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Viewpoint

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Work among refugees is purely humanitarian

Diana Negroponte, wife of Ambassador John Negroponte, U.S. envoy to Honduras, responds to an article reprinted from Mother Jones magazine (Viewpoint, April 3, 1983). In that article the author stated that Mrs. Negroponte was "working for a Christian evangelist group that ran supplies to anti-Sandinista Indians on the frontier."

By DIANA NEGROPONTE:

The Mistko, Rama and Sumo Indians continue to flee Nicaragua into Honduras. There are now more than 14,500 of these refugees. During a recent week 750 came into camp and many more are expected. No longer do these Indian tribesmen come from the Coco River, which forms the border between Honduras and Nicaragua; they are coming from towns more than 100 kilometers from the frontier.

In Honduras the refugees come under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which provides protection and financing for an overall refugee population of 37,000, principally from Nicaragua and El Salvador. This aid is administered by private, voluntary organizations, many of them from the United States. In La Mosquitia, in northeastern Honduras, the Indian refugees from Nic-

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regina are cared for by World Relief, the relief arm of the National Council of Evangelists, the California-based Missionary Aviation Fellowship, the Peace Corps and several individual American volunteers who devote from six months to two years to caring for the refugees.

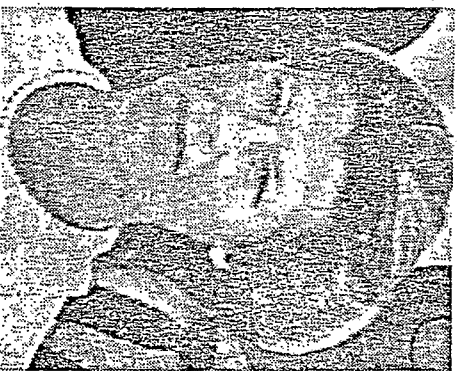
The work of these agencies and their volunteers is purely humanitarian. While aware of the political forces at work, they are discouraged from getting involved in political discussions with both refugees and outsiders. From my experience as a former full-time volunteer with World Relief, the staff have neither time nor inclination to get involved in politics.

There are more than 70 international volunteers involved in refugee relief and resettlement work in La Mosquitia. They include doctors, nurses, health promoters, agronomists, engineers, administrators and teachers. Their work is hard, with long days in blistering heat or continual downpours. They travel on foot, by boat or by single-engine plane to the remote areas where the refugees are being resel-

led. They live in the villages, eating the same food as the refugees; a steady diet of beans and rice. Stomach troubles are frequent and there is little relief from the hard work.

Why do American, European or Central American volunteers work in La Mosquitia? There is the romance of working in a remote part of the world, scarcely accessible by land, among Indian tribes with a particular culture of their own. There is the desire to help others. This desire appears very strong among young Americans who find that they are needed and that their skills are in demand; sons and daughters of missionaries, college students on summer vacation, doctors and nurses wishing to gain greater experience, people fed up with the routine.

The accusation has been made that I and, by implication, the other volunteers involved in La Mosquitia have been running guns to the anti-Sandinista forces. Such an accusation is absurd, untrue and harmful. Some have concluded — presumably based upon the news: that the Mistko, Rama and Sumo tribes are fighting to regain their land from the Sandinista government — that the relief supplies sent to the refugees in Honduras contain military wherewithal. The only ammunition



MURRY SILL / Miami Herald Staff

Diana Negroponte: No time for politics.

is food, medicines, seed, basic agricultural tools and building material for simple construction. The distribution of these

supplies is undertaken by volunteers and a strict census of the camp population ensures that only family members present receive their food rations. One pound of milk, allocated to each family for building their home, is hardly enough to purchase Sandinista trucks on non-existent roads! Such accusations raise the suspicion that the work of the volunteers is political. The reputation of these volunteers is harmed with reports of CIA collaboration. Why should the institutions that support them, or the benefactors who support World Relief, continue to provide funding in the face of such rumors?

My fear is that the volunteers may be dissuaded from coming to Honduras to work with the Nicaraguan Indian refugees. A decline in the number of relief workers from the United States and elsewhere would seriously damage the current program and its ability to provide emergency relief and longer-term development aid. The United Nations and the Honduran government depend upon volunteers to carry out the day-to-day work of looking after these refugees. Their presence is essential. We should be encouraging more people to come to work in Honduras, not spiriting their humanitarian efforts with mischievous concoctions.