



# **International Boundary Study**

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## **Guyana (*British Guiana*) - Venezuela Boundary**

**(Country Codes: GY-VE)**

**The Geographer  
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# INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

No. 21

## GUYANA (BRITISH GUIANA) - VENEZUELA BOUNDARY

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# **GUYANA (BRITISH GUIANA) - VENEZUELA BOUNDARY**

## **I. BACKGROUND**

### **A. Geographical**

The British Guiana - Venezuela boundary runs for 404 miles<sup>1</sup> through a little known area. The very dense tropical rain forest, common to the whole boundary area, is so thick and so difficult of access as to have discouraged colonization and development for over four centuries.

Starting from the coast, the boundary crosses three distinct types of topography: coastal plain, interior hilly upland and, finally, high plateau. At the ocean's edge, currents and waves have built a long, low ridge of alluvial materials under the solid stand of tangled mangroves behind which tidal lagoons, marshes and river flood-plains, choked by heavy swamp-grass, are subject to regular inundations. This "wet savanna" is broken only by narrow, tree-covered ridges of older alluvium that deflect the sluggish rivers, causing them to parallel the coast. Fifteen air miles inland, or about 37 miles along the boundary, the nearly featureless plain gives way to ancient crystalline uplands of granite and gneisses weathered to rounded hills and narrow valleys, all so covered by tropical forest as to have few openings. The rivers, of necessity becoming the main avenues of communication, are seldom broad smooth highways as they descend swiftly from the higher mountains deep in the interior, their courses often interrupted by falls and rapids and navigable only for short distances by light, shallow-draft boats. The hills north of the Cuyuni River seldom reach 1,500 feet while, to the south, they rise rapidly to over 5,000 feet. South and west of 6° North and 61° West, about 180 air miles from the coast (or some 335 miles along the boundary), the rounded hills give way to a plateau area of resistant gray and red sandstone, dissected into great tabular mesas, of which 9094 ft. Mt. Roraima, a boundary tripoint, is the highest.

### **B. Historical**

Prior to the Paris Award of 1899, which descriptively delineated the boundary between British Guiana and Venezuela, both Great Britain and Venezuela claimed large overlapping areas. The extreme British claim included the entire drainage basin of the Cuyuni River, covering the eastern third of Venezuela's Bolivar State and extending to within a few miles of the Caroni and Orinoco Rivers. The maximum Venezuelan claim, approximately equal in area, took in all the territory west of the Essequibo River, or about two-thirds of the present-day British Guiana. The British claims were based largely upon the cession, in the 1814 Convention of London, of the old Dutch colonies of Essequibo, Demarara and Berbice, without specific boundaries, acquired in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by conquest and settlement. Venezuela, proclaiming its independence from Spain in 1811 and separating from the Great Colombia Union in 1830, inherited the poorly defined Spanish claims that were founded

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<sup>1</sup> Measured on official maps at 1:1,000,000.

on alleged discovery, settlement and mission activity from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.

Despite the many years of claims and counter-claims, no official joint surveys were undertaken in the disputed area until after the award of 1899. However, one Robert Schomburgk, an engineer, after an exploratory mission for the Royal Geographical Society, reported the need for boundary demarcation in the area and was commissioned by the British Government in 1840 to return and make just such a survey. The resulting "Schomburgk Line" was not acceptable to either government as the British considered it a great reduction of the boundary claimed as a matter of right, while the Venezuelan Government, affronted, demanded the removal of survey signs and markers and also asked for reparation.

It was February 2, 1897, before the two countries agreed, in Washington, D.C. to submit the boundary to arbitration. A tribunal, meeting in Paris in 1899, announced its award in a very brief but clear description of the line to be followed by the boundary.

## **II. TREATIES AND OTHER ACTS**

### **A. The Paris Award**

The Arbitral Tribunal, meeting in Paris from January 25 to October 3, 1899, handed down the following description of the boundary in its final award.<sup>2</sup>

"Starting from the coast at Punta Playa the line of boundary shall run in a straight line to the Barima River at its junction with the Mururuma River and thence along the mid-stream of the latter river to its source and from that point to the junction of the Haiowa River with the Amakura [Amacuro] River and thence along the mid-stream of the Amakura to its source in the Imataca Ridge and thence in a southwesterly direction along the highest ridge of the spur of the Imataca Mountains to the highest point of the main range of said Imataca Mountains opposite the source of the Barima [River] and thence along the summit of the main ridge of the Imataca Mountains in a southeasterly direction to the source of the Acarabisi [River] and thence along the northern bank of the Cuyuni River westward to its junction with the Wenamu [Venamo River] and thence following the mid-stream of the Wenamu [Venamo] to its westernmost source and thence in a direct line to the summit of Mt. Roraima..."

### **B. Boundary Surveys**

Following the Paris Award, survey work by British and Venezuelan commissions, acting as one in a Mixed British - Venezuelan Boundary Commission, was begun late in 1900 and was continued each dry season until early 1905, when the work was declared

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<sup>2</sup> Arbitration between the Governments of Her Britannic Majesty and the United States of Venezuela Proceedings, vol. IX, page 3237.

completed. The published acts<sup>3</sup> of this mixed commission indicate that demarcation by clearing and monumenting took place only along the short, 21-mile Punta Playa - Barima sector. The documents also show that the mixed commissions followed the boundary from one end (Punta Playa, on the coast) to the other (Mt. Roraima), taking pains to observe a total of twenty-five geographical positions at somewhat irregular intervals along their route. Concrete posts, each with a smaller reference post located some 300 meters away, set up to mark the site of each observation, might be classed as boundary markers. All of the observations and computations by the British and Venezuelan commissions, whether made jointly or separately, were corrected and agreed upon by both groups meeting in Georgetown on January 10, 1905.

Since that date, no surveys have been made along the boundary line, although the Venezuelans tried in vain from 1915 through 1917 to induce the British to share the work and expense of reclearing and remonumenting the Punta Playa - Barima River sector and of demarcating the boundary in the Imataca Mountains area from the headwaters of the Amacuro River to the headwaters of the Acarabisi River.

By an exchange of notes on October 7 and November 3, 1932, agreement<sup>4</sup> was reached on the location of the tripoint where the boundaries of Brazil, British Guiana and Venezuela meet. A Mixed Brazilian - Venezuelan Boundary commission, working on their common boundary, had made special observations on Mt. Roraima in 1931 to determine and mark this point.

### **III. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Article 13 of the 1897 Arbitration Treaty bound both interested parties to accept as binding the decision to be handed down by the Arbitral tribunal. Discussions, instigated by Venezuela in 1962 on the grounds that it had never recognized the validity of the decision, are underway to consider the Paris Award of 1899, together with other voluminous documentation gathered by the Venezuelan government since that date.

The British Guiana - Venezuela boundary as a whole was succinctly described in the 1899 Award but, in the absence of adequate and recent topographical mapping, is subject to modest differences of cartographic interpretation. Until better surveys and maps are made and agreed upon by both governments concerned, the geographical positions established and agreed upon by the Mixed British - Venezuelan Boundary Commissions operating in the area from November 1900 to January 1905 should still be used in the compilation of maps showing the boundary line (See Appendix 1).

It was reported in the mixed commission's "Act of Georgetown, November 4, 1902," that the details of the survey were being mapped at 1:200,000. Copies of these maps are in

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<sup>3</sup> Actas de la Comisión Mixta de Límites que implican acuerdo internacional (1900 - 1905), Tratados públicos y acuerdos internacionales de Venezuela, vol. III, pp. 382 - 409.

<sup>4</sup> Acuerdos públicos...vol. IV, pp. 360 - 362.

both British and Venezuelan Foreign Offices and available to mapping agencies in those countries. However, it should be noted that among the modern, official maps, the "Mapa de Geológico de Venezuela," 1:1,000,000, 1955, by the Dirección de Geología, Ministerio de Minas e Hidrocarburos, is clearer and more correct in its rendition of the boundary than is the "Mapa físico-político de la República de Venezuela," 1:1,000,000, 1955, by the Dirección de Cartografía Nacional, Ministerio de Obras Públicas. The four-sheet map, "British Guiana," 1:500,000, 1960, by the Directorate of Overseas Surveys is likewise very correct in its use of the official observed points.

**ANNEX 1:** Geographical positions, established by the Mixed British - Venezuelan Boundary Commissions, 1900 - 1905, and the Mixed Brazilian - Venezuelan Boundary Commissions, 1931, along the British Guiana - Venezuela Boundary.

	Date of Survey Minutes	Latitude North ° ' "	Longitude West ° ' "
Punta Playa	11/24/1900	8 33 22	59 59 48
Confluence of R. Mururuma with R. Barima	12/12/1900	8 18 44	59 48 10
Headwaters of R. Mururuma	1/21/1901	8 14 05.3	59 50 07.9
Mouth of R. Haiowa at junction with R. Amacuro	1/21/1901	8 13 04	59 56 39.1
Middle of R. Amacuro at mouth of R. Haiowa	4/25/1901	8 13 02.5	59 56 04
La Lancha	4/25/1901	8 02 20	60 05 00
Salto de San Victor (Falls of San Victor)	4/25/1901	7 58 42	60 10 05.5
La Horqueta or Mouth of R. Polvo de Oro	4/25/1901	7 52 18.2	60 18 22.14
Source of R. Amacuro in Sierra Imataca	4/25/1901	7 48 00	60 21 53
Headwaters of R. Amacuro	11/4/1902	7 49 00	60 21 53
Highest point of Sierra Imataca at headwaters of R. Barima	11/4/1902	7 28 24	60 41 32.2
Point 300 meters S.W. of the source of R. Acarabisi	11/4/1902	7 10 10	60 20 39.5
Headwaters of R. Acarabisi	1/10/1905	7 08 27.7	60 20 51.1
Mouth of R. Acarabisi	1/10/1905	6 55 47.1	60 22 01.7
Camp No. 3 on R. Cuyuni	1/10/1905	6 49 28.9	60 39.12.8
Camp No. 4 on R. Cuyuni	1/10/1905	6 47 04.8	60 46 36.3
Mouth of R. Ekereku on R. Cuyuni	1/10/1905	6 43 02.8	60 56 23.7
Mouth of R. Venamo	1/10/1905	6 42 40.9	61 08 00.7
Pathawaru, R. Venamo	1/10/1905	6 26 02.3	61 07 54.1
Arawai Falls, R. Venamo	1/10/1905	6 19 36.5	61 09 22.1
Tschuau Village, R. Venamo	1/10/1905	6 11 45.8	61 07 22.1
Kura Falls, R. Venamo	1/10/1905	6 03 42.5	61 16 46.6
Deadman's Camp (Campamento del Muerto) R. Venamo	1/10/1905	5 58 06	61 22 55.7
Westernmost source of R. Venamo	1/10/1905	5 56 55.4	61 23 24.7
Boundary marker, Mt. Roraima*	1/10/1905	5 10 09.6	60 45 58.2
Tripoint marker, Mt. Roraima - Venezuelan Commission	12/29/1931	5 12 08.6	60 44 07.5
Tripoint marker, Mt. Roraima - Brazilian Commission	12/29/1931	5 12 18.92	60 44 02.31

\*NOTE: The 1905 values for the "Boundary marker, Mt. Roraima," 5°10'09.6"N. and 60°45'58.2"W., may be considered as superseded by the more recent observations.

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 4507).