



International Boundary Study

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Belize (*British Honduras*) – Guatemala Boundary

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I. BACKGROUND

According to British sources, occupation by Europeans of the coastal area of present-day British Honduras was begun in 1638 by shipwrecked English sailors; the discovery of valuable logwood, used in making dyes, and mahogany led in 1662 to the creation of an establishment. Differing opinions as to the provisions of the Treaty of Madrid, July 18, 1670, resulted in frequent fighting between the British settlers and the Spanish authorities. The Treaty of Paris, February 10, 1763, provided that all British fortifications on the Bay of Honduras "shall be...demolished" but sanctioned the cutting of dyewood or logwood.

Article 6 of the Treaty of Versailles, September 3, 1783, in an effort to reduce "all the causes of complaint and misunderstanding," again permitted the operations by British settlers but established the Belize and Hondo Rivers as the boundaries of these operations. These were extended by the Convention of London, July 14, 1786, to the Sibun River.

The last Spanish attack on the settlements, which resulted in a decisive defeat for Spain, occurred in 1798.

II. TREATY

Spain appears to have ceased to exercise sovereignty in Central America by approximately 1816. In 1823 the Central American Federation was established, but it was destined to last only 15 years. During this tumultuous period Britain appears to have expanded its activities to the area of present-day British Honduras.

On April 30, 1859, 20 years after the establishment of the Republic of Guatemala, a boundary treaty with Great Britain was signed in Guatemala City. The provisions affecting the boundary were as follows:

Art. 1. It is agreed between Her Britannic Majesty and the Republic of Guatemala that the boundary between the Republic and the British Settlement and Possessions in the Bay of Honduras, as they existed previous to and on the 1st day of January 1850, and have continued to exist up to the present time, was and is as follows:

Beginning at the mouth of the river Sarstoon (Sarstún) in the Bay of Honduras, and proceeding up the midchannel thereof to Gracias á Dios Falls; then turning to the right and continuing by a line drawn direct from Gracias á Dios Falls to Garbutt's Falls on the river Belize, and from Garbutt's Falls due north until it strikes the Mexican frontier.

It is agreed and declared between the High Contracting Parties that all the territory

to the north and east of the line of boundary above described, belongs to Her Britannic Majesty; and that all the territory to the south and west of the same belongs to the Republic of Guatemala...

Art. 6. It is further agreed that the channels in the waterline of the boundary described in Article 1 of the present Convention shall be equally free and open to the vessels and boats of both parties; and that any islands which may be found therein shall belong to the party on whose side of the main navigable channel they are situated.

Art. 7. With the object of practically carrying out the views set forth in the preamble of the present Convention, for improving and perpetuating the friendly relations which at present so happily exist between the two High Contracting Parties, they mutually agree conjointly to use their best efforts, by taking adequate means for establishing the easiest communication (either by means of a cart-road, or employing the rivers, or both united, according to the opinion of the surveying engineers), between the fittest place on the Atlantic coast, near the settlement of Belize, and the capital of Guatemala; whereby the commerce of England on the one hand, and the material prosperity of the Republic on the other, cannot fail to be sensibly increased, at the same time that the limits of the two countries being now clearly defined, all further encroachments by either party on the territory of the other will be effectually checked and prevented in the future.

A joint commission met in 1861 and demarcated the southern sector. Terminal pillars were placed at Gracias á Dios Falls and Garbutt's Falls with 29 additional pyramids along the intervening line.

In the meantime a difference of opinion developed over Article 7. In 1863 a new convention was drawn up to replace the problem article whereby Britain agreed to pay £50,000 toward the construction of a road. While the convention was never ratified, negotiations on the matter continued intermittently for the next 85 years.

In 1929 a new joint boundary commission reestablished two markers at Gracias á Dios, 900 yards upstream from the mouth of the Chocon branch of the Río Sarstún, and at Garbutt's Falls on the south bank of the Belize River. No other pillars were erected by the commission.

III. BOUNDARY SEGMENTS

The boundary resulting from the 1859 treaty may be divided into three segments. From south to north they are:

1. The course of the Río Sarstún from the sea to the Gracias á Dios Falls. The boundary according to Articles 1 and 6 follows the midchannel of the river with

free navigation guaranteed to the vessels and boats of both parties. The allocation of islands is also determined. The segment is approximately 25 miles in length and according to accepted practice would be shown as demarcated.

2. A straight line northward from Gracias á Dios Falls to Garbutt's Falls on the Belize River. The intervening demarcation markers established in 1861 have apparently disappeared. The presence of the two anchor pillars are not deemed sufficient to consider the 85-mile segment as demarcated.
3. A second straight line due north to the Mexican tripoint. This 55-mile sector should also be presented as delimited.

IV. SUMMARY

The "Belize Question" concerns sovereignty and is far larger than a boundary issue; but boundary problems play their part in it.

In a brief summary, the positions of the two states are as follows:

(1) Guatemala argues that the United Kingdom has nullified the Boundary Treaty of 1859 by failing to meet the provisions of Article 7.

(2) The United Kingdom, on the other hand, denies that it bears the sole responsibility for failure to implement Article 7. Britain claims, in any case, that it is still willing to negotiate on the matter.

It appears that the existing cartographic practices should be continued. The British Honduras-Guatemala boundary, as a result, should be shown by the normal symbol utilized for delimited international boundaries. If demarcated designations are utilized, the Río Sarstún (Sarstoon) section should be so designated. The best medium-scale compilation source is British Honduras 1:250,000 (U.K.) G.S.G.S. No. 4767, 3 sheets.*

* It is noted that Mexico and the United Kingdom established their boundary by treaty in 1893. Should sovereignty over British Honduras change, it is possible that Mexico might lay claim again to the territory which belonged to the Captaincy-General of Yucatan north of 17°49' North.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared in the Office of the Geographer, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16, Exhibit D.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Office of the Geographer, Room 8744, State Department Building, Department of State, Washington 25, D.C. (telephone: Code 182, extension 4276).