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Central America: Living On The Guatemala-Belize Border
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Category/Department: Central America
Published: 2010-04-15

Each day, from 6:00 am onward, hundreds of Guatemalans cross the border with neighboring Belize and travel to their workplace. Those who find employment in Belize include electricians, carpenters, and housemaids, among others, who are willing to work for less than the Belizean minimum wage (BZ$3 per hour, US$1.55). It is also common for middle-class families from the department of Peten, Guatemala's northernmost department, which borders on the east with Belize, to send their children to Belizean schools to improve their proficiency in English, with average yearly tuition fees around BZ$500 (US$258). Nicolas Ruiz, mayor of Benque Viejo del Carmen, Belize, claims that more than 100 Guatemalan children are enrolled at the town's local school. Many Belizeans also cross the border to use Peten's regional hospital, in Melchor de Mencos, or do their weekly shopping there to take advantage of the favorable exchange rate.

As a result of this daily exchange between the two populations, it is rare to meet someone in Benque Viejo or Melchor de Mencos whose family does not have a mix of the two nationalities. The Belizean population includes Garífunas (a mix between indigenous Caribs and Afro-descendents), creoles (a mix between Afro-descendents and British settlers), and Latinos and indigenous of various origins, including Mayan Q'eqchi indigneous people from Peten, nonindigenous Guatemalans, and Salvadorans. Jose Chacon studies public administration at the University of Belize (UB). Both his parents are Salvadoran and emigrated to Belize when he was seven years old, escaping from the bloody civil war that tore their country asunder during the 1980s. He is married to a Guatemalan woman and his children have Belizean nationality. Chacon explains that, during the 1970s, there were tensions between Afro-descendents and Latinos. "They called us Spaniards," he says, "but today we all feel Belizean." Mayan political scientist Alvaro Pop says, "Borders begin to blur with the daily experiences of the two populations," and he adds that Guatemalan Q'eqchis and Garífunas often register with the local authorities in both countries to obtain double citizenship.

Tensions on the border

Despite a border dispute between the two countries that has been unresolved since the 1940s, Ruiz says that, generally speaking, Belizeans and Guatemalans have a good relationship, although there are always latent conflicts that explode when a cross-border incident occurs. Whereas Benque Viejo is a peaceful municipality with a low crime rate, drug-related violence is a growing problem in Melchor de Mencos and is starting to spill over into Belize. The most serious cross-border incident during his administration, says Ruiz, was when a thief from Melchor de Mencos swam across the Rio Mopan, which divides the two countries, burgled a local shop in Benque Viejo, and shot a Belizean citizen. He later drowned while trying to swim back to Guatemala. However, the most common disputes tend to be triggered by Guatemalan campesinos who collect xate – an ornamental plant that is exported to the US and Holland – and who wander into the Chiquibul nature reserve in Belize. While Belizean authorities accuse their Guatemalan counterparts of failing to safeguard the border, Guatemalan authorities have accused the Belizean police of human rights abuses against the "xateros" who are arrested and imprisoned in their territory. In an attempt to minimize cross-border
disputes, in 2000, Belize and Guatemala requested the Organization of American States (OAS) to open an office in the "adjacency zone" between the two countries.

Miguel Angel Trinidad, director of the OAS office of the general secretariat in the adjacency zone, explains that, as part of a series of "confidence-building measures" that seek to minimize conflict along the border, 306 Guatemalans living on the Belizean part of the adjacency zone have been voluntarily resettled by the OAS on Guatemalan territory. In June 2004, the Mayan Q'eqchi community of Barrio Juda was renamed Nueva Juda after it was moved to Melchor de Mencos on land donated by the municipality, and a year later a second community of 120 people was moved to the municipality of Poptun. The resettled communities receive a house with electricity, potable water, and communal spaces such as schools and recreation centers, but they can only obtain title deeds after the family's children have reached the age of 18 and the residents have lived there for a minimum of 10 years. This measure is taken to prevent the resettled communities from selling the properties and moving back to Belize. Only those who were living on the Belizean side before 2000 are eligible for resettlement.

Will there be a referendum?

As Guatemalan Deputy Mariano Rayo, a member of the congressional legal affairs committee (Comision de Legislacion y Puntos Constitucionales), explains, Guatemala's historical claim over Belize has changed through the years, and today Guatemala does not seek to annex Belize's entire territory but to fix the border between the two countries, in the area currently known as the adjacency zone, and gain access to the Caribbean. Rayo adds that, given the impossibility of settling the border dispute in an amicable way, the governments of Belize and Guatemala will need to hold a referendum in their respective countries so that the dispute can be taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague (NotiCen, 2009-01-05). "In 2009, the committee gave Congress the go-ahead to set a date for a referendum to be held but nothing has been decided so far. At the moment, the Belize issue is not a priority on the congressional agenda," says Rayo. The congressman believes that the most sensible decision would be to hold the referendum at the same time as the 2011 elections to minimize the expense, but this will not be an easy task as the referendum needs to be held simultaneously in both countries and both Guatemala and Belize must obtain a "yes" vote in their respective countries for the dispute to be taken to The Hague. Given that this is a politically complex moment for the Guatemalan government, which has been deprived of valuable resources as a result of the global financial crisis and the failure of Congress to approve an important fiscal-reform package, it is hardly surprising that the issue has remained on standby. Rayo explains that, if the dispute is taken to The Hague, the court could take up to two years to issue a decision and the process could be expensive as each country would have to pay its own legal expenses.

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