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LADB Staff

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Bolivia Presses Chile for Pacific Access

by LADB Staff

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Bolivia has been urging the Chilean government to meet a 125-year-old demand for access to the Pacific Ocean. The landlocked nation has been calling for a sovereign strip of coastline with increasing stridency while Chilean officials have said they will not work with these demands until diplomatic relations are re-established between the two countries. The renewed dispute has put an end to trade negotiations between Bolivia and Chile and has garnered international attention.

Bolivia lost its access to the ocean during the War of the Pacific in 1879-1883 when Chile annexed the coast running from Arica to Antofagasta. Peru also lost a large portion of territory and some coastline to Chile in the same war (see NotiSur, 1992-02-12). Bolivia and Chile have not had diplomatic relations since 1978 when Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer (1971-1978, 1997-2001) broke off relations over the issue, just three years after he had re-established relations with Chile's de facto President Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

At the Special Summit of the Americas, held Jan. 12-13 in Monterrey, Mexico, the issue sparked a verbal confrontation between Bolivian President Carlos Mesa and Chile's President Ricardo Lagos. At the plenary session of the summit, Mesa sought to open the issue of recovery of coastal territory for consideration by international organizations, but Lagos protested that there was no "pending" matter to resolve. The public disagreement set back the possibility for dialogue, as later interviews with the presidents showed their positions further apart than ever.

"Peace, but no friendship"

Newly confirmed Bolivian President Mesa, a historian and journalist, has said that "there is peace, but no friendship" between Chile and Bolivia regarding the issue of maritime access. In 1904, the two countries signed the Tratado de Paz y Amistad, making concrete Bolivia's loss of coastline. Today Mesa's government seeks to modify those terms, arguing that it is one of the major obstacles to Bolivia's economic development.

Chilean officials respond that they have already granted sea access to Bolivia by guaranteeing tariff-free use of the port cities of Arica and Antofagasta, where Bolivia operates its own customs services and warehouses.

At the Summit of the Americas, President Lagos said he was willing to dialogue with Bolivia, but only once they had reinstated diplomatic contacts. He called the issue "bilateral" and rejected the possible intervention or mediation from international groups like the Organization of American States (OAS). This confrontation pits Bolivia, one of Latin America's poorest, least developed and least politically stable countries, against Chile, a market-oriented economy with a relatively high per capita GDP.

Mesa has said that "Bolivia's request has to do with the stability of the region...[it has] become a potential element of regional destabilization because it's put Bolivian democracy in play, it's generated a situation of terrible uncertainty and of great danger for global stability. Neighboring countries and regional countries have become worried because the Bolivian example could extend to other nations."

In October, Mesa, then vice president, ascended to the presidency after bloody protests led President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) to resign (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24). But Chile's Foreign Minister Soledad Alvear rejected Mesa's warnings, arguing that "the themes relative to each nation and their institutional stability are surely subject to internal definition."

Bolivian demands receive international attention, support

Bolivian leaders have thanked countries like Uruguay, Brazil, Cuba, Argentina, and Venezuela for their backing in the conflict. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez provoked Chile's ire when he said, "I dream of bathing at a Bolivian beach." Chile retaliated by recalling its ambassador from Caracas.

Former US President Jimmy Carter has also met with leaders in Bolivia and, along with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, has offered to help mediate between the two countries. While articles in *The Washington Post* and *The Economist* minimized Bolivia's demands for maritime access as a ploy for media attention at the summit or belittled it as an "old grievance," the renewed disagreement has important roots in the revolt that recently overturned Bolivia's government.

The indigenous-led revolt has been called the "gas war" and was ignited principally by Sanchez de Lozada's plans to export natural gas. The plans to sell natural gas to the US and Mexico via a pipeline through Chile led to nation-paralyzing protests in October and had much to do with Bolivian animosity toward Chile (see NotiSur, 2003-09-26), among other factors. Free-trade agreement derailed The dispute regarding coastal access scuttled negotiations toward a free-trade agreement between the two nations.

Shortly after the new year, the Bolivian government gave up hope of further treaty discussions and said it hoped instead to perfect the Economic Complementarity Agreement currently in effect between the two countries.

The *Economist* speculated that a Chilean concession of coast could economically benefit both countries, allowing Bolivia to export its gas and Chile to develop its northern copper mines and a petrochemical industry. Indigenous Bolivian leader Evo Morales canceled a scheduled trip to Chile because of the hostile climate between the two countries. The head of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Morales came in a close second in the 2002 presidential elections and was an important opposition voice during the gas war. The prominent leader urged "more attitude" and "greater aggressiveness" from President Mesa in regaining coastal sovereignty.

Morales has said that the Bolivian president should take the campaign for coastal access to the Chilean interior. "I dare say that, if there were a referendum in Chile with the question, 'Should

we give sea access to Bolivia?' we could win, because the Chilean people know of our need," said Morales.

A survey by the market research firm Ipsos Search Marketing found that 91% of Chileans back Lagos' responses to Mesa and that 81.3% oppose giving sea access to Bolivia. Peru tries to remain outside of the conflict Chilean officials have sought to bring Peru into the discussion, suggesting that it could provide coastal lands to Bolivia just as easily. But Peruvian ministers have called the dispute a "bilateral matter."

"If a solution is to be found," said Peru's Ambassador to France Javier Perez de Cuellar, "that solution must be found by Chile." The former foreign minister of Peru, Diego Garcia Sayan, has publicly criticized Lagos' unwillingness to provide a corridor to the Pacific. Peru has offered its backing to the government of Bolivia in its call for Chilean lands but has also maintained a cautious stance.

President Alejandro Toledo is maintaining a "wait-and-see" posture toward Bolivian claims, says his Foreign Relations Minister Manuel Rodriguez. Authorities in Lima "hope for an evolution of events," says Rodriguez.

On the Internet in Chile, one email tried to make light of the situation, proposing that the only way for Bolivia to get a piece of Pacific coast was for the country to disappear and all the territory be annexed by Chile. Another online comedian, Fernando Alarcon, proposed that "leaders who are joining Bolivia in its petition help out and kill two birds with one stone: Cuba can ask the US for Guantanamo and transfer Bolivia there. That way the Bolivian beach, which President Chavez is so longing, for will be nearby."

Naturally, the Bolivian consul, Fernando Messmer, was unamused. "This doesn't merit great comment," he said, "but it's another demonstration of the many offensive things that are coming out of Chile about our country."

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