

# Guatemalans in Canada: Contexts of Departure and Arrival

Prepared by Wei Wei Da for the Latin American Research Group

2002

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## I. Context of Departure

### a. Numbers of incoming population, time periods, peak flows

Guatemalans came to Canada in roughly two cohorts. The first wave took place during the period of 1981-1985 with more than 2,000 people arriving to Canada. The figure doubled the total flow of 880 between 1975 and 1980. This may be seen as a result of 1976 Immigration Act, which created refugee as a category (Kowalchuk, 1999). The second cohort was recognized in 1991, when more than 2,000 Guatemalans arrived.

About 60% of the Guatemalans arrived in Canada are between 15 and 44 years of age. Their educational level is relatively higher than that of the general population in Guatemala, where only 1% of the population has a university degree. Among Guatemalan refugees who came between 1980 and 1987, 3.8% had a university degree. Their social and economic background is also high. A 1983 survey conducted in Montreal showed that 37% of Guatemalans engaged in professional and technical jobs in their home country, and another 46% had white-collar jobs (Kowalchuk, 1999).

Table 1. Refugee Claimants from Guatemala by sex, 1989-2002

Year	Male	Female
1989	222	108
1990	361	219
1991	335	177
1992	405	269
1993	327	169
1994	275	177
1995	272	179
1996	224	115
1997	210	106
1998	106	67
1999	122	54
2000	117	84
2001	120	78
2002	100	70

Source: Figures are provided by Sambia Elmagraby, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa.

Table 2. Refugee Claimants from Guatemala by age group, 1989-2002

Year	0-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-65
1989	4	19	15	16	54	79	63	42	14	8	6
1990	20	37	36	22	117	128	93	46	26	18	15
1991	27	13	19	35	120	133	59	36	21	22	11
1992	34	34	39	82	147	138	68	46	40	17	12
1993	21	20	19	66	121	95	49	30	34	7	12
1994	35	15	39	64	106	65	37	41	20	10	11
1995	57	19	27	95	86	65	34	30	16	7	7
1996	33	19	32	69	55	42	34	25	12	4	4
1997	39	18	26	64	67	36	30	16	11	3	3
1998	27	11	23	29	35	18	11	8	2	2	2
1999	15	4	29	38	45	14	13	12	4	0	1
2000	26	17	39	47	19	14	17	9	5	4	2
2001	30	13	30	34	31	19	20	8	8	2	1
2002	38	9	22	29	25	14	12	8	3	5	0

Source: Figures are provided by Sambia Elmagraby, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa

Table 3. Refugee Claimants from Guatemala by marital status, 1989-2002

Year	Single	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Separated
1989	184	119	8	7	10
1990	313	229	13	14	8
1991	272	204	12	7	11
1992	371	260	9	12	12
1993	279	183	17	3	12
1994	259	163	10	6	9
1995	246	174	11	2	8
1996	177	121	8	4	11
1997	185	112	3	4	5
1998	75	63	3	1	4
1999	83	67	0	5	7
2000	104	51	7	8	9
2001	108	56	6	1	7
2002	93	59	4	5	3

Source: Figures are provided by Sambia Elmagraby, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa.

### **b. State Policies that Contribute to Displacement**

Guatemala declared its independence from Spanish colonial rule in 1821, and became a republic in 1839. Violence has permeated Guatemalan history. As early as 1871, the nation was ruled by a succession of military dictators. Colonel Jacobo Arbenz (1944-1954) took power in 1944. His government tried to implement a land reform that would

have redistributed the land predominantly owned by a small group of elite. The land reform was not successful. Instead, the military forces backed by the US in 1954 overthrew Arbenz's government. The nation was then returned to the military dictatorship. In response to the overturning of agrarian and labour reforms, guerrilla movements broke out in the 1960s. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country experienced a variety of military and civilian governments as well as a 36-year guerrilla / civil war.

A number of issues have contributed to the displacement and exile of Guatemalans to Canada.

#### *Civil war and human rights violation*

Civil war lasted 36 years till the end of 1996, when the government signed a peace agreement with a guerrilla coalition, the Guatemala National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). Though the war ended, the nation's problems remain unsolved. During the 36 years of civil war, political assassination and kidnapping, oppression and all sorts of violence had been facts of everyday life. It is estimated that over 150,000 people died, 50,000 disappeared, and about one million people became refugees during the civil war. The majority of refugees fled to neighbouring Mexico. During 1981-1983, about 200,000 Guatemalans fled to Mexico, most of the refugees were Maya (Manz, 1988). Guatemala was seen as one of the worse countries in violation of human rights through various forms. Guerrilla groups that re-emerged in the 1970s enjoyed considerable support from peasants, both Indian and Ladino, which led to various forms of violence and killings of civilians by the military. In 1982, a military coup installed Christian General Efraim Rios Montt as president. Rios Montt initiated a massive counter-insurgency programme focused in the northwestern provinces. Violence in the late of 1970s to early of 1980s led to unprecedented displacement and flight of hundreds and thousands of both indigenous and non-indigenous. Significant numbers of Guatemalans went to the US and Europe. A relatively small proportion made their way up to Canada.

#### *Indigenous Peoples*

The flight of Guatemalans is also related to the genocidal wave of terrorist activities across the country. Indigenous Indians makes 75-80% of the population according the Guatemala Mayan Indian support group (1994). Most of Indians do not speak Spanish, are illiterate, and engage in subsistence farming. Yet 80% of the land was possessed by 3% of non-Indians. Indians live under the poverty line (annual income less than \$300), and they are often the target and victims of violence. Its population has been significantly decreased through the history. The massive killings of indigenous Indian also derived from the fact that Indians showed strong support for the guerrilla groups.

#### *Land distribution*

Land distribution has long been an issue for conflicts in Guatemala's history. The government's promotion of land commercialization since the 1980s was deteriorated the situation with even a smaller size of land in sale to a large population of landless peasants.

### *Economic crisis and social welfare*

As a figure in 1981 showed that 83% of the total population was in poverty and could not meet their basic need, of which 41% were starving. Unemployment rate during the mid of 1980s was 40% (Roberts, 1984).

### *Drug trafficking*

The international drug trade is a serious problem in Guatemala, which serves as a transit point for drugs traveling from South America to the US. The military has been accused of involvement in drug trafficking.

### *Child labour*

The country has one of the highest rates of child labour in the world. According to the UN reports, one third of school-aged children were forced to work in factories and farms.

### *Education*

Illiterate was high, making up about 33% of its population; 80% of Guatemalans live under the poverty line; infant mortality rate reached 60%.

The context of Guatemalans' exile is in general seen complex and embedded in the broader social, political and economic context.

The flow of Guatemalans to Canada also showed a reflection of the US immigration policy, which tended to constrain the Guatemalans from access to their country.

### *Current State Policies*

In 1999, Portillo began his presidency and intended to undertake an unprecedented shake-up of the military high command, and claimed to be taking a leading role in restructuring the armed forces. But there have been few improvements. In general, human rights violations remain high, and among the worst in Latin America, although the government claims to take measures to tackle human rights abuse, effectiveness has been limited.

Economic situation is also worse. About 60% of its population live under the poverty line in 2000; inflation rate was 7.6% 2001, and unemployment rate was 7.5% in 1999. External debt was 4.5 billion in 2001. Guatemala received a large amount of international aid, which for example was \$212 million in 1995. Monetary devaluation is also obvious. The exchange rate with US dollars was increased from 1:6.06 in 1997 to 1: 8.02 in 2002. Illicit drug is a big problem in Guatemala. The country has been one of the major transit countries for cocaine and heroin. Money laundering and corruption are some of those serious problems in Guatemala. In addition, infant mortality is high in Guatemala. It was estimated 44.55 deaths per 1000 live births in 2002.

Guatemala is a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and protocol. In 2001, it received 176 Salvadoran refugees. In 2000, the Guatemala government launched law-enforcement initiative program to stop smuggling, with immigration agents trained by the US.

The US finances Guatemala government to deport extra-regional migrants in an attempt to prevent them from accessing to the US border.

### *Local organizations*

- Central American and Baptist Seminary in Guatemala city has affiliated organizations in neighbouring countries to provide cultural and language programs to help displaced people.
- A program called CASAS was organized in Guatemala where North American students could spend 12 weeks in the country and make contrast with their life in the home country (Chute, 1983).

## **II. Context of Arrival**

### **a. Canadian State Policies and Responses**

#### *Major federal policy shifts affecting the management of entry*

- Under the Canada's revised Immigration Act of 1976, "refugee" became a category, under which people were regularly permitted to enter the country. As a result of this policy, 2000 Guatemalans arrived in Canada during the period of 1981-1985 which is doubled than that 880 from 1975 to 1980 (Data from Kowalchuk, 1999).
- Visa requirements instituted in 1984. The government's immigration policy tried to make balance between strictness and leniency; it required a visitor's visa at Canadian Embassy in Guatemala before coming to Canada. At the same time, Canadian Embassy began to accept refugee claims locally, which was the first time that Guatemala could receive refugee status in their own country (Magocsi, 1999: 628).
- In 1987, Canada added Guatemala in the list of countries considered to be dangerous to deportation, which was in effect in 1987.

Refugee process tended to be gendered. From 1980 to 1987, the "refugee" category of men was outnumbered women by 23%. Women who could be qualified as refugees were only admitted as family members or spouses to those who came earlier (Magocsi, 1999: 627). It seemed that immigration official tended to admit men than women.

- Visa offices and staff in country/region

Canadian visa office is located in Guatemala city, Guatemala. It provides full services for immigrants, workers, visitors and students, and process applications from Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.

- Rate of refugee acceptance for selected periods of time

The acceptance rate to Guatemalans was quite high during the 1980s. An official source, the acceptance rate of refugee claims from Guatemala was **75%** in 1984, and further 8% of refusals were approved on the humanity ground (Roberts, 1984).

- Total population in 1991 and 1996 census

According to 1991 census, among 4,890, 3,855 reported themselves as entirely and 1,035 reported partly Guatemalans. But 8,920 reported their country of origin was Guatemala. Another government source indicated that a total of 13,700 came to Canada during 1974-1992 (Kowalchuk, 1999).

The 1996 census showed that a total population of Guatemalans was 34,665 (Garay, 2000).

## **b. Civil Society Reception**

### *Ethno-specific resources*

- Residential concentration in Canada (1991 census)

By 2000, Canada received 13,000 documented individuals, of which 5000 are concentrated living in the south-western Ontario (Kowalchuk, 1999).

Four provinces with large concentration of people from Guatemala, including:

- Quebec (2,180)
- Ontario (1,665)
- British Columbia (645)
- Alberta (210)

(Kowalchuk, 1999).

- Business Enclave.

Information not found yet.

- co-linguistic or other construction of co-ethnic.

Information not found yet.

- Ethno-specific education.

Information not found yet.

- Religious institutions

Catholic is the major religion claimed by majority of Guatemalans, both indigenous and ladino in Canada.

### *Guatemalan Organizations in Canada*

- Soccer club in Toronto and Montreal are popular form of recreation among Guatemala men in Canada.
- The Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC, Committee of Peasant Unity) and the Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA, Peasant committee of the Highlands) were established in Toronto in 1986 and 1988 respectively which provide services for the rights of indigenous and ladino peasants, rural workers and the oppressed groups in Guatemala. The CUC has chapters in Vancouver, Montreal, Ottawa, London, Oshawa and Kitchener and CCDA in Hamilton.
- Project Balam which is a Guatemalan organization that was founded in Toronto in 1990. Its mandate is to advocate peace and justice, and it also collects money to improve the health, education and agricultural projects in the home country.
- Nuestra Voz (Our Voice) which is a group of Guatemalan women. It has chapters in Toronto and Vancouver. It is a political-oriented organization, but its role is now still minimum. The Toronto Chapter was established in 1989 and has provided material support for projects to enhance women's economic status in the home country.

### *Mainstream society or non-governmental social agency for Guatemalan refugees and migrants:*

- The Women's Empowerment Program (Programa para el empoderamiento de las mujeres - EMPODEM). SEPREM is the governmental entity mandated to promote and coordinate public policies to advance the integral development of Guatemalan women and that encourages non-discriminatory and democratic culture together with civil and governmental institutions. It proposes work in two key areas. First, it will contribute to the institutional strengthening of Guatemala's Presidential Secretariat for Women (SEPREM). Second, the program will provide access to funds to support participation from civil society and government institutions in the implementation of the National Policy for the Promotion & Development of Guatemalan Women. SEPREM has thus far demonstrated a leadership role in the conception and development of the program. Wide consultation concerning the program has been underway with other donors and civil society organizations in Guatemala; feedback thus far has been both positive and supportive and some donor and grant organizations are contemplating their financial support to the program via the establishment of a local trust fund.



EMPODEM represents a new area of programming for CIDA in Guatemala and reflects the principles of aid effectiveness. It is the first initiative in Guatemala that Canada will work directly with a governmental institution with a view to achieve a wider and more sustainable gender equality impact within a priority area identified by the country. The program will be developed and contracted in Guatemala where approval decisions will be made by a local Management Committee consisting of participating donors and/or grant agencies, SEPREM and at least one independent gender specialist in Guatemala. The EMPODEM program offers an exciting challenge that encourages innovation, initiative, practical learning and professional development.

- New Experiences for Refugee Women (NEW) in Toronto which provides services for refugee women from Guatemala, such as six-month sessions including ESL, employment training and experience, and emotional and life-skills counselling.

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