3-15-2012

Year-long Border Dispute Brings Development to Historically Forgotten Costa Rican Region

George RodrÃguez

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

Recommended Citation

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.
Year-long Border Dispute Brings Development to Historically Forgotten Costa Rican Region

by George Rodríguez
Category/Department: Central America
Published: 2012-03-15

When conflict broke out almost 17 months ago between Costa Rica and Nicaragua on a spot in the eastern section of the land border shared by the two Central American neighbors, little did the historically forgotten Costa Rican communities along the 309 km boundary imagine development would start arriving as a result.

Both sides of the border—Costa Rica to the south of it, Nicaragua to the north—have some of the highest poverty levels in each nation, and, despite past administrations' promotion of development projects, development has not taken off to provide local communities with the means to overcome their dire situation.

In Costa Rica, basic public services such as electricity, drinking water, and roads have been a dream not turned into reality for border villages.

People going from one community to another have traditionally had to use the Río San Juan, which flows in Nicaragua territory next to the border and over which Costa Rica has navigation rights for commercial purposes, including tourism, according to a 2009 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

"El San Juan," as people on both sides refer to the river, covers some 120 km between the Nicaraguan towns of San Carlos, on the southeastern coast of Lake Cocibolca—better known as Lake Nicaragua—and San Juan de Nicaragua on the southern tip of that country’s Atlantic (Caribbean) Coast.

But the administration of Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla has said that, as a result of the present dispute, Nicaraguan authorities have made navigation difficult for Costa Ricans.

Chinchilla administration builds road along border

Last year, as a means of strengthening border security as well as sovereignty in the midst of the dispute, President Chinchilla’s administration decided to build a 160 km gravel road parallel to the boundary. With it, the administration envisioned a development as well as a defense project, so it threw in education, electricity, and drinking water for the communities.

The rural road stretches westward from Delta Costa Rica, linking it to Los Chiles—some 170 km northeast and 200 km northwest of San José, the capital—and connecting communities such as Trinidad and Fátima between both ends.

The government’s plan is to eventually build the road’s second segment—with approximately the same length as the Delta Costa Rica-Los Chiles segment—to the west of Los Chiles, reaching the border post of Peñas Blancas, some 311 km northwest of San José.

Delta Costa Rica, the starting point, has a Policía de Fronteras command post, which was improved and is now being equipped with a satellite telecommunications system, better vehicles—including
fast boats fitted with three outboard motors each, patrol cars, and motorcycles, security officials there told NotiCen.

It also has, as sleeping accommodations, two large containers confiscated in anti-drug-trafficking operations by the Policía de Control de Drogas (PCD), which were altered to fit their new function, they added. The containers, now equipped with bunks, were seized before being shipped with legitimate products—and cocaine stashed in them—from Costa Rica to Guatemala and Mexico, a PCD source who requested anonymity told NotiCen in Delta Costa Rica.

The community also has a new school, which, along with the command post, was inaugurated Feb. 17 by Chinchilla and other government officials, as well as a school in each of the nearby villages of Trinidad and Fátima.

The road is named after one of Costa Rican history’s icons and a major date: Ruta 1856 Juan Rafael Mora Porras.

The name refers to Central America’s war against mercenary forces headed by US filibuster William Walker, who had invaded the region in an effort to, among other aims, rule the area and restore slavery. In one of his incursions in the region, the southerner, a pro-slavery doctor and soldier, declared himself Nicaragua’s president for life.

The road's name also refers to Costa Rican President Mora Porras (1849-1859), who headed a local military force that took part in the successful regional resistance to Walker’s armed group. The Costa Rican detail defeated the invaders on April 11, 1856, in the southeastern Nicaraguan city of Rivas, some 36 km north of the border with Costa Rica, the stage of a key battle that led to Walker’s defeat.

From 1853 through 1860, Walker invaded Central America on three occasions and was eventually taken prisoner and executed by a firing squad on Sept. 12, 1860, in the Caribbean port city of Trujillo on Honduras’ northern coast, 440 km northeast of Tegucigalpa.

**Tensions continue between neighboring countries**

However fruitful its results regarding development for local communities within the framework of the two nation’s dispute, the road has also turned into a matter of further discord between the neighbors.

In the conflict that arose on Oct. 21, 2010, in Isla Portillos, Costa Rica accused Nicaragua of a military invasion and environmental damage in Costa Rican territory *(NotiCen, Dec. 16, 2010).* Isla Portillos is the 3 sq km northern sector of Isla Calero on the easternmost segment of the border, where the dispute broke out.

Costa Rica then accused Nicaragua of having militarily invaded Costa Rican territory and having caused environmental damage there, an allegation strongly denied by the Nicaraguan side. In January 2011, the Costa Rican government asked the ICJ to order precautionary measures against both issues *(NotiCen, April 7, 2011).*

After hearing both sides on Jan. 11-13, and while it studied each party’s claim that the territory in question was part of its own sovereignty and heard mutual accusations of sovereignty violation, on March 8, the ICJ ordered precautionary measures, contained in an 86-point, 23-page document.
The court told both countries to withdraw security forces—military in Nicaragua’s case and police in that of Costa Rica, since this country abolished its army more than six decades ago, to abstain from aggravating or extending the dispute, and to keep the court abreast on each one’s compliance with the measures imposed on the two.

The court also stated that, regardless of the point on withdrawal of security forces, Costa Rican civilians were to enter the disputed area "only in so far as it is necessary to avoid irreparable prejudice being caused to the part of the wetland where that territory is situated."

To do so, Costa Rica must consult with the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention—which protects wetlands worldwide, "give Nicaragua prior notice," and "use its best endeavors to find common solutions with Nicaragua in this respect," according the ICJ.

Costa Rica has more recently been pointing out that the conflict spot is constantly visited by members of the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) youth movement and claims that is a violation of the ICJ measures.

On Dec. 20, 2011, Costa Rica said Nicaraguan soldiers had again entered Costa Rican territory, and three days later it was informed Nicaragua was suing it in the Corte Centroamericana de Justicia (CCJ), claiming the work being done to construct Ruta 1856 was causing environmental damage.

Costa Rica reacted by stating it is not a member of the Managua-based regional tribunal and thus does not recognize the court’s legitimacy—the same stand it has on the Guatemala-headquartered Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN).

Countries making up the CCJ—with two magistrates each—are El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, while Guatemala, also a member, has not appointed its judges.

Costa Rican Foreign Affairs Minister Enrique Castillo warned the bilateral dispute should not be regionalized, since that could jeopardize Central America’s integration, and he undertook a tour of the region to explain the country’s position and to warn about consequences of a regionalizing ruling by the CCJ on the Nicaraguan allegation. He later toured Europe on a similar mission.

Meanwhile, Nicaragua took the case to the ICJ as well.