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Research Memorandum
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To : The Acting Secretary
Through: S/S
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Subject: The Honduran-Salvadoran Border Dispute: Crisis Management Mini-Style

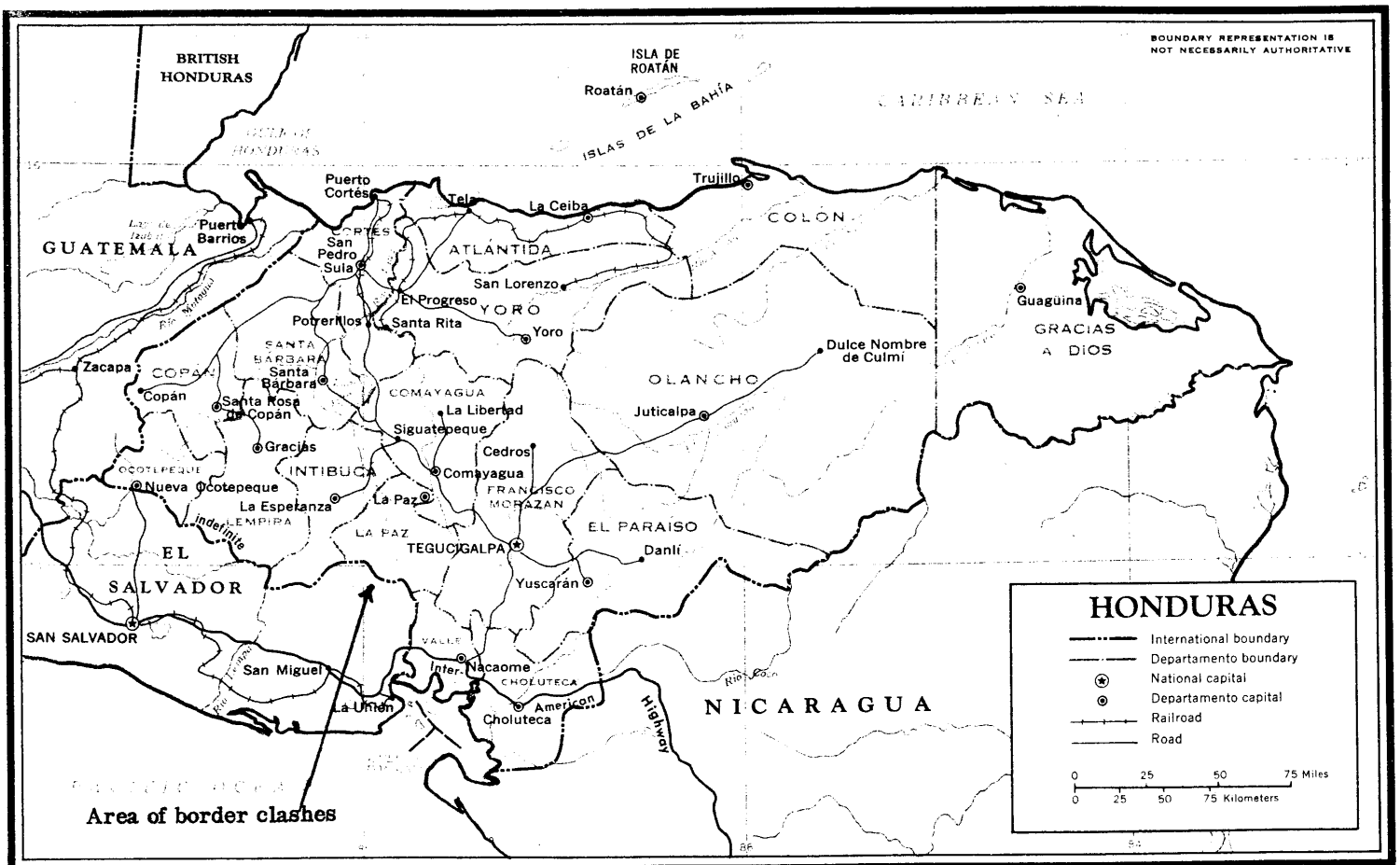
ABSTRACT

Recent border hostilities between El Salvador and Honduras appear to have resulted from haphazard occurrences in a disputed border area during late May. The incidents were initially inflated by the Honduran government in an effort to divert public attention from domestic problems and then further exaggerated by inflammatory press reports. Both governments have, however, steadfastly proclaimed their desire to resolve the crisis amicably and have accepted the recommendations submitted by a joint Salvadoran-Honduran commission set up to investigate the incidents. The immediate crisis is past and the prospect is for relative quiet along the border. Efforts to eliminate a long-standing irritant by demarcating the disputed border area may well be prolonged, however.

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Ill-Defined Border Area Leads to Incidents.

On May 26, 29, and 30 Salvadoran National Guard patrolmen and Honduran soldiers clashed near an unmarked border in the northeastern corner of El Salvador. The engagements, in which some civilians also reportedly participated, resulted in six to ten deaths, the taking of prisoners on both sides, and alarmist troop movements in Honduras and El Salvador. The incidents were related to the May 23 detention of three Salvadoran peasants by Honduran authorities and the May 25 arrest of Jose Antonio Martinez, a Honduran citizen accused and convicted in absentia of murdering a number of Salvadorans. On May 30 the two governments established a Joint Commission to review the problem, and a quick solution seemed in prospect. However, there was a new flareup in the same area on June 3 and 4, apparently caused by foraging Honduran troops. The Salvadoran government reacted by accusing Honduras of continued border violations and intimating that the Honduran government had instigated the conflict to distract national attention from domestic problems.

Facesaving Efforts Cause Further Problems. On June 5 the 3,600-man Salvadoran Army was placed on **alert**, troops were moved nearer the border area, and Army units were sent to replace the National Guard along the frontier. Publicly, the Salvadorans explained that the Army troops were more disciplined and less likely to do anything to break the peace. However, the **alert** and the troop movements also served to satisfy aggressive nationalist elements who had been demanding action.

There were similar activities in Honduras. Although no additional clashes occurred and both governments proclaimed their intent to cooperate in preserving the peace, communications media in both countries continued to overdramatize events in inflammatory fashion. The situation was further aggravated by erroneous international news reports (including one by the Voice of America) claiming that one side or the other had massed troops and that an invasion was in progress. Fortunately, government officials and the general public remained relatively calm.

As an anti-climax to this mini-conflict, on June 5 a truck-load of 43 Salvadoran soldiers strayed across the border far away from the area of dispute and were captured by the Hondurans. To further complicate matters, three US T-28 aircraft previously scheduled for delivery to Tegucigalpa landed in San Salvador enroute on June 5. The Salvadoran President protested to our Ambassador and the planes were diverted to Panama to avoid increased tensions.

Prospects is for Amicable Settlement. On June 6 the Joint Commission submitted its recommendations, and both governments quickly accepted them. The agreement involves: (1) withdrawal of all armed forces from the immediate problem area; (2) establishment of a joint, high-level military commission to supervise the area and seek to avoid further incidents;

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(3) demarcation of the disputed frontier; and (4) the exchange of all prisoners. The last point is still not fully resolved, and the Salvadorans are reluctant to release Antonio Martinez, a convicted murderer who happens to be the brother of a Deputy in the Honduras Assembly. Another complication is the fact that Martinez was captured in an area which both Salvador and Honduras claim. An agreed demarcation of the border would, of course, be a long term project.

The Honduran government appears to have succeeded in diverting national attention away from its many domestic problems (the Mid-East crisis was a further diversion). At least temporarily, the Lopez government has gained new popular support as the defender of national sovereignty. The Salvadoran government displayed considerable understanding and tolerance of Honduran domestic problems, although it is somewhat red-faced by the performance of its army, which, according to our Ambassador, would surely annihilate itself by starvation if it attempted to camp out for more than a week. The crisis has not upset the transition process leading to the scheduled inauguration of Colonel Fidel Sanchez as President of El Salvador on July 1.

The immediate crisis appears to be passed. For the longer run, the governments of Honduras and El Salvador will have to face up to rather thorny and probably protracted negotiations, if they are to eliminate the long-standing (though normally low-level) irritant of a partially disputed common border.

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