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LADB Staff

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Wall on Border Causes New Strains

by LADB Staff

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Construction of a 900-meter wall on the Costa Rican side of the border with Nicaragua has raised a new controversy between the two countries. Costa Rican officials have worsened the matter by making contradictory statements about the wall's purpose. The immigration issue has been a constant in relations between the two countries for several years.

Some estimates put the number of Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica at 500,000, most of them undocumented. As many as 300 undocumented Nicaraguans may cross the border every day. Nicaraguan immigration is credited with much of the 58% increase in Costa Rica's population since 1984, according to an analysis of the 2000 census.

The Costa Rican census bureau said the population had grown from 2.4 million in 1984 to 3.8 million in 2000. The steady flow of undocumented Nicaraguans looking for work in Costa Rica is explained in part by figures from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report for 2001. It ranks Costa Rica 41st from the top on its Human Development Index (HDI) of 162 nations. Nicaragua is near the bottom in 106th place. The HDI includes measures of life expectancy, educational levels, and real per capita income. The wall also contributed to the strained relations caused by differences regarding joint use of the San Juan River (see EcoCentral, 1998-08-13, NotiCen, 2000-03-09).

In January, Costa Rican authorities began constructing the wall 900 meters long and two meters high near the Nicaraguan border crossing at Penas Blancas, 400 km north of the capital. The wall caused a diplomatic crisis because Nicaragua interpreted it as a move to block illegal Nicaraguan immigrants from entering Costa Rica. The Nicaraguan government claimed Costa Rica was building a wall 3 km long and, in late April, sent technicians from the Instituto Nicaraguense de Estudios Territoriales (INETER) to Penas Blancas to verify that the wall had not intruded into Nicaraguan territory.

Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman and some of his Cabinet criticized the construction. Foreign Minister Francisco Aguirre said it showed Costa Rica's frustration at not being able to control illegal immigration. Defense Minister Jose Adan Guerra said the wall was "deplorable" and sent the wrong message during a time when the region was undergoing the process of integration. Costa Ricans say the wall is to protect customs area Costa Rican officials first declined to answer Nicaraguan questions about the wall.

In late June, the director general of Migracion y Extranjeria, Eduardo Vilchez, denied there was a wall, calling the Nicaraguan claims fiction. Oscar Vindas, in charge of customs at the Penas Blancas post, said there was a wall, but it was built to enlarge the customs area and protect merchandise in trucks parked on the Costa Rican side as they waited to clear customs. Security Minister Rogelio Ramos said, "In no way is the construction of the wall intended to stop Nicaraguans. I almost dare to say it is ridiculous." He said since the wall covered less than one km of the 311-km border, it could not possibly stop illegal immigration.

But Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez contradicted his own officials by acknowledging that the wall was intended to stop illegal immigration. "Costa Rica had every right to prevent the entry of illegals," he said. University of Costa Rica historian Luis Guillermo Solis told Inter Press Service that "a wall along any border in the world is an offensive symbol." He pointed out that Nicaraguan politicians are campaigning for the Nov. 4 elections. "Anything Costa Rica does will be interpreted as an aggression," he said.

Other leaders in the region expressed concern about the wall. Former Salvadoran President Armando Calderon Sol (1994-1999), a deputy in the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN), said the problem had to be resolved from a "Central-Americanist and unity-focused perspective." However, he did not think the wall would harm the integration process. Recently, Nicaraguan officials have softened their tone. Following a consultation with Nicaraguan Ambassador in Costa Rica Mauricio Diaz, Aguirre said there was no evidence that the purpose of the wall was to block immigration. Aguirre has also accepted the Costa Rican logic that a short wall was no barrier to immigrants.

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