

**C A R T A G E N A**  
**D E C L A R A T I O N**  
**O N     R E F U G E E S**

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Adopted by the Colloquium  
on the International Protection of Refugees  
in Central America, Mexico and Panama

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CARTAGENA DE INDIAS, COLOMBIA  
22 NOVEMBER 1984





## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### I

**RECALLING** the conclusions and recommendations adopted by the Colloquium held in Mexico in 1981 on Asylum and International Protection of Refugees in Latin America, which established important landmarks for the analysis and consideration of this matter;

**RECOGNIZING** that the refugee situation in Central America has evolved in recent years to the point at which it deserves special attention;

**APPRECIATING** the generous efforts which have been made by countries receiving Central American refugees, notwithstanding the great difficulties they have had to face, particularly in the current economic crisis;

**EMPHASIZING** the admirable humanitarian and non-political task which UNHCR has been called upon to carry out in the Central American countries, Mexico and Panama in accordance with the provisions of the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1967 Protocol, as well as those of resolution 428 (V) of the United Nations General Assembly, by which the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is applicable to all States whether or not parties to the said Convention and/or Protocol;

**BEARING IN MIND** also the function performed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights with regard to the protection of the rights of refugees in the continent;

**STRONGLY SUPPORTING** the efforts of the Contadora Group to find an effective and lasting solution to the problem of Central American refugees, which constitute a significant step in the negotiation of effective agreements in favour of peace in the region;

**EXPRESSING** its conviction that many of the legal and humanitarian problems relating to refugees which have arisen in the Central American region, Mexico and Panama can only be tackled in the light of the necessary co-ordination and harmonization of universal and regional systems and national efforts;

## II

**HAVING ACKNOWLEDGED** with appreciation the commitments with regard to refugees included in the Contadora Act on Peace and Co-operation in Central America, the bases of which the Colloquium fully shares and which are reproduced below:

- (a) “To carry out, if they have not yet done so, the constitutional procedures for accession to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.”
- (b) “To adopt the terminology established in the Convention and Protocol referred to in the foregoing paragraph with a view to distinguishing refugees from other categories of migrants.”
- (c) “To establish the internal machinery necessary for the implementation, upon accession, of the provisions of the Convention and Protocol referred to above.”
- (d) “To ensure the establishment of machinery for consultation between the Central American countries and representatives of the Government offices responsible for dealing with the problem of refugees in each State.”
- (e) “To support the work performed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Central America and to establish direct co-ordination machinery to facilitate the fulfillment of his mandate.”
- (f) “To ensure that any repatriation of refugees is voluntary, and is declared to be so on an individual basis, and is carried out with the co-operation of UNHCR.”
- (g) “To ensure the establishment of tripartite commissions, composed of representatives of the State of origin, of the receiving State and of UNHCR with a view to facilitating the repatriation of refugees.”
- (h) “To reinforce programmes for protection of and assistance to refugees, particularly in the areas of health, education, labour and safety.”
- (i) “To ensure that programmes and projects are set up with a view to ensuring the self-sufficiency of refugees.”
- (j) “To train the officials responsible in each State for protection of and assistance to refugees, with the co-operation of UNHCR and other international agencies.”
- (k) “To request immediate assistance from the international community for Central American refugees, to be provided either directly, through bilateral or multilateral agreements, or through UNHCR and other organizations and agencies.”

- (l) “To identify, with the co-operation of UNHCR, other countries which might receive Central American refugees. In no case shall a refugee be transferred to a third country against his will.”
- (m) “To ensure that the Governments of the area make the necessary efforts to eradicate the causes of the refugee problem.”
- (n) “To ensure that, once agreement has been reached on the bases for voluntary and individual repatriation, with full guarantees for the refugees, the receiving countries permit official delegations of the country of origin, accompanied by representatives of UNHCR and the receiving country, to visit the refugee camps.”
- (o) “To ensure that the receiving countries facilitate, in co-ordination with UNHCR, the departure procedure for refugees in instances of voluntary and individual repatriation.”
- (p) “To institute appropriate measures in the receiving countries to prevent the participation of refugees in activities directed against the country of origin, while at all times respecting the human rights of the refugees.”

### III

The Colloquium adopted the following conclusions:

1. **TO PROMOTE** within the countries of the region the adoption of national laws and regulations facilitating the application of the Convention and the Protocol and, if necessary, establishing internal procedures and mechanisms for the protection of refugees. In addition, to ensure that the national laws and regulations adopted reflect the principles and criteria of the Convention and the Protocol, thus fostering the necessary process of systematic harmonization of national legislation on refugees.
2. **TO ENSURE** that ratification of or accession to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol by States which have not yet taken these steps is unaccompanied by reservations limiting the scope of those instruments, and to invite countries having formulated such reservations to consider withdrawing them as soon as possible.
3. **TO REITERATE** that, in view of the experience gained from the massive flows of refugees in the Central American area, it is necessary to consider enlarging the concept of a refugee, bearing in mind, as far as appropriate and in the light of the situation prevailing in the region, the precedent of the OAU Convention (article I, paragraph 2) and the doctrine employed in the reports of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Hence the definition or concept of a refugee to be recommended for use in the region is one which, in addition to containing the elements of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, includes among refugees persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.
4. **TO CONFIRM** the peaceful, non-political and exclusively humanitarian nature of grant of asylum or recognition of the status of refugee and to underline the importance of the internationally accepted principle that nothing in either shall be interpreted as an unfriendly act towards the country of origin of refugees.
5. **TO REITERATE** the importance and meaning of the principle of *non-refoulement* (including the prohibition of rejection at the frontier) as a corner-stone of the international protection of refugees. This principle is imperative in regard to refugees and in the present state of international law should be acknowledged and observed as a rule of *jus cogens*.

6. **TO REITERATE** to countries of asylum that refugee camps and settlements located in frontier areas should be set up inland at a reasonable distance from the frontier with a view to improving the protection afforded to refugees, safeguarding their human rights and implementing projects aimed at their self-sufficiency and integration into the host society.
7. **TO EXPRESS** its concern at the problem raised by military attacks on refugee camps and settlements which have occurred in different parts of the world and to propose to the Governments of the Central American countries, Mexico and Panama that they lend their support to the measures on this matter which have been proposed by the High Commissioner to the UNHCR Executive Committee.
8. **TO ENSURE** that the countries of the region establish a minimum standard of treatment for refugees, on the basis of the provisions of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol and of the American Convention on Human Rights, taking into consideration the conclusions of the UNHCR Executive Committee, particularly No. 22 on the Protection of Asylum Seekers in Situations of Large-Scale Influx.
9. **TO EXPRESS** its concern at the situation of displaced persons within their own countries. In this connection, the Colloquium calls on national authorities and the competent international organizations to offer protection and assistance to those persons and to help relieve the hardship which many of them face.
10. **TO CALL** on States parties to the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights to apply this instrument in dealing with *asilados* and refugees who are in their territories.
11. **TO MAKE** a study, in countries in the area which have a large number of refugees, of the possibilities of integrating them into the productive life of the country by allocating to the creation or generation of employment the resources made available by the international community through UNHCR, thus making it possible for refugees to enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights.
12. **TO REITERATE** the voluntary and individual character of repatriation of refugees and the need for it to be carried out under conditions of absolute safety, preferably to the place of residence of the refugee in his country of origin.
13. **TO ACKNOWLEDGE** that reunification of families constitutes a fundamental principle in regard to refugees and one which should be the basis for the regime of humanitarian treatment in the country of asylum, as well as for facilities granted in cases of voluntary repatriation.

14. **TO URGE** non-governmental, international and national organizations to continue their worthy task, co-ordinating their activities with UNHCR and the national authorities of the country of asylum, in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the authorities in question.
15. **TO PROMOTE** greater use of the competent organizations of the inter-American system, in particular the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, with a view to enhancing the international protection of *asilados* and refugees. Accordingly, for the performance of this task, the Colloquium considers that the close co-ordination and co-operation existing between the Commission and UNHCR should be strengthened.
16. **TO ACKNOWLEDGE** the importance of the OAS/UNHCR Programme of Co-operation and the activities so far carried out and to propose that the next stage should focus on the problem raised by massive refugee flows in Central America, Mexico and Panama.
17. **TO ENSURE** that in the countries of Central America and the Contadora Group the international norms and national legislation relating to the protection of refugees, and of human rights in general, are disseminated at all possible levels. In particular, the Colloquium believes it especially important that such dissemination should be undertaken with the valuable co-operation of the appropriate universities and centres of higher education.



## IV

The Cartagena Colloquium therefore

### **RECOMMENDS:**

- That the commitments with regard to refugees included in the Contadora Act should constitute norms for the 10 States participating in the Colloquium and be unfailingly and scrupulously observed in determining the conduct to be adopted in regard to refugees in the Central American area.
- That the conclusions reached by the Colloquium (III) should receive adequate attention in the search for solutions to the grave problems raised by the present massive flows of refugees in Central America, Mexico and Panama.
- That a volume should be published containing the working document and the proposals and reports, as well as the conclusions and recommendations of the Colloquium and other pertinent documents, and that the Colombian Government, UNHCR and the competent bodies of OAS should be requested to take the necessary steps to secure the widest possible circulation of the volume in question.
- That the present document should be proclaimed the “Cartagena Declaration on Refugees”.
- That the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees should be requested to transmit the contents of the present declaration officially to the heads of State of the Central American countries, of Belize and of the countries forming the Contadora Group.

Finally, the Colloquium expressed its deep appreciation to the Colombian authorities, and in particular to the President of the Republic, Mr. Belisario Betancur, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Augusto Ramírez Ocampo, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Poul Hartling, who honoured the Colloquium with their presence, as well as to the University of Cartagena de Indias and the Regional Centre for Third World Studies for their initiative and for the realization of this important event. The Colloquium expressed its special recognition of the support and hospitality offered by the authorities of the Department of Bolívar and the City of Cartagena. It also thanked the people of Cartagena, rightly known as the “Heroic City”, for their warm welcome.

In conclusion, the Colloquium recorded its acknowledgement of the generous tradition of asylum and refuge practised by the Colombian people and authorities.

Cartagena de Indias, 22 November 1984

