



International Boundary Study

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Honduras – Nicaragua Boundary

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INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

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HONDURAS - NICARAGUA BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Honduras - Nicaragua boundary crosses the Central American isthmus at its widest part. The terrestrial boundary, which measures 573 miles in length, is completely demarcated.

In the northeast, the major mouth of the Rio Coco (or Segovia) at Cabo Gracias a Dios marks the Atlantic terminus of the frontier. The thalweg, or main navigable channel of the Coco and its tributary, the Poteca, forms the boundary westward for approximately 387 miles. From the headwaters of the Poteca, the boundary follows geodetic lines, broken by two short segments along rivers totaling about 10 miles, for an additional 22.4 miles. The straight lines end at Teotecacinte, where the boundary joins the watershed of the Jalapa and Dipilto ranges. These ranges form the frontier for approximately 56 miles. For the next 35.2 miles the border coincides with geographical features only coincidentally as property lines constitute the basis for international boundary. The median lines of the following rivers delimit the next sector: a) the Torondano to its confluence with the Guasaule; b) Guasaule to the Rio Negro; and c) the Negro to Amatillo. The total median line measures approximately 48 miles. A geodetic line across the coastal lowland to the Gulf of Fonseca completes the final segment of 14.8 miles.

An additional 27 miles of geodetic median lines have been delimited in the Gulf as the international boundary. Thus, the entire boundary would total approximately 600 miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

II. GEOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

A. Physical

Topographically, the Honduras - Nicaragua boundary crosses three major regions: 1) the Atlantic coastal plain, 2) the Central American mountainous spine, and 3) the Pacific coastal plain. The Atlantic coastal plain of Honduras and Nicaragua, normally referred to as Mosquitia, constitutes the largest continuous area of level land in Central America. From the flat lagoon coast of Gracias a Dios, the lowland extends westward with gradually increasing elevations nearly to the midpoint of the isthmus. About 125 miles from the Atlantic, outlying spurs of the main cordillera restrict the plain to the immediate valley of the Coco.

From the confluence of the Coco and the Poteca rivers, the boundary enters the mountainous area, the structure of which is most complex. In the frontier region, the mountain ridges extend in short arcs with radically different orientations. The Jalapa range, for example, spreads northeast - southwest while the adjacent Cordillera de Dipilto's alignment is east - west. Elevations along the frontier average between 4,000 and 5,000

feet with a maximum at slightly under 7,000 feet. After departing from the cordillera, the boundary, in turning southward, cuts the transverse ridge of the Sierra de Colon and skirts the lowland valley of San Marcos before rejoining the mountainous terrain north of the Rio Negro.

South and west of the Rio Negro, the boundary traverses a short stretch of the Pacific coastal plain. This region is low, flat, and swampy. Mangrove forests rim the shore of the Gulf at the western terminal of the boundary.

Because the frontier is approximately 14° North latitude, the entire region must be classified as tropical. Elevations moderate in the rugged interior and "temperate" conditions prevail. However, the annual temperature regime remains essentially tropical in that variations between winter and summer are almost non-existent. A typical mountainous city in Central America records an average annual temperature of approximately 67° F. The average temperature for the hottest month measures about 69° F. and that of the coldest month about 66° F. The precipitation average totals about 50 inches per annum with variations depending on exposure.

In contrast, a lowland station on the Caribbean coast has an average temperature about 80° F. The cold month normally registers in the middle 70's while the hottest month averages over 84° F. Rainfall totals over 100 inches with certain exposed areas receiving over 200 inches per annum. January through March usually constitutes the "dry" season.

The temperature regime of the Pacific coastal lowland mirrors that of the Atlantic coast although maxima are slightly lower. Rainfall totals are definitely less and more evenly spread throughout the year.

Vegetation reflects the climatic and topographic patterns. In the humid, hot lowlands, heavy forests dominate; in the drier portions savanna grasses abound. In the high mountains, where not inhabited by man, forests again grow widely. In the valley of the Rio Negro where human occupation is relatively well developed the natural vegetation pattern has been altered. The Pacific coastal segment of the frontier is swampy and ringed with mangrove forest.

B. Historic

Recent archeological evidence indicates that in pre-Colombian time much of Central America was occupied by relatively highly developed Indian cultures. Population density and distribution probably closely resembled the current situation. The Caribbean coast of Central America was discovered by Columbus on his Fourth Voyage to the New World. Although portions of the isthmus immediately fell under Spanish authority, final conquest is attributed to Cortes and his aides between 1522 and 1525. The Spaniards organized the territory into the Kingdom (Captaincy-General) of Guatemala, two of whose provinces were Honduras and Nicaragua. The boundaries of the provinces, as they evolved during the period of Hispanic authority, are essentially those of today. However, the vagueness and

contradictory nature of certain official edicts also caused the territorial dispute which was only recently settled.

In the process of organizing Guatemala, Spain placed an almost indelible Hispanic character on much of Central America. Indian influence, as a consequence, was reduced or eradicated as a significant political and economic factor. Spanish land tenure and social organization took hold to form the modern pattern of settlement and occupation.

C. Political

After a decade of unrest, Central America in 1821 rose in revolt against Spain. By 1823 a national assembly of the United Provinces of Central America had been created. It was destined to live a short and stormy life. On April 30, 1837, Nicaragua declared itself independent and, after a period of confusion, the federation officially dissolved itself on February 2, 1838. A second period of internal conflict followed lasting four years until the ideal of individual nationhood finally replaced the federal concept. In 1888, the states of Honduras and Nicaragua, accepting the principle of uti possidetis juris of 1821, negotiated a boundary treaty provisionally delimiting the boundaries. This action led to an additional treaty in 1894, the terms of which included the creation of a mixed demarcation commission. From 1900 to 1904, the commission demarcated the western portion of the boundary from the Pacific to the Portillo de Teotecacinte. No agreement could be reached on the eastern portion.

Continuing disputes between Honduras and Nicaragua led to the submission of the problem to the King of Spain for arbitration. Each side submitted its case on the basis of available documents and maps from the colonial as well as the modern period. During the colonial era, the major part of the Mosquitia was claimed but not effectively occupied by Spain. Ephemeral and limited settlements were scattered along the coast. Because of the limitations of climate and prevalence of disease, these villages failed to prosper and many ceased to exist. In addition, Spanish sovereignty was exercised from different centers at different times for different purposes. For example, military jurisdiction along the coast definitely appears to have been divided at Cabo Gracias a Dios. No provisions have been uncovered for the hinterland. In contrast, at the very end of the colonial era, Spain granted civil authority over the Caribbean coast and adjacent islands to New Granada (Colombia).

In arbitrating the dispute, the King of Spain in 1906 selected the line from the Cabo Gracias a Dios via the Coco (or Wanks or Segovia) River to the Portillo de Teotecacinte. Both Honduras and Nicaragua appeared to accept the award at first. However, Nicaragua later maintained that the award was rejected in toto and the dispute continued. Interested parties endeavored in the pre-World War II period to arbitrate the boundary problem. A final solution came, however, only when both states agreed to submit the dispute to the International Court of Justice.

The International Court of Justice on November 18, 1960 determined that the 1906 Award of the King of Spain should be carried out. The two states quickly accepted the judgement

and agreed to a Basis of Arrangement submitted by the Organization of American States. According to the Arrangement, a Honduras - Nicaragua Mixed Commission, composed of one representative each from Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Inter-American Peace Committee, received the authority to demarcate the boundary according to the 1906 Award and to establish it in two areas of question. With the assistance of a Committee of Engineers, the western segment of the boundary was redemarcated, a new boundary was established and demarcated from Teotecacinte to the Poteca, and the proper mouth of the Coco determined. Thus ended the boundary dispute.

D. Economic

The Honduras - Nicaragua frontier area is, for the most part, an undeveloped region. The eastern half, from Teotecacinte to Gracias a Dios is virtually uninhabited; the average density of population is less than 10 per square kilometer. The primary occupation of the Mosquitia area is plantation agriculture but even this form is not highly developed. Transportation is virtually non-existent and only minor trails cross the border. Westward from Teotecacinte are dispersed agricultural villages; most are small and based upon subsistence agriculture. The major portion of the landscape, however, is forested. Only where the boundary closely parallels the Choluteca River does the combination of soil and climate produce an environment with economic potential.

In this final segment of the frontier, population density increases 20 to 30 persons per square kilometer, roughly equaling both national averages. Fertile volcanic soils and healthful climate combine to give the region a moderately productive potential. The major problem, typical of upland Central America, stems from local erosion resulting from crude agricultural practices. In the lower Rio Negro, poor drainage complicated planned economic development.

The only major transportation route across the Honduras - Nicaragua boundary is the Pan American Highway which joins San Marcos (Honduras) and Esteli (Nicaragua) via the valley of the Rio Comali.

III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

In the various applicable documents, the boundary has been described as follows:

- (1) From the point known by the name of Amatillo, in the lower part of the river Negro, the dividing line is a straight line run toward the volcano of Cosiguina in an astronomical direction S 86° 30' W, 36.8 kilometers [23 miles] to the middle point of the bay of Fonseca, equidistant from the coasts of the two Republics on this side; and from that point follows the division of the waters of the bay along a line also equidistant from the said coasts until it reaches the middle of the distance lying between the northern part of Cosiguina (Monypenny) Point and the southern part of Tigre Island. From the said Amatillo [inland] the line continues along the center of

the said river Negro upstream in a general east-northeast direction to its confluence with the river Guasaule, about 10 kilometers [6.21 miles]; from said confluence, the line runs in a general north-northeast direction along the center of the river Guasaule, also upstream, to its union with the river Torondano, at a distance of 26 kilometers [16.15 miles]; from the meeting of these two rivers the line continues along the center of the river Torondano to its confluence with the Quebrada Grande; along the bed of that ravine first and along that of its affluent the Pena Blanca rivine afterwards, to the head of the latter, at a pass situated 150 meters east of Las Dantas rock on the ridge of La Botija Cordillera, the general direction of this part being northeast and its length 12 kilometers [7.5 miles]. From the said pass the line runs east-southeast along the ridge of the said Cordillera, passing the height of El Cedro and the Grande rock, to end on the peak of El Variador hill, 5 kilometers [3.1 miles] away.

(2) From the peak of El Variador hill [through Jicote rock, Tigre cliff, El Roble, the monument at Carrizal pass, the monument on the peak of El Mogote de Caguasca, the monument of Isnaya, the monument of La Estrechura de Azanda, the confluence of Licuala and Las Palmas ravines, Las Palmas ravine to the monument on its left bank, the southwest corner of San Antonio del Despoblado in Nicaragua, the edge of Las Lagunillas ravine, Los Araditos corner, the monument at the corner of El Rodeo Grande, the rock at the corner of El Higo, crossing the road from Somoto to San Marcos near El Espino, El Gobernador pass, the monument on the Plan of San Blas, crossing the river Comali or San Marcos, above the Caulatos wells, the monument on the right bank of Las Limas ravine, Zapotillo hill, Rincon height at the northern end of Oyocto plain, Yari pass, the monument at the east end of La Lagunilla prairie, the monument at the corner of Nuestra Senora de la Soledad de Duyure, the monument of Sebana Larga on Hatos Viejos hill, the monument of El Batidero, the peak of Canton or Sepultura hill, passing Los Calpules valley, the monument of El Divisadero, the right bank of the river Zapotal 100 meters from the east side of the river Grande, or Choluteca, parallel to the east bank of the river Choluteca and 100 meters distant, Samayaque corner, opposite the mouth of the river Samayre, crossing Robles ravine, the monument of Horno, along the north side of Santa Lucia del Coyolar, Chinampa furnace, crossing the river Alauca Viejo or Algodonal to the monument on its right bank, up the bed of the river Algodonal, the monument of Soyatal on its right bank, the peak of the high hill La Picona, and Las Manos pass in the Cordillera of Dipilto]. Monuments shall be erected at the points indicated on the plan.

(3) From Las Manos pass in the Cordillera of Dipilto to the neighborhood of Jalapa and Teotecacinte there has been as common boundary of the territory of both Republics, since they were colonial provinces of Spain, the ridge of said Cordillera...and the line which divides naturally the waters (of springs and rains) on the backbone of said Cordillera, to wit, in general: from Las Manos along the ridge of the Cordillera of Dipilto or Jalapa towards the Portillo de Teotecacinte, along the heights of Volcan de las Barrancas, Las Trincheras, Filo de Dipilto, the highest part

of the mountain between Dipilto and Conchagua, the peak of a sharp rock, the thick and very high peak Mogoton, Mogote Segundo, Mogote Cortado, the pass between the head of the river Horca in Nicaragua and the Potrero Grande ravine, affluent of the river San Francisco in Honduras, the pass between Las Vueltas [Honduras] and Santa Barbara [Nicaragua] ravines, the Malacate road, the edge which divides the Agua Caliente [Nicaragua] and Ochoa [Honduras] ravines, the highest part of Jalapa mountain, the throat in which rise the Aguila ravine [Honduras] and the river Solonli which flows toward Jalapa, and the pass through which goes the Teotecacinte trail, chosen as the end of this third section and conventionally designated for this purpose as the Portillo de Teotecacinte, in which have their common origin the Zarzalozza ravine [Honduras] and the river Limon, affluent of the Poteca.¹

"From Portillo de Teotecacinte, the termination of the demarcation made by the Mixed Commission in 1900 - 1901,...whose geographic position is 14° 02' 53.61" North Latitude and 86° 08' 09.01" West Longitude, the boundary line continues downstream along the center of the channel of the headwaters of the Limon River, which rises at Portillo, and the channel of the river itself, to the intersection of its center with the boundary of Sitio de Teotecacinte that passes from Rincon de Murupuchi to Cruz Sin Brazos. The geographic position of the above-mentioned intersection is 14° 03' 43.73" North Latitude and 86° 04' 37.77" West Longitude, and the straight line from Portillo to the intersection runs for a distance of 6,522.3 meters in a direction N. 76° 20' 04" E. Eighty-nine intermediate, intervisible type No. 3 markers were placed alternately on the banks of the Limon River, numbered consecutively 69-1 to 69-89. At the intersection, the boundary line leaves the Limon River and continues along the above-mentioned limit in a direction N. 08° 31' 30" E., arriving at the type No. 1 concrete marker reading "Marker No. 71 - Rincon de Murupuchi," a distance of 719.4 meters. The geographic position of this marker is 14° 04' 07.46" North Latitude and 86° 04' 34.12" West Longitude. On this line a type No. 1 marker was placed on the left bank of the Limon River, 18 meters from the center of its channel, reading "Marker No. 70 - Limon River" as well as five other linear, intervisible markers numbered consecutively 70-1 to 70-5, all of type No. 2 except 70-4, which is of the special type. From the Murupuchi marker, the boundary line runs in a straight line toward the confluence of the Agua Caliente and Guayucali watercourses, bearing S. 89° 41' 14" E. for a distance of 3,549.0 meters. The geographic position of this confluence is 14° 04' 06.82" North Latitude and 86° 02' 35.83" West Longitude. On this line 16 linear, intervisible type No. 2 markers were placed, numbered consecutively 71-1 to 71-16, and since it was not possible to place a marker at the confluence itself, a type No. 1 marker was placed 23.40 meters before reaching that point, which reads: "Marker 72, Agua Caliente and Guayucali watercourses." From that confluence, the boundary continues upstream along the right bank of the Guayucali watercourse beside a savanna covered with pine until it reaches a type No. 1 marker reading "Marker No. 73 - Ahumaderas," whose geographic position is 14° 04' 32.67" North Latitude and 86° 02' 21.73" West Longitude. Between the confluence of the above-mentioned watercourses and Ahumaderas, 9 intervisible markers were

¹ Actas de la Comision Mixta de Limites entre Nicaragua y Honduras, 1900 - 1901.

placed, numbered consecutively 72-1 to 72-9. 72-1 is a type No. 1 marker and reads "Junction of the Agua Caliente and Guayucali watercourses, 28 meters," and the other 8 are type No. 3. The 28 meters refers to the distance to the junction itself. The straight line that goes from the confluence to the Ahumaderas marker bears N. 28° 02' 03" E. for a distance of 900 meters. From the Ahumaderas marker the boundary line continues in a straight line N. 85° 37' 38" E. to the Vigia hill, crosses the Guayucali watercourse and arrives 1,991.9 meters later at a type No. 1 marker reading "Marker No. 74 - Vigia," whose geographic position is 14° 04' 37.61" North Latitude and 86° 01' 15.53" West Longitude. Between the Ahumaderas and the Vigia markers nine intervisible type No. 2 markers were erected, numbered consecutively 73-1 to 73-9. From Vigia, the boundary continues in a straight line N. 76° 30' 33" E. for a distance of 1,030.6 meters and arrives at the type No. 1 marker, reading "Marker No. 75 the Saquinli house" whose geographic position is 14° 04' 45.43" North Latitude and 86° 00' 42.12" West Longitude. Between the Vigia and the Saquinli house markers, 4 intervisible linear type No. 2 markers were erected, marked consecutively 74-1 to 74-4. From the Saquinli house marker, the boundary line continues in a straight line S. 37° 23' 51" E. toward the Plan Verde hill or the Ceja de Montana, arriving at the type No. 1 marker erected at that place reading "Marker No. 76 - Plan Verde hill," a distance of 1,417.6 meters. The geographic position of this marker is 14° 04' 08.78" North Latitude and 86° 00' 13.42" West Longitude. Between the two above-mentioned corner markers, 6 linear intervisible type No. 2 markers were erected, numbered consecutively from 75-1 to 75-6. From the Plan Verde hill marker, the boundary line continues in a straight line in a direction S. 38° 36' 54" W. to the type No. 1 marker on the bank of the Guineo or Mumuiuli River, reading "Marker No. 77 - Guineo River Bank" for a distance of 1,331.4 meters. The geographic position of this marker is 14° 03' 34.93" North Latitude and 86° 00' 41.12" West Longitude. Between the two above-mentioned corner markers, 4 linear type No. 2 markers were erected, numbered consecutively 76-1 to 76-4. From the marker on the bank of the river, the boundary line continues in a straight line S. 28° 11' 22" E., crosses the river, and arrives at a type No. 1 marker on the Cayantu hill reading "Marker No. 78 - Cayantu Hill," a distance of 613.3 meters. The geographic position of this marker is 14° 03' 17.34" North Latitude and 86° 00' 31.46" West Longitude. Between these two corner markers one linear type No. 2 marker was erected, marked 77-1. From Cayantu, the boundary line continues in a straight line S. 28° 43' 00" W. until it reaches the confluence of the Mumuiuli River with the Yupaili watercourse, now called the Poteca and Estero rivers, respectively, a distance of 7,529.0 meters. The geographic position of the above confluence is 13° 59' 42.27" North Latitude and 86° 02' 32.00" West Longitude. Along this line, 36 linear intervisible type No. 2 markers were erected, numbered consecutively 77-1 to 77-36, and one type No. 1 marker reading "Marker No. 79 - Confluence of the Poteca and Estero Rivers," 26.50 meters from the confluence itself.²

The boundary then follows the thalweg of the Poteca to the Coco and that of the latter river to the Atlantic at Cabo Gracias a Dios according to the Award of the King of Spain. The main mouth of the Coco was determined by the Committee of Engineers to be the Brazo

² Report of the Honduran - Nicaraguan Joint Boundary Commission on the placement of boundary markers in the Zone of Teotecacinte, Jalapa, December 19, 1962.

del Este. According to their calculations, the terminal point in the Brazo del Este is 14° 59' 8" North and 83° 08' 09" West.

IV. TREATIES AND OTHER ACTS

The official treaties and acts bearing on the present-day boundary between Honduras and Nicaragua are as follows:

A. Boundary Convention signed at Duyure on February 11, 1888 with ratifications exchanged in Ocotal on July 15, 1889. (Nicaragua-Tratados 1909-1922; I 175 - 82)

This treaty provisionally delimited for the first time the international boundary between the two nations.

B. Boundary Treaty signed at Tegucigalpa on October 7, 1894 with ratifications exchanged at San Salvador on December 24, 1896. (ibid., I 185 - 8).

The modern boundary stems from this agreement which also provided for arbitration and for a mixed demarcation commission. At the turn of the century the commission proceeded with the demarcation of the boundary. Within a short time, a satisfactory boundary had been created from the Pacific to Teotecacinte and the Actas of the commission describe the boundary in adequate detail. However, east of Teotecacinte, a dispute arose and the commission had to confess that it could not resolve the question. Both countries, after a brief period, agreed to submit the dispute to the King of Spain for arbitration.

C. Arbitral Award of the King of Spain signed at Madrid on December 23, 1906. (BFSP 100:1096 - 1104)

The Spanish King delimited the boundary eastward from Teotecacinte to Cabo Gracias a Dios along the thalweg of the Poteca and Coco rivers. Both countries initially accepted the decision. However, the President of Nicaragua soon requested clarification of certain issues. No amicable solution could be found to resolve the dispute until in 1958 both states agreed to abide by a decision of the International Court of Justice.

D. Judgement of the International Court of Justice signed November 18, 1960 in The Hague.

The judgement upheld the validity of the award of 1906. Both Honduras and Nicaragua immediately accepted the court decision and proceeded to carry out its provisions. Nicaragua on February 15, 1961 petitioned the Inter-American Peace Committee for its assistance in completing the boundary settlement. The OAS Committee established a Mixed Commission by:

E. Basis of Arrangement...to the Governments of Honduras and Nicaragua submitted March 1, 1961 and accepted March 4, 1961 in Washington (OAS OEA/Ser. L III CIP/1/62).

The Honduras - Nicaragua Mixed Commission, in combination with the Committee of Engineers, examined the remaining points of dispute. One of the most important actions provided for the evacuation by Nicaraguan authorities of the approximately 8,700 square kilometers of territory and for its orderly transfer to Honduran administration. The disputes on the proper mouth of the Rio Coco and the line at Teotecacinte were resolved by:

F. Decision del Embajador Vincente Sanchez Gavito sobre el desacuerdo surgido en la comision mixta rendered August 5, 1961 (OAS op. cit.)

This decision settled the question over the remaining 17.5 square kilometers in dispute in the Teotecacinte region as well as the Rio Coco distributary. The Committee of Engineers then proceeded to demarcate the boundary from Teotecacinte to the Cabo Gracias a Dios terminal point.

V. SUMMARY

The detailed and comprehensive work of the Mixed Commission and the Committee of Engineers finally settled one of the thorniest boundary disputes in the Americas. As a result, the proper representation of the Honduras - Nicaragua boundary offers no difficulty. In re-demarcating the western segment, the states have produced two excellent maps which may be utilized for compilation. For medium and smaller scale maps, we recommend the Plano de la frontera entra Honduras y Nicaragua, desde el Golfo de Fonseca hasta Rio Poteca o Bodega, 1:200,000, published in Jalapa on January 10, 1962 by the Comision Mixta de Limites Hondurena - Nicaraguense. By the same authority, there exists a large-scale (1:5,000 for the most part) series of 17 sheets covering the boundary from the Gulf of Fonseca to El Variador (approximately 86° 47' 30" W.; 13° 17' 35" N.). This series is entitled Plano...que muestra la linea divisoria entre Honduras y Nicaragua..., 1:5,000; 1:2,500, 1:1,000, published July 1958, in San Marcos de Colon.

The two maps show the location of the demarcation pillars for the area of their coverage. The 1:200,000, for example, locates all 79 type No. 1 pillars from the Gulf to the Rio Poteca. As a consequence, the new boundary at Teotecacinte is well represented for the scale.

If a larger scale is necessary in this critical region, we recommend Plano que muestra la frontera en la zona de Teotecacinte de conformidad con la decision..., 1:50,000, Tegucigalpa, Committee of Engineers, August 22, 1961. For the remainder of the boundary, the Poteca and Coco rivers serve as the boundary to the Brazo del Este mouth at Cabo Gracias a Dios.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Geographer, Office of Research in Economics and Science, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16.

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