government's estimates, which generally correspond, because they most accurately reflect the number of registered migrants.

Costa Rican Perceptions of Migrants

Numbers like those reported above, in a country of just 3 million, present-or are believed to present-a serious threat to that country's citizens. This threat was perceived principally on two fronts: (1) Costa Ricans viewed the influx of the Nicaraguans as a danger to their national peace and security as well as to the much lauded Costa Rican democracy. In sum, to many Costa Ricans the Nicaraguans were seen as importers of revolution. (2) Costa Ricans worried that the Nicaraguans would provide a cheaper labor source than Costa Rican nationals, thus taking jobs away from them.

In response to the steady growth of the refugee population, the representation of the Nicaraguan refugees in the Costa Rican media changed over time from acceptance with open arms to resentment and near hostility. Mario A. Ramírez (1989) noted that from 1984 to 1987 the reportage from Costa Rican daily newspapers that dealt with refugees was decidedly negative. My own perusal of the nation's two major papers, *La Nación* and *La República* showed that during the decade of the 1980s the negative perception of Nicaraguan refugees did indeed rise. For example, one journalist at first called all refugees victims of violence, but a short time later the tone reflected in the articles was that refugees were the source of violence rather than its victims (see, for example, *La Nación* 1983a, 1983b and 1985; *La República* 1983 and 1988; *La Prensa Libre* 1987; Larson 1991).

The large number of refugees in Costa Rica also affected their perception by the country's citizens, which in turn affected the process of refugee absorption. Costa Rica, with a long humanitarian tradition regarding displaced people, eagerly provided support for a small number of refugees. Hundreds of refugees from other Central American countries, South America, the Caribbean, and Europe already had been admitted into the country. The early migrants from Nicaragua were accepted and readily absorbed by the host population. They were considered legitimate refugees in need of protection and aid. However, the situation became very strained as their number rose and the new refugees were not absorbed into the country. Even their motives for entering Costa Rica became suspect. Interviews in 1989 with both Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans showed that Costa Ricans classified the Nicaraguans as loud, drunkards, and prone to violent behavior (Larson 1991).

Because of the growing negative perceptions both in the media and by the public, the Costa Rican government grew cautious and began to revise its policy pertaining to refugees, particularly in the area of employment.¹ Executive decrees of three Costa Rican presidential administrations (Carazo, Monge, and Arias) increasingly restricted refugees' right to work, which greatly reduced labor opportunities in both the wage-earning and self-employed sectors of the economy (Larson 1992).

REFUGEE POPULATION GROWTH

In the early 1980s Nicaraguan emigration was small compared to the flow of Salvadoran refugees. Beginning in 1983, however, the number of Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica grew progressively larger (Figures. 1 and 3), with peaks of registration in 1983, 1985, and 1988. By the late 1980s over 75 percent of all refugees in Costa Rica were Nicaraguan.

In 1980, 606 Nicaraguans received refugee status in Costa Rica, and 557 were admitted in 1981. In 1982, an additional 1,031 Nicaraguans were granted refugee status. In 1983 this number grew by over five times as 5,722 Nicaraguans were recognized as refugees. This raised the total number to 7,916. More than one-half of the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica in 1983 were Miskito Indians (Peterson 1984).²

Initially, experts were optimistic that emigration from Nicaragua would diminish by the mid-[end p. 69] 1980s. For example, Peterson (1984, 12) speculated " ... in Nicaragua, border areas are depopulated by now, so the outflow of refugees should subside in late 1983, and may even be reversed." This prediction soon proved incorrect. An additional 4,106 Nicaraguans fled to Costa Rica in 1984, by which time the flow had increased to a level that allowed the Nicaraguans to compete with the volume of Salvadoran refugees in the country. The following year 5,485 more Nicaraguans were admitted.

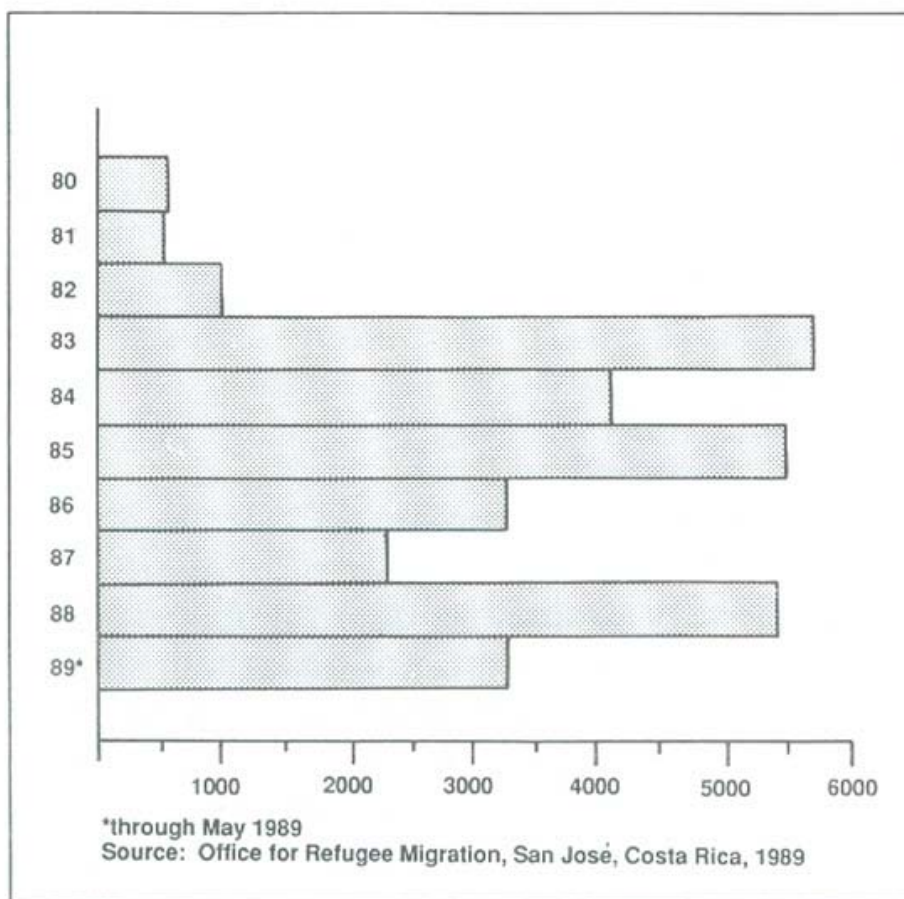


Figure 3. Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica by year of registration.

The influx of refugees, or at least the number of solicitants accepted as refugees under terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, dropped in 1986 and 1987. The number of Nicaraguan refugee admissions to Costa Rica for each of those years was 3,260 and 2,321, respectively. Although fewer were registered in 1986 and 1987, the total number of Nicaraguan refugees during those years still far outnumbered all other groups of refugees in Costa Rica. In 1988 the number of applicants granted refugee status rose again, reaching 5,414; and, by mid-1989, 3,411 Nicaraguans had been granted refugee status (Office for Refugee Migration 1989; *La Nación* 1990).

ORIGIN AND ETHNICITY OF REFUGEES

As the data described above suggest, Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica during the 1980s occurred in several waves. However, the data do not reveal details of the location of origin and the ethnicity of migrants, which also varied over time. The origins and ethnicity of the various migration waves suggest much about the refugee population and their living and working conditions in Costa Rica, characteristics which are directly related to the refugees' reasons for leaving Nicaragua.

Costa Rican government statistics through mid-1989 showed that 30.5 percent of the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica came from the department of Managua, four percent from Masaya, seven percent from Granada, five percent from Rivas, and 1.5 percent from León. These are the most urban departments in Nicaragua and the 48 percent of total migrants listed above represents the Nicaraguan refugee population from urban or semi-urban locales. The remaining 52 percent were refugees from the primarily rural departments of Chontales and Matagalpa in the mountainous central portion of the country; Río San Juan, which forms part of the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua; and the Atlantic coastal zone (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989) (Figure 4).

The Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica are ethnically heterogeneous. The various groups include Indians-Miskitu, Rama, and Sumo and Creoles, both rural and urban (CIDCA 1987; Universidad para la Paz y Universidad Nacional 1987; Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989).³

The reasons for refugees to flee Nicaragua were also varied. As mentioned above, these reasons are related to the refugees' geographic origins in Nicaragua. There are four fundamental reasons for flight. (1) Indigenous groups, Creoles, and Blacks from the east coast fled because they claimed ethnic persecution and general infringement on their autonomy by the Sandinistas. (2) Border wars with the Contras displaced thousands of Nicaraguans, primarily rural people, who lived along the Río San Juan in or near the border zones of conflict. (3) The threat of conscription into the Nicaraguan military forced thousands of other Nicaraguans (urban and rural) to flee, particularly young males or families with male children who would soon be eligible to be drafted. (4) Economic conditions in Nicaraguan cities deteriorated so that even long-time urban dwellers who may have been supporters of the revolution became disaffected with the **[end p. 70]** Sandinistas and felt compelled to flee the country to find work.

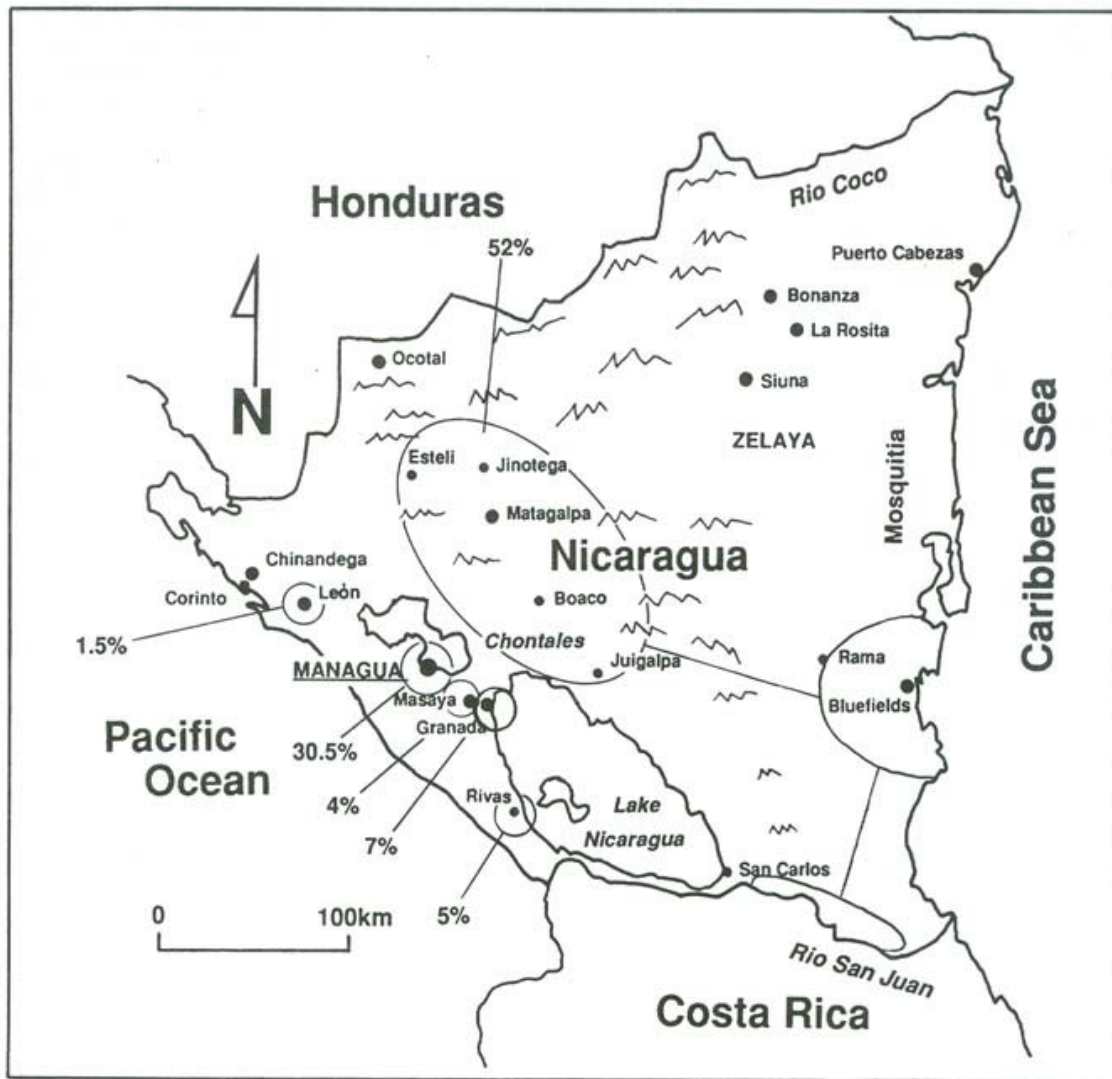


Figure 4. Source regions of Nicaraguan refugees.

Eastern Nicaragua

The first Nicaraguans to leave their country after the Sandinista victory in 1979 were Indians, primarily Miskitu, and Atlantic Coast Creoles. The Miskitu are well-organized, vocal, and influential in affairs that concern them and their territory. Their opposition to Sandinista social and economic integration programs solidified soon after the 1979 revolution (Hale 1987a; Hale 1987b). This animosity quickly led to rejection of the revolutionary government and fear of persecution, which caused mass emigration to Honduras and Costa Rica.

Miskitu flight out of Nicaragua began late in 1979 when the Sandinista regime announced that a primary goal of the new government was to gain minimal centralized control throughout Nicaragua, thus extending its jurisdiction to the Atlantic coast. This idea of an integrated Nicaraguan state had always been alien to the people of the eastern region, who had essentially been ignored during the Somoza dictatorship (Hale 1987a; Hale 1987b). [end p. 71]

Entire communities became depopulated as Indians fled their homeland voluntarily. Others were relocated by force in 1981 and 1982 when, because of Contra activities, the Sandinistas moved towns along the Río Coco, which forms part of the border between Nicaragua and Honduras, to Tasba Pri and other less volatile parts of the country (Torres-Rivas 1985).

The differences between the east and west coasts of Nicaragua---ethnically, culturally, socially, economically, and politically---have deep historical roots. Nicaraguan Indian groups represent a very complex part of the history of the region. Prior to the revolution, the people of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast were isolated from the capital, and thus the government. To them, isolation meant autonomy on one hand, but it also meant that Indians, Creoles, and others on the eastern shores of Nicaragua did not

benefit from any government assistance. Instead, the Atlantic population was exploited by U.S. companies in the region. Raw materials and cheap labor were extracted, and when profits fell, the companies pulled out. The indigenous and Black coastal people were then left with depleted natural resources, little economic development, and growing poverty (Hale 1987a; Hale 1987b). It might seem logical that under these circumstances an alliance would have formed with the Sandinista's popular government. However, it was probably precisely because of these differences that the revolutionary government had no support base on the east coast (Krantz 1987).

Therefore, Sandinista attempts to integrate people from that region met with miserable failure. According to Carlos Vilas (1987), the government implemented an "economist" bias rather than an indigenist one when dealing with the *costeños*. That is, the Sandinistas, lacking the necessary familiarity with the indigenous coastal groups, viewed the regional integration of the Atlantic coast within the framework of revolutionary transformation, emphasizing the social, economic, and environmental impoverishment of the region rather than the ethnic question (Vilas 1987). Within the first few years of Sandinista rule, however, the government admitted its early mismanagement on the question of the Atlantic coast. The Sandinistas, working with the indigenous organization, MISURASATA, made attempts to reformulate their policies and become more sensitive to the ethnic needs of the groups in the eastern portion of the country (Fagen 1987; Hale 1987a; Hale 1987b; Ferris 1987). However, despite these efforts, the chasm between the government and the coastal people grew as did opportunistic demands by MISURASATA. The aggressive anti-Sandinista policy of the Reagan administration further contributed to acceleration of the Contra war and alienation of the Atlantic coast from the Revolutionary ideal. The unfortunate outcome was that thousands of Nicaraguan Indians and Creoles were displaced, both within the country and outside.

In the early eighties about 20,000 Nicaraguans from the Atlantic coast fled to Honduras where they registered with the UNHCR and settled in border camps. An estimated 2,000 went south and crossed the mountains into Costa Rica (Peterson 1984). While Indians and Creoles were the first to flee Nicaragua, their movement slowed greatly and soon was superseded by a flow of people from other parts of the country. In 1988 the Atlantic coast refugee population living in Costa Rica represented about 25 percent of all Nicaraguan refugees in that country (Solano 1989).

Central and Western Nicaragua

As early as 1983 the pattern of refugee movement began to change from Indian groups and Creoles to non-Indian rural and urban Nicaraguans. By the mid-1980s and continuing until the end of the decade the majority of Nicaraguans migrating to Costa Rica came from these regions, so that by 1988 about 75 percent of the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica were from the central and western portions of the country.

The shift can be attributed primarily to the four reasons outlined above. (1) In the early 1980s the Sandinista government openly recognized its error in attempting to require the total integration of the east coast Indians into Nicaraguan culture and began a reconciliation process with the Indian groups, which slowed their movement out of the country (Fagen 1987; Hale 1987; Ferris 1987). (2) Crossfire refugees left zones of conflict between Sandinista and Contra forces (Peterson 1984; Ferris 1987). By 1983 people living along the border and in the central mountainous zones had begun to flee the country. (3) In late 1983 the government proclaimed compulsory military service, which prompted flight from all regions (Jamail and Stolp 1985; Fagen 1987). (4) The massive and continuous outflow of Nicaraguans in the 1980s [end p. 72] was the result of the U.S. government supported low-intensity war against the Sandinistas, which involved imposition of severe economic sanctions on Nicaragua and an expenditure of billions of dollars to support the Contra war. This subversion and its economic implications within Nicaragua turned much of the population, particularly in the cities, against the revolutionary cause. As one refugee affidavit stated, "they (the Sandinistas) are killing the people through hunger" (Office for Refugee Migration 1989). Without markets for traditional export crops, such as coffee, beef, and sugar, the Sandinista government was unable to achieve its development goals and suffered a severe credibility loss.

DISTRIBUTION OF NICARAGUAN REFUGEES IN COSTA RICA

There were three settlement patterns of Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica: (1) refugee camps assisted by the Costa Rican government and voluntary agencies; (2) spontaneous settlement, usually in border areas; and (3) dispersed urban settlement in the Central Valley cities of San José, Alajuela, Heredia, and Cartago (Figure 5). As the origin of Nicaraguan refugees entering Costa Rica changed during the decade, so too did the pattern of refugee settlement. The previous section explained why Nicaraguan emigration shifted from Atlantic coast origins to the rural central mountains, and then to urban areas of the Nicaraguan Depression. To a certain degree this east to west movement is related to the refugee settlement pattern in Costa Rica. The first refugees to cross the border—the indigenous groups and Creoles from the Atlantic coast—were settled in refugee camps. Refugees entering after 1983 were primarily rural Nicaraguans of non-Miskitu origin who settled in rural and semi-urban areas, usually along the border or on either coast. Finally, later arriving refugees from Managua and other urban centers went directly to San José or other major cities in the Central Valley. The majority of the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica avoided camp life completely, and either settled in the northern provinces that border Nicaragua or went directly to the cities.

Refugee Camps

Nicaraguan refugees who settled in the camps were predominantly rural and coastal farmers and fishers with little formal education. In Costa Rica they were placed in guarded camps, a style of living very unlike their own. Further, many Miskitu Indians arriving at the camps did not speak Spanish. This complicating factor inhibited communication between the refugees and the camp officials, and placed a great deal of stress on all parties (Universidad para la Paz y Universidad Nacional 1987; Refugees 1989). When it became clear in 1983 that the flow of refugees from Nicaragua was escalating, the Costa Rican government, aided by the UNHCR, opened two refugee camps. The first was in Limón, on the Atlantic coast. The majority of the refugees at this first camp were Miskitu Indians and Creoles, groups that identify culturally and ethnically with Costa Rica's Atlantic coast population. The second camp established in Costa Rica was located in Tilarán, in the northwestern province of Guanacaste.

Increasing refugee flows led the Government of Costa Rica, with help from the UNHCR, to open three additional refugee camps by 1985: Alvaperal, Boca Arenal, and El Achioté. The five camps that existed in 1985 were divided into three types: reception centers, transit centers, and active centers.

Reception Centers

Alvaperal and Boca Arenal were designated as reception centers. Both were in the province of Alajuela in north central Costa Rica. Alajuela has a longer contiguous border with Nicaragua than any other province, and numerous places along this border were commonly used as entrance points by Nicaraguans seeking refuge.

The principal objective of the reception centers was to offer immediate attention to refugees who had recently crossed into Costa Rica and needed housing and food assistance. People hoping to obtain refugee status were evaluated at these centers. Some remained at the center at which they were evaluated. Others, depending on availability of space in any given camp or the need to be reunited with family members, were relocated. Still others left the camp on their own accord and moved into urban areas (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989). In 1989 there were 2,262 and 642 people in Alvaperal and Boca Arenal, respectively.

Transit Centers

The older camps, Tilarán, and Limón, were [end p. 73] designated transit centers. These camps offered health services, food and housing, and helped the refugees prepare the documentation necessary to remain legally in Costa Rica. As the name suggests, the transit centers were created as places for the refugees to stay temporarily. At these centers officials determined the type of training a refugee needed to assure his or her successful integration into the Costa Rican economy through "durable solutions projects," (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989).⁴

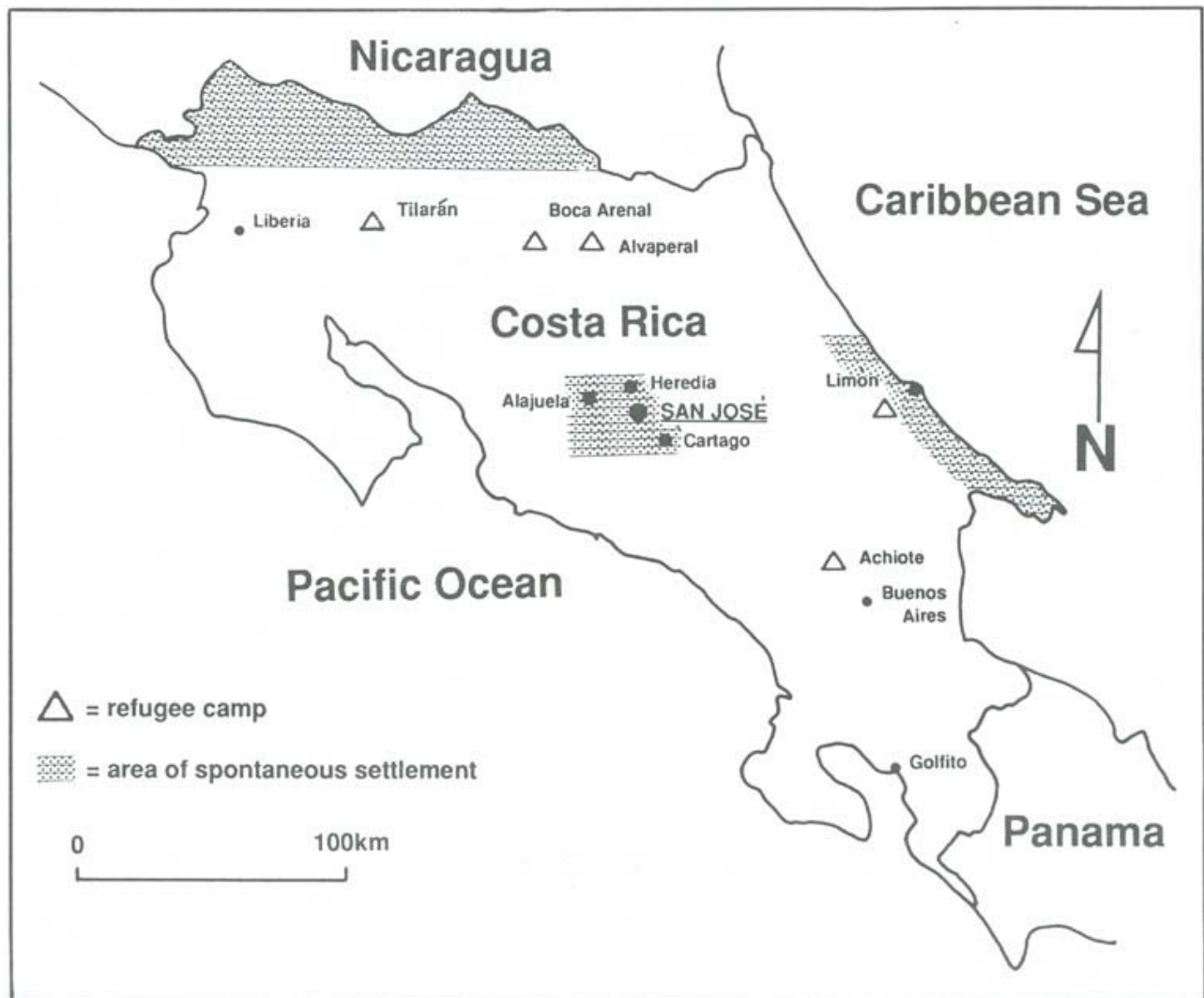


Figure 5. Locations of Nicaraguan refugee camps and zones of spontaneous settlement.

Because the transit centers filled beyond anticipated capacities, they were not as well-prepared as they should have been. As a result, problems arose. For example, refugees suffered from general ill-health, had low morale, and appeared lethargic. The major problem, however, was that people who did not qualify for refugee status were living at the centers. That is, hundreds of young men were posing as refugees, but were actually combatants for the Contras (Universidad para la Paz y Universidad Nacional 1987). In the early years of the Sandinista struggle Costa Ricans supported the ouster of Somoza and tolerated the presence of Sandinista guerrillas on their national territory. They later became as disillusioned with the Sandinista regime but felt much less comfortable with Contra guerrillas operating from Costa Rican territory. According to Patricia Weiss Fagen (1988, 71), Costa Rica had been criticized for its earlier: [end p. 74]

... lenient attitude toward the young male Nicaraguan refugees in those countries [Honduras and Costa Rica] who used to divide their time between the refugee camps and the contra encampments. In the camps and settlements for Nicaraguans under UNHCR supervision, the population of young men fluctuated widely, depending on how many were engaged in combat at any time ...

At the end of 1983 the Costa Rican government halted its former policy of ambiguity toward the Contras operating from within the country's borders and stated that Contra activity would not be tolerated (Universidad para la Paz y Universidad Nacional 1987).

Active Center

The only camp established in the southern part of Costa Rica was El Achioté, an active center in the province of Puntarenas. There were 1,670 refugees in Achioté in November 1988. Groups of refugees selected from other camps were relocated to

Achiote where they performed tasks specifically designed to facilitate their integration into the Costa Rican economy. Workshops for carpentry, manufacture of cinder blocks, and weaving were established. Men and women learned to use the tools of these trades, operate machinery, manufacture a product, and then market it outside of the camp. Residents of the camp raised chickens and pigs and received training in animal husbandry. Land adjacent to the camp was set aside for subsistence agriculture, but the camp did not, nor was it expected to attain self-sufficiency (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989).

None of the refugee camps was intended to become a permanent residence for the refugees. However, a persistent influx of refugees into the country and a national economy that could not absorb all of them quickly enough made the camps virtually permanent homes to 8,000 refugees at any given time (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989).

Settlement along the Borders

The Costa Rica-Nicaragua border is about 290 km (180 mi) long and essentially unpatrolled. Movement between the two countries is nothing new. Nicaraguans had entered Costa Rica yearly for the coffee harvest, Costa Rican produce moved regularly across the border, and Nicaraguan television stations were viewed in northern Costa Rica. When refugee flight began, people entered the country illegally through the rainforest routes. Thousands of Nicaraguans, particularly in the early to mid 1980s, settled in the surrounding rural areas or along the Atlantic coastal border. Those who settled in these more remote areas were generally from the rural parts of Nicaragua or from the Atlantic coast. They worked as day laborers on large farms in the northern provinces of Guanacaste, Alajuela, Heredia, and Limón (Torres-Rivas, 1985). These rural refugees, along with the much smaller percentage of camp refugees, made up 58.5 percent of Costa Rica's Nicaraguan refugee population.

Urban Settlement

About 35.4 percent of the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica live in urban areas in the Central Valley, in San José, Alajuela, Heredia, and Cartago. The remaining 6.1 percent of the refugee population live dispersed throughout the country (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1989, 53, Map 3). Settlement in the urban areas was dispersed; that is there was not one particular *barrio* within the Costa Rican cities that attracted refugees over the others, and there were only small enclaves of Nicaraguans scattered throughout the cities. The only requirements the refugees had in terms of where they would live were affordable rent and available housing. Affluent neighborhoods naturally were excluded. Refugees, like urban poor the world over, often must move about within the city if their businesses flounder and they cannot maintain rent and utility payments. One refugee who was interviewed initially for this study and with whom there was subsequent correspondence once wrote that because his shoemaking business had not gone as well as he had expected, he and his family had to move to another part of San José. Within five months another letter revealed that this time, because of the poverty level and crime rate in the second *barrio*, he and his family had moved again.

POSTSCRIPT: INTO THE 1990s

In January of 1990, one month before the Nicaraguan national elections, 439 of that country's citizens crossed the border into Costa Rica. At least half of them, however, were reportedly returned to their country for lack of information that would support their case and insure them of obtaining refugee status (La República 1990).⁵

Even after the elections, which brought the [end p. 75] U.S. supported coalition government UNO, headed by Violeta Chamorro, into power, refugee movement out of Nicaragua continued. The day following Chamorro's victory on February 26, sixteen Nicaraguans from Chontales entered Costa Rica and were intercepted by border officials. On the next two days six and four, respectively, crossed the border. These last ten were from the Río San Juan region, near the Costa Rican border (La Nación 1990). Immediate post-election correspondence with refugees indicated that many took a "wait-and-see" attitude and did not intend to return to Nicaragua until they were assured that at last "democracy had arrived" and the lines to buy beans and rice were shorter.⁶

In the months immediately following the February, 1990 election, requests for voluntary repatriation to Nicaragua more than doubled to 200-300 per month. Many returning refugees received assistance in the form of agricultural tools, seeds, construction materials, transportation back to their country, and a reinstatement grant (Refugee Reports 1990). UNHCR durable solution projects were initiated after 1990, but often, because of lack of resources both within the local communities and in government and non-government refugee organizations, projects failed (López-Cifuentes 1993).

By mid 1991 all five refugee camps in Costa Rica had closed (Refugees 1991). Between 12,000 and 15,000 Nicaraguan refugees left Costa Rica and repatriated (Refugees 1991; World Refugee Survey 1992), the majority of those being ethnic Miskitus (Ortega 1991; Refugees 1992). Nevertheless, at the end of 1991 an estimated 20,000 registered Nicaraguan refugees still lived in Costa Rica and had become locally integrated.

Refugee Reports (1992) noted that by 1993 the UNHCR would attempt to help repatriate Central Americans, including

Nicaraguans, who were living in neighboring Central American countries. However, according to the Costa Rican Government (1993), and personal interviews in the summer of 1993 (with Avila; Murillo, and von Essen), it was determined that the majority, about 19,000, of the registered Nicaraguan refugees would probably remain in the country. The balance between rural and urban refugees also shifted by 1992; 70 percent of the Nicaraguans were reported to live in urban and semi-urban areas, while only 30 percent lived in rural communities.

In the summer of 1993 the UNHCR office and other governmental and non-governmental refugee offices in Costa Rica continued to aid Nicaraguan refugees. The aid is now referred to as "priority projects," which include a documentation center; training and credit for refugees; educational infrastructure; reinforcement of health services; child-care centers for low-income mothers; housing credit; support in reforestation and agroforestry; and funding for small entrepreneurs (Gobierno de Costa Rica 1993). The government's biggest project, however, is changing the status of Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica. A country-wide campaign is currently being carried out by the government, UNHCR, and other humanitarian refugee assistance organizations in Costa Rica. The campaign's objective is to change the status of the remaining Nicaraguan refugees to permanent, legal residents of Costa Rica, or to facilitate their return to Nicaragua. Finally, interviews in summer 1993 with Nicaraguan women who repatriated from Costa Rica in 1990 show that, because of the severe economic problems in Nicaragua, they are prepared to re-enter Costa Rica, not as refugees, but illegal immigrants. Discussion of that issue, however, will have to await another installment of the on-going story of Central American refugees.

CONCLUSION

This paper raises a number of interesting questions regarding the impact of massive migration on countries that espouse strong support for human rights. In the case of Costa Rica, political pressure brought about by large scale and largely uncontrolled Nicaraguan migration led to changes in legislation relating to the granting of political asylum (Larson 1991; 1992). It is noteworthy that a similar process of tightening up laws governing the granting of asylum also occurred in Canada with respect to migration from El Salvador and Guatemala (Elbow 1992), and European countries also seem less than eager to accept refugees from the conflict in Bosnia. This leads one to question whether it is possible for even the best-intentioned government to resist negative public opinion when the demand for political asylum reaches crisis proportions.

Also called into question are the motives of migration. While earlier migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica, especially among minority groups such as the Miskitu, might have been a [end p. 76] response to perceived danger from the Sandinista regime, later migrations seem to be more economically motivated. How should a government such as Costa Rica's react to such changing motivations for migration? And how could migration officials within Costa Rica or any other country determine the true motivation of people for migration?

To what extent might a permissive human rights policy on the part of a government such as that of Costa Rica contribute to the establishment within the country of potentially destabilizing elements? And, what measures might be taken to avoid having such migrants enter the country? Finally, to what extent was United States policy responsible for creating the conditions that led to large-scale Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica and, if it is determined that those policies did play an important role, should the United States be held responsible for helping Costa Rica deal with the problems of resettlement and integration of these people? These and similar questions may well grow even more in importance as the world enters a period of increasing instability.

NOTES

1. Canada is another example of a country that traditionally had an open door policy regarding Central American refugees, that is, until 1988 when the government revised the law making entrance more difficult (Elbow 1992).
2. Miskitus are the predominant Indian group in Mosquitia, which extends along the Caribbean coasts of Honduras and Nicaragua (commonly referred to as the Mosquito Coast). They are the largest Indian culture group in Nicaragua, living primarily on the Caribbean Coast from Cabo Gracias a Dios in the north to Laguna de Perlas in the south. Smaller populations of Miskitus in Nicaragua are found in the mining towns of Sin una, Rosita and Bonanza, as well as along the banks of major rivers in the northeastern portion of the country. The 1981 estimate of Nicaraguan Miskitus was 66,994 (Hale and Gordon 1987). Other smaller Indian groups in eastern Nicaragua are the Rama and the Sumu, with estimated populations of 650 and 481 respectively (Hale and Gordon 1987).
3. The Miskitu, Rama, and Sumu Indians have a unique cultural, social, and political heritage and are generally differentiated from other ethnic groups within Nicaragua. Creole is a racial term that refers to a mixture of Indian or European and Black. Mestizo is also a racial reference to a person with European and Indian blood. Like mestizos, ladinos have a mixture of European and Indian blood, but the word ladino carries a cultural connotation, that is, ladinos exhibit more hispanic or western characteristics and have often given up some Indian tradition, such as ritual and dress.

4. Durable solutions projects refer to long-term, income generating projects, conducted on either an individual or communal level, which are designed to aid refugees in attaining self-sufficiency should they decide to reside indefinitely in Costa Rica
5. In the late 1980s, the tendency to deny Nicaraguans refugee status had increased substantially. The elections that put Violeta Chamorro into power legitimated this trend of denying official refugee status.
6. Nicaraguan refugees in "Little Managua" in Miami have also adopted a wait-and-see attitude about returning to Nicaragua. Even though the fighting has ended, the Nicaraguan economy is still in a shambles and citizens are unwilling to leave the new lives they have made for themselves in their countries of asylum and return to an uncertain future and painful past (Refugee Reports 1990).

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Resumen

Este ensayo presenta una reseña del estado de los refugiados nicaragüenses en Costa Rica durante la década de los 80 y los primeros años de los 90. Se consideran primero las tasas de migración nicaragüense a Costa Rica durante los 80. Luego el ensayo describe el origen étnico y geográfico de los refugiados en relación a su destino en Costa Rica. Finalmente, discute el estado de los refugiados en medio del año de 1993. La migración de nicaragüenses a Costa Rica empezó lentamente en 1980 a 82, pero el flujo de migrantes alcanzó un zenit en 1983 y fluctuaba durante el resto de la década. En 1989 más del 75 por ciento de todos los 108 refugiados ubicados en Costa Rica eran de origen nicaragüense. Se puede describir la migración de nicaragüenses durante la década de los 80 como una serie de ondas, cada una compuesta por personas de origen étnico y regional distinto, tal como indígenas Miskitu y criollos de la costa atlántica, mestizos campesinos de la frontera oriental del país, y mestizos urbanos de Managua y otros centros urbanos de la zona central. Estos grupos se ubicaron en zonas diversas dentro de Costa Rica. Los Miskitu los criollos se ubicaron en centros para refugiados creados por el gobierno costarricense, los mestizos campesinos se localizaron en las zonas rurales cerca a la frontera con Nicaragua, y los de origen urbano buscaron refugio en San José y otras ciudades del Valle Central. [end p. 79]