

Opening Remarks – Canadian Council for Refugees Spring Consultation
By Karen Cocq, Inter Pares
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In June, 2010, Inter Pares' Karen Cocq was invited to address organizations involved in the settlement, sponsorship, and protection of refugees and immigrants at a consultation held by the Canadian Council for Refugees. Karen spoke of Inter Pares' long history of supporting the struggles of displaced peoples around the world, and highlighted the need to see 'refugee rights' as only one part of the much broader issue of migrant justice.



Good morning. I'd like to first extend my thanks to Janet and the rest of the coordinating team at the CCR for inviting me to speak here today.

My name is Karen Cocq, and I am the program manager for Central America and Mexico at Inter Pares. Inter Pares means 'among equals'. We build long-term relationships of common cause with organizations around the world who share our analysis that poverty and underdevelopment are caused by structural inequalities between and within nations, and who are working for social change.

Inter Pares has a long history of supporting the struggles of displaced peoples around the world, in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Today I want to give you a brief history of some of this work in order to highlight three key points that I feel provide important insights into the theme of this Consultation: how we can act in solidarity with refugees and displaced peoples at home and abroad.



The three key points I want to make are the following – that, to be able to act in solidarity with displaced peoples in Canada and abroad, we, as Canadian organizations, advocates, support workers, lawyers, and community activists must:

- 1. Support the **self-organization** of displaced peoples to **advocate on their own behalf** for their own demands;*
- 2. Support the **collective** and **political** organizing of displaced peoples, and not just individual and case-based work;*
- 3. See ‘refugee rights’ as part of a bigger picture – in terms of **migrant justice** – and see the links between the needs and rights of displaced people and the social, economic, and political issues that cause their displacement. This includes broadening our view to look not only at the question of refugees, but of displaced people generally, and understanding the rights of displaced peoples in broader terms: **the right to stay, the right to return, as well as the right to move and to re-settle** – and most importantly, **to be able to assert these rights under conditions of dignity, safety, and justice.***

I’ll begin with Guatemala, then take us to Burma, and end back here in Canada.

In the early 1980s, Inter Pares began supporting Guatemalan refugees who had fled the armed conflict into Southern Mexico. Through our local counterpart, we supported groups of refugees, and in particular women refugees, living inside and outside camps in Mexico, who began organizing themselves to meet their basic needs. But these were political organizations too, and many of the women’s organizations that formed in exile remained active after their return to Guatemala. Many are still active today as influential civil society organizations that Inter Pares still supports.



The refugee return process in Guatemala was unique in that it was the first time ever that a ‘repatriation’ program was actively negotiated by refugees themselves. Refugees living in Mexico had formed political organizations over their years in exile. In the early 1990s, when the possibility of returning to Guatemala began being discussed, these refugee organizations formed themselves into broadly representative Permanent Commissions. The Permanent Commissions negotiated over the period of two years with the Guatemalan civilian government in order to come to agreement about the terms and conditions of their return, what became known as the October 8 Accords signed in 1992. There were several notable elements of this process.

First, the Accords were negotiated with the Guatemalan government by refugees themselves in a *collective* manner. This was because displaced people who had been living in exile for so many years needed the collective strength of their unity to be able to leverage any political power vis-à-vis the Guatemalan government. In addition, being able to negotiate the terms of a return process with the government, as opposed to simply being the objects of a pre-determined repatriation scheme (by government and the UNHCR) bought refugees very critical time – to think through their return to their homeland and to deliberate on and articulate their priorities and needs for ensuring that this process was effective and safe, and done with dignity. Being politically organized allowed refugees to play an active part in decision-making up to the highest levels – to collectively set the terms and conditions of their own return.

This is why Guatemalan refugees in Mexico talked about ‘return’ versus ‘repatriation’ - repatriation is done *to* refugees, while return is a conscious, voluntary, and political act undertaken *by refugees themselves*. As one leader of a refugee women’s organization said, “To return is to struggle” – meaning that refugees were determined to return to a



Guatemala that would have better conditions than when they had left, and that returning did not mean the end of their struggles or their political organizing. This was especially the case for women refugees, whose organizations and interests were under-represented in the negotiation of the October 8 Accords, reflecting a long and on-going history of marginalization and exclusion in their communities and in their country that many of these women's organizations continue to challenge to this day.

Second, the Accords themselves represented a series of explicitly political and collective demands that sought to affirm a broad set of rights of displaced peoples. The Accords contained 7 agreements:

1. That refugees could return to Guatemala in a collective and organized manner, that would protect their personal security and dignity, and that this choice would be voluntary. Each block of returning refugees would decide for themselves when, how and where to return, and the UNHCR, international NGOs, and the government would be presented with an operative plan outlining their responsibilities by the Permanent Commissions. In effect, this was the refugees determining the conditions of their return and giving the government and UNHCR their marching orders.
2. That all returnees had the right to freedom of association and organization. This again was a collective demand, and included the right to preserve and rebuild the communities and culture of returnees as indigenous peoples, the right to organize freely, and to have their organizations recognized by government. This demand also included the right to NOT do mandatory military service.
3. That refugees would have accompaniment on their return, not just from the camps but through various stages of integration into life in Guatemala.



- Returnees would get to choose who accompanies them, whether national or international organizations, and the government would facilitate the presence of international organizations to do so. Inter Pares and other Canadian organizations played a significant role in this, which I will discuss later on.
4. That returnees had the right to freedom of movement within, and out of, Guatemala. This included choosing where to settle in Guatemala, as well as demanding speedy processing of papers and documentation, and the immediate legalization of marriages and children born in Mexico.
 5. That returnees had the right to life, and to be respected as persons and communities; the right to personal and collective development (identity, culture, language, traditions). Importantly, this demand included the right to live autonomously – to elect their own leaders, to have 8% of the national budget to administer themselves, to set their own laws, and to provide their own services to their communities.
 6. The right to land, including land titling, that land be allowed to be cooperatively owned and managed, and the settling of land disputes (with those who occupied indigenous lands after communities had been displaced).
 7. Access to mediation and verification throughout the return process – for return, resettlement, and reintegration. This involved the creation of a mediation group to foster dialogue between the Permanent Commissions and the Guatemalan government, to monitor the process and ensure implementation of the Accords. This group would be made up of the UNHCR, the Human Rights ombudsman, the Archbishop, and a human rights NGO. They also created the GRICAR, a group of international organizations to monitor the process, including embassy involvement.



The role of Canadian organizations in supporting this process was clear and significant. I'll back track briefly, and take us to El Salvador. In 1986, refugees in two UNHCR camps in Honduras decided to leave the camps and return home to El Salvador, despite the violent war that was still raging. They wanted to assert their right to return in a public and political manner, and demand accompaniment from the international community in support of this right. This march was historic, and it began the momentum towards the eventual peace process in El Salvador. Inter Pares responded to this request from its local counterparts that were supporting these refugees, and began collaborating with other Canadian organizations working in El Salvador to leverage Canadian government support for the return process. This became known as the El Salvador Monitoring Group.

In the early 1990s, when Guatemalan refugees in Mexico began planning their return, the El Salvador Monitoring Group sent a delegation to Guatemala to assess the situation. The report that was produced, *The Right to Return*, outlined the needs of the internally displaced and those exiled in Mexico, highlighting that the ability to return home was indeed a right that the Canadian government could and should take responsibility in protecting. The report also emphasized the need to understand the situation of Guatemalan refugees in broader terms – as displaced peoples, confronting short-term, medium-term, and long-term challenges that were fundamentally political in nature. In addition, Canadian civil society organizations working in Guatemala were called on to provide political, financial, and logistical support to this process – specifically, to leverage pooled funds to support Guatemalan organizations who were leading the preparations for the return. The CAMG report was presented to Parliament, the Foreign Affairs Committee, CIDA, and DFAIT, in January of 1992. In response, the Canadian government agreed to fund the work being done by Canadian NGOs. The



Canadian Ambassador to Guatemala even travelled to the Mexican border with Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchú to accompany a group of refugee women back to Guatemala.

Both the El Salvador Monitoring Group and the CAMG were living and working examples of genuine and effective solidarity – a solidarity that took the lead from and supported the demands of refugees themselves who were organized politically and who were asserting their broader collective and political rights outside of the traditional channels – in this case UNHCR repatriation schemes – that were available to them.

Now let me take you to Burma.

For more than two decades, the military dictatorship in Burma has terrorized the civilian population, especially ethnic minorities, and driven hundreds of thousands into exile along Burma's borders with Thailand, India, Bangladesh, and China. In Thailand alone there are more than 2 million Burmese, some living in refugee camps but most living precariously as illegal migrants. In the early 2000s, it appeared that political conditions might improve so that the refugees could return back to Burma and there was much discussion about repatriation by the UNHCR. But many refugees had concerns about the conditions of their repatriation and their future in Burma. In addition, women's groups were concerned about the future of their organizations once they returned home to their various communities.

Through our local counterparts the Burma Relief Centre (BRC) and the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), Inter Pares was supporting groups of displaced Burmese in their efforts to organize themselves to meet their own needs. Take, for example, the



case of the health work we support on the border. Dr. Cynthia Maung, a physician and refugee herself, established the Mae Tao Clinic just over the Thai border, virtually from scratch in extremely isolated and politically hostile conditions in 1989. The clinic is world-famous, serving over half a million people, providing a full range of primary and long-term health care, conducting research, and training a continuous stream of health care workers. It trains displaced people as medics who go back into the conflict zones to provide health services. It is likely the only health system in the world run entirely by refugees. And it is a political project – not only is the clinic attempting to meet the health needs of the displaced population, it is aspiring to build the foundations of a health care system for a future free Burma.

Similarly, Inter Pares has been supporting the efforts of Burmese women to self-organize – often for the first time in history – to assert their rights and meet the specific needs of women fleeing the military regime. Over the years, these small nascent women’s groups have developed into a strong, broad-based, and internationally recognized women’s movement – speaking before the CEDAW on the state crimes against women, producing groundbreaking documentation and research of the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. These organizations and the women that make them up will be leaders in the construction of a more just and peaceful society in Burma. This is a role only they can play. Our role, as we have seen it, is to support these courageous efforts, facilitating the conditions in which Burmese refugees can organize themselves to assert their rights and build their capacities as agents of social change.

Our experience supporting displaced peoples’ organizations led us in 2002 to develop the idea for an exchange between women’s organizations from Guatemala and from the Thai-Burma border. There were many parallels between the two situations, especially



for displaced women: they had experienced extreme violence on the part of military and state actors, including the widespread use of sexual violence as a weapon of war; had lived for extensive periods of time in exile; and had endeavored to organize themselves politically. The refugee return process from Mexico and the experience of women organizing politically while in exile and then adapting to the new political realities of being back in Guatemala could provide important lessons to Burmese women still in exile and preparing for their eventual return to Burma.

The exchange took place in two phases, the first in the fall of 2002 where Inter Pares staff accompanied Burmese women activists to Guatemala to meet with refugee women's organizations and plan the second larger phase of the exchange. This second phase took place in early 2003, where Inter Pares staff accompanied three women activists, representing the three major women's organizations in Guatemala which had all formed in exile, to the Thai-Burma border for two weeks of workshops, skills sharing, and knowledge exchange.

The idea behind the Guatemala-Burma exchange was that there would be much that these women could learn from each other. The principle was that there is immense value in displaced people speaking to displaced people, in women speaking to women, and learning from one another. And that our role as Inter Pares – as a Canadian organization – was to facilitate this knowledge creation and solidarity between displaced peoples as agents in political struggles for their own self-determination.

The lessons from the exchange, as articulated by the women who participated, were significant: that the experience of refuge – and return – is inherently political; that being organized as displaced peoples, and especially as women, is essential; and that



organization facilitates the participation of displaced people as agents over their own destinies long after their return home and beyond their condition as ‘refugees’.

Finally, let me end with an experience closer to home which, although it is not a campaign in which Inter Pares was involved at the time, is instructive in terms of the possibilities for our solidarity as Canadian organizations here at home.

Many here will remember when, in early 2002, the Canadian government under Jean Chrétien and Immigration Minister Denis Coderre lifted the 5-year old moratorium on deportations to Algeria. At the time, Canada was preparing to host the G8 meetings in Kananaskis, and Algeria was Canada’s largest trading partner in the region. The consequences of the lifting of the moratorium were severe for the thousands of non-status Algerians living in Canada, as the dangerous political situation in Algeria had hardly changed and the threat of torture, imprisonment, and death for anyone deported there had not diminished. In response to this situation, the non-status Algerian community in Montreal organized themselves – as la Comité d’action des sans-status, the Action Committee of Non-Status Algerians, or CASS. The Committee had three demands: 1) an immediate end to all deportations; 2) the reinstatement of the moratorium on deportations to Algeria; and 3) the regularization of all non-status Algerians living in Canada. Through the summer and fall of that year, the CASS, and the women’s committee that formed within the CASS, organized public education activities, media work, protests and direct action to press the government to meet their demands. In October 2002, the provincial and federal governments announced special procedures to regularize non-status Algerians. But because of key loopholes in the procedures, CASS continued its campaign demanding a wholesale regularization program that would not exclude anyone.



The reason I raise the experience of the CASS is because it is a clear example, similar to those of Guatemala and Burma that I previously described, of displaced peoples organizing themselves in order to make collective demands for justice. The CASS campaign was explicitly political and collective – rather than focus energy on obtaining status on a case-by-case basis, the campaign had as a starting point a collective demand for full regularization. Similarly, their rejection of the special procedures highlighted that a person’s level of education, work experience, or degree of ‘integration’ into Quebec and Canadian society were all simply discriminatory and divisive criteria that would allow some Algerians a path to permanent residence while committing others to a future of deportation, poverty, violence, and possibly even death. This, according to the CASS, was inherently unjust, and would not suffice as a solution to the situation of non-status Algerians in Canada. The CASS stood firm on their demands, while also supporting several members of the non-status Algerian community who had taken sanctuary, and in the case of Mohammed Cherfi, had been deported via such loopholes in the procedures. The CASS even occupied Minister Coderre’s office in Ottawa on May 29th, 2003, as I’m sure many of you will recall. Furthermore, the CASS joined in the efforts of the Coalition Against the Deportation of Palestinian Refugees (CAPDR) and the Action Committee of Pakistani Refugees Against Racial Profiling, which had formed around that time in Montreal to resist deportations from these communities. These campaigns coalesced around key demands that remain at the forefront of migrant justice movements in Canada: the regularization of all non-status people in Canada, an end to deportations, and an end to immigration detentions.

There are other examples today of these campaigns in which migrant and non-status communities in Canada organizing. Perhaps most notable are the efforts in Toronto and



Montreal, among other cities, to secure safe access to basic services for non-status people – so that they can call the police, see a doctor, send their kids to school, even flee domestic violence – without fear of being reported to immigration enforcement officials. These have taken the form of Don't Ask Don't Tell Campaigns, but also longer term goals of building Solidarity Cities, creating entire communities where non-status people can live safely and with dignity. These efforts by migrants to organize themselves around collective demands for justice for their communities can and should benefit from the logistical, financial, and political support of organizations like ours in this room. This would be an act of solidarity on our part, and, much like the experience of Inter Pares in the case of Guatemala and Burma, would be fulfilling our responsibility to support the struggles of migrants for dignity, equality, and justice at home and abroad.

