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HONDURAS

Honduras to Name Ambassador to Cuba

The Cuban government has been asking Honduras to name an ambassador to that island nation for the past four years. Finally, on 10 Oct, much to the annoyance of the Bush administration, the Honduran government announced its decision to send an ambassador to Cuba in Jan '07.

Cuba and Honduras have had excellent relations for several years, but due to political reasons, there has been no official ambassador representing Honduras in Havana, the capital of Cuba. Now, after careful consideration, President Manuel Zelaya is making preparations to select an official for the post.

The Villeda Morales administration broke relations with Cuba in '61, because of heavy pressure from the US. However, in '98, Honduras renewed its contacts with Cuba and has maintained successful diplomatic relations to the present. The current relationship with Cuba is fundamentally one of healthcare assistance.

In '98, despite its disapproval of Cuba's human rights record, the Honduran government accepted Fidel Castro's offer to send 350 Cuban doctors to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch devastated much of the country in Nov of that year. With over 50% of the population living in rural areas and 1.5 million people with no access to healthcare, there was an urgent need for more doctors and medical personal to attend to the crisis. Then-President Carlos Flores signed a bilateral agreement with Cuba to let in the doctors and to pay them a monthly salary of \$300, with the condition that they work in rural areas where many Honduran doctors refuse to go. As part of the same agreement, some 600 Hondurans were permitted to study medicine in Cuba. The Honduran government pays Cuba \$300 to \$400 a year, per student.

The decision to name an ambassador to Cuba has been the subject of much discussion between Honduras' Central American allies, trading partners and primarily the US. The US government has an established policy to not trade with nations that have dealings with Cuba, and has often threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with those nations as well. However, Honduran Foreign Minister Milton Jiménez emphasized that "the relations between Cuba and Honduras, like the rest of Latin America, are historical, cultural, social, political and economic." Although the decision has been debated between the two countries, Honduras is not at risk of losing trading relations with the US, one of its biggest trading partners.

IDB Approves Water Infrastructure Loan

The Inter-American Developmental Bank (IDB) announced on 3 Oct its approval of a \$30 million loan to Honduras to improve the infrastructure of water services. Most of the money has been designated for improving sanitation services in 21 previously-selected communities throughout Honduras. The rest of the money is earmarked to create a municipal fund for financing the development of more water and sanitation facilities, as well as other infrastructure needs of these communities.

Full repayment of the loan is required within 40 years, with a 10-year grace period. During the first decade, the interest rates will be 1%, and will then increase to 2% for the remainder of the term.

Border Dispute with El Salvador Continues

Honduras and El Salvador are at it again, arguing over land ownership along their common border. The Honduran government and its citizens have protested against an official document published by El Salvador that claimed *Isla Conejo* (Rabbit Island) as the property of El Salvador, despite the fact that the island has historically belonged to Honduras. Border disputes between Honduras and El Salvador are nothing new; the two neighboring countries have been fighting over territory on and off since their independence in 1821.

The current problem arose in early Oct, after the Salvadoran Armed Forces published in its *Libro Blanco de Defensa*, a government document that details official boundaries and territories of the country, that *Isla Conejo* was part of El Salvador and that its eastern maritime boundary is with Nicaragua in the Gulf of Fonseca, which denies Honduras of free access to the Pacific Ocean.

In Sep '92, El Salvador and Honduras took their case regarding disputed territory before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ ruled that the *Isla Conejo* was within Honduran sovereign boundaries and had been so since its independence (Vol. 11, No.10). In '03, the ICJ again studied the issue and ratified its decision, closing the case to further appeals.

The current conflict is not just about the island itself, which is no more than a small piece of land, but the fact that Hondurans feel threatened and believe that the Salvadoran government is trying to block their access to the Pacific Ocean via the Gulf of Fonseca. The location of *Isla Conejo* is strategically important to Honduras for the transportation of goods by ship in and out of Honduras, as well as an important security factor. Honduras patrols the waters around *Isla Conejo*, along with those of its other island territories, to make sure they are not used for illegal activities. Honduran officials have been patrolling the island for more than 28 years without having any problems from El Salvador. Honduras Foreign Minister Jiménez stated that the “facts are clear: the ICJ gave the rights of the island to Honduras and we are asking that El Salvador respect the ruling and the sovereign rights of Honduras.”

The tiny island is located in the Gulf of Fonseca, whose waters, according to the ICJ, are an international territory to be shared by Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, because all of these countries have borders on the gulf. According to the '92 ICJ ruling, all waters beyond three miles of a country's coast are international waters and open to navigation by all nations. Therefore, international ships have always had the right to pass through the Gulf en route to ports in the three countries. The only restrictions are for navy and military ships, or if the countries are in conflict.

On 25 Oct, a Honduran congressional session was held at which time all doubts and concerns about the island were debated for more than six hours. In a press conference held after the meeting,

legislator José Azcona stated that El Salvador's claims to the island were motivated by its commercial interests. El Salvador is having problems with the water depth in Union Bay, in the Gulf of Fonseca, because it is too shallow to handle large ships. Therefore, those ships are forced to navigate through Honduran waters in the Gulf of Fonseca to reach another Salvadoran port. Azcona explained that El Salvador is in need of a deep-water port in the Gulf of Fonseca, and claiming *Isla Conejo* as Salvadoran territory is their solution to the problem.

However, the presidents of both countries have clearly stated that the dispute over *Isla Conejo* would not result in the suspension of diplomatic relations between their two countries. Nevertheless, the Honduran government has declared that all other bilateral projects between the two nations are being put on hold until the situation is resolved. Honduras is asking that El Salvador recognize Honduran sovereignty to *Isla Conejo*, change its maps and respect the ICJ rulings of '92 and '03.

Furthermore, the Zelaya administration is waiting for an explanation from the Salvadoran government as to why it suddenly claimed *Isla Conejo* as Salvadoran territory. According to the former Minister of Foreign Relations of El Salvador, Hector Dada Hirezi, the border dispute with Honduras has been reopened many times by different ARENA governments over the years to divert the public's attention from the more serious problems facing that small nation. He added that the current ARENA administration is no different. By creating a border dispute, it creates a diversion from the increasing poverty, gang activity and corruption plaguing the country, at least for the moment.

San Pedro Sula: At the Mercy of Delinquents

The upward spiral of crime and violence continues in Honduras, especially in San Pedro Sula, the nation's largest city. The daily murder and theft rates there are alarming. This year there was an increase in both cell phone theft and residential robberies, while the murder rate hovers around five a day. As of 24 Oct, an average of 4.7 homicides were committed daily during '06 in San Pedro Sula, an average of 13 cell phones were stolen daily, and five to seven home burglaries occurred daily.

In an investigative report in *La Prensa* of 24 Oct, reporter Elvis Guzmán stated that, although the most dangerous time for crime is at night, he found only nine police officers on city streets after 10:00 pm on 19 Oct. However, Police commissioner José Luis Muñoz Licona stated that normally about 181 police officers patrol the streets of San Pedro Sula after dark. But this is still not an impressive number for a city of over 700,000 people.

Furthermore, according to Muñoz, the few police officers that he found on the streets were concentrated in the center of the city, leaving many areas with no officers at all. It is common for some of the worst areas of the city to be left to police themselves, with officers arriving only after receiving calls, and often arriving too late. The lack of police attention in these areas has led to many violent deaths and robberies, and has allowed gang members to freely operate in these areas and to collect "war taxes" at will.

Although, in Aug, President Zelaya assigned 2,000 soldiers to assist the police in patrolling urban areas, their presence seems to have had little positive impact (Vol. 25, No. 9). Eighty percent of the population in San Pedro Sula polled by Vox Populi—published in *La Prensa* on 19 Sep—said they have lost faith in the police to protect them. In general, they have lost their sense of freedom, and they feel like prisoners in their own houses.

—Stephanie Luckam