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Congress Seeks Investigation of Disappearance Of Island In Gulf Of Mexico More Than A Decade Ago

The mysterious disappearance of a small island off the coast of Yucatan more than a decade ago is being linked to a 2000 agreement negotiated between the US and Mexico that redefined the territorial limits in the Gulf of Mexico. The pact negotiated by former Presidents Ernesto Zedillo and Bill Clinton established boundaries in previously undefined areas in order to determine drilling rights for crude oil. Some Mexican legislators contend that the Mexican government ceded a large part of its territorial rights to the US during the negotiations. A key to determine Mexico's boundary was the tiny Isla Bermeja, which had been 160 km off the coast of Yucatan and Campeche states but was no longer visible when the negotiations were concluded in 2000. Island was key to territorial accord with US Six senators from the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) raised the question about Isla Bermeja on the floor of the Senate in early November, citing "plentiful suspicions" that the island may have been caused to vanish on purpose. The senators said the island disappeared "mysteriously" some time before the Zedillo and Clinton governments began negotiations on an agreement on the disputed area. Under the agreement, the US and Mexican governments divided a zone spanning 17,790 sq km in the Gulf of Mexico known as the Donut Hole (see SourceMex, 2000-06-07).

Negotiations on the Donut Hole were a follow-up to a 1978 treaty that established maritime limits between the two countries. There are some suggestions that the US and Mexican governments purposely waited 17 years between the signing of the original agreement on territorial limits in 1978 and the negotiations on the Donut Hole to allow Isla Bermeja to disappear. Isla Bermeja was considered a strategic point of reference to define Mexico's maritime territorial limits in the area but was apparently no longer visible at the time of the negotiation on the Donut Hole. The PAN senators contend that Zedillo knew about the disappearance of the island in 1997, a year before negotiations on the Donut Hole boundaries started. The senators argue that the physical absence of the tiny island caused Mexico to lose rights to a vast reserve of crude oil. "Because the island was no longer physically visible when the negotiation took place, Mexico lost rights to a maritime area that potentially holds about 22.5 billion barrels of oil," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy. Others say the lost territory also holds vast reserves of natural gas and other minerals. The PAN senators, led by Sen. Sebastian Calderon Centeno, who chairs the marine affairs committee (Comision de Marina), and Luis Alberto Coppola Joffroy, head of the tourism committee (Comision de Turismo), demanded that President Felipe Calderon conduct a thorough investigation of the situation and present a report to Congress by the beginning of December. Also in the group were PAN Sens. Humberto Andrade Quezada, Juan Bueno Torio, Felipe Gonzalez, and Jaime Rafael Diaz Ochoa. Among other things, the six senators questioned the disappearance of documents related to the negotiations on the 2000 agreement. "The minutes from Congress that include the debate on the treaty have disappeared, as have the names of the Mexican legislators who participated in the discussion," wrote columnist Francisco Alfaro Ruiz in the Tabasco Hoy daily newspaper, based in the city of Villahermosa. The senators acknowledged that the Congress failed to speak up about possible irregularities in the negotiations that led to the 2000 territorial agreement, which was approved by all parties in a near-unanimous vote.

The only voice of protest came from Sen. Jose Angel Conchello, who was chair of the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) in the upper house. In 1998, as the negotiations were just beginning, Conchello warned about a secret plan by the Zedillo government to cede exploration rights to US companies (see SourceMex, 1998-04-22). One of the US drilling companies that Conchello said would benefit was Reading and Bates Corp. Some political observers who agree with the call for the investigation say other questions also have not been answered. "Senator Conchello...died in a mysterious car accident in 1998 that was never investigated," said Alvaro Ruiz.

Congress seeks full investigation Three key members of the Chamber of Deputies joined their Senate colleagues in the call for the Calderon government to conduct a thorough investigation, including legislators from the PAN and from opposition parties. "We are not certain whether there was an island involved or whether the area comprised a series of caves," said PAN Deputy Jorge Nordhausen Gonzalez, secretary of the energy committee (Comision de Energeticos) in the lower house. "That's not important. What matters is that a portion of our territory was surrendered." "This is a matter that President Calderon must clarify, independent of any irregularities that occurred during Zedillo's PRI administration," said PRI Deputy Carlos Zatarain Gonzalez, a member of the national defense committee (Comision de Defensa Nacional) in the lower house. Deputy Jose Manuel del Rio, a member of the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) and chair of the marine affairs committee (Comision de Marina) in the Chamber of Deputies, also demanded an investigation. "An island cannot disappear overnight," said del Rio. "This sounds very strange." The question of Isla Bermeja comes at a time when Mexicans are preoccupied by another concern involving ownership of petroleum reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. During debate on reforms of the oil industry this year, questions arose about the "efecto popote" (drinking-straw effect), by which companies conducting deep-sea drilling operations on the US side of the Gulf of Mexico could potentially draw in supplies under Mexican territorial waters (see SourceMex, 2008-08-06). The request for an investigation is also coming from the academic community. "Everything appears to indicate that the Mexican government ceded the rights to an enormous reserve of oil riches to multinational corporations," said economist Fabio Barbosa Cano of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). Cano Barbosa said the investigation could offer valuable information that would help Mexico reclaim its rightful territory. "By locating the site of Isla Bermeja, we would be able to move the border of our territorial waters further north," said the UNAM economist. Just how did the island disappear? While none of the critics ventured to accuse the Zedillo government of directly causing Isla Bermeja to vanish, legislators implied that the administration might have had something to do with its disappearance. Media accounts did not quote officials from the Zedillo administration or any US sources.

Experts say, however, that the government lacked the physical means to cause the island to vanish completely, and only the top portion was "shaved off." Geologists Jaime Urrutia of UNAM and Saul Millan of the Instituto Politecnico Nacional (IPN) say it would take a hydrogen bomb to cause the disappearance of a landmass the size of Isla Bermeja. "This is a very costly process, and we assume that Mexico does not possess hydrogen bombs," said Urrutia. Millan said it is physically impossible to destroy an island, but it is possible to make it disappear from view. "They can hide it under water, but not make it disappear completely," the IPN geologist said, citing theories that the government somehow "shaved off" the top of the island. Some of those

theories hold that the remnants of the island are now about 40 m to 50 m below the ocean surface. "If there was any maneuver to shave off the top of the island, it had to have taken place with the knowledge of the highest authorities," said PRI Deputy Zatarain Gonzalez. There are those who do not subscribe to the conspiracy theory and argue that the surface areas of the island, which might have been the equivalent of a huge sand bar, disappeared because of erosion and other natural phenomena such as hurricanes. Regardless of how it happened, Calderon Centeno said a full investigation is warranted to "allay the suspicions of civil society" on the circumstances that caused Mexico to lose control of potential reserves of hydrocarbons.