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Andrés Gaudán

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Bilateral Conflicts in Latin America Persist Despite Integration Efforts

by Andrés Gaudín
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Despite the proliferation of regional and global organizations designed to promote integration and good relations between countries, bilateral conflicts—territorial, political, economic, and environmental—persist in Latin America (NotiSur, March 8, 2013). In recent weeks, differences have re-emerged between Argentina and Uruguay and between Colombia and Nicaragua, reviving crises supposedly already resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.

Neither regional organizations nor the ICJ have proved efficient in resolving differences and achieving ongoing peaceful coexistence.

Chile maintains old disputes with Bolivia and Peru, challenging opinions issued in The Hague (NotiSur Jan 23, 2004, June 29, 2007, and April 8, 2011). Though it has not yet taken action, Argentina has announced that it will appeal an ICJ decision to force neighboring Uruguay to control alleged pollution from a pulp mill installed on the east bank of the Río Uruguay (NotiSur, Aug. 13, 2010). Colombia and Nicaragua, vying for control of a vast area of the Caribbean, have also taken their dispute to The Hague. However, the Colombian government does not recognize the ICJ decision (NotiCen, Sept. 20, 2007, Dec. 13, 2012, and Oct. 10, 2013).

Interestingly, while people in all countries maintain disputes are resolved with increased cooperation, all these conflicts have re-emerged at a time of greater regional integration.

Bolivia, Peru dispute Chilean border

Bolivia revived a 150-year-old dispute with Chile in late September in verbal debate during the annual session of the UN General Assembly. The dispute dates back to the 1879-1883 War of the Pacific when Chile extended its border northward by annexing territory from Bolivia and Peru. Bolivia lost its Pacific coast and became a landlocked country without a port for trade. For more than a century, Bolivia has sought access to the coast from Chile. Faced with persistent refusal, it broke diplomatic relations with Chile in 1978 and the dispute has remained open in The Hague. (NotiSur June 10, 1992, Jan. 23, 2004, Nov. 18, 2005, and April 8, 2011)

While in New York—before and after delivering a speech to the world forum—Bolivian President Evo Morales challenged his Chilean counterpart President Sebastián Piñera for what he labeled "contradictions" in a recent speech. "On the one hand, Piñera tells us that treaties [referring to a disputed agreement signed by the parties in 1904] are untouchable, and, on the other hand, he says they can be improved," Morales said.

Chile’s Foreign Minister Alfredo Moreno responded, saying, "There is nothing to discuss here nor any dispute to reconcile in The Hague because the borders between our countries have been perfectly delimited for more than a century by the 1904 treaty. Comments by Bolivia’s president are unsuitable; sovereignty is not negotiable."
The dialogue between Piñera and Peruvian President Ollanta Humala at the UN was less tense. The two heads of state met to talk about a claim Peru put before the ICJ in 2008, asking for a maritime border that would give it a vast area rich in fishery resources (NotiSur Nov. 18, 2005, and Feb. 8, 2008). Chilean officials consider the claim, which also dates from the end of the War of the Pacific, resolved with the signing of binational fisheries agreements in 1952 and 1954.

The ICJ postponed ruling on the case until September of this year and then again to January 2014. It pushed the date back first because of a saturated agenda and then because the court considered it inappropriate to make a ruling that could impact the Chilean electoral process due to culminate with presidential elections in November.

At the end of their meeting in New York, Piñera said in front of Humala that "the two countries respect international laws and peaceful coexistence between people, for which we have agreed to respect, obey, and comply with the decision in The Hague, where the conflict will be resolved."

Colombia and Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Ecuador

Colombia has other levels of conflict completely outside the international arena. It is engaged in bilateral discussions with Venezuela on sovereignty in the Golfo de Coquivacoa, a region with fisheries and oil reserves. The situation has been under consideration since 1964. The Comisión Negociadora de Áreas Marinas y Submarinas was established in 1990 to resolve the conflict, but has not met since 2009.

A distinct situation exists between Colombia and Nicaragua regarding the Caribbean archipelago of San Andrés, some 75,000 sq km with tourism and fisheries importance (NotiSur, July 28, 1992, and Sept. 22, 1995). Last year the ICJ issued a final ruling awarding Nicaragua part of the area in question for economic exploitation.

However, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos stated Sept. 9 that the court’s ruling "is not applicable" and added in a threatening manner, "What I watched over as a sailor and defended as defense minister, I will protect to the end as president." Days later during the UN General Assembly, Santos handed UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon a letter of protest denouncing Nicaragua’s "expansionism."

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, responding in the same arena, maintained the validity of the ICJ ruling (NotiCen, Sept. 12, 2013) and announced that his government has already authorized US, Canadian, and Spanish firms "to explore the maritime region recovered from Colombian control."

Venezuela, which does not recognize the jurisdiction of international justice agencies such as the ICJ, also claims ownership of a 159,000 sq km region of Guyana Essequibo. It has claimed the region since 1840 and first negotiated with Great Britain, the colonial power that held the area until May 1966 when the independent Republic of Guyana was created.

Despite the region’s subterranean gold and diamond mineral resources and large rice and sugar plantations, tensions have not become violent. The resolution of this conflict, now in the hands of the UN secretary-general, has been a dead issue with no action since Ban Ki-moon was named to the position in 2007.

Ecuador, which had its last war to dispute its border with Peru in 1995, (NotiSur Feb. 10, 1995, and Nov. 11, 2011) has chosen the path of negotiations. Last September, while other countries of the
region engaged in verbal pyrotechnics, Ecuador negotiated the solution of a border dispute with Colombia (NotiSur, Oct. 11, 2013). That experience in the last decade of the 20th century sealed a border demarcation in 1998 (NotiSur, Oct. 30, 1998, and May 14, 1999). The accord, signed in the Cordillera del Cóndor, an Andean mountain range, was backed by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US.

Some analysts say that losing its dispute against Nicaragua in The Hague may have persuaded Colombia to negotiate with Ecuador. However, Ecuador had dropped its suit presented before the ICJ. On Sept. 17, the ICJ confirmed that President Rafael Correa’s government had withdrawn its suit against Colombia for excessive spraying of toxic herbicides on crops in borderlands. The Spanish news Agency EFE reported that official Ecuadoran sources said Colombia settled by paying US$15 million to those affected by the spraying of glyphosate, a powerful weed killer produced by the multinational firm Monsanto for genetically modified crops.

**Ecuador’s president warns against disintegration**

Meanwhile, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa warned that groups interested in stoking border disputes can spark sufficient conflict between countries to keep them from sitting down at the same table to discuss social and economic issue that should be priorities. In an interview on Bolivian state television Oct. 3, Correa said it is not just an issue of territory but a question of politics that affects the lives of millions of people. In the end, he said, these conflicts send a warning to all countries in the region and a true challenge to the policy of Latin American integration.

Correa warned that Latin America is experiencing a major conservative counteroffensive and a process of the revival of the right at the same time that the impetus toward regional integration has slowed. "We must take care when analyzing Latin America, because, even though leftist governments were installed when we had a united front against the clumsy and crude behavior of [former US President] George W. Bush, today the right is rebuilding itself throughout the continent. We must recognize reality," he said, "and retake our historical course with greater energy and intelligence. We must take care because this process can be slowed by backward forces."

Correa paused briefly and cited the Alianza del Pacífico formed by Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Mexico (NotiSur, April 5, 2013). "This alliance," he said, "does not conceive of integration as an instrument to create a great society of regional citizens but to create a great market, to create consumers, and that won’t help build an environment of peace and dialogue."

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