

10-17-1996

Border Disputes Latent Danger for Central American Integration Initiatives

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Border Disputes Latent Danger for Central American Integration Initiatives." (1996).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8173>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Border Disputes Latent Danger for Central American Integration Initiatives

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Region

Published: 1996-10-17

Since August, territorial disputes have flared up among Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua regarding land and maritime claims by all three countries. The conflicts especially in the case of El Salvador and Honduras constitute a latent danger for regional integration efforts, since the threat of military skirmishes remains constant. Since late 1995, tensions between Honduras and its two southern neighbors regarding territorial disputes have remained fairly constant, at times leading to harsh diplomatic exchanges among the foreign ministries of those countries. In December 1995, for example, the Nicaraguan Coast Guard confiscated five Honduran fishing boats and arrested more than 100 Honduran fishers after accusing them of cruising Nicaragua's territorial waters. The incident led to a bitter diplomatic exchange between the two countries, which, since 1960, have maintained an ongoing dispute over their maritime border on the Atlantic (see NotiSur, 03/14/96).

Since then, the conflicts between Honduras and Nicaragua have continued, both on the Atlantic and within the Gulf of Fonseca on the Pacific. In early August, an unspecified number of Honduran fishing boats allegedly sailing in Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast territorial waters were forcibly expelled by the Coast Guard and the Air Force. And, in late September, the Coast Guard captured another three Honduran fishing boats, this time in the Gulf of Fonseca. The August incident led to a sharp diplomatic exchange between officials from both countries.

Shortly after the Aug. 7 expulsion of the vessels, the Nicaraguan government announced that it was purchasing new patrol boats from Israel, which, according to Nicaraguan army chief Gen. Joaquin Cuadra, would be used to "protect our maritime resources against pirates and seaborne delinquents." That, in turn, provoked a harsh response from the Honduran military. "I have my own budget and my own fuel reserve so that, God forbid, we will be prepared if there is a conflict with the Nicaraguan military," said Honduran Defense Minister Mario Hung Pacheco. "It is our obligation to defend the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we have the resources necessary to respond to any attack by Nicaragua."

Although the affair died down soon after, the potential for new conflicts remains strong, since a series of meetings to settle the country's maritime disputes ended in failure in August, and no new meetings between the countries' foreign ministries have taken place. In fact, more disputes are likely because Nicaragua has greatly increased its efforts this year to keep all foreign boats out of its territorial waters. Since January, Nicaraguan security forces have either captured or expelled more than 600 foreign vessels from its waters, many of them Salvadoran and Honduran craft allegedly caught fishing in Nicaragua's area of the Gulf of Fonseca. Likewise, Salvadoran and Honduran authorities have captured or expelled Nicaraguan vessels for the same reasons, practically converting the gulf into a low-intensity conflict zone. Apparently, fishing companies from all three countries have been forced into heavy competition since overexploitation in recent years has steadily depleted the gulf's resources.

Still, although such maritime disputes represent a constant thorn in relations among those countries, territorial conflicts regarding the land border between Honduras and El Salvador presents a much graver danger. Tensions along the border between those two countries are chronic, and the threat of another military confrontation remains a reality. The two nations fought a brief war in 1969 over disputed territory in which 5,000 soldiers were killed.

For more than 10 years after the war, relations between Honduras and El Salvador remained extremely tense, with minor military skirmishes frequently reported. In 1980, however, the two nations agreed to re-establish diplomatic ties and begin direct negotiations regarding their territorial claims. Then, in 1986, after failing to reach an agreement in the talks, the countries requested that the World Court at the Hague act as arbitrator. Finally, in September 1992, the World Court reached a decision, which both nations have agreed to abide by. A total of about 400 sq km of territory was under dispute, covering six "land pockets" along the 374 km border that divides the countries. In its ruling, the World Court awarded about 300 sq km to Honduras, and the other 100 sq km to El Salvador.

Nevertheless, the judgement did not resolve questions about the citizenship and property rights of some 10,000 Salvadorans residing in the areas awarded to Honduras, nor some 3,000 Hondurans residing in the zones granted to El Salvador. Regarding those individuals, the ruling binds the two countries to negotiate a "humane and disciplined solution," one that "completely respects the rights acquired by the people in those zones." In addition, with the court's ruling in hand, the countries committed themselves to complete the legal demarcation of their common border. Since 1995, a binational commission of experts has attempted to resolve these pending problems.

But despite numerous meetings, little progress has been made on either front. Of the 374 km border, 227 km must be demarcated. Of that total, the commission has so far only managed to define the territorial boundary for 48 km. And, regarding the rights of the individuals in the territories, the commission has snagged on discussion of the 10,000 Salvadorans in Honduras. El Salvador has offered dual citizenship for the 3,000 Hondurans living in its zones, but on the condition that the Salvadorans in Honduras receive the same treatment. Nevertheless, the Honduran Constitution prohibits dual citizenship, and so far the Honduran government has refused to consider a constitutional amendment. Moreover, the Magna Carta prohibits foreigners from owning lands within a 40 km zone along the border, meaning that the Salvadorans will lose their property unless they accept Honduran nationality.

As a result, tensions remain constant in the territories because paramilitary organizations and in some cases government security forces frequently harass communities on both sides of the border. In early August, for example, a group of Salvadorans attacked 50 Honduran families in El Salvador, burning their properties and throwing them off their lands. Two Hondurans were wounded in the attack, which prompted a sharp protest note from the Honduran Foreign Ministry.

Coinciding with the protest, the Honduran government said it was considering reinforcing its army patrols and outposts along the border to protect its citizens, thus inflaming tensions with the Salvadoran government. The flare-up subsided in mid-September after high-level authorities

from both countries met in Honduras to push forward the border demarcation and discussion of citizenship and property rights. In a joint communique, both sides firmly committed themselves to "maintain a peaceful and harmonious environment along the border zones," and to adopt "whatever measures are necessary" to resolve the remaining territorial issues. But despite the meeting, on Oct. 3 border tensions exploded again over reports that a 300-member paramilitary organization had been formed by Hondurans living near the territories.

The group *Comite de Defensa de la Soberania Nacional* (CERQUIN) told Honduran reporters that it is carrying out daily patrols along the border to protect Honduran citizens from Salvadoran attacks. Pictures of CERQUIN members dressed in fatigues and berets and carrying modern M-16s and AK-47's as they patrolled border areas appeared on the front pages of Honduran newspapers, generating alarm in San Salvador. "We have received instructions to carry out an exhaustive investigation of the situation," said El Salvador's deputy minister of public security, Alberto Carranza.

"This is not a domestic problem for Honduras, it is an international problem and we will send warning messages to the other Central American countries and to extraregional governments. Honduras had best consider the consequences of this situation because the Salvadoran armed forces are prepared to uphold our national sovereignty and territorial integrity." Added Rodrigo Avila, head of the Salvadoran *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC), "If there are really 300 armed people then we are talking about something extremely serious. It is not just a little band of delinquents." Aggravating tensions are suspicions that the Honduran army may have organized and armed CERQUIN. "In the press photos, these people are dressed in military uniforms and they are sporting modern M-16s, which is the official weapon used by the Honduran security forces," said Ramon Custodio, head of the *Comite de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de Honduras* (CODEH).

According to Custodio, the Honduran army may be deliberately inflaming tensions with El Salvador and Nicaragua to create an artificial crisis that could strengthen the army's ability to resist demilitarization in Honduras. The army is currently locked in a dispute with President Carlos Roberto Reina's civilian government over large troop and budget reductions (see *NotiSur - Latin American Political Affairs*, 02/02/96 and 03/29/96). Regardless of political motives, the border conflicts remain a threat to peace, and they constitute an important stumbling block for regional integration and development initiatives. Both Honduras and El Salvador are planning large-scale development programs along the borders and in the Gulf of Fonseca as part of the regional effort to push the Central American Sustainable Development Alliance (ALIDES) forward (see *EcoCentral*, 10/10/96). Foreign financing for those programs is highly unlikely unless the two countries completely resolve their territorial disputes. In fact, in May the director of the Honduran Tourism Institute, Ricardo Martinez, warned that, unless the border conflicts are resolved, Honduras could stand to lose up to US\$2 billion in projected aid and investments for sustainable-development programs during the next decade.

Meanwhile, border-related problems continue to affect most other Central American countries as well. Illegal immigration between countries is perhaps the largest problem plaguing the region. Costa Rica, for example, estimates that some 200,000 Nicaraguans have crossed into the country's northern zones in search of work because of the desperate economic conditions in Nicaragua.

The government estimates that Nicaraguan migrant workers are currently draining about US\$240 million annually from Costa Rica through family remittances that they send back to their relatives in Nicaragua. And, in addition to aggravating competition in the local labor market, social conflicts in Costa Rica's northern zones are growing, since many Costa Ricans blame the Nicaraguans for an alarming rise in delinquency (see NotiSur, 03/01/96 and 03/15/96).

Given the growing problems along their common border, on Oct. 15 Costa Rican President Jose Figueres and directors of that country's police forces met with the heads of Nicaragua's armed forces in the Nicaraguan border town of San Carlos. The delegations discussed joint measures to control crime and immigration in the region. Both countries have launched broad development plans along the Rio San Juan, which forms a natural boundary between the countries. The plans include massive investments by foreign mining and timber companies (see EcoCentral, 05/30/96 and 07/18/96). But restoring security to the border zones is an essential prerequisite for the development schemes to move forward.

"This region has enormous economic potential," said Figueres after the meeting. "But we must redouble our efforts to maintain peace and order. We must work together to change the current international image that security along our borders is not as good as it should be." [Sources: Inter Press Service, 08/08/96; Inforpress Centroamericana (Guatemala), 03/28/96, 05/09/96, 08/22/96, 09/12/96; The News (Mexico), 09/19/96; Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias- Spanish news service EFE, 03/13/96, 05/23/96, 06/08/96, 06/09/96, 10/01/96; La Jornada (Mexico), 10/07/96; Agence France-Presse, 05/15/96, 05/19/96, 05/22/96, 05/27/96, 08/08/96, 08/13-15/96, 08/19/96, 09/02/96, 09/09-11/96, 09/16/96, 09/25/96, 09/26/96, 09/29/96, 10/02-05/96, 10/11/96, 10/12/96, 10/15/96]

-- End --