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Border Conflict Between Belize and Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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The territorial conflict between Belize and Guatemala and a long history of negotiations continue to affect the politics and economy of both countries.

In recent years, violence near the de facto border has brought about new negotiations sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS). The negotiations are entering the final phase, and, by the end of August, two facilitators, one designated by each country, are expected to present proposals for a final resolution of the conflict.

The conflict has its roots in the 1859 Aycinena-Wyke Agreement between Guatemala and Great Britain. Guatemala insisted the agreement ceded the territory conditionally to Great Britain, and Great Britain insisted that, since it already owned the territory, the agreement merely delineated boundaries. Guatemala held that, since Great Britain failed to comply with the terms of the agreement, it should return the territory to Guatemala. With Belize's independence in 1981, it inherited the controversy.

In 1991, Guatemalan President Jorge Serrano Elias (1991-1993) acknowledged Belize's sovereignty but was unable to define their common border. His successor, President Ramiro de Leon Carpio (1993-1996), revoked the recognition, and subsequent presidents have been unable to resolve the issue (see NotiCen, 2000-03-09). Tensions between Belize and Guatemala increased in the last few years, particularly with the killing of two Guatemalans along the border and the discovery of Guatemalan settlements in territory claimed by Belize. With the aid of Great Britain, Belize has supported a diplomatic settlement, while Guatemala has yet to abandon the possibility of taking the case to an international court. The conflict includes mainland and island territorial issues, maritime and border differences, and issues of compensation between the two countries.

Francisco Villagran Kramer, former civilian vice president in the Lucas Garcia administration (1981-1982) and legal advisor to Guatemala in the negotiation process, said that, while the presidents of both countries believe they can reach an agreement, "neither government wants to make predictions [on the outcome] because they await the proposals." Villagran said that finding a solution is a "high priority, because the conflict is more than a century old. These days, no one goes to war over these problems," and, in case the issue goes unresolved, it could last another hundred years. Villagran added that there is a possibility that other countries could assist in resolving the conflict if an agreement is not reached.

Great Britain has offered financial assistance for both Guatemala and Belize if a resolution is reached. "The benefits [of resolving the conflict] for both countries are great," said Edgar Arana, press advisor for the Guatemalan Ministry of Foreign Relations). "If we can resolve this historical

problem," said his Belizean counterpart Rudy Castillo, "both countries would be brought together economically." Castillo also said that, upon reaching a solution, Belize hopes to participate with Guatemala in initiatives at the regional level.

Private sector moves faster than governments

Initiatives at the private-sector level seem to be ahead of politics. Kevin Herrera, general manager of the Belizean Chamber of Commerce, explained that this year the chambers of both countries have met to discuss investment and trade issues. He said that, while "politics should be left to the politicians as much as possible," the conflict "has had negative effects on both countries." Herrera said potential areas of cooperation between the two countries include investment, joint tourism projects, and trade. Additionally, he mentioned Belize's position as a bridge between the Caribbean and Central America stemming from its membership in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) as well as the Secretaria de Integracion Economica Centroamericana (SIECA). "We hope to build on this to increase trade benefits to Central America," he said.

One sign of decreased political tensions, Herrera said, was Guatemala's support for Belize's application for membership in SIECA. "Both countries are relatively poor developing countries, and there is so much that we can do to cooperate with each other...the more we can work together, the more we can address the adverse effects of globalization issues that are really marginalizing small developing countries. I am hoping that this is a first step in that direction," added Herrera. Sharon Lindo, executive director of the Association of National Development Agencies (ANDA) in Belize, said that, although tensions from the conflict were felt on all levels, they were greater at the political than the community or business level.

Priority of reaching agreement is questioned

"At the moment, the situation is fairly calm. There have been no problems. And we believe this is because of the negotiation process," said Juan Francisco Oliva, mayor of Poptun, a municipality in the Peten department, which shares the border with Belize. Oliva said that conflicts about people who cross the adjacency zone (a zone protected by both governments while the negotiations continue) are now resolved more peacefully. Oliva said that a census showed the Guatemalan community of Santa Rosa was located on the Belizean side of the adjacency zone. But the situation is being settled calmly via negotiations, said Oliva. Castillo said that Belize was also happy with the current situation in the adjacency zone.

Spokespersons for both governments said they hoped for a resolution but the Guatemalan side appears less optimistic. Castillo said the consultation process is expected to conclude within 60 days after presenting its recommendations. But Arana stressed that the proposals would first have to be analyzed by the Guatemalan government to determine whether they would be accepted. Arana also said there was no hurry for the government to complete the process before the next elections. In the past, analysts have argued that the Guatemala government has used the border issue to distract the population from internal problems.

However, Arana denied there was any political motive in the negotiations with Belize. "This is a continuation of a policy that began with the Ramiro de Leon Carpio administration...it is a State policy," said Arana. He said Guatemala's last formal territorial complaint was in 1999, "in the middle of the election campaign, and no one said anything."

Integrated border community ignored in negotiations

The communities most affected by the relations between the two countries are those in the Peten located near the adjacency zone. Analysts say this region would stand to gain the most from a resolution. For these municipalities, part of the conflict stems from a lack of resources in the Peten. Much of the Guatemalan land in the Peten is already in private hands or is protected by the government, obligating poor campesinos to search for land needed to survive. Lindo said Belize does not escape the scarcity of land, as 40% of the country lies in protected areas.

Analysts say that the present situation calls into question the governments' ability to manage development policies in areas that suffer from territorial conflicts and a lack of resources. "The problem is the economic situation," said Deylr Pinelo, secretario municipal (municipal secretary) in Melchor de Mencos, another municipality on the adjacency line. "People cross the border and risk all kinds of problems. If it intends to negotiate with Belize, the [Guatemalan] government should take into account the need to create more jobs on the border so that people will not need to travel to Belize," he added.

Municipal officials in the adjacency zone say the Guatemalan central government has not consulted them about including local needs in the negotiating agenda. When asked what the government had discussed with him, Oliva answered, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Oliva said, "The first priority should be to design a work plan that really contemplates the needs of the population and to talk about projects that would address the economic situation of the population." An agreement with Belize could provide new sources of income and employment for the border areas. However, the Guatemalan Foreign Relations Ministry sees no need to consult with those areas to formulate its priorities in the negotiations. Arana said the Guatemalan central government has supported the Peten communities during the tensions with Belize, but the negotiations themselves are the task of the president and vice president.

At the community level, the reality is often different from that at the national level. Mayors of neighboring Belizean and Guatemalan communities often have lunch together. Hundreds of young Guatemalans travel to Belize daily to attend Belizean schools. And officials openly refer to a "border," a term stricken from the vocabulary of the Guatemalan Foreign Relations Ministry when speaking of Belize. Integration at the local level contrasts with the insistence of the Guatemalan government on negotiating a definitive border before taking up the theme of joint economic initiatives. "Communities have a tendency to be ahead of politics, and actually lead the process," said Herrera.

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