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Guatemala-Belize Border Tensions Flare After Shooting

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A shooting incident on April 20 in which a Guatemalan teenager died has re-ignited a long-standing border dispute between Guatemala and Belize. Twenty-four hours after 13-year-old Julio René Alvarado Ruano was killed, Guatemala deployed 3,000 troops to the border with Belize, leading to an escalation in tensions between the two countries.

The Guatemalan government says Alvarado Ruano, his father, and his 11-year-old brother were attacked as they planted crops in the border community of San José Las Flores, on the border between the department of Petén and Belize.

The Belizean authorities, on the other hand, say its security forces were investigating illegal land clearing in the Cebada area of the Chiquibul National Park in western Belize when they detained a Guatemalan man suspected of illicit activities. An official statement said the patrol came under fire around nightfall and shot back in self-defense. Before leaving the area, just inside Belizean territory, the soldiers allegedly found the teenager’s body, which was taken to Belize City for an autopsy.

The Belizean government also stressed that its soldiers were accompanied by members of a Belizean conservation group when the incident occurred.

However, the autopsy determined Alvarado had been shot eight times, including four times in the back, by a high-power military-grade rifle. “It is regrettable that the defense forces of Belize are the only army in the Latin America and Caribbean region that fires on unarmed civilians from another country,” reads a statement issued by the Guatemalan Foreign Ministry after the results of the autopsy were made available.

These types of incidents have become commonplace in recent years as Guatemalan peasants often stray across the border into Belizean territory in search of xate leaves, an ornamental plant sold in local markets. Nine Guatemalans have been killed by Belizean forces since 1999. (NotiCen, March 9, 2000, June 2, 2005, March 15, 2012, and May 3, 2012).

‘Strict exercise of protection’

Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales described the shooting as “a cowardly and excessive attack” and called for those responsible to be brought to justice. “We have decided that from this moment on, we will carry out a strict exercise of protection” of the border area, Morales added.

Belizean Prime Minister Dean Barrow referred to President Morales’ statements as “inflammatory” and added that Belize “has a long history and tradition as a peace-loving country, respectful of international law [and] human rights.”

Morales became unpopular in Belize during the election campaign last October when he said textbooks should show Belize as part of Guatemalan territory and vowed to “recuperate” the territory of Belize. When Morales traveled to Belize last November after winning the elections, he was met by protesters.
On April 21, local and international media reported that 3,000 Guatemalan troops had been deployed to the border area, a move that Guatemalan Defense Minister Williams Mansilla, described as “a preventive measure” and not “a declaration of war.”

The following day, Morales met with Barrow in New York, where both leaders had traveled to sign the UN Convention on Climate Change. Morales stressed the need to investigate the shooting but agreed to pull Guatemalan troops away from the border in an effort to defuse tensions.

Later, Barrow told the Belizean news site 7newsbelize.com that Morales had committed to de-escalation.

“President Morales said that the killing of Guatemalans by the Belize Defense Forces (BDF) could not continue, and that Guatemala must protect its citizens and would, among other things, seek redress for the death of the minor from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC),” he said. “But he agreed with me that while the OAS [Organization of American States] inquiry and Guatemala’s petition to the Human Rights Commission were proceeding, it was absolutely necessary to dial down the tension between our two countries.”

In a press conference, Mansilla also said that media reports that 3,000 troops had been deployed to the border area had exaggerated and misinterpreted the facts.

“What was done was reinforce the adjacency zone,” Mansilla said. “So if we had 500, right now we have about 1,000 men. That act of mobilization of 3,000 men from here, the capital, to the city is a lie—that is false. What is being done is that the mechanism in place in Petén reinforced the detachments in the adjacency zone.”

**OAS calls for referendum**

The OAS) said it would investigate the 13-year-old’s death at the request of both authorities and urged the Guatemalan and Belizean governments to hold referendums to decide whether the long-standing dispute between the two countries should be taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.

An agreement between the two countries stipulates that the referendums must be held simultaneously. Guatemala was initially expected to hold its vote on the issue during its second round of presidential elections in October 2015. However, four months before the agreement was signed, Belize amended the law on referendums, requiring a 60% voter turnout on the day of the vote for it to be legally binding. The Guatemalan authorities argued that with voter turnout around 35% in recent years, Guatemala risked spending around US$90 million on the referendum for nothing. They requested the Belizean authorities to change the law and lower the required threshold. Since the Belizean authorities have yet to comply with this request, the referendums remain on hold in both countries.

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