

## **Indigenous Settlement Relocations in Central America**

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### **Introduction**

Indian populations are often incorrectly believed to remain within fixed culture regions over centuries. Innumerable historic events show that boundaries of indigenous territories have been in considerable flux. Recent relocations in Central America, where Indians comprise 12.5 percent of the population, indicate that cultural boundaries continue to move until the present. This essay examines recent relocations in some detail to determine the source regions, causes of migrations, and the eventual sites of new settlement of several Indian groups in Central America.

One consequence of civil war in Central America is widespread human displacement. Since 1980, perhaps 1.7 million people, of a total 25 million, have been uprooted from their homes. Most of these have fled the threat of unjustified persecution and are "refugees," according to the definition of the United Nations. Probably 650,000 Central Americans have left the isthmus entirely. But over one million remain, homeless in their own countries, or across international borders. All seven countries are affected -- whether they are producing migrants or are serving as a host country (Table 1).

Only two aspects of population relocation in Central America are here described: 1) the zones of non-Indian (Ladino) and Indian migrations and (2) the highly publicized movements of Indians from Guatemala and Nicaragua. The piece is informational and based in large part on the author's field work; no solutions are proposed.

### **Ladino Migrations**

Almost all non-Indian (Ladino) refugees originate in El Salvador and Nicaragua. The greatest out-migration, by far, has been from El Salvador -- reasonable estimates run as high as 500,000. Every other Central American country has generously received Salvadorans and eight refugee camps have been established between Ciudad Romero in Panamá, and Valley of Peace, Belize (Map 1). Repatriation from these camps occurs, but as of June 1986 only 3,000 Salvadorans have returned home.

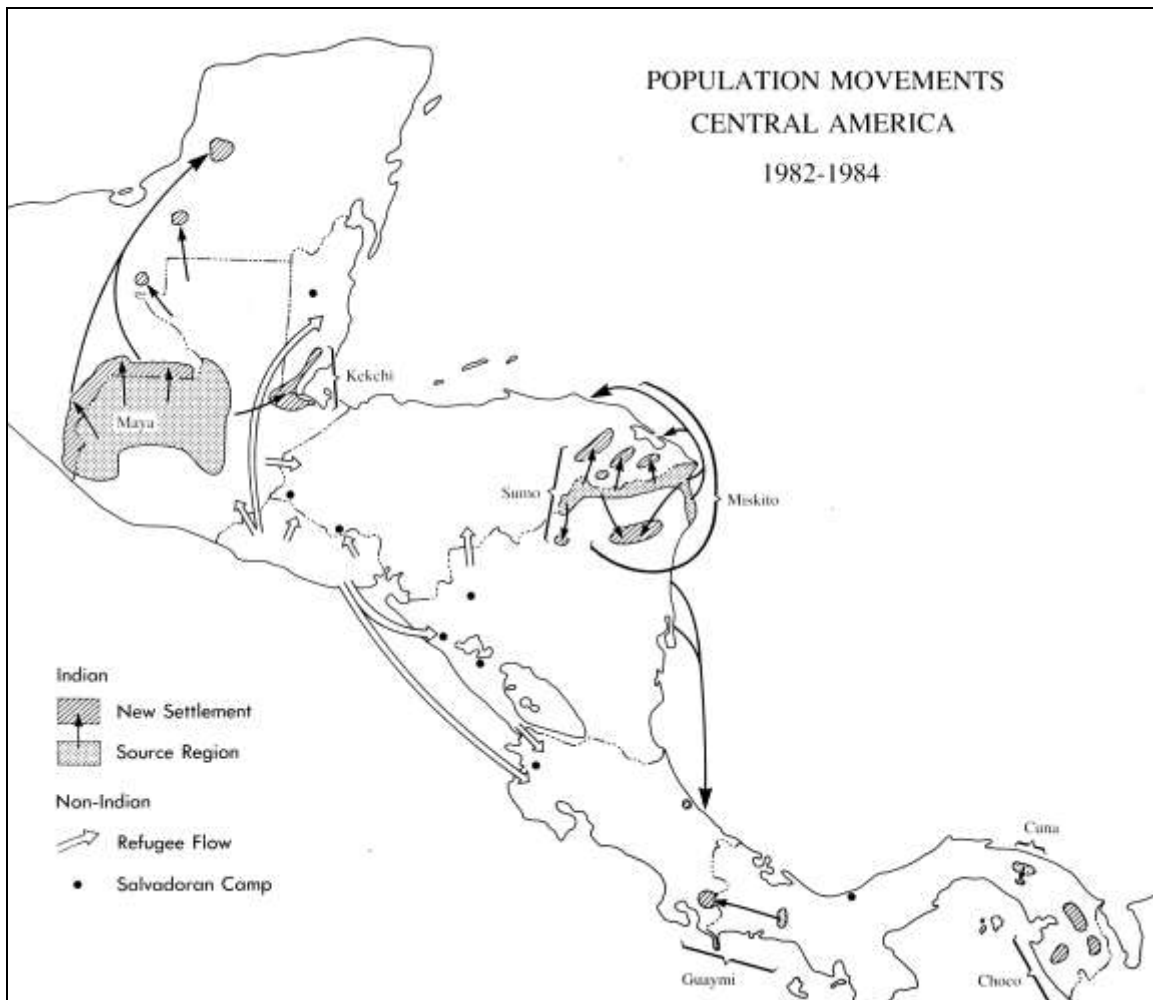
A significant, but much smaller ladino migration, has taken place from Nicaragua into western Honduras and Costa Rica. From interviews with refugees in

western Honduras, I conclude that they are, in large part, recently converted evangelical Protestants. Guatemalan mestizos, about 2,500 in all, have crossed into Honduras near Copán. Perhaps a thousand have entered Belize from the Petén.

**Table 1. Internal and International Displacements of Central Americans, within Middle America, figures estimated for mid-1986.**

<b>Host Country (No. of Emigrants)</b>	<b>Ladino Refugees</b>	<b>Indian Refugees</b>	<b>Internal Displacements</b>
<b>BELIZE (0)</b>	2,500 Salv. 1,000 Guat.		
<b>GUATEMALA (110,000)</b>	35,000 Salv. 500 Nicas		250,000
<b>EL SALVADOR (135,000)</b>			500,000
<b>HONDURAS (0)</b>	20,000 Salv. 5,500 Nicas 2,500 Guat.	19,000 Nica Miskito 3,000 Nica Sumu	
<b>NICARAGUA (33,000) ?</b>	21,000 Salv.		125,000
<b>COSTA RICA (0)</b>	16,000 Salv. 5,500 Nicas	2,000 Nica Miskito 250 Nica Sumu	
<b>PANAMA (0)</b>	1,600 Salv. 1,500 Nicas		
<b>MEXICO (0)</b>	40,000 Salv. 3,500 Nicas	100,000 Guat. Maya	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>156,100</b>	<b>124,250</b>	<b>875,000</b>

Map 1.



## Indian Relocations

Indian movements unrelated to civil unrest occur throughout Central America. Settlement changes have also taken place outside zones of over conflict, normally prodded by economic considerations. Almost 9,000 Chocó of eastern Panamá have voluntarily abandoned their traditional dispersed pattern for village life, creating a completely new landscape. The damming of the Bayano River brought a relocation of a thousand Cuna in interior Panamá. The Guaymí of western Panamá are continuing to move across the Costa Rican border in search of land suitable for agriculture. The same reason motivates the Kekchí and Mopán Maya of southwestern Belize to move off of their reserves and toward the center of the country up the Southern Highway. These examples, although widespread, concern relatively few people, about 12,000. The major Indian relocations — those of northwest Guatemala and eastern Nicaragua — include a few hundreds of thousands, are involuntary, and therefore produce much more conflict and trauma. In these instances, political ramifications can be of great consequence, even worldwide.

**The Guatemalan Situation.** Unrest in Guatemala is concentrated in the highlands of Quiché, Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, and Chimaltenango. A few sites in the Petén have also felt the conflict. While some 250,000 Indians have left destroyed homes for safer villages or urban centers within Guatemala, over 100,000 have crossed into Chiapas, México. By spring, 1984, the United Nations estimated that 46,000 Indians lived in 67 refugee camps, all rudimentary and crowded. The remaining 54,000 roam unsupervised, farther from the border. In August, 1984, a new aspect of the Guatemalan problem arose when the Mexican government began to transport refugees from the border to Campeche state. Seven thousand of the Indians have refused to relocate farther from Guatemala and will remain behind, probably to be aided less by their Mexican hosts.

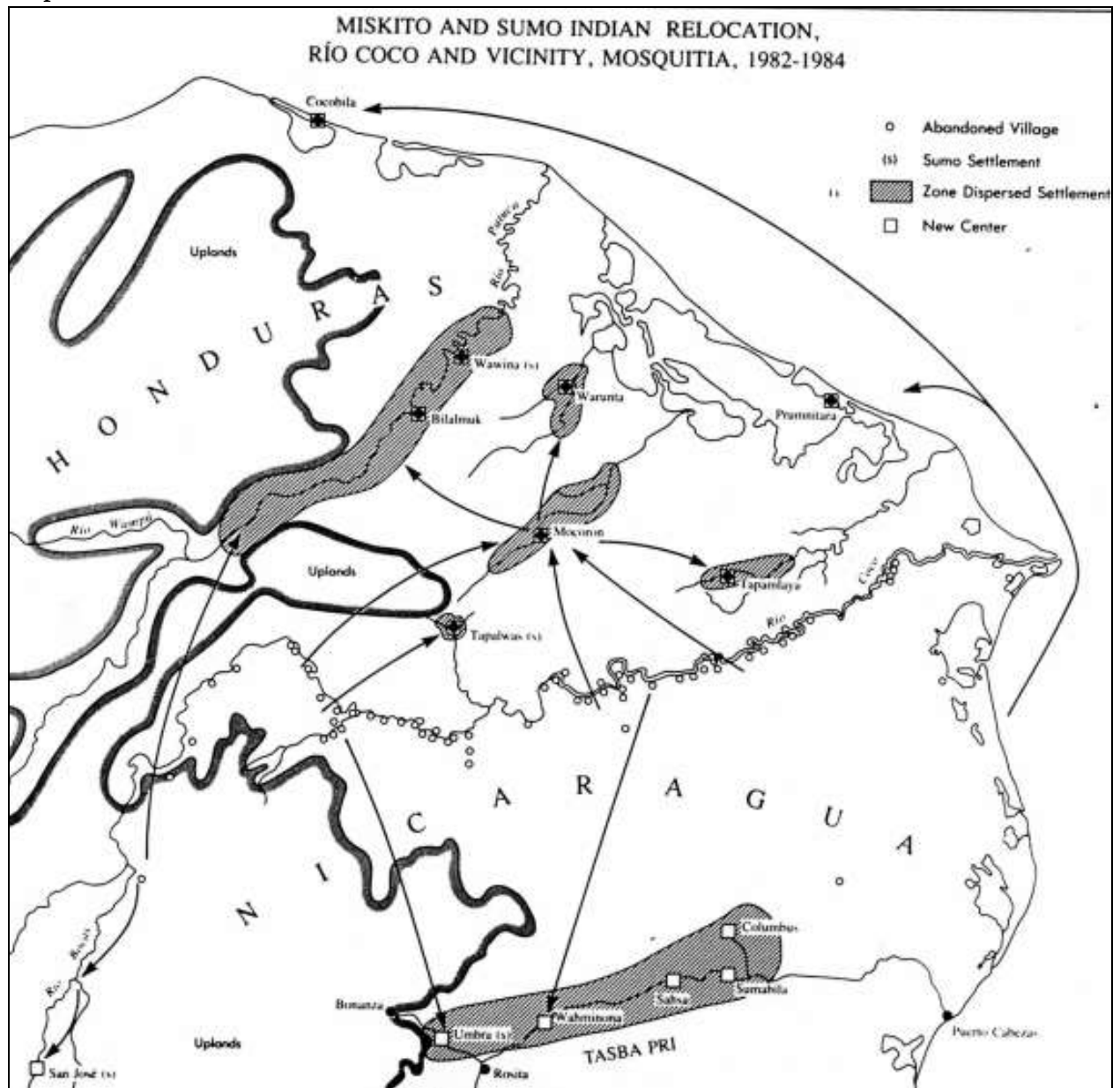
**Problems in Mosquitia.** The second largest relocation of Indians has occurred in eastern Honduras and Nicaragua, in an area often known as Mosquitia. Since the Sandinista Revolution began in 1979, this region has captured much popular attention, but I think very little detail is known about the recent and historical population relocations that have occurred along the Río Coco, which separates the two countries. Reliable information, of course, is always difficult to find in cases of such emotional and political interest.

Three movements of Indians have occurred: 1) from the Nicaraguan borderlands into both planned and spontaneous settlements in Honduras and Costa Rica, 2) from the Nicaraguan borderlands towards interior Nicaragua into planned resettlements (later reversed), and 3) perhaps 10,000 Indians by themselves have made temporary moves to refugee areas surrounding their villages in eastern Nicaragua (Map 2).

The banks and tributaries of the Río Coco form the primary source region of the refugees. There were, before 1982, about 60 settlements along the river. Now these villages are completely, or almost completely, abandoned. The river, as a boundary, has been in dispute since colonial times, but before the Sandinista Revolution, Indians crossed the river freely to visit relatives and to exchange produce. In such an isolated location, there was little local recognition of the border. Only at rare places did roads touch the river. Settlements along the river were generally clustered according to cultures: the Miskito lived along the middle and downstream portions; Sumos lived on tributaries entering upstream.

During the winter of 1981-82, because of armed conflict along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, the river lands were depopulated. There were reports of military attacks from both Honduras and Nicaragua against the Indians, of Indian settlements being burned, and of forced and voluntary Indian removals toward the interior of both countries. All of those activities took place, but the events have been exaggerated. Still, it is clear that several thousands of Indians were displaced.

Map 2.



Eighty-five percent of the Río Coco Indians have entered Honduras. At first, migration had little direction, but soon the United Nations refugee effort selected Mococon as the site of initial aid and orientation. Now, several zones of relocation have been occupied, primarily along the major rivers and on the adjacent savannas. Generally, the Sumo and Miskito have been established in separated camps to duplicate their former Nicaraguan situation. Spontaneous Miskito settlements have also been built, particularly by those who left Nicaragua by sea.

The forced removal of Indians from the river and deeper into Nicaragua was more highly organized. The zone of relocation, called *Tasba Pri*, stretched roughly along

the road between the mining center of Rosita and Puerto Cabezas. Within the region of broadleaf tropical forest, about 6,000 Indians were placed in five pioneer settlements. Some longitudinal regularity can be seen in the pattern of dispersal: that is, Santo Tomás de Umbra, the westernmost village in Tasba Pri, and the only all-Sumo village, was settled from the Sumo source region on the upper Coco. Undoubtedly, the site was attractive to the Sumo, in part, because their relatives had lived near there previously. Wahminona, the second settlement, was comprised solely of former residents of Kisalaya, on the middle Río Coco. This village seems to have been isolated from the others because its residents are Catholics, instead of Moravians. The other settlements, Columbus, Sahsa, and Sumubila, were much larger, and drew the bulk of their populations from more dispersed, but still identifiable, stretches of the river. This episode in Nicaraguan displacement ended in failure late last spring (1986) when Tasba Pri was disbanded and the Indians moved back towards the Río Coco. Once there, conflict again occurred, and most of the Indians fled into Honduras.

Indian relocation is not new along the Río Coco. Abandonment and resettlement has taken place about every 25 years. In 1960, after the World Court announced that the river would be an international boundary, certain Miskitos living on the Honduran side of the river moved to the south side to maintain contacts with Nicaragua, which unlike Honduras had a rudimentary road system, a hospital, some schools, and a large market center (at Waspám). The movement was not slight, but significant, and carries the local name, "el traslado." Earlier, in 1932, during the original Sandino Affair, battles along the river caused evacuation. The event gave birth to a folk tradition recounted by Anthropologist Mary Helms in *Asang*. When she lived on the river in 1964, the Miskito were still circulating rumors of impending terrorist activities and river bandits. She also reported, (somewhat prophetically), "There are constant rumors from village to village . . . that a new war involving the United States will result in bombing or invasion of the river at any time." (1971: 41) The U. S. war of that moment was, of course, Vietnam. Central America was not then an issue. But the rumors of invasion persist even today.

### **Concluding Remarks**

To conclude, I offer some observations to place the current Central American movements in perspective. The remarks involve matters of scale, history, geography, and politics. First of all, the displacement of Central Americans during the 1980s, while it might eventually include two million people, is relatively small in comparison to other refugee regions, such as East Africa and Southeast Asia. To state the Central American case more powerfully, the proportion of the population must be considered: 7 percent of all Central Americans have actually been forced from their homes! Secondly, the widespread relocation of Central Americans —Ladinos and Indians alike—is not new. Since the pre-Hispanic days of Mexican exiles down in Central America, and during the centuries of Spanish occupation, Indians have been forcefully transferred or made to flee their homes uncountable times. During the last century, cultural conflicts between the Spanish-speaking, Catholic Ladinos of western Nicaragua and the English-speaking Protestant Indians of Mosquitia, have flared frequently. There is no reason to expect this

to change under other regimes. Perhaps because of their marginal position, economically and geographically, minorities in Central America are five times more likely to become refugees than members of the "national" culture. Thirdly, refugee problems often originate, and later erupt, as a border phenomenon. The oppressed often live towards the margins of national power and when they flee, particularly across international boundaries, almost always tense "national" reactions follow. With virtually all Central American borders under dispute, geopoliticians should expect conflicts to intensify with refugee movements. Finally, the persecution of Ladinos and Indians in Central America apparently occurs without regard to political persuasion. Both leftist and rightist regimes share the displeasure of the displaced, who generally just wish to be left alone — to continue their lives in peace, in the homelands of their ancestors.