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Bolivia Pushes Claim to Recover Pacific Coast

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Although Bolivian President Evo Morales is not yet campaigning for a second re-election, all his recent official acts have the effect of proselytizing efforts to sweep up votes in the Oct. 5 elections (NotiSur, Jan. 31, 2014, and March 7, 2014). His most recent act had such importance that even the right-wing opposition was obliged to participate and applaud.

On April 15, accompanied by a delegation of ministers and parliamentary leaders of diverse political sectors, Morales traveled to The Hague, Netherlands, to present the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with a voluminous historic and judicial account of landlocked Bolivia’s effort to recover its coast. The document asks the ICJ to force neighboring Chile to sit down at the negotiating table to discuss Bolivia’s demand for a sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean (NotiSur, April 8, 2011, and Nov. 1, 2013).

Morales became the first head of state in the world to appear in person before the ICJ to make a sovereign claim.

Healthier country asserts self on world stage

In December, the Bolivian president had made a strong impact by going to China to see the launching of his country’s first telecommunication satellite. He again made front-page news for his poor, forgotten, indigenous nation of the South American highlands in January when he accepted the presidency of the Group of 77 (G-77) developing countries. He said he made the commitment with the idea of "decolonizing the economy, culture, and world and exchanging hunger and poverty for science and technology."

On March 25, the Uruguayan Senate had opened the door for Bolivia to become the sixth member of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) [NotiSur, Dec. 6, 2013, and Sept. 13, 2013]. Once Brazilian and Paraguayan parliaments accept Bolivia’s integration into the trade group, Morales’ focused diplomacy aimed at giving his country a place on the world stage will be complete. In June, developing countries (G-77+China) will hold a summit in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, a rich part of eastern Bolivia that until recently was a bastion of ultraright political factions. On March 9, the Spanish online magazine Sin Permiso reported that the right recently lost its hold on the area after large agricultural and industrial entrepreneurs warned that it would be beneficial "to drop extreme radical positions and take advantage of the country’s economic boom by doing less politicking and more business."

Historical precedents explained

A 200-page "Bolivian memoir" that Morales presented to the ICJ tells how Chilean troops invaded Bolivia 135 years ago and turned it into a landlocked nation by taking away its connection to the Pacific Ocean. Ever since, Chile has continually ignored Bolivia’s request for dialogue. The document includes two judicial and one historical tomes, plus a series of appendices.

"For Bolivians, the sea is undeniably theirs, and the country will never be at peace until this issue is resolved," Morales told foreign media in The Hague.
Dozens of foreign journalists who flocked to interview the Bolivian president were attracted more by his being indigenous and because a head of state had never before appeared before the ICJ than by their interest in knowing why the South American country has suffered the injustice of being landlocked.

The document Morales presented included legal, moral, and historical arguments for the suit that had been anticipated since April 2012. It gives Bolivia’s explanation of its "legitimate and original right" to recover its coastal sovereignty and calls for the ICJ to rule that Chile has an "obligation to negotiate a prompt and effective agreement in good faith."

Bolivia’s plea gives Chile two options: ask the ICJ to declare itself incompetent in the matter within a maximum of 90 days, or to make a counter presentation by Feb. 18, 2015.

In the second half of the 19th century, the discovery of major nitrate deposits in the Atacama Desert—in what is now northern Chile—had ignited the voracity of British companies and their local partners to obtain the mineral from the area. On Feb. 14, 1879, without prior declaration of hostilities against an unsuspecting nation, the Chilean Navy occupied the Bolivian port of Antofagasta to launch the War of the Pacific, which could more correctly be called the Guano and Nitrate War (1879-1883).

After 43 months of bloody battle, Chile snatched 120,000 sq km of Bolivian territory that included 400 km of its coastline. Bolivia lost the entire Litoral department and all its ports. It became landlocked in the middle of South America and very far from any coast, making it practically impossible to export production. In 1904, weakened and under strong military pressure, the country was forced to sign a Treaty of Peace and Friendship. That treaty serves as Chile’s main argument to discredit Bolivia’s territorial claims.

Throughout the 20th century and first decade of the current one, three attempts at Bolivian-Chilean conciliation have been made.

The first, which Chile’s democratically elected President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) initiated shortly after his inauguration, was aborted with the bloody coup that deposed him on Sept. 11, 1973. The second, proposed by Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), did not work out either, because of a clause that required a consultation with Peru, which had allied itself with Bolivia during the war. The third was proposed by Chilean President Michele Bachelet during her first administration (2006-2010) and included a 13-point agenda allowing for coastal access. That initiative, however, fell apart during the administration of conservative President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014).

The ball is now in the Chilean court, and Bachelet, re-elected last year, now must choose between business interests and setting her sights on the kind of regional integration that would honor Allende, the leader who shocked the Americas in 1971 when he said, "The time to repair a great injustice to Bolivia has come: Chile has a century-old debt to Bolivia, and we are prepared to undertake a historic solution."

Thousands of Bolivians witnessed Morales’ presentation of the Bolivian documents to the ICJ live on a giant screen set up in front of government offices in La Paz. The crowd included members of the ruling party and opposition groups, uniting under the same banner for the first time in many
decades. Together, they cheered the president as they had never done before and as no one ever imagined they would do.

In The Hague, excited and with tears in her eyes, right-wing Sen. Centa Rek embraced Morales and expressed her belief that, "with today’s action, we are going to settle the dispute. ... We hope our government has put us closer to reaching a solution." She added that opinion in Bolivia is united. Rek’s party, Convergencia Nacional (CN), had no option but to back her up.

All print and broadcast media led with the same news. Focusing on the national unity generated by the demand for coastal territory, Vice President Álvaro García Linera said, "Seldom have we seen Bolivians as united as we do now." Speaking in the southern city of Tarija where he was participating in a regional event, he added, "I’m sure that the whole world will appreciate this and give the Bolivians justice."

No one said so because everyone knew Linera's comments were made without petty political motives, but it was clear that April 15 set the stage for the outcome of the Oct. 5 election.

For the above as well as economic reasons, Morales appears invincible—at least for the time being. Only this can explain that, after eight years in office, the indigenous leader who until two years ago had been discriminated against and had suffered the worst examples of racism is now a symbol of stability in what has long been a very unstable country (NotiSur, Jan. 31, 2014). In the 112 years since 1902, presidential terms—shortened 56 times by coups d'état—have averaged exactly two years.

The Sin Permiso report cited examples of newfound respect for Morales such as a CNN business program awarding Bolivia a gold medal for its economic development and the highest of praise coming from the IMF. Sin Permiso also quoted The New York Times Feb. 16 story titled "Turnabout in Bolivia as Economy Rises From Instability" that acknowledged the IMF and World Bank's praise for Morales as being prudent despite his policy of expropriation (NotiSur, April 19, 2013). It quoted the NYT as saying, "According to the monetary fund, Bolivia has the highest ratio in the world of international reserves to the size of its economy, having recently surpassed China in that regard." The newspaper said that Bolivia's reserves of "about US$14 billion [are] equal to more than half its gross domestic product."

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