

Recognizing Other Refugees

Hurricane Andrew has added new marchers to the pathetic parade of refugees streaming across the world, usually in other countries. They are better off but they have the same problems of those uprooted from their homes and uncertain about tomorrow.

We see children in Somalia, with starting ribs and starting eyes. We see the Bosnians fleeing the Serbs, clutching their babies and their grandmothers; they know they can expect no mercy from ethnic fiends who fire on buses carrying children to safety and machine-gun the funerals of the victims.

At least we see their pictures in the paper. We see them on television every night. We know what is happening to them. The world may be slow to respond, but at least it is watching. We dial the international 911, the United Nations. We send food trucks. We reproach governments that can't or won't do right. When Mother Nature is the agent, we declare a disaster area. We weep with the dispossessed. We rage at their oppressors. It does not put food in distended bellies or restore wrecked homes. But it may be better than not having one's suffering noticed.

Take the case of the Guatemalan refugees, about 46,000 of whom live in U.N.-sponsored refugee camps in Mexico. It's time to go home, the United Nations is telling them. The financial aid is being wound down, the camps must close.

But going home to Guatemala is like stepping off a cliff. There is perhaps some mathematical chance of survival, but the chances are minimal. The government of Guatemala, which we coddled during the contra war, has a hair-raising record of civil rights violations. The majority Indian population is treated like insects by the people in charge.

The authorities boast that they have no political prisoners. That is true. They murder them. Indigenous people are thought to be enemies of the state; in the last 10 years, 200,000 civilians have been killed or "disappeared."

The refugees are understandably seeking guarantees from the government before going back. They want assurances of human rights, an international escort to take them back and visit them later, and freedom of mobility, association and organization. The last word from the negotiation table is that the representatives of the regime have promised they would not

employ their notorious "civil patrols"—the death squads that eliminated labor leaders, human rights advocates and students—"unless necessary."

We pay attention to Guatemala when its security forces go after U.S. citizens, like Sister Diana Ortiz, who was raped and tortured, and Michael Devine, who was murdered. Something more is called for. We are the only great power in the world, and therefore the closest it has to a conscience—couldn't someone demand a show of human decency? Couldn't we take sides? In convention, Republicans took credit for the democratization of the world; how about some in our own hemisphere?

Some Americans think "attention must be paid." They are members of an organization called Witness for Peace and they write, tirelessly and politely, to reporters, editors, radio stations and members of Congress, pointing out the injustices and atrocities. They believe, as Bernice Muller of Tucson wrote, that "the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . . extends to all mankind."

Across the globe, in Kashmir, an earthly paradise, other blameless people are suffering hellish persecution not for anything they did but for being who they are. The Kashmiri Pandits, a minority Hindu sect that has lived in Kashmir for 5,000 years, would like to go home, just as much as the Guatemalan peasants. They have been driven off their ancestral lands by the terrorism of Islamic guerrillas who wish to annex Kashmir to the crescent of fundamentalist countries in the area. India, which will do anything to keep Kashmir in its possession, has refused to acknowledge the existence of the Pandits in refugee camps along the border, because "they don't want to add a religious element to the problem." Under the oppression, the population has shrunk from 280,000 to 250,000. Their numbers are being reduced further by conditions in the camp—snake bites and extreme heat.

A few loud words from our acting secretary of state about the abominable conduct of both India and Pakistan might help, but, alas, he is otherwise engaged. We hear about it because a Kashmiri-born U.S. citizen, an engineer named Vijay K. Sazawal, in the American way, won't have it. He speaks, writes, addresses Amnesty International meetings and has formed an organization to protest—and to remind the world that it should not accept the unacceptable.