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FROM : American Embassy, Tegucigalpa DATE: August 2, 1967

SUBJECT : Survey of Honduras-Salvadoran Relations

REF : Embassy's A-121 of October 26, 1966 and A-268 of April 3, 1967

The border dispute which flared between Honduras and El Salvador in May 1967, and which continues to be a partly unsettled political issue between the two countries, calls for a summary of this basic problem together with other issues which may have a bearing on its final solution. This airgram discusses the border problem, the problem of Meanguera Island, the disparity of military power between the two countries, and the immigration issue.

The border issue. Honduran-Salvadoran relations have been flawed in several ways in the past few years. The most important cause for discord between El Salvador and Honduras has been their partly undemarcated border. Though much of the border is not contested, there are several sizeable disputed areas in remote regions between the two countries, and considerable confusion and misunderstanding has resulted from the lack of demarcation. The legal and public security problems in these areas are many: criminals may seek refuge in them, claiming that they are outside the jurisdiction of one or the other government; persons born in them may claim citizenship of one or the other government; squatters from one side may obtain land title documents from their government; and public security forces from one country may enter what the other country considers its territory. Even trivial events occurring in these areas can become major international problems.

The most recent serious incident between Honduras and El Salvador was triggered by a private feud between Hondurans and Salvadorans in one of the disputed areas. In May 1967, a Honduran

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FORM 10-64 DS-323 ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ For Department Use Only In Out

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rancher, who claims that his ranch is in Honduras, was reportedly arrested by Salvadoran authorities on his ranch, taken to El Salvador and jailed. Honduran authorities believing that the ranch is on Honduran soil, attempted unsuccessfully to "save" their countryman. An exchange of shots resulted, and in the following week there were several armed clashes between police and soldiers of the two countries. There were small numbers of dead and wounded on each side, and both countries alerted their Air Forces and moved regular Army troops into the border area. By May 31, the shooting had stopped, and a joint military border commission had begun to arrange for troop withdrawals and an exchange of prisoners. Despite several later incidents in border areas, the intervention of the Archbishops of the two countries eventually resulted in an agreement to have the Foreign Ministers of Costa Rica, Guatemala and Nicaragua mediate, and this may lead to a lowering of tensions.

Despite the partial settlement of this latest dispute, the mutual confusion over the undefined border will remain until it can be demarcated. Since this will probably take months or years of technical work and negotiations, the border issue may well continue to agitate relations between the two countries for some time.

Meanwhile, confusion is compounded by the fact that the two countries publish maps showing wide variations of the border line along several stretches of their common frontier. US public and private maps are of little help in trying to decide where the border is or should be, since no two available here seem to be exactly alike.

The Meanguera issue. In the minds of most Hondurans, and as seen by the local press, the dispute between the two countries over Meanguera Island, in the Gulf of Fonseca, cannot be separated from the general border issue. Since the most recent discussion of the border issue between the governments seems to have ignored the island for the most part, it might remain a separate and only occasional bone of contention. However, we think it more likely that the Hondurans will press their claim to sovereignty over it when the general discussions of the disputed land border areas take place. (The Honduran claim to sovereignty over the island was treated in the Embassy's A-268 of April 3, 1967.)

Disparity of military power. With ripe territorial issues outstanding between Honduras and its neighbor, the thoughts of many Hondurans have gravitated to Honduras' military posture and its ability to defend its frontiers. Most Hondurans believe, correctly, that Honduras is somewhat stronger militarily than El Salvador, and they want this advantageous disparity to continue. However, as early as June 1967, the Honduran military was aware that the Salvadorans are at least tentatively interested in obtaining a number of new armaments, possibly including jet fighter aircraft.

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The Country Team is firmly opposed to Honduran acquisition of expensive new weapons such as jet fighters--there are numerous military, political and financial reasons for this. We also appreciate the efforts of the US Mission in El Salvador to exert a moderating influence on Salvadoran aspirations along this line, because acquisition of advanced weapons by El Salvador would certainly stimulate Honduran desires to maintain its favorable balance of military power. President Lopez has stated to the Ambassador his concern at the possibility that the Salvadorans may acquire jets. He said this would put him under great pressure from public opinion and the military, although he has no desire or need for jets and the GOH can not afford to spend its resources, needed for development, on such luxuries.

The immigration issue. There is heavy immigration, both legal and illegal, from El Salvador to Honduras, and there are large numbers of Salvadoran workingmen engaged in Honduran agriculture and industry. Estimates of the total Salvadoran population run up to 300,000 though the lack of good statistics on this migrant population casts doubt on the accuracy of such estimates. (Immigration has gone on historically and some geographers estimate that over half the population of Honduras is of Salvadoran ancestry.)

A treaty between the two countries has liberalized Honduran requirements regarding the residence in Honduras of Salvadoran citizens (A-121 of October 26, 1966). However, since the treaty took full effect (in April 1967) there have been a number of complaints from Honduran groups about the presence and behavior of Salvadorans in Honduras. From time to time Honduran radio commentators and editorial writers complain of the alleged opportunism and criminal tendencies of the Salvadoran settlers.

A recent cause for Honduran complaints is the failure of Salvadoran immigrants to comply with the provisions of the immigration treaty which allows them to qualify easily for permanent legal residency in Honduras. (El Salvador has opened a number of new consulates in Honduras to facilitate this.) However, it seems that thousands of Salvadoran residents have no interest in qualifying. Honduran officials, who had hoped to control immigration better by establishing records on existing Salvadoran settlers, find that their hopes are being largely frustrated. More important, the immigration treaty affords Honduran authorities a legally valid reason to deport those who do not qualify. In the event that anti-Salvadoran sentiment in Honduras should become more fierce, Honduran authorities might see fit to deport more Salvadorans, thus angering the Salvadoran Government.

A related problem, which is closely tied to the recent border clash, is that of illegal Salvadoran immigration into the disputed border areas. Honduran Minister of the Presidency, Ricardo ZUNIGA, recently told the Ambassador that the Hondurans do not regard such settlers as bonafide

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immigrants because: 1) some have settled on "Honduran" soil and attempted to change the sovereignty of the land they live on by registering it in El Salvador, and 2) they have come in droves during times of Honduran national weakness or preoccupation with other matters, taking advantage of Honduras' inability to drive them off. Zuñiga said that Honduras must depend on private citizens to "protect Honduran sovereignty" in the disputed areas, and he cited the Honduran rancher who was arrested in May 1967 by Salvadoran authorities as an example of these so-called private border guards.



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