

Modern exodus

Mayans flee their homeland

From their highland village in Central Guatemala, the Mayans descend by foot into the Lacandon jungle of southern Mexico, following the Chahal and Ixcán River valleys.

While still in Guatemala they cannot build fires for warmth, cooking, or to sterilize their water, because the light and smoke might betray them.

These are people in flight from genocide, and while amoebic dysentery, typhoid, malaria, malnutrition and heat and humidity will be their constant companions, the Mayans consider these hosts more benign than the Guatemalan government. They would rather die in Mexico, they say, than return to Guatemala.

This is part of the picture in

Mexico as painted by Ron Spector, a Canadian herbalist who lived and worked among Guatemalan refugees this past March and April.

Now, he says, he can only marvel at their ingenuity and optimism, especially in a camp he knew best — Puerto Rico.

They used jungle vines to lash things together, Spector says. "The people had very few tools — not every man had a machete and an axe. They went into jungle rain forests and built homes for 4,000 people without hammers or saws or axes."

"And then," he pauses, shaking his head in disbelief at the list of projects, "they built a school, an outdoor children's dining hall, a clinic and a church."

About 100,000 of the more than 200,000 Mayan refugees have fled the present regime in Guatemala, running from "terror and massacres," Spector says.

Thirty Years of Persecution

Guatemala's Indians have been the object of persecution for nearly 30 years, Spector says, ever since 1954 when the CIA overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacob Arbenz, which had attempted to buy back and institute land reform on reserve land unused by United Fruit.

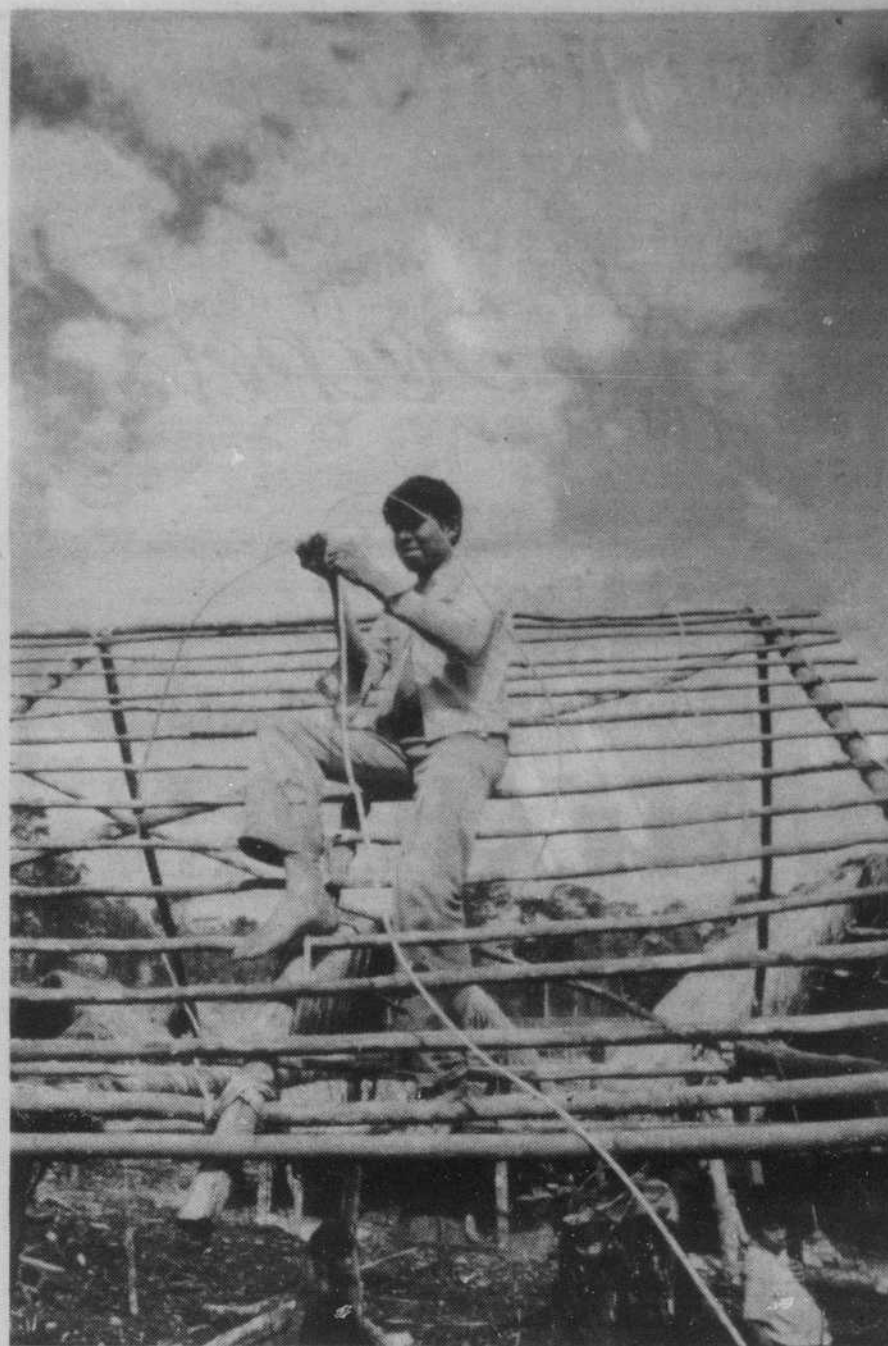
Many of the Indians in Guatemala — about 3.5 million in a country of 8 million, — migrate a few months every year to the coastal lands to work in the coffee, sugar, cacao, banana, or cotton plantations, where, Spector says, they are subject to the hazards of pesticides not allowed in this country.

"In fact we find (in Guatemala)...the highest level of DDT found in mother's milk in any country in the world."

The Indians migrate to the coast, Spector says, because they do not have enough land to provide the necessities of life for themselves. After all, he says, about 2 percent of the population controls about 80 percent of the land.

"It has been a continuous process on the parts of the rulers to seize and erode the land title of the people," to at once secure land presumed rich in oil and minerals, and at the same time maintain a cheap source of labor for corporate agriculture.

But the tyrannies of previous dictatorships pale beside the recently deposed regime of Rios Montt, Spector says. Between March 1982, when Montt assumed power, and March 1983, (the latest period documented by Amnesty International), AI reports that more than 10,000 civilian non-combatants were killed as a result of the Guatemalan government's



Story by Brooks Dareff
Photos courtesy of Dave Beers



Photographer Dave Beers took these pictures while visiting a Mayan refugee camp in Chajul, Mexico. The Mayans left their home in Guatemala to escape persecution by their government, according to a local herbalist who visited refugees in the Mexican camp of Puerto Rico. Conditions in the camp are primitive, but the native Guatemalans hope eventually to build a strong, and modern, society.

"scorched earth" policy. This, according to Spector, includes burning and massacring entire villages. "A sort of 'final solution'" to the Indian problem, he says.

And as the terror escalates, so does emigration. Spector says that while refugees have been filtering into Mexico from Guatemala for the last three years, the major influx occurred between August, 1982 and January, 1983.

The Land that Time Forgot

The refugee camp at Puerto Rico is situated 700 meters from Guatemala, in the region of Chiapas, along the Lacutan river. It is the biggest refugee camp in Chiapas, home for more than 4,000 refugees. It is one of three camps Spector visited in Chiapas.

The very first thing the refugees built in Puerto Rico was an airstrip because they knew it would be the most expedient connection to relief agencies bringing in food

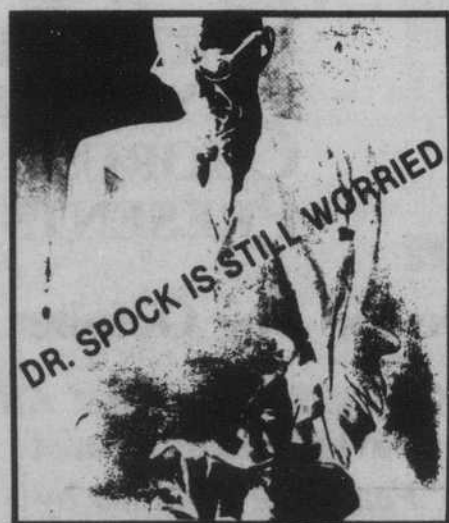
and medical help, Spector says.

Spector says the Mexican government consistently has banned international organizations from directly providing relief to the Mayan-Guatemalan refugees. Therefore, three local agencies have been their principle benefactors; Cargua, consisting primarily of a Mexican man and a German woman; Comar, the Mexican government's official commission, the official executor of about \$6 million in U.N. aid; and the local Catholic diocese, which Spector says has flown diseased and malnourished children out of the jungle to hospitals.

"The problem," Spector says, "is not so much food, as getting food in." Spector says much of the U.N. funds are grafted by the Mexican government. A family of six receives about nine kilos of corn and one kilo of beans every

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