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The El Salvador-Honduras Border: Pockets Full of Problems



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An Intelligence Assessment

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GI 83-10262
November 1983

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The El Salvador-Honduras Border: Pockets Full of Problems



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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by  of the
Office of Global Issues. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. 

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 7 November 1983
was used in this report.*

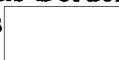
A string of disputed pockets of territory—*bolsones territoriales*—are major stumblingblocks to resolving the longstanding boundary problem between El Salvador and Honduras. Not only does the problem sour relations between the two neighbors, it complicates efforts to suppress Salvadoran guerrillas operating in the border region. Left unsolved, the dispute will be a continual irritant that we believe could eventually lead to a significant deterioration in political and military relations between El Salvador and Honduras. The presidents of both countries have publicly stated that the dispute should be settled quickly, but negotiations appear stalemated, significant differences remain, and we see little prospect for an early resolution of the issue. This assessment briefly reviews the history of the border dispute, describes pertinent geographic factors, discusses the relationship of the problem to the Salvadoran insurgency, and examines prospects for settlement.

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Background

No agreement has ever delimited the entire El Salvador-Honduras boundary. During the Spanish colonial period, later while both countries were part of the Central American Union, and still later in the early 19th century when both were independent, the border region was of relatively little political interest. The Letona-Cruz Agreement of 1884 defined the boundary on the basis of property, ecclesiastical, and colonial administration documents. Honduras renounced that agreement in 1935 when El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala met to establish their triborder point. In 1955 a joint cartographic survey project acquired aerial photography of the border region and a ground survey was initiated, but not completed. A Honduran-Salvadoran mixed commission drafted a treaty in 1968, but negotiations were curtailed in July 1969 when the so-called Soccer War broke out between the two countries.

Although violence between Hondurans and Salvadorans following World Cup soccer qualifying matches in both countries ignited the five-day war, a major cause of the conflict was a long-festering demographic problem. El Salvador, Central America's most densely populated country, has traditionally sought to alleviate overcrowding by encouraging emigration. Before the 1960s most of the Salvadoran emigrants went to Honduras, the least densely populated country in the region. Short of labor, Honduras had encouraged immigration, but by the early 1960s the influx of Salvadorans (variously estimated at 125,000 to 300,000) was becoming a political issue among partisan groups in Honduras seeking to promote their nationalist credentials. Under the guise of land reform, which prohibited foreign nationals from owning distributed lands, many Salvadorans were driven from areas they had been farming and were forced to return to El Salvador in 1969.

During the war the Salvadoran Army penetrated Honduras in several places, capturing the provincial capital of Nueva Ocotepeque and an area extending some 20 kilometers along the Inter-American Highway east of Goascoran. Although the fighting lasted only five days, more than 2,000 people were killed.

Table 1
Country Statistics

	El Salvador	Honduras
Area (sq km)	21,400	112,150
Population (estimated July 1983)	4,685,000	4,276,000
Average annual growth rate (percent)	2.7	3.5
Density (persons per sq km)	219	38
Bolsones as a percentage of national territory	1.79	0.34



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The Organization of American States (OAS) arranged a cease-fire and a withdrawal of Salvadoran troops; the San Jose Protocol of 1970 established a demilitarized zone 3 kilometers wide on both sides of the border.

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Post-Soccer War Negotiations

Fresh military incidents along the border led to meetings of the foreign ministers of the guarantor nations of the San Jose Protocol and to the signing of the Act and Protocol of Managua in August 1976. A general peace treaty was negotiated under the mediation of a former president of Peru and signed in Lima on 30 October 1980.

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Besides terminating the state of war and normalizing diplomatic relations, the treaty:

- Delimited seven border sections, amounting to almost 60 percent of the boundary.
- Contained provisions by which agreement could be reached within five years on disputed sections of the border, including portions of the Golfo de Fonseca.

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- Called for a Joint Boundary Commission to demarcate the defined sections and negotiate territorial claims in "zones of controversy" on the basis of historical records, including civil and ecclesiastical documents and maps.
- Provided that, should the commission be unable to reach agreement on these zones within five years, either or both countries could submit a claim to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for binding arbitration.

The commission has met periodically, but, because of mutual distrust and the fear of domestic criticism in both countries, little progress has been made. OAS observers, deployed along the frontier to ensure peace, departed in July 1981 after reimbursement for their expenses could not be arranged with El Salvador and Honduras. [redacted]

Survey and demarcation work has proceeded very slowly. According to a US State Department official, surveys of the boundary along 50 kilometers of the Rio Goascoran have already taken almost two years because of continual disagreement over such minor points as what constitutes the center of a river. Rugged terrain and occasional heavy rains make field work difficult in many portions of the border, but the primary obstacles are political. [redacted]

Current Status of Dispute

Each country takes a distinctly different approach toward solving the boundary problem. The Hondurans favor negotiations to delimit each disputed zone separately and insist that their cooperation in establishing a US-supported regional military training center (RMTC) in Honduras should have accelerated negotiations. The Salvadorans want one agreement to resolve the status of all disputed territories and reject any linkage to the RMTC. They also want the demarcation of the undisputed sections of the boundary to precede survey mapping; Hondurans prefer that the tasks be accomplished in the reverse order. According to the Hondurans, security in the border zone is not a major problem and they accuse the Salvadorans of foot-dragging. The rigidity of both governments was indicated by the stalemate in negotiations announced by the Honduran Ambassador in San Salvador during the October 1983 meeting of the Joint Boundary Commission. [redacted]

A Geographic Sketch of the Disputed Territories

Remote from the economic and political core areas of El Salvador and Honduras, the bolsones remain beyond the effective control of both governments. They range from about 8 to 153 square kilometers in extent and total more than 380 square kilometers, somewhat more than twice the size of the District of Columbia. [redacted]

Except for the disputed area in the Golfo de Fonseca, the bolsones consist of hilly to mountainous terrain with elevations ranging from 300 to nearly 2,800 meters. They are covered by grass, brush, pine, and broad-leaved evergreens; some of the denser stands of trees provide good concealment for insurgents. Steep slopes, rocky gorges, and lack of roads make movement difficult through most of these areas and sharply limit the use of vehicles. Scattered trails are the primary means of communication. The few natural-surface roads are probably impassable during much of the May-to-October rainy season, making rapid movement of troops and military equipment difficult. Soils are thin and rocky, and economic activity consists mostly of subsistence farming and grazing. [redacted]

The disputed area in the Golfo de Fonseca includes land near the mouth of the Rio Goascoran (three-fourths of which is swamp and marsh), two islands, and nearby territorial waters. In the delta, land that is not too marshy or swampy is used for farming and grazing. The homes of peasant farmers are scattered along natural surface roads. The Isla Meanguera is a steep-sided volcanic island with ravines and rugged slopes covered by grass and stands of evergreen trees. Most of the small population lives in a fishing village, but there are a few scattered farm settlements. [redacted]

According to officials of the Inter-American Geodetic Survey (IAGS), the small Salvadoran team assigned to the Joint Boundary Commission spends much of its time on other matters, including mapping of parcels of land for distribution under the land reform program.

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Table 2
The Disputed Territories

Bolson	Area (sq km)	Population (estimated)
Gualcho	8	50
Las Pilas	42	1,250
Arcatao (Zazalapa)	34	1,250
Sabanetas (Nahuaterique)	153	1,500
Monteca	47	500
Murujuaca		
Goascoran delta	84	1,000
Isla Meanguera	16	500

The Salvadoran Constituent Assembly, currently drafting a new constitution, has postponed until the end of their deliberations consideration of the article dealing with national territory and international boundaries. [redacted]

El Salvador recently proposed concessions in two of the disputed zones, according to the US Embassy in San Salvador. As part of a larger settlement, El Salvador is willing to give up the northern portion of the Arcatao *bolson* and the disputed lands (mostly swamp and marsh) at the mouth of the Rio Goascoran. It has also offered to formalize the de facto condominium arrangement for sharing the use of the river and maritime areas in the Golfo de Fonseca. The Hondurans have not responded to the proposal, and one Salvadoran official describes their attitude as "totally negative." [redacted]

Honduras devotes more attention to the boundary question and has a much larger team assigned to the problem than El Salvador. The US State Department reports that Honduras is already looking for international lawyers to present its case to the ICJ and has sent a senior commission member to research relevant historical documents in the United States, France, England, and Spain. State Department officials familiar with the border question say that both countries already have large volumes of material—much of it contradictory. [redacted]

The Joint Boundary Commission has requested US material support and technical aid to speed mapping and demarcation of the boundary. [redacted]

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[redacted] In August 1983 Honduras suggested that the United States appoint a "coordinator" who could expedite the negotiations and demarcation, but El Salvador rejected direct US participation. The IAGS in Tegucigalpa has provided the commission with tents and other gear to support field survey work. Helicopters, jeeps, communications equipment, and financial aid have also been requested by the commission. [redacted]

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Honduras continues to urge El Salvador to resolve their border differences before the December 1985 treaty deadline. Earlier in 1983, according to US Embassy reporting from both capitals, the Government of Honduras insisted that progress on the border issue was a prerequisite for the opening of the RMTC. But El Salvador holds that cooperation in military training and border control requires no special repayment because ridding the region of leftist insurgents serves the interests of both countries. The Honduran Congress debated and eventually approved the training of Salvadoran Army units, and the first contingent arrived at the RMTC for training in late June. [redacted]

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Since the end of the Soccer War, troops from each country have harassed the other's civilian residents of the border zone. Occasionally, people have been wounded or killed. Most of these violent incidents are probably due to undisciplined soldiers, but some may be designed to generate pressure for a settlement or drive residents from the region, thus weakening their governments' claim to the territory. [redacted]

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Disputed Territories and the Insurgency

During the early stages of the current turmoil in Central America, much of the El Salvador-Honduras border region was free from government military control. Arms traffic crossed Honduran territory from

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Nicaragua to El Salvador, and guerrillas moved with ease in and out of Salvadoran refugee camps just inside the Honduran border. The guerrillas enjoyed even greater freedom in the *bolsones* because of their confused legal status and treaty limits on military forces in the border region. [redacted]

Since the inauguration in January 1982 of President Roberto Suazo Cordova, Honduras has begun to defend its territorial integrity with more vigor and to cooperate militarily with El Salvador. Efforts have been made to interdict arms traffic, and more than half of an estimated 18,000 Salvadoran war refugees in Honduras have been moved away from the border. On several occasions coordinated Honduran-Salvadoran military operations have been carried out in the "demilitarized area" near the border. The Honduran Army has increased its patrols and placed blocking forces along the border and inside *bolsones* to stop fleeing Salvadoran insurgents. These actions limit the ability of the insurgents to use the border area, refugee camps, and *bolsones* as supply bases and zones of refuge. However, the insurgents continue to transfer arms and supplies through the region to their camps inside El Salvador, and the civilian sympathizers in the *bolsones* reportedly provide some food and support [redacted]

For now, western Honduras near the borders with El Salvador and Guatemala, including the westernmost *bolsones*, is relatively quiet, but the area could become the scene of increased insurgent activity directed against the Honduran Government. [redacted]

[redacted] This could further complicate military operations and delay mapping and demarcation of the border. [redacted]

Conclusions and Outlook

Resolution of the border dispute would reduce suspicions and permit much closer cooperation between Salvadoran and Honduran military forces in their counterinsurgency efforts. Honduras remains concerned that it is helping to train a potential enemy. Tegucigalpa will probably continue to try to capitalize on its agreement to host the regional military training center in order to gain US cooperation in pressuring El Salvador for concessions on the boundary problem. But, given their sensitivity to territorial issues, the Salvadorans are unlikely to make any appreciable concessions. Because of the slow pace of negotiations and the prevailing atmosphere of mutual distrust, we foresee no early end to the problem. If and when the dispute is finally settled, we believe it will probably be as a result of arbitration by the International Court of Justice. [redacted]

Serious conflict over the *bolsones* is unlikely in the near term because both countries are preoccupied by leftist threats—El Salvador with insurgents, and Honduras with a growing Nicaraguan military presence along its southeastern border. The ambiguous status of the border territories will continue to benefit guerrillas and be a source of ill will between El Salvador and Honduras. Left unresolved, we believe the dispute could eventually cause a serious deterioration in relations between the two countries. [redacted]

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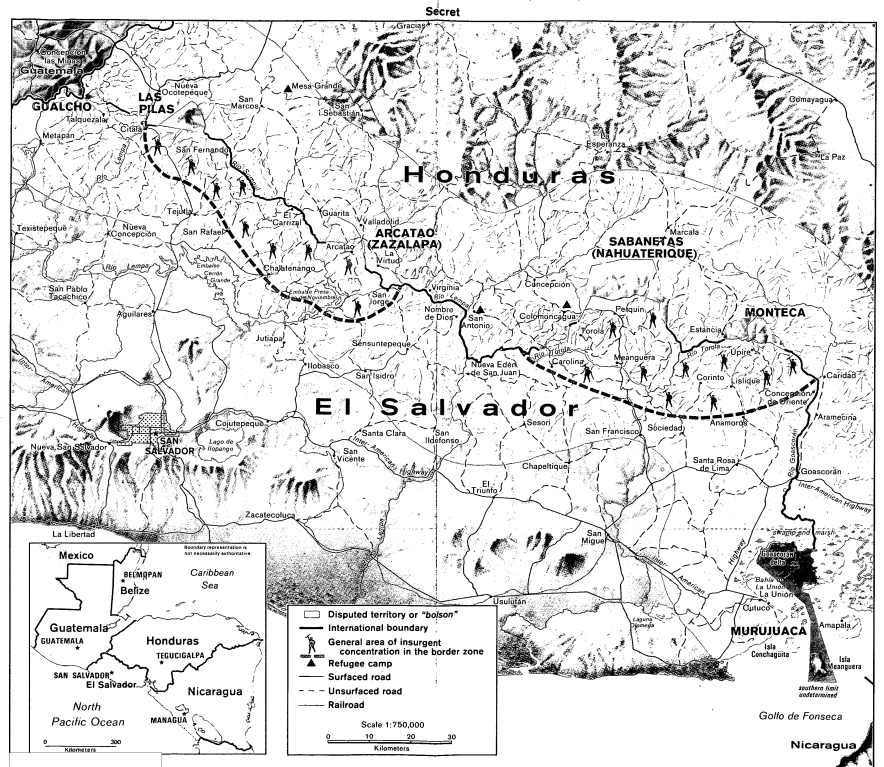
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