

Activity Four: Guatemala

SEEKING ASYLUM

Whether migration is controlled by those who send, by those who go, or by those who receive, it mirrors the world as it is at the time.

—Kingsley Davis, *Scientific American*, (1974), 3: 6.



The forced migration of people because of natural disaster or political conflict is evidenced in the case of Guatemala, especially during the 1980s. The patterns of out migration, that is migration from Guatemala to either neighboring Mexico or to the United States, were influenced by the policies and actions of the Guatemalan government. Return migration was equally influenced; when the situation was perceived to be less dangerous, people would return.

The relationship between the Guatemalan government and the indigenous communities has been the subject of many academic studies most citing it as an antagonistic one.¹ The goals of the government to modernize Guatemala have sometimes excluded the interests of the indigenous communities. Some governmental leaders advocating this goal of modernizing Guatemala saw the indigenous communities as an obstacle to this process. The Guatemalan government backed by the military wanted to integrate the indigenous communities into the modernization process.

The indigenous population in Guatemala consists of 22 ethnic groups which speak 23 different languages. Not only is language one of the separating factors between the indigenous communities and the government, but customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and dress also add to the divide. Most of the indigenous population lives in the northwest mountainous region of the country...

Little information exists about the groups in Guatemala resistant to the government. Different factions from socialist groups to separatist groups have existed. The question about the place of the indigenous community and its role in the struggle against the government has been a debate among these groups. At the core of this debate is the question: is the struggle about land, race, or culture? At the time that many indigenous people were being drawn into the struggle against the government, the government was increasing its campaign to eradicate the resistance and to integrate the indigenous communities into a national development process. Some of the policies of this development effort were increased military presence in the areas of large indigenous populations; the recruitment of young indigenous men into the army; the creation of the Civil Patrol System; and the creation of model villages to integrate these communities economically.²

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During this period some human rights groups claim that 50,000 people were killed and many more were displaced. Given the proximity as well as the social and cultural similarities, many of the Guatemalan refugees crossed the border into the Chiapas region of Mexico. The majority of the refugees came from the northwest region of Guatemala. Some eventually attempted to enter the United States. Approximately 75 percent of the refugees are women and children.³ Since this area is one of the poorest regions of Mexico, the influx of refugees has put additional pressure on scarce land, food, and water.

The person seeking asylum in the declaration in Resource Card 1 is an example of one refugee who crossed the border between Guatemala and Mexico. After some time in Mexico, she decided with others to attempt to go to the United States. The declaration for political asylum describes her experience and perspective on the political violence occurring in Guatemala.

Outline of Activity

In this activity students will read a declaration for political asylum by a Guatemalan refugee. They will examine this document to better understand how violent conflict can contribute to the large scale movements of people. Students will design a poster using elements of Guatemalan weaving to illustrate the reasons people leave Guatemala.

Extension Questions

1. How should governments assist political refugees? How should nations deal with refugees since some countries have more refugees than they can handle?
2. What other groups of refugees have you heard about or learned about? How does their case compare to the Guatemalan case?
3. What is the difference between political refugees and economic refugees?
4. How should nations deal with groups that want to maintain their culture, their language, and their customs?

Related Issues

- Ethnic minority or language minority groups in the world
- Laws protecting political refugees
- International human rights
- Rigoberta Menchú, Noble Peace Prize Winner
- The human rights of a few versus the goals of the government

Reference Materials

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Endnotes

¹Carol A. Smith, *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 281.

²*Ibid.* 272.

³Miguel Messmacher, *La Dinámica Maya: Los Refugiados Guatemaltecos* (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, S.A. de C.V., 1986), 351.

SEEKING ASYLUM ACTIVITY CARD

Guatemala is located in Central America and shares borders with Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. More than half of the population in Guatemala consists of indigenous people. Spanish is the official language, but more than 20 different languages are spoken. The indigenous peoples are descendents of the Mayans and live the northwest region of the country.

In Guatemala, there has been a war between the Guatemalan army and groups of people called guerrillas. Guerrillas are people who are against the government and want to change it. Some of the guerrilla groups were started by indigenous people who wanted land rights and to be able to have their own language and customs. Many indigenous people left Guatemala, crossing the border to Mexico because of this war. While some refugees stayed in Mexico, others went to the United States.

Refugees are people who leave their country because they feel that they are in danger. Some countries have a system by which a refugee can apply for political asylum. This means that they will be protected by that country and can live in that country legally. The person applying for political asylum first gets a lawyer, fills out applications, and then has a hearing with a judge who grants or denies asylum.

Read the declaration for political asylum by a Guatemalan refugee. Discuss the following questions with your group:

1. What are the reasons this person has for leaving Guatemala?
2. What is the situation in Guatemala that she describes? How does she make the decision to leave Guatemala?
3. Discuss what it means to be a refugee. How would it feel to be living outside one's country? How would it feel to be away from your home and your family?
4. Migration affects both the community that is losing people and the community that is gaining people. How has migration affected Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States?

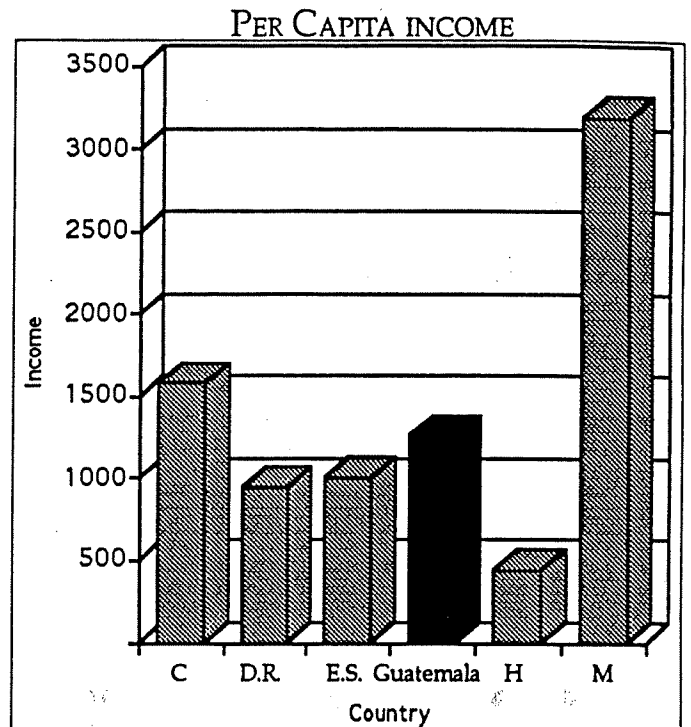
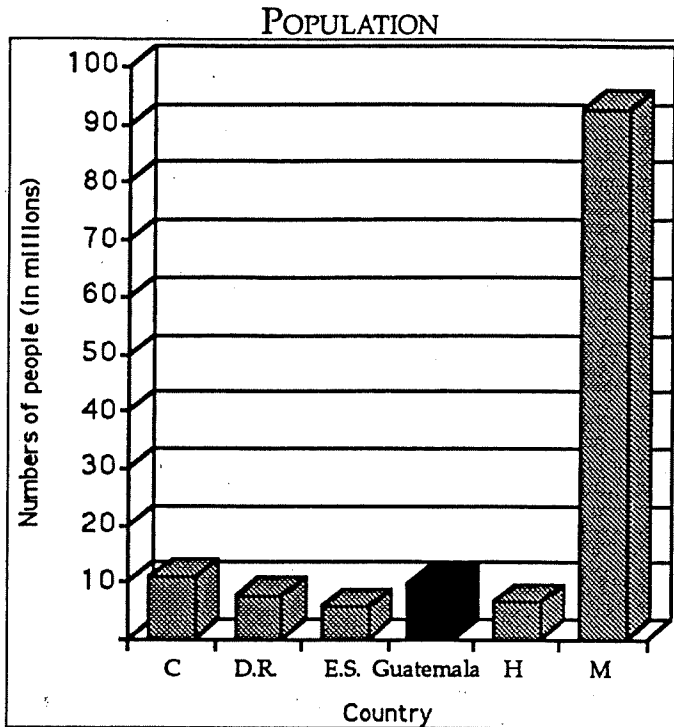
GROUP TASK

In Guatemala the women weave and embroider the clothes they wear. A blouse is called a *huipil*. Each village has a pattern that distinguishes them from other villages. Some of the designs on the cloth tell stories. The weaver uses symbols such as diamonds, snakes, butterflies, or people to tell the story. Look at the picture of a Guatemalan cloth on Resource Card 2.

With your group make a poster of a Guatemalan weaving with a design to show the reasons why people leave Guatemala. Be ready to explain to the class the meaning of the symbols and designs your group chooses.

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SEEKING ASYLUM DATA AND MAP CARD



MAP OF GUATEMALA



SEEKING ASYLUM RESOURCE CARD 1

NOTE: The name of the person who made this declaration has been left out to protect her confidentiality and her safety. The names of the villages have also been changed. This case has not yet been decided.

Excerpts from a Declaration of _____ in support of application for political asylum

I was born on April 4, 1970 in Nebaj, in the department of El Quiché, Guatemala. I am an Ixil Indian, descendant of the Mayas. My family was poor. When we were growing up, life was difficult. We had no land for cultivation in Nebaj. Every year my father had to go to the south coast of Guatemala and hire himself out as a migrant farm laborer on the big coffee and cotton plantations in order to earn a little bit of cash to sustain us. We sometimes didn't have enough to eat. I never attended school because there were no schools.

I was only twelve years old when the repression of the military against the people was tremendous. This repression came because the military accused us of helping the guerrillas. The guerrillas, who were based in the mountains all around, often came down, and to other nearby towns asking the collaboration of the people. Some young boys went with the guerrillas up to the mountains. Some people gave food, some gave a small amount of money. Almost everyone in town gave something, whether they agreed or not, because they felt obligated.

The first brutal act of repression I remember was a terrible massacre. I was not in my town that day. I was with my father harvesting corn on a small piece of land my father has there. From the land we could hear what sounded like firecrackers; I thought there was a fiesta taking place. My father and I went up on a hill and saw that it wasn't a fiesta. We saw there were planes, and the sound we had heard was of bombs being dropped on the town.

On that day many people fled out of the town. We met some on the road, and they told me and my father about the massacre. My father and I began to cry. We did not return to town until early in the morning the next day. When we entered the town we saw cadavers in the plaza. My mother told us about the massacre. She told us that the soldiers had arrived very early in the morning, coming from the military headquarters. They had come to kill the people that they accused of helping the guerrillas. But because they were so angry they killed many more. The soldiers didn't leave right away. They made a list of people they accused of being subversive. My father and uncle were arrested and luckily then they were released.

I don't remember the exact dates, but my family left Guatemala and went to Mexico for a short time after the massacre. We went to Chiapas, Mexico. My uncle died of sadness in Mexico. After a

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while my father went back to Guatemala to see if the situation appeared safer. He told us that the soldiers had left so we returned.

My father had to become a member of the **civilian patrol**. When the civil patrol first started, my father was obligated to patrol for twenty-four hours every three to four days. This mandatory civil patrol service brought more suffering and poverty upon us. Because of this my father and other men from our village could no longer go to the south coast to work. This increased our hunger; we ate corn, and some other green plants, but we never ate meat, and we didn't have enough money to buy shoes or clothing.

Because of all the violence and suffering I had witnessed, I was scared and distraught. At night I would dream of people in my village who had been killed. I would sometimes dream that they were still alive. Other times I would dream that the soldiers had their rifles aimed at me, my sister and my grandfather. I would wake up fearful that this was an omen that something had happened to them, so I would get up and make sure they were still all right. My grandfather told me that my dreams signified the war that would continue on our lands.

In 1985 I met _____ who asked me if I would accompany him to leave Guatemala. I had felt such great sadness and fear because of the situation that I agreed to leave with him. I entered the United States in the summer of 1986. Then we were arrested by the immigration authorities. We were scared to be sent back to Guatemala, so at first we said that we were Mexicans. But another friend who was also Guatemalan said he was from Guatemala. Then the immigration authority realized that we were also. We were given some papers but we couldn't read, and we didn't have a lawyer. We didn't know about political asylum. This is how it was that we were **deported** to Guatemala.

Dictionary of Terms

cadavers: dead bodies

civilian patrol: system initiated by the government in Guatemala to guard against guerrillas

cultivation: the preparation of land for the raising of crops

deport: to send out of the country

guerrillas: one who engages in warfare against the established government

massacre: the act of killing helpless human beings

Maya: a member of the Indian peoples of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize

migrant: a person that moves regularly to find work especially in harvesting crops

political asylum: protection and security from arrest given to political refugees by a nation

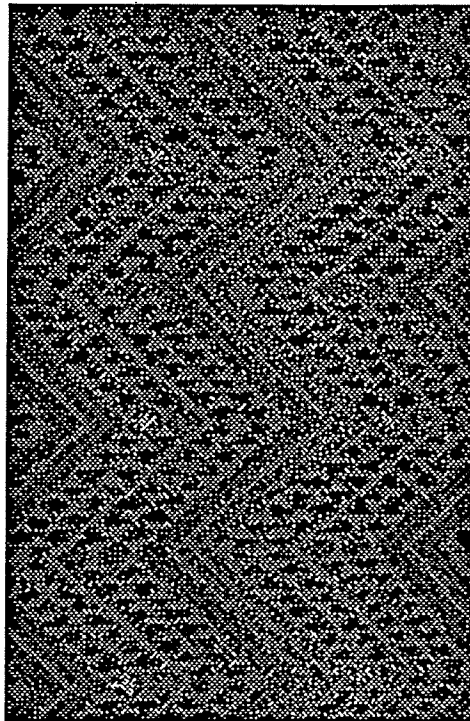
repression: the act of putting down by force

subversive: to be working secretly to overthrow the government

SEEKING ASYLUM
RESOURCE CARD 2



A young girl wearing a huipil.



A close-up of a huipil.

SEEKING ASYLUM
INDIVIDUAL REPORT

NAME _____

1. What caused this person to leave her country? What were the conditions in Guatemala?

2. What other refugees have you heard about? Describe what you know about them. What were the conditions in their countries that forced them to leave?