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End To Border Dispute

by LADB Staff

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The long-standing territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize may be coming to a conclusion, with the help of the Organization of American States (OAS). Guatemala's Foreign Minister Gabriel Orellana confirmed on Aug. 30 that a process of mediation begun in March of 2000 between the countries, at OAS headquarters in Washington, DC, had reached a successful conclusion (see NotiCen, 2002-06-20).

The OAS had named a team of facilitators to resolve the dispute, which has been simmering for more than a century. Guatemala claims sovereignty over about half of Belize's 24,000 sq km of national territory. The countries had jointly requested mediation following a series of violent incidents along the indefinite border that had at times brought them to the brink of war (see NotiCen, 2002-03-09).

The OAS responded by assembling a panel of mediators headed by a representative of each of the countries. Each representative would deal with a facilitator; the facilitators would then deal with each other. They are, for Belize, Caribbean statesman Sir Shridath Ramphal, and US lawyer Paul Reichler for Guatemala. Honduras was also involved, as its maritime limits border those in dispute. The maritime boundaries are particularly complex, especially in the Gulf of Honduras. The final agreement will therefore be, said Orellana, trinational in scope.

The process had progressed to the stage at which cartographic, demographic, and oceanographic documents could be drawn up and a final draft submitted to OAS Secretary-General Cesar Gaviria. Orellana described the final document as a series of proposals arrived at by conciliation rather than negotiation. The minister declined to discuss the content of the agreement pending its release by the OAS, within 30 days. Following that, a referendum will be placed before the Guatemalan people, to approve or reject the solution.

This has been a process of two year's duration that has, said Orellana, put OAS mechanisms to the test, resulting in an outcome that has left international observers satisfied. Although the final solution has not been spelled out, it is unlikely that Guatemala gained much, if any, of the 12,000 sq km it claimed.

Belizean Prime Minister Said Muso told his people in a radio broadcast that his government would not cede territory. "Our borders are sacrosanct," he said. He added that there could, though, be an agreement in the maritime area. Muso told reporters that he had instructed his OAS facilitator, Shridath Ramphal, that the borders of Belize had been established, in 1859, from the Rio Hondo in the north, to the Rio Sarstun in the south, to Gracias a Dios in the west. What lies between those points, however, leaves a great deal to be resolved; most of the border between the countries remains unmarked.

It was along those unsurveyed borders that, two years ago, the Guatemalan army "arrested and kidnapped," in Muso's words, government officials of Belize. The lack of clear boundaries has been the excuse for countless military incursions, land-grabs, and deaths before and since that time. Though Muso appeared to be unmovable on the question of giving up land, he was clearly motivated to come to some agreement. "It's a powerful country with a powerful army," he said of his adversary. The shadow of conflict has hung heavily over Muso's country since then Guatemalan President Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000) formally demanded the return of those 12,000 sq km.

Despite Muso's caveats, the Belizean press reported that they were to expect final recommendations "to achieve an ultimate, peaceful, and definitive resolution" to the historic dispute. The present process was scheduled to have terminated in 2001, but in July last year the process was extended another year. Even now, the announcement of successful conclusion is hedged and nuanced.

Ramphal said, "Sometimes the last mile is the hardest, because quite often the objective is toward the top of the hill, but we will get there." Reichler echoed, "... we are not finished with the recommendations, but we are sure about a solution." It must also be reiterated that it ain't over till it's over. The final document will be subject to national referenda on both sides. These are to be held simultaneously in both countries 60 days after official delivery of the final agreement and only after review by the respective governments and major political parties, and after public consultations to educate the electorate.

In addition to the territorial dispute, the agreement is expected to cover an accord on Guatemala's access to the Atlantic through Belize's Caribbean waters, possibilities for exclusive economic zones, and questions relating to ecological exploitation of the cayes off the coast. Despite the potential benefits to both countries, there is no guarantee that the referendum will be successful.

For Guatemalans, the claim to the land that is now Belize is as much a part of their heritage as is the flag. The first Constitution of Guatemala asserted that "Belice es nuestro." Recent textbooks used in primary grades used maps that did not show Belize as a separate country. In 1992, then President Jorge Serrano recognized Belize's independence, setting off a furor within the population. But even Serrano did not give up his country's claim to those 12,000 sq km, setting the stage for Arzu's later demand. The claim goes back at least as far as the 1840s when Guatemala claimed, and England rejected, sovereignty over Belize as an inheritance from Spain.

England apparently has not forgotten its part in the conflict. On Sept. 2, Guatemalan newspapers reported that Great Britain had contributed US\$62 million to facilitate a favorable outcome. The two countries are to split the proceeds equally, about half upon signing the accord and the rest to be paid out over time.

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