Displaced Nicaraguans tool up

Miriam Blandon, 62, stood overlooking the settlement of Palwas, where she and members of 150 other families had taken refuge from contra attacks last year.

"When we left our farms, we lost everything—our houses, our animals, our tools," she said. "Now what we need is peace, to be left alone, so we can start our lives again."

Across the river is another settlement, of 100 families. And to the west there are five more, with a population totaling about 4,000. Altogether, 180,000 people have been displaced by the war in northern and central Nicaragua since 1984, and 250,000 in the country as a whole.

When I visited Palwas in January, 30 more families had just arrived. Some of the children were seriously malnourished.

"The contra will do anything to keep people from planting their fields," said Father Jim Feltz, the parish priest, adding that "to organize a cooperative" is to invite death.

In the early morning of May 13, 1984, in a community where Feltz was helping to promote pig cooperatives, contra forces attacked and killed 35 people in their sleep, including five children and eight women.

"Since then," Feltz said, "the war got so much worse. There has been a constant flow of people from the countryside."

The parish at Palwas, with support from Oxfam America, has played an important role in responding to the needs of the displaced—not with charity, but with long-term recovery assistance. In October 1983, for example, a truckload of tools and agricultural equipment arrived as part of Oxfam America's TOOLS for PEACE and JUSTICE campaign. These materials were among the $61,000 worth of agricultural supplies collected in the United States in the summer of 1983 and distributed in Nicaragua during the fall.

In Palwas, rakes, hoes, shovels, and a rototiller provided by the TOOLS campaign were used to clear and prepare land for planting. An outboard motor was used to transport people and supplies by boat to the settlement across the river. And a pickup truck donated by a Paloúse, WA, group provides Father Feltz and other parish workers with better access to other settlements in the area.

There is still an urgent need for carpentry tools to build walls on the many houses that now have only posts and zinc roofs. Farming tools and corn mills are also still in demand. A shipment of these items, valued at $18,000 and purchased with funds raised by the TOOLS campaign, is to be sent by Oxfam America this spring. Because of the U.S. trade embargo against Nicaragua, the agency is again required—as we were for last fall's shipment—to apply for a special export license from the U.S. Treasury Department.

In addition to tools, Oxfam America has provided seeds, fertilizers, and technical training to encourage food self-reliance. Several settlements have planted family vegetable plots. Agricultural cooperatives have been formed, and members—many of them women—are being trained in pig-raising and basic grain production. We've provided supplies to cultivate about 200 acres of corn in six cooperatives.

For the people of Palwas and the surrounding settlements, recovery is a gradual, difficult process. The continued arrival of displaced families puts a strain on already-scarce resources. For many, accustomed to living in dispersed family farms, adjusting to the settlements' close living quarters has been hard.

But there is a high level of cooperation and a pervasive desire for peace.

"Rather than giving money to the contra for warmaking," one man said, referring to recent aid from the U.S. government, "why not give it to us to construct schools and to produce food?"

Jethro Pettit
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SO IS MY LIFE

My duty moves along with my song:
I am I am not: that is my destiny.
I exist not if I do not attend to the pain
of those who suffer: they are my pains.
For I cannot be without existing for all,
for all who are silent and oppressed.
I come from the people and I sing for them:
My poetry is song and punishment.
I am told: you belong to darkness.
Perhaps, perhaps, but I walk toward the light.
I am the one of bread and fish
and you will not find me among books,
but men and women:
they have taught me the infinite.

-Pablo Neruda-

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