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Tensions between Guatemala and Belize Flare Up after Belizean Soldiers Gun Down a Guatemalan Farmer

by Louisa Reynolds

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Noemí Caal and her four children sleep on the floor of a tiny wooden shack with a palm roof in the village of Monte Los Olivos, in the municipality of Dolores, on the border between Guatemala's northern department of Petén and Belize. The remote village is next to a 2 km wide strip known as the adjacency zone (NotiCen, April 15, 2010), which is subject to a long-standing border dispute between Belize and Guatemala.

Caal is a Q'eqchi' Mayan. Like most inhabitants of Monte Los Olivos, she does not speak Spanish. The village is a five-hour bus ride from Dolores and six hours from the closest hospital.

Caal is five months pregnant, and her unborn child will never see its father, 29-year-old farmer Juan Choc Chub, who was gunned down by the Belize Defense Forces (BDF) on Jan. 28. His brother Daniel was severely wounded during the attack.

"The governments should find a way to determine who these lands belong to and reach an agreement. They have to bear in mind that this conflict is not my family's fault," said Caal.

Belizean Defense Minister Carlos Perdomo claims that Choc was well within Belizean territory and not even close to the adjacency zone.

Two similar incidents occurred in 2000 when Guatemalan farmer Samuel Ramírez was shot by the BDF. Eleven months later, Jesús Ramírez Icho and his sons, Virgilio and Jesús, suffered the same fate.

Impoverished Guatemalan farmers often stray into Belizean territory to cut xate leaves, an ornamental plant that they sell in local markets to eke out a miserable living, and by doing so they risk a deadly encounter with Belizean soldiers.

On the other hand, Guatemalan campesinos living in Dolores and other border areas claim that they have been beaten and threatened by Belizean soldiers who stray into Guatemala. They have also protested that cutting xate leaves can hardly be considered a crime as the leaves grow back abundantly without causing any environmental damage to the forest.

In 2011, 75 cases of alleged human Rights abuses by Belizean soldiers against Guatemalan farmers were reported to the Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos (PDH) in Poptún, Petén.

However, Belizean authorities have repeatedly complained that Guatemalan farmers stray into their territory and that eight families are living illegally in the Chiquibul Nature Reserve, in Belize, where they are clearing this protected forest to plant crops.

Presence of drug traffickers adds to problems

More recently, the allegations have become more sinister, as Belizean military officials claim that farmers are now planting marijuana, under the protection of or orders from heavily armed Zetas on the Guatemalan side of the border.
The Zetas—a deadly army created by the Gulf cartel in Mexico—evolved into a fully fledged cartel that has spilled southwards from Mexico into Guatemala and most of Central America in the past five years (NotiCen, May 13, 2010).

BDF soldiers claim they have found threatening messages like, "We are watching you," etched into the trees, with the letter "Z."

Petén is Guatemala’s largest department, and the presence of drug traffickers in border areas has been widely reported. In May 2011, 27 peasants were brutally decapitated by Zetas in a farm known as Los Cocos in the municipality of La Libertad. Their limbs were found strewn across the farm as a reprisal against local narco-rancher Otto Salguero (NotiCen, Oct. 6, 2011). This was one of the worst massacres that Guatemala has seen since the Peace Accords put an end to a bloody 36-year civil war in 1996.

Guatemala calls for investigation

Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina issued a strong statement condemning Choc’s killing and calling for a swift and thorough investigation to bring those responsible to justice. "The Belizeans claim that he was 1,600 meters away from the adjacency zone. He could have been as far as 3 kilometers away from the area, but human life must be respected, and they had no right to shoot a Guatemalan citizen," he said.

However, the president added that the incident would not damage bilateral relations between Guatemala and Belize and efforts to hold a simultaneous referendum in both countries (NotiCen, Jan. 15, 2009) to decide whether the border dispute should be taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague.

The high cost of holding a referendum has prevented Guatemala and Belize from moving forward on this issue. Guatemala has a historic claim over half of Belize’s territory, but it would be difficult for the ICJ to decide on the annulment of a sovereign state.

Two weeks later, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Harold Caballeros travelled to Belize to meet his counterpart Wilfred Elrington. Choc’s death inevitably dominated the meeting, even though it had been planned before the incident occurred.

Caballeros called for Belizean authorities to compensate Choc’s family. "We feel that, even if this matter happened on Belizean soil, the response was out of proportion. If these campesinos were caught with xate—which I understand is forbidden here—there is a due legal process for that but not exactly killing a person. This person died in the arms of his brother who was also injured. That is unacceptable."

Elrington replied that the Belize Police Force would investigate the matter under supervision from the Organization of American States (OAS). "The police will go out there and do their job. If we have reasonable grounds to believe that anyone in Belize is at fault, then of course legal action will be taken against them. If it is necessary, they will be arrested and charged and the matter will go to the courts," said Elrington.

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