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MEMORANDUM FOR MR. CHARLES HILL
Executive Secretary
Department of State

COL R.J. AFFOURTIT
Executive Secretary
Department of Defense

[Redacted Name]

Executive Secretary
Central Intelligence Agency

STAT

SUBJECT: White House Digest: "The Human
Tragedy of Dislocation"

The NSC requests review and clearance of the attached
White House Digest by June 27, 1984.

Robert M. Kimmitt
Robert M. Kimmitt
Executive Secretary

Attachment

White House Digest

cc: Ronald L. Blunt
Special Asst. to the Attorney General
Dept. of Justice

L-288

THE HUMAN TRAGEDY OF DISLOCATION

Violence causes flight. A common feature of warfare in the 20th century has been lines of people trying to escape the indiscriminate slaughter of modern weapons. Even after wars end, upheaval often continues, causing even more disruption and dislocation.

For those forced to flee their homelands, it is an ordeal beyond imagination. As repressive regimes have taken control of countries in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, hundreds of thousands have had to choose between enduring Communist oppression or facing a perilous journey into the unknown.

Such a human tragedy is currently taking place in Central America. It is an unpleasant reality that sudden emigration does not result only when Marxist-Leninists are successful. Violent terrorism, even when unsuccessful in its ultimate goal of overthrowing an existing government, can still create refugees.

Estimating the Numbers

Any attempt to estimate how many people will take flight from a given country if it falls to Communism will be open to debate. Refugees flee out of chaos, often coming to countries bureaucratically ill-equipped to keep track of how many enter. Moreover, the countries from which they come are often unwilling to give reliable estimates of the number of refugees who have fled. Finally, many refugees die en route.

A useful method, however, is to base predictions on past experiences. Since 1959, 1,250,000 Cubans, more than 12 percent of the island's population, have fled Cuba's Communist regime. Nearly 85 percent have come to the United States. That high percentage is partly due to Cuba's proximity to this country. Because the United States is prosperous and free it is the most popular destination for those fleeing Communism, so the exodus from Communist governments can be expected to be higher when those governments are nearby.

Because Central America is not much farther and, unlike Cuba, is connected to the U.S. by land, a similar percentage of Central Americans can be expected to leave their homelands. With 25 million people living in the region, a 10 percent exodus -- slightly less than that out of Cuba -- would yield 2.5 million people. A rock bottom estimate of five percent would yield 1.25 million. These numbers do not include the Caribbean island nations, which may also be vulnerable.

From Central America

Today, the five nations of Central America and Panama face the threat of disruption and violence. This alone has caused hundreds of thousands to suffer dislocation. Should the worst come to pass, and Central America falls to Marxist-Leninist terrorists seeking to impose dictatorships on the people, experience indicates that many more would flee.

Estimates, based on the experience of Cuba, Southeast Asia and other places around the world, indicate that between ¹1.5 million and 2.5 million personal dislocations would occur. ² As Ambassador H. Eugene Douglas, the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, has said:

"If we truly care about the people of Central America, then we must not allow them to be forced onto the refugee trail... Democracy allows many options: the option to vote for or against the government; the option to stay or to leave. Communism offers only one option -- to flee. But if the free world allows any country to be forced so far along the Communist path that millions of its people feel they have no choice but to flee, then we have already failed. No provisions, no matter how compassionate, that may be made for the refugees, can make up for that failure."¹

Fleeing the "Revolution of Broken Promises"

The flight from Communist-led Nicaragua has been highlighted in recent months by several large scale departures by Miskito Indians. This ethnic group has suffered greatly under ²the Sandinistas' Marxist plans to "rescue" the Atlantic Coast.

In an event widely referred to as The Christmas Exodus, 1,000 Miskito Indians left the relocation camp of Francia Sirpe and walked for three days through the jungle to the safety of Honduras. They were accompanied by Catholic Bishop Salvador Schlaefter, who³ has ministered to the Atlantic Coast region for over 30 years.

This Exodus has been repeated. At the beginning of April, some 2,500 more Indians trekked 50 miles to escape Sandinista repression and take up residence in the more hospitable regions of Honduras.⁴ Both these mass escapes have taken place since the Sandinistas announced an "amnesty" plan, which has been loudly rejected by the Indians.

Interestingly enough, the Honduran government views the Miskito refugees as a positive boon. The refugees have proven to be extraordinarily productive and will be given land along the Honduran Mosquita coastal region, making that area productive for the first time in many years.

But for many, the nightmare continues even after leaving the land of their persecution. Conditions in many refugee camps are bad -- not enough food, clothing, shelter, or medical attention. Wycliffe Diego, political representative of MISURA, an organization of Indians opposing the Sandinistas, recently described the conditions refugees face:

"The children are dying daily because of hunger and lack of medicine. At the present time, there are some 20,000 Miskito Indians that have sought refuge in Honduras and another 6,000 or 7,000 in Costa Rica. ... Every day in the refugee camps in Honduras and Mocoron and Costa Rica we have 12-13 of these children dying every day."⁵

For those left alive, the reminders of life under the Sandinistas and the hardships of flight are all around. An American doctor toured the border between Nicaragua and Honduras recently to provide medical attention to the Nicaraguan refugees. He reports widespread medical problems due to malnutrition and exposure. But he also chronicles some of the reasons the people have accepted their deprivations:

"They [the refugees] spoke of torture and showed me fingernails that had been torn out, hands that had been crushed, scarred backs from whippings and scarred bottoms of the feet from the same treatment. Many had tendons that had been cut. A favorite of the Sandinistas was to cut Achilles tendons and to sever tendons in the wrist that made the thumb and forefingers useless on the dominant hand. ... They told me a common torture was to throw pepper and sand in the eyes while hands were tied to chairs."⁶

Of particular concern both to the refugees and the Honduran government is the attempt by the Sandinistas to force some of the refugees back into Nicaragua. Several cases have been reported of Sandinista troops crossing the border into Honduras and coercing refugees to return so that they could be displayed as Indians taking advantage of the government amnesty program.

These incidents illustrate the essential problem of refugee status -- the insecurity. Becoming a refugee means giving up one's home, farm, and way of life for an often squalid and precarious existence in a refugee camp. Residents frequently complain that what is even worse than the lack of adequate food, clothing or shelter is the constant insecurity, not knowing when, or if, they will be able to return and try to put their lives back to normal.

There are other problems as well. Honduras and Costa Rica are ill-equipped to provide for either the security or the economic well-being of the newcomers. Eventually they will become productive citizens but this does little to alleviate the suffering caused by a sudden and massive emigration.

In El Salvador

Over 400,000 people have fled areas of conflict in El Salvador and are now living in government-run refugee camps, in spite of the inadequate resources and personnel at most of these refugee centers.

El Salvador is a populous country, but 400,000 is still a substantial percentage of its population. If the same percentage of Americans were forced to flee their homes, it would mean 18.4 million people in refugee camps.

Even this figure does little to convey what it means to be a refugee. Mrs. Geraldine O'Leary Macias, who fled Nicaragua with her husband in 1982, commented recently on what this has meant for them:

"[F]irst of all, I am a refugee; one of thousands who have left Nicaragua in the last four years. My husband is a Nicaraguan. I have watched him in the last year and a half lose contact with his family, his elderly parents; struggle with the English language, which he never planned to learn before. ... I have watched him lose his culture ... and suffer the fact of being a political refugee, and basically it's because he's two things: a Christian and a politician."⁸

A refugee, almost by definition, is a stateless person whose desperation makes them attractive targets for those who profit from people in need. The ultimate destination of many refugees is the United States. Getting here from El Salvador is a short but dangerous trip, especially for those without protection.

The Mariel Experience

In 1980, over 125,000 Cubans either escaped or were expelled from that country and became part of what is known as the Mariel boat lift. These Cubans and the few thousand Haitians who arrived about the same time are a tiny fraction of the 10 million we can expect to flee to this country if the entire region from the Rio Grande to the Panama Canal is engulfed in turmoil.

The sudden nature of their arrival, and the fact that many arrived destitute, caused a number of problems for Florida especially and for other Gulf States. Federal reimbursements to Florida alone totaled nearly half a billion dollars for fiscal years 1980 through 1983.⁹

That figure does not include federal administrative costs, nor does it take into account local expenses such as money for special bilingual education programs. A lack of government officials sufficiently fluent in Spanish was also a problem.

Finally, the sudden appearance of over 100,000 refugees sapped the resources of churches and charitable institutions who

try to help them through the adjustment period. Once this period ends, the refugees become able, patriotic citizens who contribute innumerable benefits to the communities where they live. This has been the case with refugees who have fled Communism in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Cuba.

Any mass migration brings chaos, and that chaos brings costs -- costs that are expressed not only in dollars and cents but in significant strains on the social fabric. Even in Miami, which has been accustomed to heavy immigration for more than 20 years, the sudden immigration from the 1980 exodus has certainly, and unfortunately, contributed to social tensions in that city.

Should Central America fall to the Communists, Florida, still reeling from the Cuban-Haitian exodus, would not be able to absorb 2.5 million new sudden immigrants, nor could the other states along our southern border. The immigrants would have to be distributed throughout the country, as would the temporary financial and social burden.

An Ounce of Prevention

The American people have always welcomed refugees from Communism. Their presence in this country has demonstrated how quickly and how willingly Americans give help to people in need. This is in the nature of a cure.

What the people of Central America need is a preventative, not a cure. We can make the human tragedy of dislocation unnecessary. We can prevent the deprivations that refugees face. We can insure that there will be no need for millions of people to risk their lives to escape to the United States.

We can do this by supporting the democratic aspirations of the people of El Salvador and Nicaragua. We can give our Central American neighbors the military aid and training and, even more important, the economic assistance they need to turn back the Communist challenge.

Democracy is under attack and the people are afraid. Fear causes refugees -- the fear that one's life or one's freedom will be lost. Attacking the root cause of this fear is easier, cheaper and more compassionate than dealing with the results.

Endnotes

1. Memo to the White House Outreach Working Group on Central America, August, 1983.
2. See Freedom House report.
3. El Tiempo, Bogota, Colombia 26 December 1983. Quoted in the Washington Post "For the Record" column 6 January 1984.
4. "Buscan Refugio en Honduras 2,500 Miskitos," Diario Las Americas 7 April 1984 p. 6
5. Wycliffe Diego, "Statement before the Outreach Working Group on Central America - Special Briefing on Religious Persecution in Nicaragua," 4 May 1984
6. Dr. Othniel J. Seiden, "Medical Mission to Honduras," Report to the Virginia and Albert Gildred Foundation 20 September 1983.
7. Tegucigalpa, Cadena Audio Video 12 January 1984 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service 13 January 1984, p. P11)
8. Geraldine O'Leary Macias, "Statement before the Outreach Working Group on Central America - Special Briefing on Religious Persecution in Nicaragua," 4 May 1984
9. Memo from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Department of Health and Human Services, to the Outreach Working Group; August 31, 1983.