

6-20-2002

# Nicaragua and Costa Rica Sidestep River Dispute

LADB Staff

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

---

## Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Nicaragua and Costa Rica Sidestep River Dispute." (2002). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8973>

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](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Nicaragua and Costa Rica Sidestep River Dispute

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Nicaragua Costa Rica

Published: 2002-06-20

Nicaragua and Costa Rica have decided to put aside their differences regarding access to the San Juan river, which marks the border between the two countries. While the original disputes remain unresolved, Costa Rica has backed off its insistence that its armed police be allowed to travel on the river. Meanwhile, the two countries have decided to focus on trade and economic integration. Both countries recognize the river as Nicaraguan territory, while Nicaragua acknowledges Costa Rica's treaty rights to use the river for commercial purposes. However, during the previous administrations in both countries, a conflict arose concerning Costa Rica's use of armed police vessels on the river.

In July 1998, Nicaraguan President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002) prohibited armed Costa Rican police vessels from using the river. Before that, Costa Rican police had used the river to resupply remote outposts. Costa Rica argued that its police vessels needed access to the river not only for resupply operations but also to guard against illegal immigration and contraband (see EcoCentral, 1998-08-13). Following the initial dispute regarding the San Juan, a series of negotiations on the conditions under which Costa Rican police would be allowed to navigate the river ended in failure (see NotiCen, 2001-11-01).

Costan Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez (1998-2002) resolved to take the case to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. This prompted an angry response from Aleman, who threatened to impose high tariffs on goods imported from Costa Rica. The dispute reached a fever pitch during the 2001 Nicaraguan presidential campaign, when Aleman called Sandinista presidential candidate Daniel Ortega a "traitor" after he criticized Aleman's fixation on the river issue.

### *Costa Rican president will not take case to The Hague*

The new administrations have adopted a more conciliatory approach to the river dispute. Recently elected Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco has decided not to take the dispute to The Hague tribunal. Speaking on the matter at the recent Madrid summit of Latin American and European leaders, Pacheco said, "The quarrels should end," and the two countries should seek a solution "like civilized people." Pacheco added, "We have to understand that it is absurd that a country without an army is fighting about the free passage of armed people on a navigable river that is drying up."

Mauricio Diaz Davila, Nicaragua's ambassador to Costa Rica, said he thinks the inhabitants on both sides of the river are not interested in whether the treaties that govern control of the river "are missing a comma or a period." What truly concerns the border inhabitants is "the search for alternatives to move ahead and bring sustenance to their families," he said.

Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Norman Caldera even hinted that a compromise agreement on the San Juan might be possible in the future. Caldera, who represents the new Nicaraguan administration of President Enrique Bolanos, has referred to "border courtesies" that are customary between nations. He alluded to a possible agreement that would allow Nicaraguan soldiers to travel on Costa Rica's Frio river, while permitting Costa Rican police to travel on the San Juan. Caldera says that such an agreement is not "convenient at this moment," but that perhaps in the future, "when a different situation exists," the two countries could contemplate such an agreement.

But perhaps the most important step in improving relations between Nicaragua and Costa Rica was the simple avoidance of the subject of the San Juan dispute. "We have agreed not to talk about the San Juan river and to converse only about programs of cooperation" among the countries of Central America, Caldera said. "Upon gaining more integration and advancing more toward that process, we will have fewer problems."

-- End --