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Maritime Conflicts Flare Up Again Between Nicaragua, Honduras

by LADB Staff

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In late January, tensions regarding maritime rights in the Gulf of Fonseca erupted again between Nicaragua and Honduras. Meetings are scheduled for mid-February among officials from those two countries and El Salvador, but Nicaragua's insistence on linking demarcation of boundaries in the gulf to a resolution of border problems with Honduras in the Atlantic may complicate talks. Territorial rights in the gulf have been a frequent source of tension among the three countries that share the waterway because hundreds of small fishers constantly cross from their country's waters into those of the neighboring countries, leading to arrests and confiscations of boats and catches.

Nicaraguan and Honduran naval patrols, protecting their citizens, have also clashed on occasion. The increased military tensions led to accords in August 1997, whereby naval forces agreed to joint patrols and to exercise more restraint (see NotiCen, 09/04/97). Nevertheless, the accords did not improve the bellicose climate in the gulf, and Nicaraguan naval forces continued to impound dozens of boats and arrest the fishers throughout the year. In late January, a new flare-up occurred, aggravated by the bravado of Nicaraguan officers.

The Nicaraguan navy captured a dozen small fishing boats, arrested their crews, and confiscated their cargo. After the arrests, the head of Nicaragua's Pacific-based naval forces warned that a direct confrontation with Honduras was possible. "Armed confrontations with Honduras cannot be discarded," said Lieut. Jose Centeno. "The problem is that the Honduran military regularly protects pirates from that country and helps them violate our territorial waters."

The comments inflamed nationalist sentiment in Honduras. "Once again we are the object of aggression by the Nicaraguan navy," said Honduran Deputy Mamilio Rodas, a member of the congressional Defense Commission. "It has become modus operandi for the Nicaraguan navy to capture Honduran boats and fishers and then charge thousands of dollars for their freedom and the return of their belongings. We should not just limit ourselves to protests. Our naval forces should intervene."

Demarcation in Gulf of Fonseca complicated by Atlantic dispute

Tensions subsided in early February after the foreign ministers from all three countries agreed to discuss demarcation of maritime borders in the gulf, a prerequisite to regulating commercial activity. For years, the countries have been negotiating construction of border markers in the gulf, but the talks have always broken down over disagreements regarding the exact location of the boundaries.

The renewed negotiations may stall as well because of Nicaragua's decision to link the gulf demarcation to resolution of border disputes with Honduras in the Atlantic. As in the gulf, on the

Atlantic Coast Nicaraguan naval forces frequently arrest Honduran fishers for violating territorial waters. In November, for example, the navy arrested 80 fishers, setting off another diplomatic row. The problem on the Atlantic is more complicated than in the gulf because the two sides have not resolved their territorial claims. Honduras says that its southern boundary is parallel 15, but Nicaragua says it stops further north, at parallel 17. "We have to resolve all conflict zones, not just selected ones," said Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Emilio Alvarez. "If Honduras wants to discuss its rights in the Pacific and lay down border markers, there is no problem, as long as it also cooperates to resolve the conflict on the Atlantic Coast." [Sources: La Prensa (Nicaragua), 11/03/97, 11/04/97; Inforpress Centroamericana (Guatemala), 01/30/98; Notimex, 01/20/98, 01/22/98, 01/28/98, 02/05/98; Reuter, 11/03/97, 11/04/97, 01/25/98, 02/07/98; El Tiempo (Honduras), 01/30/98, 02/06/98, 02/09/98]

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