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Refugee Camps as Spaces of the Global Cold War: Cold War activism and humanitarian action within refugee camps in Honduras during the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at refugee camps for Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras, as a lens to examine the relationship between the Cold War and humanitarianism during the 1980s. While this period, particularly in Central America, saw an intensification of the Cold War, it also saw humanitarian actors assert themselves more forcefully and independently than previously. Even as signs of a more independent humanitarian system were beginning to emerge however, the actors within that system were unable to avoid the continuing influence of the Cold War context. This article demonstrates how historical analysis of refugee camps has a relevance outside of refugee studies and the history of humanitarianism.

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The Cold War during the 1980s was a complex interplay between intensifying conflict and confrontation, and the emergence and strengthening of new forces which would outlast the Cold War world. An 'unprecedented expansion' of the United Nations' responsibilities and powers in the humanitarian realm was, as Mark Mazower has argued, the defining feature of the post-Cold War world.¹ Examining the 1980s through the prism of refugee camps, which straddled both the Cold War system and the humanitarian realm, demonstrates that, even as the Cold War hardened anew, some of the changes which would produce a new global system were emerging. Using Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras as a case study, this article shows that the nature of the Cold War by the 1980s meant that humanitarian actors had greater freedom of action but also that these actors themselves still struggled to, or did not seek to, escape the Cold War's framework.² While many strove to enact an independent, neutral, humanitarianism, the Cold War's influence was so dominant that it enforced binaries even on those who sought to act outside its ideological parameters. This article shows how

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¹Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*, (New York: Penguin Press: 2012), 379.

²For works on the history of the UNHCR, including that of the institution during the 1980s, see Anne Hammarstad, *The Rise and Decline of a Global Security Actor: UNHCR, Refugee Protection and Security*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014) and Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A perilous path*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001).

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different interpretations of independent humanitarian action were, themselves, often shaped by the Cold War.³ This Cold War influence was facilitated by the ways in which the Ronald Reagan administration, and its opponents, turned to refugees and humanitarian language to justify their stances on the conflicts of the 1980s. The growing importance of human rights and humanitarian rhetoric – even when used solely as a tool – did, however, mean that the voices of previously marginalised groups, in this case refugees, grew in significance, amplified by transnational organisations to influence the international system.

The conflicts which led to the movement of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans into Honduras had their distinct local and regional dimensions, but both were firmly enmeshed in the global Cold War. Those from El Salvador had fled from the unrelenting terror meted out by Salvadoran military and paramilitary forces as these state security forces, with Washington's backing and assistance, waged an anti-communist war against the population and the leftist guerrilla group, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).⁴ Meanwhile, refugees from Nicaragua had fled following confrontation with the newly established socialist Sandinista regime. Honduras was host to several different segments of the Nicaraguan population during this time, including supporters of the ousted regime of General Anastasio Somoza, but this article focuses on the Miskito Indians who comprised 70% of Honduras' Nicaraguan refugee population.⁵ Also present in Honduras were armed anti-Sandinista groups, known as Contras; these received Honduran, Argentinian and American support as they sought to overthrow the Sandinistas. For its part, Honduras was firmly aligned with Washington. Honduran political and military leaders understood themselves to be on the frontline of the global Cold War, surrounded as they were by socialist Nicaragua and growing left-wing guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Given this context, it is unsurprising that Tegucigalpa's policy toward each refugee group was overwhelmingly dictated by its Cold War alignment.⁶ On the one hand, the 19,000 refugees from El Salvador, the vast majority of whom came from FMLN strongholds, were confined to closed refugee camps. Here they were patrolled by the Honduran military, and they were vulnerable to attack by both Honduran and Salvadoran armed forces.⁷ In contrast, those from Nicaragua enjoyed much greater

³Humanitarianism has long been shaped by differing interpretations and factors. See, for example, Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁴For a history of Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras see Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, refugees, and collective activism in the Salvadoran civil war*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

⁵For an account of the conflicting narratives surrounding the Miskito – Sandinista conflict see Jarquín, Mateo C., "Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981-1982", *Cold War History* 18, no.1 (August 2017): 91–107. While the overwhelming majority of indigenous refugees were Miskito, a small number of Mayanga refugees were also under the protection of the UNHCR. For more on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast see Baron Pineda, *Shipwrecked Identities: Navigating Race on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast* (London: Rutgers University Press: 2006) and Nathaniel Morris, "Between Two Fires: Mayanga Indians in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979 – 1990", *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 33, no.2 (2014): 203–18. On relations between indigenous Honduran groups and indigenous Nicaraguan refugees see Danira Miralda Bulnes, *Latwan laka danh takisa: los pueblos originarios y la guerra de baja intensidad en el territorio de la Moskitia, República de Honduras*, (Tegucigalpa: Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia: 2012).

For information on Nicaraguan ladino refugees in Honduras see Elvia Elizabeth Gómez García, 'Refugiados Nicaragüenses y Desplazados en Honduras en la Década de los Ochenta', *Historia Contemporánea* 65, (2021): 163–95.

⁶While the Cold War was an important factor in determining the Honduran government's attitude toward the Salvadoran refugees, it was not the only one; the legacy of the 1969 'Football War' also loomed large.

⁷Franco, L., Americas Section to UNHCR Offices, 'Refugee Statistics in the Northern Latin American Countries', 3 September 1983, UNHCR Archives Geneva, (Hence UNHCR), Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 31, V.3.

freedom of movement and faced less harassment by the Honduran military. Honduras was not, of course, alone in hosting highly politicised refugee programmes during the 1980s. Thailand, which hosted Cambodian refugees, and Pakistan, which hosted Afghan refugees, are two other examples.⁸ Indeed, Fiona Terry's *Condemned to Repeat* examines these camps, along with those in Honduras and elsewhere, to show how states and non-state actors utilised and manipulated humanitarian assistance to their own ends.⁹ Honduras, however, is particularly noteworthy in that it hosted refugee populations on both sides of the Cold War divide. Furthermore, although the Honduran government set the terms of refugee assistance – such as dictating that the Salvadorans be confined to closed camps – unlike its Thai or Pakistani equivalents, it was determined to keep the actual organisation of this assistance at arm's length. Despite the occasional precarity of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) position on account of Honduras' status as a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it had a relatively high degree of autonomy to co-ordinate assistance which was then administered by a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).¹⁰ This relative autonomy, coupled with the depth of Tegucigalpa's involvement with the Cold War, means that Honduras offers an illuminating case study of the Cold War's interaction with humanitarianism and humanitarian actors.¹¹

By viewing this interaction through the prism of the refugee camp, this article highlights the relevance of refugee camps to historians of the global Cold War. In this it builds on a rich and diverse historiography of work on refugee camps. Michel Agier and Kirsten McConnachie have shown how camps are spaces of shared or contested sovereignties, while McConnachie has also looked at the history of the refugee camp itself, linking this to other 'camps of containment' such as prisoner-of-war camps and internment camps.¹² Others, including Jordanna Bailkin, have drawn attention to how refugee camps have served as 'crucial sites of encounters and entanglements that have had profoundly transformative effects,' and how, in addition to being sites of confinement and scrutiny, they have also been sites of 'multiple

⁸Politicised responses to refugees were not, of course, confined to refugee camps; Carl B. Tempo and Bruce Nichols have demonstrated how US asylum policies were primed to grant refuge to those fleeing communist, or Soviet-aligned, states. Gil Loescher & John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present*, (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers: 1986). Carl B. Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and refugees during the Cold War*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2008).

⁹Historians frequently focus on how humanitarianism is used or misused by various Cold War actors, often paying less attention to the ways in which humanitarian actors pushed back at such utilisation; Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (London: Cornell University Press: 2002). Young-Sun Hong meanwhile draws attention to the way in which the Algerian National Liberation Front utilised humanitarian assistance to internationalise the Algerian War of Independence against the efforts of the French government to portray the conflict as a domestic issue: Young-Sun Hong, 'The Algerian War, Third World Internationalism and the Cold War Politics of Humanitarian Assistance', in *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Johannes Paulmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2016), 289–309.

¹⁰Maja Janmyr has written on the relationship between non-signatory States and international refugee law. Maja Janmyr, 'The 1951 Refugee Convention and Non-Signatory States: Charting a Research Agenda', in *International Journal of Refugee Law* 33, no. 2 (December 2021): 188–213.

¹¹At present, historians have devoted more attention to the end of the Cold War and human rights than to the end of the Cold War and its relationship with humanitarianism. See for example, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, 'Human Rights and History', *Past & Present* 232 (2016): 279–310. Eleanor Davey's *Idealism beyond Borders* examines the changing nature of French humanitarian thought from 1954–1988: Eleanor Davey, *Idealism beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954-1988*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2015).

¹²Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, (Cambridge: Polity: 2011). Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order, and Legal Pluralism*, (London: Routledge: 2014)

Kirsten McConnachie, 'Camps of Containment: A Genealogy of the Refugee Camp', *Humanity* 7 (2016): 399.

experiences and practices'.¹³ These ideas are central to this article's conceptualisation of refugee camps. Recognising the mixture of regional and international factors shaping refugee policy, Jana Lipman meanwhile argues that, to understand refugee politics, we 'must look at the camps, the places that hosted them, and the people inside'.¹⁴ Building on these seminal works, this article seeks to move beyond recognising that the refugee camp has a history and that this history can illuminate understandings of refugeedom and humanitarianism.¹⁵ It shows how historical analysis of refugee camps has a relevance outside of refugee studies and the history of humanitarianism. In this regard, it uses the refugee camp to respond to recent calls to integrate refugee history and global history in 'mutually productive and constitutive ways'.¹⁶ In emphasising how refugee camps are places of diverse interaction in which the Cold War lens can be combined with a humanitarian one, this article then echoes Jochen Lingelbach in his description of refugee camps as 'portals of globalisation'; spaces, such as urban centres, port cities, or imperial metropolises where actors with different 'identitarian spatial references' interact.¹⁷

The first of this article's three sections illustrates the limitations of the Cold War system in dictating the location of UNHCR-administered camps for Miskito refugees. The second examines the differing interpretations of humanitarian agencies regarding events in the Salvadoran refugee camp of Colomoncagua, demonstrating the Cold War's ability to shape the actions of even those who saw themselves as responding to humanitarian norms, and not Cold War ones. Finally, the third section shows how both those on the Left and Right were drawn to these camps as places about which they could use the language of humanitarianism to justify the righteousness of their Cold War cause. Throughout, this article draws on material collected from several archives including the Digital National Security Archive, those of the UNHCR, and those of various NGOs including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Oxfam. Additionally, numerous oral history interviews with former refugees and aid workers all underline that refugee camps, as described by Liisa Malkki, are sites of 'intense historicity'.¹⁸

Section I – The UNHCR and Miskito refugees

The physical location and structure of a refugee camp could, at first glance, appear as its most basic elements. Depending on one's perspective, camps are variously understood to be structured for humanitarian reasons; for the efficient distribution of aid; for political reasons; or to confine the refugee population away from the host country's population. A history of refugee camps could pay attention to the various factors which, over time, have shaped the physical structures of refugee camps while explaining the diversity of

¹³Jordanna Bailkin, *Unsettled: Refugee Camp and the Making of Multicultural Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2018), 15. Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, 'What is refugee history now?', *Journal of Global History* 17 (2022): 11.

¹⁴Jana Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Repatriates* (California: University of California Press: 2020), 4.

¹⁵Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013), 9 Bailkin, *Unsettled*, 7.

¹⁶Banko, Nowack, Gatrell, 'What is refugee history, now?', 19.

¹⁷Jochen Lingelbach, 'Refugees in the Imperial Order of Things: Citizen, Subject, and Polish Refugees in Africa (1942–50)', *Africa Today* 69 (2022): 80.

¹⁸Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricisation', in *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no.3 (1996), 383.

camp structures, for example, from closed camps to open ones. Looking at the forces shaping how a refugee camp comes to be structured and located can, however, also shed light on the nature of these forces themselves.

In the case of the Nicaraguan refugee camp located at Mocerón in Honduras, humanitarian impulses and the ambitions of armed anti-Sandinista groups clashed as guerrilla leaders and the UNHCR each sought to determine the camp's physical form and location. This dispute illustrates the ability of humanitarian actors to stymie the instrumentalisation of a refugee camp for the benefit of US-backed actors involved in a Cold War-linked conflict. In this respect, it highlights humanitarianism as an occasional barrier to Cold War machinations, even in the so-called 'USS Honduras' during the 1980s.¹⁹

In July 1982, Nicaraguan Miskito refugees at Mocerón were informed by UNHCR representatives that by January 1983 the camp's water supply and health system, along with food assistance, would be discontinued.²⁰ Refugees were to be dispersed in settlements within the Honduran Mosquitia, all of which were situated at least 50 kilometres from the Nicaraguan border. The camp's refugee leaders were strongly resistant to this dispersal and, following the camp's closure they, along with Reagan administration-linked groups, encouraged refugees to relocate near the border in breach of the UNHCR's 50-kilometres stipulation.²¹

From the perspective of Arne Lundby, the UNHCR's Deputy Chargé de Mission in Honduras, the refugee camp at Mocerón was, by mid-1982, an 'artificial situation' and no longer necessary in humanitarian terms.²² Less than a year previously, Lundby had described the settlement of refugees at Mocerón as being the most 'practical' means by which humanitarian aid could be provided.²³ In the intervening period, however, the camp had grown rapidly, from 200 at the beginning of 1982 to over 7,000 by April of that year.²⁴ By August, refugee leaders estimated that another 10,000 would soon arrive.²⁵ This rapid growth, coupled with the camp's location in the swampy and inaccessible Mosquitia region, contributed to the camp's poor conditions; sanitary problems were rife and refugees were living in overcrowded conditions.²⁶ Moreover, such a situation was not warranted given the freedom of movement granted to the refugees by the Honduran government, along with the government's preparedness to provide land to each family so that they could become self-sufficient.²⁷ As Florence Egal, World Relief's Mocerón coordinator described it, the Honduran government's stance meant that 'for once, there seemed to be a satisfactory and rapidly viable alternative to the classic refugee camp'.²⁸ Encouraging the dispersal of refugees into self-sufficient communities was, from

¹⁹Walter La Feber, *Inevitable Revolution: The United States in Central America*, (New York: Norton: 1993), 310

²⁰Lundby, Arne to UNHCR Geneva, 'Nicaraguan Miskito Refugees - Dispersal Plan', 22 July 1982, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.3.

²¹NYT, 19 April 1985. Deborah to Peter, 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia 1st - 18th October 1985', 24 October 1985, PRG/5/3/3/2. Oxfam archive, Oxford (hence Oxfam).

²²Ibid.

²³Lundby, Note For the File: *Nicaraguan Miskito Refugees*, 11 October 1981, UNHCR Fonds II, Series 2, Box 92, V.3

²⁴*The Washington Post*, 30 April 1982.

²⁵Radford to Wingfield (Save the Children), 30 September 1982, Save the Children Archive Birmingham (hence SCF), SCF/OP/4/HOD/11.

²⁶Lundby, Arne to UNHCR Geneva, 'Nicaraguan Miskito Refugees - Dispersal Plan'.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Florence Egal, 'Hope Imposed at Mocerón: Refugees Dispersed into Small Communities', *Refugees*, no. 18 (June 1983).

the UNHCR's perspective, much more preferable than sustaining a camp situation with the associated dependency and psychological difficulties.

The participation of refugees in the proposed dispersal plans was, however, 'minimal', according to Egal.²⁹ Given the poor conditions within the camp, described by one UNHCR officer as a 'nightmarish bog', the opposition of Mocerón's leaders to the UNHCR's proposals cannot then be understood in terms of a humanitarian rationale.³⁰ Rather, their ambitions relating to the Miskito-Sandinista conflict drove their objections. Miskito leaders within that conflict saw the refugee camp at Mocerón as an important base of support. This was linked not just to the propaganda value a camp offered over dispersed settlements, but also the control which could be more easily exerted over a camp populace. Such control was important in terms of recruitment, forcible and otherwise, but also in terms of inter-Miskito rivalries. This was vividly demonstrated in February 1982 when Brooklyn Rivera, leader of the Miskito guerrilla group MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista, Asla, Takana), was forced to leave Mocerón by followers of Steadman Fagoth, a leader much more closely aligned to other Contra groups and the US.³¹ In the aftermath of Rivera's ouster, refugees residing outside of the camp were threatened by followers of Fagoth who sought to relocate them to Mocerón.³² Within the camp, affairs were run by a six-person refugee commission closely linked to Fagoth's armed group, MISURA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama).³³ The resistance to dispersal came from this commission.

One factor contributing to this opposition was the propaganda value which could be derived from the camp. In December 1982, in a quest to gather international support for MISURA, Fagoth travelled to Belgium, the Netherlands, and the Federal Republic of Germany, and claimed to represent the refugees of Mocerón.³⁴ He held press conferences and met with government officials to request aid for his followers in Nicaragua.³⁵ In terms of garnering publicity for MISURA, Mocerón also served as a focal point for journalists and activists, to whom it was a prime example of the fallout from the Sandinistas' actions along the Atlantic Coast. While images of destitute families at Mocerón were likely to pull on readers' heartstrings, some journalists questioned the authenticity of refugee testimony. Loren Jenkins, writing in *The Washington Post*, noted how refugee testimony relating to an alleged Sandinista massacre at Leimus differed enormously depending on whether members of the refugee leadership were present.³⁶

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Mark Malloch Brown, 'Nicaraguan Miskitos', *Refugees Magazine*, no.1 (September 1982).

³¹US Embassy Nicaragua, *Miskito Leadership* (Memo), 18 March 1982, accessed online at the Digital National Security Archives (hence DNSA), Nicaragua: the making of US policy, 1978–1990 (hence Nicaragua).

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, OAS, *Report on the situation of human rights of a segment of the Nicaraguan population of Miskito origin*, Oct. 1983, 41 accessed online at the Chief George Manuel Memorial Indigenous Library (hence George Manuel). Nicaraguan indigenous guerrilla groups fractured along both personality and ideological lines. Throughout the decade Fagoth and his MISURA group were more closely aligned to the FDN and Washington than Rivera and MISURASATA. While Fagoth maintained a stronghold in Honduras, Rivera was largely based in Costa Rica and co-operated with Edén Pastora and ARDE. In 1985, with the heavy involvement of the US, there was an attempt to sideline Fagoth through the creation of KISAN (Kus Indian Sut Asla Nicaragua ra). For an overview of the different groups involved in the Contra War, see Verónica Rueda Estrada, *Recompas, Recontras, Revueltos Y Rearmados: Posguerra y conflictos por la tierra en Nicaragua 1990 – 2008*, (Mexico: Instituto Mora, 2015), 66–82.

³²UNHCR Costa Rica to Geneva, 22 June 1982, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 92, V.3.

³³UNHCR Geneva to Honduras, 22 February 1983, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, V.4.

³⁴UNHCR Geneva, 22 December 1982, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 646.

³⁵Liebeck (UNHCR), 'Note for the file: Telephone Conversation with the UNHCR Representative in Brussels re: Visits of Steadman Fagoth to Belgium', 7 January 1983, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 646.

³⁶*The Washington Post*, 30 April 1982.

UNHCR officials were fully aware that MISURA saw the camp as an asset in its public relations campaign, later noting that those opposed to its dispersal favoured the 'maintenance of a large, highly visible camp'.³⁷

Another role served by Mocerón was the material support it provided to MISURA. There was widespread speculation among relief workers that aid from Mocerón was being diverted to the MISURA base at Rus Rus and the UNHCR encountered repeated reports of forced recruitment.³⁸ As one former combatant recalled, 'when the people were in Nicaragua, the *Contras* did not have the capacity to capture young . . . But when you're in Honduras, you're in the hands of MISURA'.³⁹ In addition to forcing refugees into Mocerón, MISURA combatants also prevented others from leaving, with those who wished to do so departing under the cover of darkness, out of fear of reprisals.⁴⁰

Despite the objections of Mocerón's leaders, the relocation of over 10,000 refugees took place during January and February 1983; the camp was then transformed into a reception centre.⁴¹ This did not, however, spell the end to tensions over the location of refugee settlements in the area. The UNHCR's stipulation that settlements had to be at least 50 kilometres from the Nicaraguan border was designed to hinder the utilisation of these settlements by armed groups. Maintaining a refugee presence along the border was in the interest of anti-Sandinista guerrilla groups who sought to use settlements as a source of food, shelter, and recruits.⁴² Although the UNHCR and its operating partner, World Relief, refused to work in this area, a group of openly pro-Contra and anti-communist aid agencies with ties to the Reagan Administration sought to encourage settlement along the border.⁴³ As a 1985 report prepared for members of the US Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus concluded, the 'relief effort for the Miskito Indians living on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border has had the effect of maintaining the MISURA "contra" army'.⁴⁴ The UNHCR meanwhile saw this 'frontier programme' as luring refugees from UNHCR camps and creating an artificial emergency along the border, something which would subsequently be used by US-based groups as evidence of the institution's abandonment of the victims of Sandinista repression.⁴⁵

World Relief's refusal to work along the border, along with its support of the dispersal plan, is also noteworthy. A US-based organisation, it was the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, the organisation to which Reagan delivered his 'evil empire' speech and had previously counted Diana Negroponte, wife of the US Ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, among its staff.⁴⁶ Its director in

³⁷Nicholas van Praag, 'Making it beyond Mocerón', *Refugees Magazine*, no.16 (April 1985).

³⁸Radford to Wingfield, 'Mocerón', 21 May 1982, SCF/OP/4/HOD/10.

Envio, 'The Silent Invasion', 14 August 1982.

³⁹'Former Sumu MISURA combatant,' quoted in Americas Watch Committee, *The Sumus in Nicaragua and Honduras: An Endangered People* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Americas Watch, 1987), 9.

⁴⁰UNHCR Geneva, 25 January 1983, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 646.

⁴¹Haselman, Bertrand (UNHCR), 'Mission Report: Honduras (June 1983)', PRG/3/3/3/8, Oxfam.

⁴²*The New York Times*, 19 April 1985.

⁴³Deborah to Peter, 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia 15th – 18th October 1985', 24 October 1985, Oxfam, PRH/5/3/3/2 Nicaragua.

⁴⁴'Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, Report: 'Who are the *Contras*? An Analysis of the Makeup of the Military Leadership of the Rebel Forces, and of the Nature of the Private American Groups Providing them Financial and Material Support', 18 April 1985, 2.

⁴⁵*The New York Times*, 19 April 1985.

Deborah to Peter, 'Field Tour to Honduran Mosquitia 15th - 18th October 1985', 24 October 1985, Oxfam, PRG/5/3/3/2 Nicaragua.

⁴⁶David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*, (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1990), 251.

Honduras, Tom Hawk, would later go on to join the right-wing ARENA (National Republican Alliance) party in El Salvador. Given such links to the Reagan administration, the seeming logic of the Cold War could have determined that the agency sided with MISURA over the UNHCR as, indeed, did other organisations, such as Friends of the Americas.⁴⁷ Instead, World Relief's actions, in this case at least, stemmed from a humanitarian logic which favoured refugee self-sufficiency over a camp situation.

Links between armed groups and refugee camps are by no means uncommon, nor is the leveraging of a refugee camp for propaganda purposes.⁴⁸ The events in the Honduran Mosquitia, however, highlight, the contested nature of the physical structure of a refugee camp. Here, a humanitarian rationale in favour of dispersing a camp and relocating refugees away from a group involved in forced recruitment clashed with the goals of armed actors who sought to use a humanitarian space for their own means. The success of the UNHCR's dispersal plan, and the institution's refusal to work in the border region despite US pressure, speaks to the complex relationship between humanitarianism and the Cold War, with humanitarian actors capable of disrupting Cold War-linked dynamics or ambitions. Nor should such a success be taken to indicate that Mocerón was unimportant to MISURA or its backers. In the face of strong global support for the Managua government, anti-Sandinistas were desperate for propaganda victories. The regime's mistreatment of indigenous populations was important in this regard, as US Secretary of State Alexander Haig accused the Sandinistas of 'genocidal actions', referencing photos of atrocities committed by the Somoza regime.⁴⁹

Section II – Interpreting Humanitarianism in a Cold War context

Recognising that humanitarian motives could act as a foil to Cold War ones is not to imply that a binary always existed between the two. Although humanitarian organisations would outlast the Cold War world and come to be a defining feature of the post-Cold War system, they were staffed by individuals whose perspectives often reflected a Cold War lens. Thus, although the 1980s showed that 'the Cold War icepack could be broken, and that activism could make a difference', that very activism could not always escape the dynamics of the Cold War.⁵⁰ A dispute between Salvadoran refugees and MSF in the second half of the 1980s is a prime example, illustrating the pervasive nature of the Cold War; the ideological struggle created binaries which made carving out any sort of middle ground nearly impossible, even for those who did not view themselves as being involved. Moreover, the internal space of the refugee camp shows the impact of this ideological pervasiveness on daily life.

In the summer of 1988, a press release was issued in the name of the Salvadoran refugee community in Honduras, drawing the attention of national and international solidarity organisations, humanitarian organisations and national governments to the 'totally deficient' standard of care being provided by MSF to refugees in the camps of

⁴⁷For more on Friends of the Americas see Fionntán O'Hara, 'Mixed Motives: The Politics of U.S. Interest in Refugees in Honduras during the 1980s', *The Latin Americanist* 65 (2021): 481–510.

⁴⁸As previously mentioned, during this period both Pakistan and Thailand hosted refugee camps which were heavily used by armed groups.

⁴⁹Jarquín, 'Red Christmases', 105.

⁵⁰Mazower, *Governing the World*, 326.

Mesa Grande, Colomoncagua and San Antonio.⁵¹ A later MSF end-of-mission report noted that at all times, MSF had complied with international standards, and this had been regularly verified by the UNHCR's medical assessor.⁵² The report went on to lament the 'over-medicalised' nature of Central American society where patients seldom left a doctor's office without receiving some sort of medication.⁵³ Examination of an apparent dispute centred around cultural differences and technical standards soon reveals an ideological dimension with linkages to the Cold War; it also raises questions as to who determined events within the internal space of the refugee camp.

Although MSF had been providing healthcare to Salvadoran refugees since 1980, difficulties between the refugee population and the organisation had evolved gradually, particularly once MSF replaced Caritas as the medical assistance coordinator.⁵⁴ From this point, MSF staff frequently clashed with the refugees, represented by camp committees, over access to medicine and health standards.⁵⁵ More generally, MSF's leadership was not as supportive of the refugee committees as other aid agencies. With the US Embassy in San Salvador convinced of the camps' vital role in sustaining the FMLN's insurgency, the Honduran government had sought to relocate them away from the border.⁵⁶ The refugees strongly, and successfully, resisted this. Whereas other aid agencies, including Caritas and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), supported the refugees' protests, MSF cited the Honduran government's right to determine the location of refugee camps as well as the UNHCR's Handbook for Emergencies which stipulated that camps should be located at least 50 kilometres from international borders. MSF's refusal to back the refugees in this regard, (which included the removal of an MSF coordinator who did support the refugees' position), damaged relations and highlighted that MSF did not view its role in terms of offering unwavering solidarity.⁵⁷ In contrast, the support given by other agencies' staff to the refugees was so marked that Werner Blatter, the UNHCR's representative in Honduras, expressed concern that they were radicalising the refugees.⁵⁸ By August 1988 relations between MSF and the refugees had deteriorated to such a degree that refugees had denounced MSF in newspaper advertisements and blocked MSF staff from entering the camps.⁵⁹

It is clear therefore that the refugee committees' complaints were rooted in issues that went beyond medical care. Similarly, MSF's position was not only driven by technical standards. In the view of Rony Brauman, then MSF President, the camp committees were linked to the FMLN and their behaviour was dictatorial.⁶⁰ The situation was, according to Brauman, particularly dire in Colomoncagua, which was linked to the more hard-line

⁵¹As attached in letter from Dr. Magdi Ibrahim (MSF), 26 July 1988, MSF archives Paris (hence MSF), Honduras 1988 deuxième rapatriement massif.

⁵²Magdi Ibrahim, 'Rapport De Mission: Pays: Honduras', Dec. 1988, MSF, Honduras 1988 deuxième rapatriement massif.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibrahim, 'Rapport De Mission: Pays: Honduras'.

⁵⁵Beth Cagen, Steve Cagen, *This Promised Land, El Salvador*, (London: Rutgers University Press: 1991), 70

Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 125. For more on the refugees' internal organisation see Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement*.

⁵⁶See, for example, 'Report of the El Salvador Military Assistance Team', November 1981, DNSA, El-Salvador: the making of US policy, 1977–1984 (hence ESUS).

⁵⁷MSF Speaking Out: Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras 1988, 13

⁵⁸UNHCR Honduras to Geneva, 'Re telecon British Embassy', 25 January 1984, UNHCR Fond 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.7. Blatter to UNHCR Geneva, 30 April 1984, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 94, V.8.

⁵⁹Ibrahim, 'Rapport De Mission: Pays: Honduras'.

⁶⁰MSF, 'Conseil d'administration du 22 juillet 1988', 22 July 1988, MSF, Honduras 1988 deuxième rapatriement massif.

ERP (People's Revolutionary Army).⁶¹ Here, Brauman alleged, refugees were held hostage by camp leaders; he claimed refugees had been forcibly prevented from repatriating and in August 1985, following a disagreement, five refugees had been executed.⁶² Such allegations were, however, vehemently rejected by refugee leaders. The falsehoods being spread about the standard of MSF's care were, according to Brauman, not simply the result of cultural misunderstandings but were manufactured by the committees so that any repatriation could be presented as being the result of inadequate care.⁶³ Overall, unlike 'other' aid organisations, MSF could no longer cooperate with the 'Khmer Rouge-style' committees and, in July 1988, MSF's board voted to withdraw from the camps.⁶⁴ At the same time, the reasons for this withdrawal remained private so as not to provide ammunition to the Honduran and Salvadoran military and US embassy which already viewed the refugee camps as bastions of guerrilla support.⁶⁵

The dispute is particularly noteworthy on account of the contrasting viewpoints of MSF and other aid organisations. An article in *The Sunday Times*, which described the camps as 'jungle gulags' under the control of dictatorial Marxist guerrillas, prompted letters of complaint from the British Refugee Council, War on Want, Christian Aid and Oxfam.⁶⁶ Opposition to the MSF position was expressly articulated during an ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) meeting in which the UNHCR requested that ICVA members, which included CRS and Caritas but not MSF, support MSF on the grounds that the refugees' rejection of the organisation set a bad precedent.⁶⁷ At this point, an agency representative stated that there were no grounds to doubt the rationality of the refugees' decisions.⁶⁸ Refugees, according to the Church World Service representative, should participate in deciding who was contracted to provide services to them.⁶⁹ However, the UNHCR representative had little time for this 'utopic' idea.⁷⁰

Despite their differences, the UNHCR, MSF, Caritas and CRS all claimed to be striving toward a common goal: refugee protection, welfare, and assistance. The backdrop of the global Cold War goes some way to explaining the different positions of these humanitarian actors. In this regard, the frequent comparisons made by Brauman between the refugee committees and the Khmer Rouge are instructive. MSF's experience in Cambodia and Ethiopia had had a profound effect on the organisation, with leaders, including Brauman, coming away with the belief that they had been blind to the excesses of the Left.⁷¹ Indeed, Brauman approached the situation in Honduras as a self-described anti-communist, believing himself adept at spotting communists.⁷² As Eleanor Davey has

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²MSF Speaking Out: Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras 1988, 30.

⁶³MSF, 'Conseil d'administration du 22 juillet 1988'.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Oxfam to *Sunday Times*, 28 November 1988, British Refugee Council archive, University of East London (hence BRC), Box 69, LA89. War on Want to *Sunday Times*, 30 November 1988, BRC, Box 69, LA89. Christian Aid to *Sunday Times*, 30 November 1988, BRC, Box 69, LA89.

⁶⁷Alfredo del Rio, UNHCR Senior Legal Adviser, Note for the File, *Meeting with the ICVA Sub-Committee on Central America and Mexico*, 12 October 1988, 600.HON H, UNHCR.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*, 234.

⁷²Author interview, Rony Brauman, Zoom, 22 December 2022. Interview with this and other interviewees has the approval of the London School of Economics and Political Science's Research Ethics Committee

detailed, the 1980s saw *tiers-mondisme* come under attack in France with MSF launching Liberté Sans Frontières (LSF) in 1984. Strongly anti-totalitarian and anti-communist, LSF aimed to challenge the Third Worldist orientation of aid workers and its agenda attracted the support of some sections of the French far-right.⁷³

Although the organisation's recent history undoubtedly influenced how its leaders regarded and interpreted events, this is not to say that MSF was wholly inaccurate in its description of Colomoncagua. During interviews with former refugees, many mention the coercive measures sometimes employed by Colomoncagua's leaders including the withholding of food, the assignment of unpleasant duties and, at times, the forcible return of particularly uncooperative refugees to El Salvador.⁷⁴ At the same time, these interviewees take pride in the camp's connections to the ERP and note the necessity of a strong internal organisation in the face of a myriad of threats.⁷⁵ Others, meanwhile, are less sanguine, repeating the accusation that five refugees had been executed and their bodies dumped in Colomoncagua's latrines.⁷⁶

If experiences in Cambodia framed the Salvadoran camps in a certain light for the MSF leadership, other agencies were not immune from such wider influences. Liberation theology, alongside the murder of Archbishop Óscar Romero, meant that those working with faith-based agencies often viewed their role as standing in solidarity with the refugees, at times sharing sympathies for the FMLN's campaign.⁷⁷ Religion was a central aspect of life in the camps, and this promoted a shared sense of identity, with some aid workers viewing the Salvadoran conflict and the oppression of Honduran border communities as a war on Christian-based communities.⁷⁸ This idea of a shared struggle was also compounded by the reality of the camps. Viewing the situation through a Cold War lens, the Honduran government saw the refugees as subversive and those aiding them were similarly tainted. From the refugees' viewpoint, raids on camps, including the killing of refugees by Honduran security and paramilitary forces, and the consequent constant sense of insecurity necessitated a high level of collective organisation. Nor was this sense of siege limited to the refugees – relief workers, particularly those from Honduras, were not immune to harassment by the military; in 1981 a Caritas worker, Elipidio Cruz, was killed by Honduran forces.⁷⁹

Solidarity with the refugee community and humanitarianism were not, however, always comfortable companions. While the UNHCR understood a refugee's ability to decide when to repatriate as an 'essential' right, the refugee committees regarded such a decision as an act of betrayal which endangered the community.⁸⁰ As the UNHCR sought to facilitate individual voluntary repatriation, conflict arose with the refugee leadership. In one incident, in May 1988, a refugee who wished to repatriate was separated from UNHCR officers by a crowd of refugees and badly beaten before being

⁷³Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*, 215–17, 222.

⁷⁴Various author interviews with former refugees of Colomoncagua, conducted November 2022, Morazán, El Salvador.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Lucio Vásquez (Chiyo), Sebastián Escalón Fontan, *Siete Gorriones*, (San Salvador: Museo de La Palabra y la Imagen, 2011), 245–46.

⁷⁷Archbishop of San Salvador, Romero was assassinated by Salvadoran death squads on March 24th 1980 while celebrating mass. He had been vocal in condemning human rights abuses in El Salvador.

⁷⁸Author interview with former UNHCR protection officer in Honduras, Zoom, March 2020.

⁷⁹Oxfam America to UNHCR Geneva, 24 November 1981, UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 2, Box 93, V.2.

⁸⁰UNHCR Honduras, 'UNHCR to the Colomoncagua refugee community', 25 June 1988, 100.HON.SAL [c].

'taken hostage'.⁸¹ Most notable for this article was the UNHCR accusation that, as its officers sought to protect themselves and the repatriates from a crowd armed with sticks and machetes, four international staff from Caritas and CRS present made no effort to intervene.⁸² The extent of the solidarity which some staff felt with the refugee community is evident from a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker's dispatch; this included a description of an occasion in which relief staff did intervene. Commenting that they had stood against the collective refugee voice which had demanded that a refugee accused of murder be killed, the MCC worker wrote: 'I realised that we had taken an action against the stated wishes of the refugees ... We had up to now been able to stay neutral and let the UNHCR take the heat for going against their will. Now we had sided with the UNHCR.'⁸³ The fact that this relief worker felt a sense of unease in opposing the refugee population (and where inaction risked condoning the extrajudicial killing of another refugee) highlights the degree to which, for some, a supposed humanitarian role could blend into one of near unquestioning solidarity.

Solidarity alone does not fully explain a CRS representative's statement, during a heated discussion with UNHCR officials, that that the agency 'respected the internal structures of the camp'.⁸⁴ This was, after all, a structure which the UNHCR claimed to respect until it went 'against the wishes of individual refugees'.⁸⁵ Rather, it is highly likely that the wider context of the Salvadoran conflict influenced the staff of CRS and other agencies. As Blake Ortman of the MCC recalls, the Salvadoran government was a 'terrorist government', and so an attitude prevailed which rejected any criticism of one's 'own' side.⁸⁶ Shared support for the FMLN's struggle could therefore mean that some aid workers overly identified with the refugee leadership and thus were not sufficiently distant to be critical; as Kevin O'Sullivan has described it, humanitarian assistance was seen here as a 'weapon in a global anti-imperialist campaign'.⁸⁷

Although UNHCR officials offered support to MSF, their interpretations of events differed to Brauman's standpoint. An ideological commitment to Marxism was, in Brauman's view, at the heart of the committees' behaviour. From this perspective it was unsurprising that they displayed dictatorial tendencies. Damasco Feci, Head of the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, saw this as a 'one-sided interpretation' which failed to understand the impact of Honduran policy which meant that the refugees were 'obliged to live under unusual and coercive standards with no alternative solution in sight'.⁸⁸ It was the reality of life within the camps, rather than an ideological predisposition toward authoritarianism which, for Feci at least, explained events.

⁸¹UNHCR Tegucigalpa to UNHCR HQ, 26 May 1988, 600.HON H, UNHCR.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³MCC, 'Vigil For Life: Mesa Grande Refugee Camp, Honduras', 11 July 1988, archives of the Mennonite Central Committee, Akron Pennsylvania (hence MCC), Refugees – Personal Testimonies 1988.

⁸⁴J. Telford, *Report on CRS Seminar in Tela*, 6/12/1988, 507 HON A, UNHCR.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Blake Ortman, author interview, 09 March 2021.

⁸⁷Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Civil War in El Salvador and the Origins of Rights-Based Humanitarianism', *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021): 256.

⁸⁸D. Feci (UNHCR, Head, Desk Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean) to L. Lima (UNHCR, Head of Sub-Office in San Marco), 'Report on Western Honduras for period July-August 1988', 6 October 1988, 100.HON.SAL [d], UNHCR.

It is notable that such divisions took place in the context of the late 1980s. Humanitarianism which prioritised individual refugee rights *versus* humanitarianism as an expression of solidarity chimes with the contemporaneous growth of human rights as a lens by which to view the world. Certainly, it speaks to Samuel Moyn's description that 'westerners left the dream of revolution behind' and concentrated instead on an 'internationalism revolving around individual rights'.⁸⁹ Yet, the position of MSF and that of agencies such as CRS were both products of the Cold War; one fell into Cold War binaries, seeing the FMLN as analogous to the Khmer Rouge, while the other saw public criticism of the refugee leadership as implicitly giving support to the Salvadoran Right and its backers. All organisations would have seen themselves as answering to a humanitarian mandate but interpretations of that mandate were unavoidably shaped by the Cold War world.

Section III – Humanitarian language and the Cold War

While refugee camps can be viewed as inward spaces – ones which draw in different groups and which are shaped by external and internal actors – they can also be viewed as outward spaces, ones from which influence and information flow. In the case of Honduran refugee camps, a variety of actors were eager to harness this information in pursuit of diverse aims. Within the US, those on the Left and Right turned to these camps, seeking evidence and images to further their domestic political positions regarding the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In both cases, the use of refugee testimony, coupled with a focus on the victims of the conflicts, illustrates how, by this stage, the language of the Cold War was changing with parties increasingly using – whether for genuine or propaganda purposes – the language of humanitarianism and human rights to justify their goals. Examining the outward space of Honduran refugee camps highlights this, but also draws attention to the global nature of the Cold War, the diversity of actors involved, and the transnational networks which facilitated the flow of information and propaganda.

Most refugee camps attract a variety of international actors – from NGO workers to the refugees themselves – but a notable feature of the Salvadoran refugee camps was the frequency of visits by international delegations. These visitors included both individuals, often travelling with a solidarity association or religious organisation such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and politicians, both from the US and further afield. Such visits, which ranged in terms of duration, were encouraged by the refugees who keenly appreciated that abuses by the Honduran military were tempered in the presence of an international audience.⁹⁰ In addition to this practical concern, international visitors represented an opportunity for refugees to share their experiences and draw attention to the atrocities committed in their home country. Acutely aware of the impact of such testimony, refugee leaders were involved in shaping how international visitors experienced the camps, with public relations committees determining which

⁸⁹Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, 4 & 8.

⁹⁰Bill Barrett, 'Report on Visits to Refugee Camps in Honduras Mesa Grande, Colomoncagua, El Tesoro for the AFSC 13 through 25 July 1983', July 1983, American Friends Service Committee archive Philadelphia (hence AFSC), Latin America – CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983.

visitors could speak with refugees, and which refugees they could interview.⁹¹ At times, this control troubled aid workers: Patricia Weiss Fagen, a UNHCR Public Information Officer, noted in 1989 that refugees could only speak to visitors in the presence of leadership and that UNHCR officials found it difficult to speak to refugees privately.⁹²

As I have examined elsewhere, Democratic Congressional members Barbara Mikulski, Robert Edgar and Gerry Studds collected testimony from refugees regarding Salvadoran military atrocities during a 1981 trip to Honduras.⁹³ These Congressional representatives were vocal opponents of military aid to El Salvador. Their planned trip to that country had to be cancelled due to safety concerns and the refugee camps therefore provided an important source of information on the conduct of Washington's ally.⁹⁴ Following the trip, Mikulski played recordings of refugee testimony at a press conference, with the testimony detailing how Salvadoran troops cut an unborn child from the body of the refugee's pregnant friend.⁹⁵ This testimony, together with other accounts, was submitted by Studds to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs with recommendations that military training, sales and assistance to El Salvador be suspended, given the military's 'systematic campaign of terrorism'.⁹⁶

Employing testimony to challenge US policy was in keeping with the refugees' aims. As one US visitor with the AFSC commented, a clear message from the refugees was that 'the fighting would stop if the US would end its military aid'.⁹⁷ Coming away with the taped testimony of ten recently-arrived refugees, this visitor noted that the refugees saw the war as stemming from poverty and injustice, not a communist threat.⁹⁸ In addition to testimony, written petitions and refugee letters also distributed through international visitors. These frequently denounced the 'imperialist' motives of the US in Central America, warning international supporters of plans to further militarise the Honduran-Salvadoran border to prepare for a wholesale invasion, and thus a regional war.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, a letter addressed to Pope John Paul II called on the Vatican to 'intercede in the armed intervention' of the US government in Central America.¹⁰⁰ It is, of course, difficult to assess the impact of individual calls to action, but the citing of refugee

⁹¹Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 128–29. In tandem with this, Salvadorans in the US worked both to amplify the voice of those in Honduras but also, as Héctor Perla has detailed, to develop the US solidarity movement. As Kim Christiaens and others demonstrate, such utilisation of international solidarity networks was not unique to Central or Latin America. Héctor Perla, 'Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement', in *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 136–58

Kim Christiaens, 'Europe at the Crossroads of Three Worlds: Alternative Histories and Connections of European Solidarity with the Third World, 1950s – 80s', in *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 24, (2017): 932–54.

⁹²Internal refugee control appears to have increased over the decade in response to internal divisions.

Patricia Weiss Fagen, UNHCR, to Prof. Jack Hammond, 21 March 1989, 507.HON A, UNHCR.

⁹³Fionntán O'Hara, 'Mixed Motives: The Politics of U.S. Interest in Refugees in Honduras during the 1980s'

The Latin Americanist 65 (2021): 481–510

⁹⁴*Washington Post*, 5 April 1981.

⁹⁵*United Press International*, 19 January 1981, (accessed through Factiva).

⁹⁶Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1982: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981.

⁹⁷Karen Mulloy, 'AFSC Visitors to Honduras', 15 August 1983, AFSC, Latin America – CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁹Letter signed 'Los Refugiados Salvadorenos En Honduras', 7 November 1983, AFSC, Latin America – CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983.

¹⁰⁰Letter from refugees at Mesa Grande to Pope John Paul II, 17 July 1983, AFSC, Latin America – CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983.

testimony by members of Congress as they opposed the Reagan administration's Salvadoran policies does suggest a degree of successful leverage.¹⁰¹

The role of humanitarian workers within the camps in facilitating this flow of information demonstrates again how the humanitarian system could be employed to counter Washington's Cold War policies. In one instance Solange Muller, a former UNHCR program assistant, and later protection officer, sent copies of refugee letters and testimony tapes to the AFSC expressing the hope that the organisation could put them to use in the US.¹⁰² Others worked for organisations such as the MCC which were active in refugee relief and political campaigning. A 1982 MCC open letter to churches declared that only the US could force the Salvadoran government to 'come to the bargaining table'.¹⁰³ An attached study guide, which the MCC asked readers to promote at Sunday school, house-church, Bible study, high school and college classes, noted that 'guerrilla warfare is a response to the violence of the system'.¹⁰⁴ An internal MCC document recommended that North American churches do everything possible to challenge the 'structures that impede the process of development and justice in Central America'.¹⁰⁵ This overlap between political activism and humanitarian action was problematic for some. In a letter to Muller, Poul Hartling, then the High Commissioner for Refugees, wrote that humanitarian workers must impose 'limitations' upon themselves to ensure the non-political and humanitarian nature of their work, no matter how frustrating those limitations might be.¹⁰⁶ 'Well-meaning individuals' working in the camps had, he continued, stepped out of this purely humanitarian role by becoming overly politically involved.¹⁰⁷

The US Embassy in Honduras was quick to cast doubt upon the veracity of Salvadoran refugee testimony, but it was, nonetheless, eager to tap the Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras as a source of information for 'intelligence and especially public affairs purposes'.¹⁰⁸ Within the US, the Reagan administration utilised the plight of these refugees to boost the morality of the Contra cause and damage the standing of Managua. Anti-Sandinista guerrilla leaders linked to refugee settlements in the Honduran Mosquitia understood the value of refugees in damaging Managua's international standing and improving the image of their cause. As mentioned, on occasion refugees were coached to describe atrocities; these descriptions included one, in 1986, which an Americas Watch investigation concluded had not occurred.¹⁰⁹ More alarmingly, journalists reported that, in 1986, KISAN (Kus Indian Sut Asla Nicaragua ra), a guerrilla group closely linked to Washington and other Contra organisations, staged an influx of refugees, coercing people to cross the border.¹¹⁰ Organised to attract the

¹⁰¹The matter was raised by Studts, Milkuski, and others, including the ACLU, while the House Sub-Committee on Inter-American Affairs also held hearings on Salvadoran refugees in Honduras.

¹⁰²Solange Muller to Tony (AFSC), 1 February 1983, AFSC, Latin America – CA 35341 CA Field Rep Refugee Camps 1983.

¹⁰³Gerald Schlabach & Herman Bontrager, 'Letter to the Churches', 20 July 1982, MCC, The face of change in CA and MCC study resource.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Linda Shelly & Grace Weber, *The Development of "Word and Deed" Ministry in the History of the Honduran Mennonite Church*, August 1985, MCC, Honduras Mennonite Church History 1982, 1985.

¹⁰⁶Poul Hartling to Muller, 8 May 1984, UNHCR, Fonds 2, Series 11, Box 92, V.2.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸US Embassy Tegucigalpa to S/LDP Ambassador Reich and others, 'Systematic Debriefing of Nicaraguan Refugees', 30 April 1985, DNSA: The Negrofonte File.

¹⁰⁹IPS, 11 April 1986.

¹¹⁰*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6/4/1986.

IPS, 14 April 1986.

attention of international journalists, this event coincided with an upcoming US Congressional vote on Contra aid.¹¹¹ As Luise Druke, the acting UNHCR representative in Tegucigalpa, later concluded, this forcible relocation of 8,500 people within the space of a week was undertaken 'solely to create a stir in international public opinion, in gross violation of common article three of the Geneva Convention'.¹¹² A 1986 UNO (Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora) document titled 'The Challenge of our Diplomacy: The Search for Legitimacy' meanwhile proposed that, in the struggle for 'cultural hegemony', missions to Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras should be organised to win over the public to the anti-Sandinista cause.¹¹³ This strategy, the document continued, had been successfully deployed by the FMLN and efforts should be made to replicate it.¹¹⁴

Viewing refugee camps as places of transnational and international activism highlights both the impact of the refugee voice but also the means by which other actors can seek to shape this voice. Salvadoran refugees, by being refugees, were able to utilise a transnational humanitarian network to provide testimony and to call for international engagement with the circumstances which had triggered their flight. Yet, at the same time, some of this international engagement was encouraged not just by humanitarian concerns but by existing ideological preoccupations with the Salvadoran conflict and the wider Central American Cold War. In this way, refugees were able to tap into audiences, such as solidarity groups, and certain European and North American politicians, who were extremely receptive to their messages given their pre-existing opposition to the San Salvador regime. As the UK Ambassador to Honduras, Bryan White noted, Salvadoran refugee camps thus became a 'living symbol of the anti-government struggle in El Salvador'.¹¹⁵ In the Miskito case, the recognition that refugee settlements could be a powerful source of propaganda led to efforts to increase the number of refugees to further the Contra cause. Whatever the differing impact on refugee lives, the two cases illustrate the increasing use of humanitarian language in the 1980s, both by those looking to wage the Cold War and those looking to halt its conflicts.

Conclusion

The situation in the refugee camps along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border could hardly have been more different to those in the camps along the Honduran-Salvadoran border. Even within the different Salvadoran and Nicaraguan camps, significant differences existed. At the same time, key elements remained constant: the linking of each refugee community with an armed guerrilla group, a focus on the refugees as victims of either US-backed or communist-linked aggression, and the clashing or overlapping of Cold War and humanitarian aims. The international actors involved in each camp – from NGOs, the UNHCR and the US Embassy – all brought their own perspectives and experiences gained in other refugee encampments with linkages to the Cold War. Similar situations existed in

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Luise Druke, *Preventive Action for Refugee Producing Situations*, (Paris: Peter Lang, 1993), 119.

¹¹³Secretaría de Relaciones Internacionales, UNO, 'El Desafío de Nuestra Diplomacia: La Búsqueda de la Legitimidad, document de trabajo', October 1986, Hoover Institute archives, Resistencia Nicaragua records, Box 14, Folder 1. Formed in 1985, UNO was an umbrella anti-Sandinista group.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵White to FCO, 6 September 1985, The National Archives UK, FCO99/2182.

camps in Pakistan and Thailand, among others. It is this combination of specificity and similarity which makes refugee camps useful as places in which to examine both the global but also regional and local dimensions of the Cold War.

The 1980s, the last decade of the Cold War, are a particularly useful period in which to interrogate the relationship between the Cold War and humanitarianism. As illustrated by NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) 1999 'humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo, the language of humanitarianism would outlast that of the Cold War.¹¹⁶ While humanitarianism has a history which pre-dates that of the Cold War, it would only emerge as an international system of governance in the post-Cold War period. The 1980s offers a decade in which to analyse the growth of this system and the collapse of the Cold Warframework. Looking at camps in Honduras and recognising the Cold War's influence on refugee camps far removed, both geographically and politically, from centres of power, demonstrates the pervasiveness and reach of the conflict's ideological dimension. At the same time, however, this pervasiveness should not be taken as implying that Cold War actors could dictate events. In the example of Mocerón, humanitarian actors such as the UNHCR were able to resist those who sought to transform refugee camps from humanitarian spaces into support structures for armed groups. This ability to resist did not, however, fully prevent such utilisation, something demonstrated by the staging of refugee influxes. Nor was it always clear who was driven by humanitarian imperatives and who was driven by other, Cold War-linked, motives. Even as the language of the Cold War evolved to encompass the emerging humanitarian system then, actors within that system found themselves shaped by the enduring legacy of the Cold War era.

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¹¹⁶Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 186