

Through the Eyes of the Media: Perceptions of Nicaraguan Refugees in Costa Rica in the 1980s

Elizabeth M. Larson
1018 N. Wisconsin Ave.
Rice Lake, WI 54868

ABSTRACT

As their numbers grow, attitudes toward, and images and perceptions of refugee populations worldwide increasingly become more and more negative. No longer seen simply as victims of violence, some refugee groups are perceived as the cause of violence and instability in their countries of asylum, and frequently find it difficult to become absorbed. However, the way in which refugees are portrayed in the media often contributes to their struggles to become absorbed.

This paper is a micro-level study of what really is a global issue. Here, I trace the long-established history of animosity between the Costa Ricans and the Nicaraguans, and then chronicle the story of Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica as seen through the eyes of the Costa Rican press. What emerges is a decade of negative perceptions that are grounded in the past, but that very much affect the future of the Nicaraguans, at least as long as they remain in Costa Rica-which may be indefinitely. The conclusions drawn from this micro study are that we all must be aware of the power of the press, and that in this age of correct speech, we all must bear some of the responsibility to change the errors of the past.

INTRODUCTION

The attitudes toward, and images of, a refugee population held by members of the host society affect the refugees' absorption into the society and economy of that country. In this case, traditional and long-standing rivalries between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans, and the images portrayed by the Costa Rican press about the Nicaraguan refugees in that country, reinforce negative perceptions of the refugees held by the Costa Ricans. These perceptions in turn may play a role in the eventual acceptance or rejection of the refugees.

This paper is divided into two parts. First, I describe the structural differences, and traditional and more recent rivalries between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Second, I use media coverage of the refugee situation in Costa Rica to chronicle the story of the Nicaraguans in Costa Rica during the 1980s. What emerges is that even in the early part of the decade, after a brief period of sympathy for the refugees' plight, Costa Ricans had formed a negative opinion of them. This second section not only tells the refugees' story, it also illustrates how these opinions were articulated and reinforced through the actions (the written communication) of the Costa Rican national press in the 1980s.

Although deeply ingrained attitudes are part of the overall structure of a social system, they are perpetuated through the dialectic of control by the daily actions of individuals within that society via the authoritative power of communication of the national press (Larson 1991, 29-60; see also Giddens 1984). For example, the Costa Rican citizen, who in general has a negative opinion about Nicaraguans and the refugees, draws upon the information disseminated by journalists through their editorials and news stories. Citizens react to the articles by accepting or rejecting the refugees. Acceptance or rejection of the refugees thus becomes legitimized through the daily coverage of the refugee situation in the local newspapers.

The significance of this study lies in the interpretative strategy that illuminates these attitudes and images on an unconscious level. These [end p. 25] perceptions then ultimately work to enable or constrain the refugees in the process of absorption and assimilation. Clearly, there are many other factors that help or hinder refugees as they attempt to become productive members of society, such as government policy, aid

from national and international organizations and, of course, the individuals' experience, education, and skills (see Larson 1991 and 1992). But, in general, in a country such as Costa Rica where there is a high level of literacy and participation in the democratic process, the media is a dominant force in shaping and reinforcing points of view.

ONGOING PROCESSES OF NON-ACCEPTANCE

Complex societies are intricate codes of exchange. Some of these codes are formulated into laws and regulations; most are internalized patterns of behavior that the dominant institutions of society have more or less succeeded in inculcating. Yet a complex society is never immune from the threat of anarchy... Its diversified and stratified population inevitably contains elements which, for different reasons, deviate from the generally accepted norms, or which seek deliberately to subvert them. Madmen do not obey rules of polite behavior. Neither do vagrants and loiterers and, in general, the dispossessed and rootless poor. To members of established society, such people are unstable drifters; they have no ties to place, family, and worldly goods. They are seen as violent, ready to commit crimes against property and persons (Tuan 1979, 187; emphasis added).

Tuan was not referring to refugees, but rather to the mentally ill or to criminals. In no way do I want to suggest that we equate refugees with mad people, vagrants, or loiterers (although they are certainly dispossessed and, for the time being anyway, rootless poor). However, immigrant populations, refugees in particular, are seen by many host populations as deviating from societal norms (Maldonado and Moore cited in Taylor 1994). Refugees are different, they are suspect, they are the undesirables within the established society. They often do not possess the "mutual knowledge" necessary for successful assimilation into the host society, and thus do not display the "rational behavior that is appropriate to the rules of that [host] society" (Larson 1991; Giddens 1984,3-4). Given the historical animosities and cultural differences between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans, we will see that this case is certainly no different. For example, in this study, the Nicaraguan refugees are perceived by Costa Ricans as being *mal criados* (bad mannered) because they are less aware of the "appropriate" behavior in Costa Rica. The point to be made here is that the "intricate codes of exchange," and the "internalized patterns of behavior" in the dominant society are going to reject, at least to some degree, the societal outcasts ---in this case the Nicaraguan refugees.

However, negative attitudes of host societies toward immigrant or refugee populations are not unique to Costa Rica. It is a problem common to the global refugee phenomenon. Germany's anti-foreigner sentiment and the V.S. government's own inclination to keep certain groups of refugees out of the country (Haitians) are only two recent examples of ways in which these sentiments are manifested.¹ Goldschmidt and Boesch (1983, 25) wrote that:

... waves of needy, deprived newcomers repeatedly tax the potential of the local population and their administration to render assistance, a fact which has had in all likelihood consequences upon local attitudes toward the refugees. Initial readiness to help may thus quickly be reversed, the underlying reasons including economic and or ecological considerations (emphasis added).

The problems encountered by refugees that have settled in urban areas are more complex (but not necessarily more traumatic) than those of refugees in camps. Urban refugees must confront the attitudes and expectations of their host community on a daily basis in the workplace, the marketplace, schools, social service lines, and so on. These refugees are from different backgrounds, have different ambitions, and seek individual solutions (Karadawi 1987, 115). They have to forge a new existence for themselves. Goldschmidt and Boesch (1983, 66) explained that once the novelty of the situation and initial sympathy to their situation wears off, the readiness to help refugees may decline.

Therefore, the growth of hostility on the part of the citizens of the host country toward the refugees is due in part to the refugees' increased social visibility because of their increasing numbers, and their willingness to work harder for less pay so that they may begin to be absorbed, which may displace some national labor. A more specific reason for rising hostility between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans in the 1980s has to do with the Costa Ricans' perceptions of themselves versus their [end p. 26] perceptions of the *nicas* (the name they have given the Nicaraguan refugees).

The Ticos, We Are a Model of Virtues: Costa Ricans' Attitudes about Themselves

Costa Ricans' attitudes toward the Nicaraguan refugees depend, in part, on the way Costa Ricans view themselves, and on the way they view the refugees and their country of origin. Attitudes of any group of people are deeply embedded within the culture and society of the country. They are based on past and present socio-cultural history, tradition, and experience.

The Costa Rican mind-set is, according to Ramírez (1989, 3), "... one which tends to raise values such as political and economic democracy, peace and respect for human rights to mythic proportions." Joanne Kenen (1984, 31) refers to this Costa Rican attitude of superiority as the "white legend of Costa Rica."² Along these lines, an article in the Costa Rican weekly newspaper *Esta Semana* was titled "The *ticos*, we are a model of virtues" (17-23 Nov., 1989). According to the article, 94 percent of the Costa Ricans interviewed by the Institute of Psychological Research (IIP) of the University of Costa Rica considered themselves peaceful people. Over 70 percent of the population considered themselves valiant, and well over 50 percent of those interviewed said that Costa Ricans were hard workers, responsible, honest, and happy. Therefore, while the Costa Ricans' optimistic attitude is indeed well-earned—this country is the region's most stable democracy, has the highest rate of literacy, and its economy, although weak in recent years, has been more stable than any of the other Central American countries—it contributes to feelings of ill-will toward the Nicaraguans, whom the Costa Ricans feel deviate from these standards.

TRADITIONAL RIVALRIES BETWEEN COSTA RICA AND NICARAGUA

The negative attitudes of the Costa Ricans toward the Nicaraguans stem from traditional animosities between the two nations. In addition, during the 1970s and 1980s the escalating violence in Nicaragua and the flow of refugees into Costa Rica created an even bigger rift between the citizens of Costa Rica and the refugees.

The rivalries between Nicaragua and Costa Rica are important indicators of why the Costa Ricans view the Nicaraguan refugees unfavorably. These rivalries aid in the construction of mental images and the formation of attitudes of each group, and about each group. They are important in order to understand the continuous flow of action that is firmly embedded in Central American daily life.

Since Independence in the early 1800s, the two countries have often exhibited hostility toward each other (as indeed other countries in the region have, El Salvador and Honduras, for example, or Guatemala and Belize). William Furlong (1987, 126-127) pointed to five historical bones of contention between Costa Rica and Nicaragua:

1. ***There is an ill-defined border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua.*** Specifically, the borders near Nicoya, in the northwestern portion of Costa Rica, and along the San Juan River region in the northeast are disputed.
2. ***Nicaragua is the only country to have invaded Costa Rica.*** These invasions included the 1856 invasion by William Walker into Costa Rica, and later invasions by Somoza in the late 1940s, the 1950s, and late 1970s, and those by the Sandinistas between 1983 and 1986.
3. ***There are divergent political systems in the two countries.*** Costa Rica has maintained a peaceful, democratic political system since 1948, while Nicaragua historically has been politically and socially

volatile.

4. ***The two countries have different cultural and value systems.*** Furlong (1987, 150) noted the fundamental differences between the Costa Rica and Nicaragua (see also Ferris 1987,66-73). Of the two, Costa Rica is more European, while Nicaragua is characterized by a population that is more Indian or mestizo. Costa Rica has a much larger middle-class than does Nicaragua, which is marked by a great gap between the rich and powerful, on one hand, and the poor and powerless on the other. Further, Costa Ricans tend to be directed toward self-reliance and political participation, and Nicaraguans more prone to fatalism coupled with higher rates of crime and violence. Costa Ricans have also shown more capability to engage in political compromise than Nicaraguans, who have been involved in political upheaval and instability for [end p. 27] generations. Costa Rica has a strong democratic civic culture, while Nicaragua has had a succession of dictatorships. Diets differ between the two countries as does skin color (Nicaraguans are generally darker) and preference for sports (Nicaraguans prefer baseball and Costa Ricans prefer soccer).
5. ***The social and economic development of each county has differed greatly.*** Education is given greater priority in Costa Rica than in Nicaragua. Costa Rica boasts a well-developed health care system. In contrast, illiteracy has traditionally been higher in Nicaragua, and the rural parts of the country are much more underdeveloped than the Costa Rican countryside.

In short, Costa Rican and Nicaraguan society and culture are quite different. These differences have prompted the Costa Ricans to take a superior view of themselves alongside their neighbors. My conversations with both Costa Ricans and Nicaraguan refugees lend support to these arguments. It is, in general, an accurate portrayal of how Costa Ricans feel about the Nicaraguan refugees, and also what the Nicaraguans *think* the Costa Ricans feel about them.

CONTEMPORARY ANTAGONISMS BETWEEN COSTA RICA AND NICARAGUA

The conflict throughout much of Central America, the economic decline in Costa Rica, and the influx of Nicaraguans into Costa Rican territory widened the gap and worsened relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Antagonisms between them persist into the 1990s. The following six points represent the problems during the 1980s (Tomasek cited in Furlong 1987, 127-130).

1. ***Costa Ricans became increasingly wary of the Sandinista government.*** In the final years of the Nicaraguan Revolution and in the early years of Sandinista rule Costa Rica supported the new government. However, as the decade progressed the region's economic and political problems became more pronounced. Nicaragua's economy was failing, the citizens of the country were fleeing by the thousands, and the U. S. was exerting pressure on the Costa Rican government, enticing it with economic aid in exchange for ideological support. Thus, Costa Ricans began to tire of the idea of self-determination and non-intervention for the Nicaraguan people in Nicaragua, and instead adopted anti-Sandinista sentiments.
2. ***The Sandinista government believed that Costa Rica's [earlier] lenient policies toward Nicaraguan refugees were, in part, a cover to protect contra forces operating inside the Costa Rican border.*** Indeed, Costa Rica has been accused of policies of ambivalence toward the regional situation. The government has on one hand declared its neutrality within the region, while simultaneously allowing contra forces to operate inside its borders (Ferris 1987,66-73).
3. ***Nicaragua's government imposed restrictions on Costa Rican navigation rights on the San Juan River.*** The contras used the river region as a sanctuary and as a base for entering and attacking the Sandinista army in Nicaragua.
4. ***Costa Ricans believe that Nicaragua has attempted to subvert the peace and stability in Costa Rica. Bombings inside Costa Rica, which were aimed at U.S. marines or contra leaders, caused some of this discontent.*** The attempted kidnapping of a Japanese businesswoman, car bombings, and a grenade attack on the U.S. Consulate in San Jose increased the feelings of

mistrust toward the Sandinistas (Furlong 1987, 127-130).

5. ***Costa Ricans believe that the Ortega government tried to discredit Costa Rica through disinformation.*** In a speech by Sandinista Humberto Ortega, which was published by Costa Rica's *La Nación*, the Sandinista army commander referred to Costa Rica's democracy as 'bourgeois,' and stated that this type of government was not suitable for Nicaraguans whose 'popular power' was a truer form of democracy (Ferris 1987,68). And
6. ***Costa Ricans believe that Nicaragua has impugned Costa Rican dignity and honor, and has threatened their economy and their way of life.***

This final antagonism is aimed directly at the Nicaraguan refugees and not at the Sandinista [end p. 28] government or the contra forces. Costa Ricans blame the refugees for a variety of social maladies including a rise in crime, drug and alcohol addiction, sexual promiscuity, and health and disease problems, all of which serve to weaken relations (*La Nación*, 18 October 1983; *La Prensa Libre*, 17 November 1983; Refugees1986). For example, an article in *La República* (25 July 1988) states:

Traditionally, Costa Ricans have received refugees with pleasure, provided that they do not infringe upon the laws of the country and that they do not displace national labor. Recently, the problems that have presented themselves are that both conditions have been violated and they dedicate themselves to committing crimes not only for economic reasons, but also for political and military motives.

Another article later in the year titled "Too many refugees in the country" declared that "the refugees hold a weight over the politics, economy, health and education in our country" (*La República*, 13 November 1988). In interviews and conversations Costa Ricans say that the Nicaraguan refugees drink too much, that they are too loud, and that they are mal criados. To the Costa Rican the words 'nica refugee' connote primarily negative characteristics such as "filth," "drunkenness," and "disease" (Hatanaka, pers. com., August, 1989).

These descriptive words stem not only from historical and modern antagonisms but also from media reports about events within the refugee community. For example, negative opinions of the refugees were further reinforced when epidemics broke out within refugee camps or when refugees left the confines of the camp for an evening and got into trouble in a nearby town (Ramírez Rojas, pers. com., August, 1989). Resentment and tension continued to mount when Nicaraguan refugees, standing next to poor Costa Ricans in lines at the Social Security office, receive higher allotments than citizens (Ferris 1987, 80-81).

In short, rapport between Costa Rica and Nicaragua has been strained since Independence. The historical reasons for the antagonisms range from border disputes to cultural dissimilarities. Over the past decade, as an outgrowth of general economic and social tensions in the isthmus and specifically in response to the massive flow of Nicaraguan refugees into Costa Rica, relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua have deteriorated further.

THE REFUGEES' STORY: THE COSTA RICAN MEDIA CHRONICLED

The national press in Costa Rica is important in shaping Costa Rican attitudes. Journalists can be thought of here as a collective of influential individuals. They communicate to the citizenry what they learn about the refugee situation.³

Literacy is high in Costa Rica and its people take pride in their participation in the democratic process and in being well-informed about what is happening in the country. Articles from major Costa Rican dailies in the 1980s reflect the attitudes and perceptions of the ticos toward the Nicaraguan refugees. A survey of *La Nación*, *La República*, and *Universidad*, the three leading national newspapers, between 1984 and mid-1987 showed that 145 articles on the refugees out of 234 portrayed the refugees negatively. Only thirty-seven

articles made positive reference to the refugees, and 52 indicated no bias (Ramírez 1989,13).

Certain themes run throughout the news reports about the refugees. They include key words and phrases such as "general panic," "prejudice," "discrimination," "social burden," "chaotic," "unstabilizing," and "jeopardizing force." These words set the mood for the news articles and serve to reinforce the negative attitudes toward the nicas already held by the Costa Ricans.⁴

Costa Ricans are not pleased about the refugees' intrusion into their country. Early in the 1980s either the journalists or the officials from whom they received their information had formed a definite, poor opinion of the refugees. This opinion coupled with the Costa Rican attitude of superiority over their Nicaraguan neighbors, makes it easy to see how the negative attitudes are perpetuated within society.

Although the Sandinista government was installed in Nicaragua in mid-1979, people did not start leaving in great numbers until late 1982. Therefore, in 1980 and 1981 most newspaper coverage of the refugee situation in Costa Rica pertained to the recent influx of Cuban Marielitos and the Salvadoran refugees. At this early date, the attitude of the national press toward refugees in general had a more sympathetic tone. Costa Rica's door was open to refugees and both national and international dialogue was undertaken in an attempt to remedy, or at least mitigate the refugees' hardship. [end p. 29]

For example, the headline of an article in *La República* read "Government insists on helping the Cuban refugees" (20 April 1980). Two days later *La Nación* (24 April 1980) reported that a summit meeting in Costa Rica would host twenty-five nations, and planned to look for solutions to the Cuban refugee problem. A letter to the editor on 13 May 1980 (*Prensa Libre*) declared that people should be allowed to leave their homeland if they did not agree with the government, and that Costa Rica had opened its doors and extended its arms to the Cubans. "In reality," the letter read, "who is it that has placed more obstacles in the way of their exit; Cuba, who has opened its doors and facilitated everyone in leaving, or those countries who have not made concrete their offers to take them in?" At that time, it appeared that the Cubans were welcome refugees.⁵

By 1982 the number of officially registered Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica had doubled from the previous year. (In 1981, 557 Nicaraguans received refugee status, and in 1982, 1031 more refugees were granted official recognition.⁶) This increase contributed to the general atmosphere of suspicion and panic. In an attempt to retain journalistic objectivity, an editorial in a Costa Rican newspaper, *Contrapunto* (1 Oct. 1982), argued that:

[T]he lack of information about the situation in which the refugees live in Costa Rica has caused prejudice. For some costarricenses, a refugee is a delinquent, a terrorist, ... sometimes causing displacement within the national labor force. They are prejudices that get rooted in a poor country during one of the most economically critical times in the country's history.

The writer concluded by stating that one should not generalize; when one refugee commits a crime it should not reflect on the entire population.

However, the upshot of an article (and most of those that followed thereafter) in Costa Rica's leading daily newspaper, *La Nación* (16 Oct. 1982), was that Costa Ricans had done enough for the refugees. They no longer wanted refugees entering their country and damaging their democracy. After all, they had enough of their own problems. And three days later another editorial in *La Nación* (18 Oct. 1982) decried the Costa Ricans' apathy to the problems produced in their country by indiscriminately having opened their doors to

the refugees. It continued by referring to the refugees as dishonorable expatriates, undesirable women who sell themselves, drug traffickers, spies for the left and right, and professional agitators. The closing words insisted that:

[T]here will not be economic recuperation; there will not be social stability nor political and institutional normality, if we permit those pariahs from other latitudes to infiltrate our soil to upset the liberty and peace of the inhabitants of our tranquil country.

Not only Costa Ricans citizens were alarmed at the rising number of refugees, but so was the government. Throughout the year various restrictions had been placed on the refugees' entrance criteria and their right to work in Costa Rica. The government had declared that the unabating immigration was "intimately related to national security" (Larson 1992,333-334).

However, one article portrayed the Nicaraguan refugees as victims of violence. The article (*La República*, 19 April 1983) described the plight of refugee families fleeing their homeland with few or none of their belongings. The article focused on a small girl from the Miskito coast of Nicaragua who brought only one thing with her—a large red rooster. The accompanying photograph showed the little refugee holding tight to the rooster that was almost as big as she was. The closing line of the story read "They are, all of them, the eternal victims of violence."

The tone of very few articles was one of sympathy for the victims of violence, most reflected a concern for the well-being of Costa Rica. The refugees were more frequently described as a big problem for a small country. Refugee reception centers had become saturated, funds were scarce, and communities reacted negatively when approached about the possibility of having refugees located nearby (*La Nación*, 18 Oct. 1983). By 1983 it was apparent that the people and the government of Costa Rica were deeply concerned about the rapidly growing presence of Nicaraguans in the country.

Because of this growing concern, a meeting to be held in November of that year was planned by government officials to discuss if they should renounce the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to which the country is a signatory (*La República*, 13 Nov. 1983). Some [end p. 30] recognized that prejudice and rumor had led, perhaps more than reality, to the rejection of the refugees (*La Nación*, 17 and 18 Oct. 1983). Nevertheless, a more common line of rhetoric was that "... the country did not know what to do with so many foreigners, especially the Central Americans, that no other country wanted to accept under any condition, and almost through force Costa Rica should have them" (*La República*, 13 Nov. 1983). The problem rested on the fact that the country did not have sufficient resources to tend to the growing numbers of refugees.

In the minds of many Costa Ricans, Nicaraguan refugees were the source of violence rather than its victims. One of the problems that contributed to this attitude was that the refugee camps near the border areas were being infiltrated by young men suspected of being either contras or spies for the Sandinistas. As anxiety grew, newspapers reported that the refugee problem in Costa Rica was "reaching an explosive character" (*La Prensa Libre* 17 Nov. 1983). The following day in the same newspaper, the question was raised whether the refugee presence would harm the nation's peace. The solution, wrote the journalist, was to stop viewing the situation compassionately and to start looking at the "cold criteria of reality."

Three weeks later an editorial in *La Nación* (8 Dec. 1983) addressed the refugee situation in the country:

The tradition of asylum and hospitable character of our country are being put to the test with such a high level of immigration. There are neither medical resources, nor is there shelter, nor is there employment for so many people

The solution of the problem, nevertheless, is not only in furnishing bread and housing. It is necessary to provide them with medical attention and basic education for their children. Above all, it is necessary to find employment for the adults. In sum, it is a process of partial absorption in the community, precisely when the country suffers a sharp economic crisis.

The condition of the refugees is not the same as with other foreigners that permanently integrate themselves in a country. By way of definition it is a transitory condition, and of great scale, which makes it more difficult for the nation that receives them to grant them the humanitarian and just treatment that their character demands.... The saturation converts the one who would have been welcomed into an uncomfortable visitor.

It must be noted that while the Nicaraguans agreed that they were aware of the negative attitudes of the ticos (because they read the newspapers too), most had not personally experienced discrimination, except perhaps in the job market. At worst, some refugees stated that they felt indifference on the part of personnel at government and voluntary aid agencies, and sadness because they knew what was being said about them (author's personal interviews with refugees in and around San José conducted in 1989).

The number of officially registered Nicaraguans into Costa Rica fell slightly in 1984 to 4,106 (down from 5,722 in 1983), but by this time the number of Nicaraguans exceeded all other refugee groups in the country (Larson 1991,96). The government was fairly silent that year with regard to refugee decisions, and the national press followed suit.

In 1985 the number of Nicaraguans to receive refugee status rose again; to 5,485. In response, the Costa Rican government began to discuss new policies that were appropriate to the growing Nicaraguan presence within the country. They realized that the refugees were in Costa Rica indefinitely, giving rise to the concept of "durable solutions projects." That is, if the Nicaraguans were not going to go back, they had to find gainful employment and become absorbed into the economy. *La Nación* (23 April 1985) claimed that the tenure of the refugee in Costa Rica was not going to be a "brief lapse." Therefore, the article stated, the objective of government policies was to achieve "true integration" of the refugees. The proposed durable solutions would insure that the refugees did not become a social burden for the country, but rather that they would become "productive elements as much as for their own benefit as for the country." At the end of 1985 new government policies that dealt with refugee administration within Costa Rica, and which would be in charge of allocating work permits to refugees were put in place. These commissions, however, were so tangled in bureaucratic red tape and requirements for receiving a work permit were so cumbersome that many refugees circumvented the process altogether and worked illegally (Larson 1992,335-337).

The following year, 1986, again was relatively quiet on the border with only 3,260 Nicaraguans receiving refugee status. Oscar Arias, the newly **[end p. 31]** elected president of Costa Rica, made fewer important decisions that directly impacted refugee entrance criteria or labor rights than did his predecessors, Rodrigo Carazo (1978-1982) and Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986). Arias did, however, make significant strides toward ending the violence that had wracked the entire region for decades, winning the Nobel Prize in 1987 for his commitment to Peace in Central America. In spite of the lowered numbers of refugees gaining legal refugee status in Costa Rica in 1986, the press referred to "panic in the government in the face of a 'migration bomb'" (*La República*, 3 Oct. 1986). Apart from the ongoing difficulties in the labor force and social service sectors, it was reported that there was another problem "of a psychological kind." Apparently, Costa Ricans' rejection of the refugees had led to problems in various communities.

In 1987 a public opinion survey dealing with the Nicaraguan refugees and their impact on Costa Rica was conducted by the firm "Alvaro Ramos and Asociados" (*La Prensa Libre*, 15 Oct. 1987). Two hundred Costa Ricans between 18 and 65 years of age, including both sexes and all economic sectors, were asked the

following question:

Do you feel that the presence of 32,000 Nicaraguan refugees affects Costa Ricans in one way or another?

Their reported responses were:

- The Nicaraguan presence harms us: 89.50%
- It neither harms nor benefits us: 8.00%
- It benefits us: 1.50%
- Don't know / No response: 1.00%
- TOTAL: 100%

By the end of 1987 the media reported that the government was urging the nicas to comply with repatriation (*La República*, 22 Dec. 1987). The welcome mat was threadbare and the Costa Ricans wanted the Nicaraguans' to go home. Refugee officials were suspicious of the Nicaraguans claims of persecution. Fewer and fewer of the solicitants were granted asylum, and on more and more files the words 'economic migrant' or 'draft dodger' were written in the space reserved for status determination (Larson 1991). Indeed, *La Prensa Libre* (21 Jan. 1988) reported that the newest entrants from Nicaragua were fleeing the "obligatory military service or the severe socio-economic crisis that confronted the Nicaraguan citizenry."

The principal problem, which undoubtedly led to a series of lesser problems for-and ongoing resentment of the Nicaraguans, was that offinding enough jobs in view of Costa Rica's own economic and employment difficulties. A story in *La Nación* (23 March 1988) stated that, hopefully, within the months to come, approximately 7,000 Nicaraguans that were far from home and facing an uncertain future, would perhaps see their dreams of a secure job become reality. Articles in July (*La República*, 25, 1988) and August (*La Prensa Libre* 4, 1988) also addressed the durable solutions programs for the refugees, this time targeting the refugees living in camps throughout the country. Seasonal jobs in the agricultural sector, particularly during the coffee and rice harvests, were employing hundreds of young male Nicaraguans.

Toward the end of 1988 panic rose again and one headline read: "Costa Rican social fabric in danger, too many refugees in the country" (*La Republica*, 13 Nov. 1988). The article began with a statement by the Costa Rican Minister of Foreign Relations who argued that "Costa Rica cannot continue within the current of unconditionally receiving all of the thousands of people that they [the Sandinista government] want to send us, because it harms the Costa Rican social fabric." The concern was related to the great burden the refugee population was placing on the Costa Rican economy. The article stressed that the country needed international aid to help ease the financial problems caused by so many refugees. The reasons for this renewed migratory flow were the state of the Nicaraguan economy and the aftermath of hurricane Joan, which devastated the east coast of Nicaragua on the 21st and 22nd of October, 1988. Shortly thereafter, *La República* (18 Nov. 1988) reported that the influx of Nicaraguans continued and that the Costa Ricans were alarmed at the "massive arrival of our brothers from the neighboring country." The government decided that more vigilance along the northern border was necessary to decrease the flow of refugees into the country, as well as to protect the area from a potential rise in crime.

In early 1989, the tone of the articles shifted away from the panic and chaos, or disease and crime, and instead focused again on the search for durable [end p. 32] solutions for the refugees in Costa Rica. The three solutions proposed by the UNHCR and the Costa Rican government (as in the case of all refugee groups) were: 1) repatriation ---the preferred, and hopefully permanent, solution; 2) local integration ---so that the refugees would not remain inactive in camps, totally dependent on national and international aid; and 3) relocation to a third country--- the least practical and least successful (*La República*, 14 March 1989

and 21 Aug. 1989; *La Prensa Libre*, 21 April 1989; *La Nación*, 4 June 1989). More than 30,000 registered Nicaraguans clearly had placed a tremendous burden on the humanitarian capacity of the *ticos*.

The alternatives for the continued protection and aid for the refugees were: 1) to voluntarily return to their country of origin; or 2) to become economically absorbed into Costa Rica (while not displacing Costa Ricans). The headlines in *La Prensa Libre* (29 May 1989) read, "Refugees confront di lemma of repatriaation or integration." The director of DIGEPARE declared that the refugee situation could no longer be simply sustained, but rather that it must be resolved.

This paper not only chronicles the refugees' history in Costa Rica as seen through articles in the national newspapers, but it also begs us to question the objectivity of the media. Not just the Costa Rican press, but worldwide. Journalists use sensational, eye-catching headlines to capture readers' attention. As an collective agency they represent a major force in shaping perceptions regarding people, events, places, or periods of time. Powerful images are conjured up in our minds when we read large black headlines that state "Government in Panic in Face of Migration Bomb" (*La República*, 3 Oct. 1986), or "Violence is Feared: Explosive Problem with Refugees" (*La Prensa Libre*, 16 Nov. 1983), or "Saturation Feared in Refugee Camps" (*La Nación*, 23 Oct. 1984). The power and authority of journalists and the media cannot be overlooked when discussing the level of acceptance or rejection faced by any refugee (or simply any) population. (But, to be fair, blame should not be unduly placed on journalists and the media, nor should they take *entire* responsibility for not incorporating politically correct speech into their news stories. We all have far to go in that regard.) This paper represents only one way in which this old problem has manifested itself. Perhaps it will provoke more questions than it answers. Perhaps it will just encourage us to read between the lines a little more.

In the meantime, in 1994, long after the *contra* war has ended in Nicaragua, long after Violetta Chamorro has been president of Nicaragua, and long after the U. S. economic embargo against that country has been lifted, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica still number about 20,000. In the summer of 1993, the Costa Rican government was working with refugee aid agencies to either promote repatriation or change the Nicaraguans' refugee status to resident status. Most will opt to change their status to resident of Costa Rica. They are not keen to return to Nicaragua because of a severe economic crisis and the uncertain future that accompanies it (from interviews with refugees and refugee officials conducted by the author in the summer of 1993).

NOTES

¹ It is argued by some that the United State's policy of denying Haitians refugee status is based on racist principals of exclusion (see, for example *Refugee Reports*, 23 February 1990, II, and 27 April 27, 1990, 10).

² The "white legend" is a reference to the sixteenth-century "black legend" by Bartolomé de las Casas, whose chronicle reported the atrocities committed against the Indians by the Spanish conquistadores.

³ Since journalists get their information second-hand from high-ranking politicians or bureaucrats, they may be considered by proponents of the structuralist school only as intermediaries voicing the opinion of those in control.

⁴ For a discussion on how "languages of racism" permit negative stereotypes to become routinely expressed and thus sanctioned in society see Jackson (1989, 132-154).

⁵ A study on the Cuban Marielitos in Costa Rica by Gaston Fernandez and Leon Narvaez (1986) indicated

that by this time the Cubans too were becoming unwelcome in the country.

⁶ The figures of Nicaraguans receiving official refugee status should not be confused with the number of refugees applying for refugee status nor those entering Costa Rica. The estimated number of refugees in Costa Rica toward the middle of the 1980s [end p. 33] was between 100,000 and 200,000 (Ferris 1987, 78). The number of Nicaraguans that applied for status is not available, but certainly in the latter part of the decade more applicants were being denied official recognition than were granted it (author's perusal through refugee affidavits held at the Office for Refugee Migration, July-December, 1989).

REFERENCES

Anon. "Dade country call for federal investigation of alleged abuses at INS Krome facility." 27 April 1990, *Refugee Reports*, XI (4): 9-10. (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Committee for Refugees).

_____. "INS decreases overcrowding at Krome detention center, but tensions remain." 23 February 1990. *Refugee Reports*, XI (2): 9-11. (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Committee for Refugees).

Fernández, K. and Narvaez L. (1987). "Refugees and human rights in Costa Rica: The Mariel Cubans." *International Migration Review*, vol. 21: 406-416.

Ferris, E. G. (1987). *The Central American refugees*. (New York: Praeger).

Furlong, W. L. (1987). "Costa Rica: caught between two worlds." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 29: 119-154.

Giddens, Anthony. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*, (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Goldschmidt, A. M. F. and Boesch, E. E. (1983). "The world refugee problem: Refugees and development." In E. E. Boesch and A. M. F. Goldschmidt (Eds.), *Refugees and development*. (Berlin: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft Baden-Baden): 25-66.

Jackson, Peter. (1989). *Maps of meaning: An introduction to cultural geography*. (London: Unwin Hyman).

Karadawi, A. (1987). "The problem of urban refugees in Sudan." In J. Rogge (Ed.) *Refugees: A third world dilemma*. (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield): 115.

Kenen, Joanne. (1984). "Costa Rica: practically neutral." *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 253: 76.

Larson, Elizabeth M. (1991). The process of Nicaraguan refugee absorption into Costa Rica, 1980-1990: A structurationist perspective. University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

_____. (1992). "Costa Rican government policy on refugee employment and integration, 1980-1990." *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol. 4: 326-342.

Ramírez, M. A. (1989). *Refugee policy challenges: The case of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica*. (Washington D. C.: Hemispheric Migration Project, Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistant, Georgetown University).

Taylor, Ronald L. (Ed.). (1994). *Minority families in the United States' A multicultural perspective*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall)

Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1979). *Landscapes of fear*. (New York: Pantheon Books).

Newspaper Sources

"En Costa Rica 21,196 reciben ayuda de la ONU: El drama de 10s refugiados." *Contrapunto*, 1 October 1982.

"Los ticos somos un dechado de virtudes." *Esta Semana*, 17-23 November 1989.

"Libertad, libertad." (24 April 1980). *La Nación*.

"Gobierno anuncia severidad contra quienes violan asilo." *La Nación*, 16 October 1982.

"Costa Rica y el extranjero." *La Nación*, 19 October 1982.

"Prejuicio y rumor distancian a tilaranenses de refugiados." *La Nación*, 17 October 1983.

"Alegan falta de recursos para reubicar refugiados." *La Nación*, 18 October 1983.

"Una política para refugiados." *La Nación*, 8 December 1983.

"Temen saturación de centros de refugiados." *La Nación*, 23 October 1984.

"La política del Gobierno en materia de refugiados." *La Nación*, April 1985.

"Trabajo y esperanza para refugiados." *La Nación*, 23 March 1988.

"Sobre refugiados centroamericanos." *La Nación*, 4 June 1989.

"El exodo de los cubanos." *La Prensa Libre*, 13 May 1980.

"Temen violencia en diciembre: explosivo problema con los refugiados." *La Prensa Libre*, 16 November 1983.

"Combatientes infiltrados: Consejo de Seguridad vea problemas de los refugiados." *La Prensa Libre*, 17 November 1983.

"Los refugiados." *La Prensa Libre*, 18 November 1983.

"El ingreso de nicaragüenses no beneficia al país." *La Prensa Libre*, 15 October 1987.

"Odisea de refugiados para llegar a Costa Rica." *La Prensa Libre*, 21 January 1988.

"Las refugiadas no tienen adolescencia." *La Prensa Libre*, 4 August 1988.

"Refugiados en disyuntiva repatriación o trabajo." *La Prensa Libre*, 21 April 1989.

"Refugiados enfrentan dilema de repatriación o integración." *La Prensa Libre*, 29 May 1989.

"Gobierno insiste en ayudar a cubanos." *La República*, 20 April 1980.

"Invasion de refugiados víctimas de violencia. *La República*, 19 April 1983.

"Refugiados gran problema para país. *La República*, 13 November 1983.

"Pánico en el Gobierno ante "bomba migratorio." *La República*, 3 October 1986.

"Gobierno urge que nicas cumplan la repatriación." *La República*, 22 December 1987.

"¿Se debe querer o no a los refugiados?" *La República*, 25 July 1988. [end p. 34]

"Demasiados refugiados en el país." *La República*, 13 November 1988.

"Ministros en Barra del Colorado: continua la inmigración masiva de nicaragüenses." *La República*, 18 November 1988.

"Gobierno hace tres pedidos sobre caso de refugiados." *La República*, 14 March 1989.

"La nebulosa de los desplazados." *La República*, 21 August 1989.

Interviews with Officials at Refugee Agencies

Hatanaka, Hatsune. August 1989. Doctoral candidate, Department of Anthropology, SUNY-Albany, and Program Assistant, UNICEF, San José, Costa Rica.

Ramírez Rojas, Francisco. July 1989. Director, El Achioté refugee camp, Buenos Aires de Puntarenas, Costa Rica.

RESUMEN

Al aumentar el número de refugiados se percibe también un aumento en las actitudes negativas que el resto de la población tiene acerca de la imagen del refugiado. Ya no son vistos simplemente como víctimas de la violencia, sino que son percibidos como grupos que ocasionan violencia e inestabilidad en los países de asilo, y con frecuencia encuentran dificultades para ser aceptados. Sin embargo, la manera en que estos refugiados son retratados o descritos por los medios de comunicación contribuye a menudo a aumentar sus luchas para ser aceptados por la sociedad.

Este ensayo es un estudio a nivel micro de lo que en realidad es un problema global. Aquí, trato de describir el rencor que a través de los años se ha ido estableciendo entre costarricenses y nicaragüenses, y luego presento una historia de los refugiados nicaragüenses en Costa Rica a través de los ojos de los periodistas costarricenses. Lo que se observa es una década de percepciones negativas que son basadas en el pasado, pero además afectan el futuro del al menos durante el tiempo que persista pueblo nicaragüense, en continuar viviendo en Costa Rica, lo que posiblemente será durante un tiempo indefinido.

Las conclusiones de este corto estudio son que todos debemos ser conscientes del poder que poseen la prensa y los medios de comunicación en general, y que en esta época cuando se habla "políticamente correcto" todos debemos tomar alguna de responsabilidad en tratar de corregir los errores del pasado. [end p. 35]