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## **Airrecu: Birth Of A Nation?**

*by LADB Staff*

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[The following article is reprinted with permission of the weekly newspaper The Tico Times in San Jose, Costa Rica. It first appeared in the October 11-17, 2002, edition of the newspaper.]

Leaders of a separatist movement on Costa Rica's northern border warned this week that the Costa Rican government has one last chance to reclaim land lost to Nicaragua before the independent nation of Airrecu is reborn (see NotiSur, 1995-07-28, NotiCen, 1998-07-23). The disputed territory is a 440 sq km area south of Lake Nicaragua, which belongs to Costa Rica under historic border treaties, but has been mistaken as Nicaraguan territory since 1905. After failing to recognize the problem of the misplaced border stones for the last century, the Costa Rican government last month finally started investigating the issue and is expected to take an official position on the disputed land as early as November, according to Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN) Deputy Alvaro Gonzalez.

At the request of PLN Deputy Jose Miguel Corrales, the Legislative Assembly last month formed a special congressional commission to investigate allegations that several border markers were placed too far inside Costa Rican territory at the turn of the last century. Gonzalez, who was appointed secretary of the congressional commission, said the group of five lawmakers has started to discuss the issue and is conferring with outside experts.

Omar Jaen, a Latin American border expert consulted by the commission, claims the problem is rooted in a historically inaccurate interpretation of the border markers. According to Jaen, border surveyors in 1905 were forced to place the two-meter-tall stones several kilometers inside Costa Rican territory, south of Lake Nicaragua, because the swampland through which the border passes floods during the rainy season and would have submerged the markers.

As a result, surveyors who navigated the area by boat put the stones in the ground 5.7 km south of the real border as "provisional orientation markers," on the first piece of dry land they found. These markers, Jaen claims, were never intended to delineate the border, as specified by the 1858 Canas-Jerez Treaty, which clearly states that the border should parallel the southern coast of Lake Nicaragua at a distance of 3.2 km.

Over time, Jaen explains, the stones were mistaken by both governments as actual "border markers," and the line between the two countries was erroneously drawn on maps as two straight lines intersecting in a "V" at marker 13-A, 9 km south of Lake Nicaragua. "There are several forms of illiteracy. Some people never learn how to read, while others learn to read but don't understand the meaning of the words," Jaen said, referring to the century-old misinterpretation of the stones.

To make matters worse, Jaen said, the Costa Rican government in 1995 placed a series of smaller border stones between the original markers. Instead of following the 3.2-km parallel of the lake,

surveyors put the stones in straight lines connecting the 100-year-old "provisional markers," thereby reinforcing the historic error, he stressed. The problem became instantly obvious to the 2,500 residents of Mexico de Upala 5.6 km south of Nicaragua who woke up one day to find the misplaced border passing through their town.

The Costa Rica attorney general's office, thinking the agricultural hamlet was built illegally inside the 2-km border zone owned and protected by the state, this year issued the town demolition notices and ordered the people off the land. The town, however, resisted the order, insisting that the border through their town was incorrectly drawn and that they were well outside the area of state-owned land. Their appeal to the Canas-Jerez Treaty forced the government to suspend the demolition order, pending further study. The legislative commission was formed two weeks ago to investigate the problem and present its findings to Congress.

Gonzalez, a Northern Zone deputy who claims to be familiar with the century-old border problem, recognizes the error and thinks the situation can be resolved through dialogue with the Nicaraguan government. However, others including Corrales and Francisco Villalobos, attorney general for international affairs have told *The Tico Times* the dispute may have to be resolved by an arbitrator. Jaen, meanwhile, claims that the best solution for the disputed land which is inhabited by some 5,000 Costa Rican and Nicaraguan campesinos, as well as many ex-Sandinista and contra soldiers is for Costa Rica and Nicaragua to recognize the territory as the independent nation of Airrecu.

The idea of forming Airrecu (the Maleku Indian word for friendship) was born in 1995, but the fledgling country, which already boasts its own flag and national anthem, was never recognized by the UN or other countries. But now that more people understand the border is wrong, Jaen thinks Airrecu's time has finally come. "This land does not belong to Nicaragua, and Costa Rica lost its right to it by never claiming the territory as part of the country," he stressed.

Jaen, one of Airrecu's original founders and its honorary vice president, claims the marginalized former soldiers living on the land feel abandoned by both countries and are willing to resort to violence to draw attention to the fact that they have no access to health care or education. "These people have guns and training [in war]; this is a real threat," Jaen said this week. "This is a forgotten land of ex-soldiers, and [international organizations] like the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS) must recognize the injustice and prevent a war, rather than try to put out a fire later."

A spokesman for the Nicaraguan government, who wished to remain nameless, confirmed that ex-soldiers, some of whom recently attacked a local village, burned homes and killed several campesinos, overrun the land. Jaen insists the problem could be resolved by recognizing Airrecu as an independent country. "Airrecu is already an independent state without international recognition," he noted. "The people on this land live more independently than most countries that have recognition."

With its untouched natural beauty, home to abundant flora and fauna, Jaen claims an independent Airrecu could base a sustainable economy on tourism. "Who wouldn't want to visit a new and unknown country?" Jaen asked.

Airrecu President Augusto Rodriguez, who was also named a consultant to the congressional commission, argues that this is Costa Rica's last chance to reclaim its lost land. If the government does not recognize the border error and fix it now, the whole Canas-Jerez Treaty will become invalidated, he said, and the border will return to its colonial-era specifications. "There is no going back now," Rodriguez told *The Tico Times* this week. "The problem has gone unnoticed for 100 years, but now that the Costa Rica government has recognized it, something has to be done to fix it."

Before the Canas-Jerez Treaty, drawn up following Central America's military defeat of US filibuster William Walker, Costa Rica's territory extended north all the way to Lake Nicaragua and to an imaginary line drawn through the middle of the Rio San Juan. However, following the defeat of the US imperialists, the border was redrawn and Costa Rica lost land to Nicaragua. "We won the war, but still ended up losing land," Corrales noted. Rodriguez claims it would be to Nicaragua's benefit to recognize the mistake and give back to Costa Rica the disputed land south of Lake Nicaragua which is protected by the Nicaraguan government as Los Guatuzos nature reserve. Otherwise, he said, Nicaragua would have to face the possibility of losing its sovereignty over the Rio San Juan, as a result of the nullified Canas-Jerez Treaty.

Corrales, meanwhile, claims it is well-known in political circles that much of the borderland is owned by powerful Costa Rican and Nicaraguan political families, who have the land titled under different names. The territory is potentially valuable because of longstanding plans to build a canal through the area and because of reports that the land is rich in oil, as evident by the many natural-gas geysers in the area. But regardless of who has title to the land, inside sources assured *The Tico Times* that Airrecu is ready to reclaim it, if Costa Rica does not.

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