7-29-2005

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by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Chile Bolivia
Published: 2005-07-29

Bolivian authorities responded favorably to Chilean plans to commence demining operations along the border between the two countries in July. Top officials say the move is a tangible step toward greater integration and cooperation between the two nations, which remain divided regarding Bolivia's demand for access to the Pacific Ocean. It may be one of the first steps toward resolving the conflict that has prevented the two countries from developing high-level political and commercial relations.

Chilean military to remove more than 4,000 mines

The demining of the Bolivia-Chile border began on July 21 with the cleanup of two minefields and 3,300 anti-personnel mines, according to Chile's Defense Ministry. Armed forces demining units will also remove and destroy 1,100 anti-tank mines, which supposedly cannot be detonated by people walking over them and are not included in the 1997 Ottawa Convention against mines, which Chile signed in 2001.

Previously, the Chilean government had ordered the partial excavation of a minefield in Tambo Quemado, where much of the work is also happening today. The government destroyed 820 mines in that clearing project in December 1999.

Officials say that all minefields along the border have been fenced in and labeled with signs in accordance with international standards. The removal effort will also include giving assistance to victims of mine accidents and providing accident-prevention education for residents in the area.

The Chilean government hopes that the current round of mine removal will be concluded in 2006, after eight months of work. "Our challenge," said Defense Minister Jaime Ravinet in an interview, "is to finish between now and 2012 with the 118,377 anti-personnel mines that we have planted in 174 minefields in different parts of the borders in the north and south of our territory."

Of those, 22,988 anti-personnel mines are planted in 42 different fields along Chile's border with Bolivia. Ravinet said that, in the 30 years the minefields have been along Chile's borders, the government has recorded 49 mine accidents, leaving a total of 123 victims. Of those victims, 63 suffered injuries from anti-personnel mines, 57 from anti-tank mines, and 3 from unexploded munitions abandoned in the field.

Twenty-three victims died and 100 were wounded and had to undergo amputations. Victims included both civilians and soldiers. Seventy-five Chilean soldiers had mine accidents, and, among civilians, 27 Chileans, 15 Peruvians, and 6 Bolivians were victims of mine incidents. Ravinet pointed out, however, that much information about victims was incomplete or needed better verification. Losses to cattle, which are not well quantified, are said to have well exceeded human victims.
Five years ago in Charana, Bolivia, a group of campesinos unearthed mines planted in 1975 after the failed peace attempt known as the "embrace of Charana" between dictators Hugo Banzer (1971-1978, 1997-2001) and Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). The campesinos, tired of the loss of cows, sheep, and llamas caused by the mines, delivered them to a local firefighters' station. "A step toward greater integration"

Chilean Defense Minister Ravinet said the demining operation would "contribute decisively to generate better conditions for integration, as much at the physical level as politically and in relations between the two peoples." Ravinet said the demining would improve the quality of life for residents in border areas and would remove an obstacle to exchanges between the countries. The government intends to build a binational Integrated Customs Complex to facilitate transit along the common border.

Officials hope that increased trade and transit will help fortify relations between the two countries. In the first five months of 2005, Bolivia exported US$16 million in products to Chile and imported US $53 million, leaving Bolivia with a bilateral trade deficit of US$37 million.

Chile, in the midst of an energy crisis (see NotiSur, 2004-04-30, 2005-07-01), could make good use of Bolivia's large natural-gas reserves, but historical animosities have made any such exports impossible. Chile is entirely dependent on imports for its natural-gas supply.

In mid-August the two governments will meet to strengthen the Acuerdo de Complementacion Economica (ACE-22), which both countries signed in 1993. Bolivia's goal at those meetings will be to reverse its unfavorable trade relations with its Andean neighbor.

Bolivia lost access to the Pacific Ocean during the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), which has been an enduring source of tension between the two countries (see NotiSur, 1992-02-12, 2004-01-23). Since 1962, the two countries have not had diplomatic relations at an ambassadorial level, except for a brief period between 1975-1978.

Positive advances in Chile-Bolivia relations

The Bolivian press, in papers like El Diario, has emphasized Chilean rhetorical concessions about maritime access, featuring statements such as those by President Ricardo Lagos, who acknowledged that Chile had taken more than half of Bolivia's historical landmass in the War of the Pacific.

In April, the government of then President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005) applauded Lagos' acknowledgment that Chile had taken Bolivian land. Since Mesa's fall, the Bolivian Foreign Relations Ministry has said that there have been "positive advances," in the words of Vice Minister Jorge Gumucio speaking after a meeting with Chile's Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker.

Relations "have newly begun to move," said Gumucio in July, saying that there had not been advances under (former foreign minister) Soledad Alvear. New meetings are set to strengthen the
ACE-22 and to foment the use of the northern Chilean port city of Iquique for Bolivia's international trade.

**But what are the near-term prospects for bilateral rapprochement between Bolivia and Chile?**

Increasingly, Lagos is becoming a lame duck president, with elections to choose his successor scheduled for December. A member of his Concertacion government, former defense minister Michelle Bachelet, is the heavy favorite to win, with polls showing her likely to capture nearly half the votes, while the two other top candidates, Joaquin Lavin of the Union Democarta Independiente (UDI) and Sebastian Pinera of Renovacion Nacional (RN), have split the right and are very unlikely to muster enough popular support to derail the Bachelet campaign. This means a government similar to Lagos', probably with many of the same people, will be installed in Santiago in 2006.

Bachelet headed both the Defense and Health Ministries during the Lagos administration. Bolivian President Eduardo Rodriguez, interim president following the failed government of Carlos Mesa until new presidential elections in December, will only hold office until the beginning of 2006 and will not likely have enough power to concretize a gas or maritime deal between Chile and Bolivia, given that both are such explosive issues.

The effort by President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) to pipe gas through Chile for export was one of the key issues that led to bloody street battles that brought down his government (see NotiSur, 2003-09-26 2003-10-24). If, however, the two new governments of Bolivia and Chile are able to keep up their conciliatory efforts, a maritime access deal could lead to a new era in bilateral relations.

Since April, Bolivian Foreign Ministry officials have been talking about the possibility of a "gas for sea" deal with Chile. Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, who has repeatedly cut off natural-gas deliveries to Chile because of the power crisis within his own borders, has called for a resolution to the tensions between the two nations.

Chile has made a deal to receive a portion of the gas Peru exports from its Camisea project, but some analysts doubt that there is enough gas there for Peru to meet all its commitments (see NotiSur, 2005-07-01), so Chile's need for Bolivian gas will likely be a continuing factor in bilateral relations.

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