

9-19-2002

El Salvador And Honduras Renew Border Dispute

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "El Salvador And Honduras Renew Border Dispute." (2002). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9008>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

El Salvador And Honduras Renew Border Dispute

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: El Salvador Honduras

Published: 2002-09-19

On Sept. 11, 1992, at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, a judgment was handed down that would resolve the simmering border dispute between Honduras and El Salvador once and for all (see NotiCen, 1998-01-29). Honduras was the clear winner territorially, gaining sovereignty over 66% of the 450,000 sq km in question, and both countries were winners institutionally in the sense that they mutually accepted the decision.

Ten years later, the discovery of an ancient map throws that decision into doubt. El Salvador intends to exploit that doubt on the chance of recovering some of its lost territory by having filed an appeal with the ICJ just before a ten-year-period deadline was to expire. El Salvador claims to have convincing evidence that an antique map presented by Honduras a decade ago was altered and that the alteration cost Central America's tiniest republic 72 sq km.

Most of the original judgment is not in dispute. It is the area around the Rio Goascoran that El Salvador wants back. The Salvadoran newspaper *Diario de Hoy* broke a story claiming that, during the long litigation that ended in 1992, Honduras used a map made in 1794 that was "full of inexactitudes if compared with the original map." The map with the errors was drawn by the Spanish explorer and navigator Salvador Melendez y Bruna, who came to the Gulf of Fonseca in 1794 on the order of the Spanish Crown, King Carlos IV.

During the nearly six-year trial before the ICJ, El Salvador's lawyers claimed that a natural phenomenon changed the course of the Rio Goascoran. They alleged that the river ended at La Cutu, six kilometers from its present mouth, and that in 1916 Honduras built a dam, and later a road, to keep the river from returning to its original bed. Honduras defended the location more favorable to its position by presenting in evidence the allegedly altered Melendez y Bruna map. El Salvador claims to have discovered the original map in an international institute that also has the navigator's diary and says that map does not coincide with the one presented by Honduras.

Honduras was reportedly taken by surprise by the allegation, and taking the matter seriously, bought up a number of copies of the newspaper, flew them to Honduras, and initiated a study of the story "inch by inch" by high government officials "under the strictest measures of security and confidentiality," in preparation of a report to President Ricardo Maduro and the military high command. Honduran officials who declined to be identified confirmed that, if El Salvador's claims were substantiated, a revision of the decade-old decision would be possible. ICJ procedures require that "new facts" be presented six months prior to an appeal.

The closed-door sessions notwithstanding, the revelations quickly became public in Honduras, giving rise to harangues against El Salvador on television and radio. One of the first to speak up was ex-President Carlos Roberto Reyna (1994-1998), who denied any use of false maps, and reiterated, "In the judgment, it was determined that the Goascoran is 100% Honduran."

Back to no-man's land?

As semanticist Alfred Korzybski said, the map is not the territory. For people who live on the actual ground newly under dispute, confusion reigns. President Francisco Flores of El Salvador tried to reassure people along the border that there was a shared responsibility recognized by both countries, and for most, nothing would change. Only one small part of the border was brought into contention by El Salvador's allegations. Flores said that the only solution for the people of the zone who do not know what country they are in (see NotiCen, 1998-01-29) is the completion of the demarcation a project that has proceeded at an agonizingly slow pace, less than 20 km a year for the last ten years. "I think that if we make an effort to mark the frontier, we will be turning the page, and the residents will have a better certainty than they have at this moment," said Flores.

President Ricardo Maduro of Honduras also took an opportunity to reassure people along the uncertain border. With a posse of officials in tow, he went to Nahuaterique, where the formerly Salvadoran townfolk described themselves as being in limbo, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the ICJ decision. He raised the Honduran flag, dedicated a civic center, and spoke of the many improvements the government had made to the area during the decade: schools, health posts, electricity, telephone service. He assured the populace that El Salvador's challenge to the judgment would not affect its execution.

A local resident, Federico Ramos, put some perspective on the visit. "It is important that the president came, it's the first time; but we hope he does more [public] works here, because we need more schools and health centers," said Ramos. He further recommended that the government do something about employment, "because we can't keep cutting down the forest; we need jobs to live." The region has been seriously deforested.

Adding to the reassurances, Salvadoran Army Gen. Juan Martinez Varela denied any intentions of sending troops to the border zone in remarks during an exercise commemorating Sept. 11, 2001. That statement was matched by one from President Maduro that there would be no additional militarization on the Honduran side. Having taken measures that included a hastily arranged face-to-face meeting to allay fears of escalated conflict, both presidents committed themselves to an expenditure of US\$7 million, divided equally, to speed up the border survey. They expect to accelerate the process to a rate of 10 km a month. During the preceding 10 years, only 195 km of the 375-km total has been completed. A clear line drawn in the dirt is expected to go a long way toward relieving the feeling of being in limbo.

-- End --