

BARTICA JOURNAL

In Guyana, a Land Dispute With Venezuela Escalates Over Oil

· By WILLIAM NEUMAN The New York Times



MERIDITH KOHUT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A military parade in Georgetown, Guyana, this month. Guyana is in a dispute with Venezuela that dates to the 19th century over two-thirds of its land.

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BARTICA, Guyana — At a little tin-roofed beer joint on the west bank of the Essequibo River, Rawle Huggins relaxed on a wooden bench and considered his tiny country’s escalating border spat with its much bigger neighbor, [Venezuela](#).

“Here is [Guyana](#),” said Mr. Huggins, a sometime gold miner, referring to the land beneath him and everything around it. “I don’t live

in [Venezuela](#). I live in [Guyana](#). They live,” he added, gesturing beyond the jungle that fringes the town, “over there.”

Bartica (pronounced BAR-ti-ca), a two-and-a-half-hour journey by car and boat from Guyana’s capital, Georgetown, is the jumping-off point for what the Guyanese call “the interior,” a sparsely populated region of forest and savanna that holds indigenous villages, mining camps and deposits of gold, diamonds, bauxite and other minerals.

That region is at the center of a bitter battle between neighbors. In a squabble that goes back more than 100 years, Venezuela insists it is the rightful owner of everything west of the Essequibo, laying claim to nearly two-thirds of Guyana’s territory, including Bartica.



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Passengers arrived in Bartica, a two-and-a-half-hour journey by car and boat from Guyana’s capital, Georgetown.

The dispute has heated up in recent months, after Exxon Mobil, working for the Guyanese government, announced in May that it had [discovered a large reserve of oil](#) in ocean waters off the disputed territory. Venezuela’s tough economic and diplomatic retorts have even kindled warnings of a military clash

“The oil that we find, Venezuela is claiming,” said Towannah John, a waitress at a nearby refreshment shack, the Palm Court, where miniature Guyanese flags flap from the ceiling.

To emphasize her indignation, Ms. John began singing a folk song popularized during an earlier standoff with Venezuela over the same territory: “I ain’t giving up no mountain, I ain’t giving up no sea, I ain’t giving up no river that belongs to me.”

The dispute dates to the 19th century, when Guyana was a British colony and Britain was seeking to expand its foothold in South America by making aggressive claims about the colony’s boundaries. Venezuela objected and sought help from Washington, which, in a crucial test of the Monroe Doctrine, pressured Britain to take the dispute to an arbitration panel.

The panel met in Paris in 1899. It consisted of four judges, two each from Britain and the United States, and a Russian diplomat who could cast a fifth vote as the tiebreaker. A former United States president, Benjamin Harrison, was the lead lawyer arguing the case for Venezuela.

When the panel announced its decision, it was seen to be highly favorable to Britain, which got almost all the land it had sought.

That appeared to be the end of the controversy until 1949, when a letter from an American lawyer in the proceedings was made public, asserting that the British judges had colluded with the Russian diplomat to force an outcome benefiting Britain.

Venezuelan officials declared the 1899 decision invalid and insisted that the territory be returned, a demand that continued after Guyana gained independence from Britain in 1966.



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“Venezuela has 40 times our population, it has four times the territorial size of Guyana,” said President David Granger of Guyana, center.

The dispute has entered one of its angriest phases in recent months, against the backdrop of a deepening [economic and political crisis in Venezuela](#).

President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela has long accused the United States of conspiring against him. This year he shut down the main [border crossings to Colombia](#), accusing its government of backing conspirators planning to kill him.

Now he has focused his aim on Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America.

After Exxon Mobil’s announcement, Mr. Maduro issued a decree establishing maritime defense zones that encroached on Guyanese waters, as well as on the territorial waters of other Caribbean and South American neighbors. Although he later pulled back the decree, a loud statement had been made.



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Bartica is the jumping-off point for what the Guyanese call "the interior," a sparsely populated region of forest and savanna that holds indigenous villages, mining camps and deposits of gold, diamonds, bauxite and other riches.

Around the same time, Venezuela stopped subsidized oil shipments to Guyana in exchange for Guyanese rice, which had been part of Venezuela's program supporting many smaller countries in the region.

Mr. Maduro also withdrew Venezuela's ambassador from Georgetown, and Guyana eventually removed its ambassador from Caracas.

There was more. Venezuela objected to Brazil's efforts to help Guyana develop hydroelectric projects in the disputed zone. It sent a letter to Exxon Mobil objecting to the oil drilling. And it sent a similar letter to a Canadian company, Guyana Goldfields Inc., threatening to stop it from operating a large gold mine west of Bartica.

Officials in the two countries have also engaged in a fierce war of words. Mr. Maduro accused President David Granger of Guyana of representing Exxon Mobil rather than his own people.



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Traders weighing gold and testing it for impurities in Bartica.

Mr. Granger warned over the summer that Venezuela was massing troops and military equipment on the border, while Venezuela said it was merely conducting military exercises.

Mr. Maduro and Mr. Granger met in September in New York, but little came out of it other than an agreement to restore their ambassadors.

Mr. Maduro, a leftist, has sought to play Venezuela as the victim in the dispute, saying it was cheated by the powerful British Empire.

It is a variation of Mr. Maduro's standard script, which has Venezuela playing David in an epic struggle with the United States, cast as Goliath.

But many here see Venezuela's tangle with tiny Guyana, one of the poorest countries in the region with a population of just over 735,000, in a similar light.

"Venezuela has 40 times our population; it has four times the territorial size of Guyana," Mr. Granger said in an interview, adding that his army has only two helicopters, two transport planes and no navy, while Venezuela has fighter jets, tanks and warships.

"There's no way we can contemplate a military confrontation," Mr. Granger said.

Mr. Granger, a soft-spoken former army general, warned of the “Finlandization” of Guyana, meaning it risked being dominated by its more powerful neighbor. “A simpler word would be bullying,” he said.

“The main impact of the claim is the effect it has on potential foreign investors,” Mr. Granger added. “The risk is they would rather not invest here.”

Officials in Venezuela did not respond to requests to interview Mr. Maduro and Delcy Rodríguez, the foreign minister.

In July Mr. Maduro gave an interview to a government-run television station, Telesur, in which he objected to the suggestion that “Venezuela is now the imperialist country.”

“We are the country that had something taken away from us,” he said. “That land was not given to us as a gift by the British Empire or the Spanish Empire. Our grandfathers won it fighting on the battlefield. It is sacred ground.”

In Venezuela, maps routinely show the disputed land as part of Venezuelan territory, sometimes covered in candy cane stripes, with the label “Reclamation Zone.” It is generally referred to as the Essequibo, but because of the area’s elongated shape, some Venezuelans call it “the elephant’s trunk.”

But while Venezuelans are taught from the earliest years of school that the territory is rightfully theirs, few have actually set foot there.

“All these people that talk about the Essequibo have never been there,” said Charles Brewer-Carías, a Venezuelan outdoorsman and explorer.

Mr. Brewer-Carías was a youth minister in 1981 when he led a group of about fifty young Venezuelans on a secret excursion over the border and into the Guyanese jungle, planting Venezuelan flags as they went.

He also flew over Guyana in a small plane to map strategic facilities, such as airstrips. At the time he hoped to incite his government to invade. (It got him fired instead.) He started out thinking that the area was an empty jungle, but came to find it was occupied by Guyanese people, towns, farms and mines.

He says that Venezuela should accept the status quo and emphasize

friendly relations.

“It is impossible to take away land from a country that has developed it,” Mr. Brewer-Carías said. “We are so given to magical things that we think we will get it and get its oil wells and gold mines.”

On a dock along the Essequibo River, in a town called Parika, Mike Prince, 61, a Guyanese Army veteran, sat watching passengers boarding boats for Bartica.

“I would re-enlist just to chase these sons of back to where they came from,” he said, genteelly omitting an obscene word. It was, he said, all about the oil.

“Greed,” he added, “is a terrible thing.”

Patricia Torres contributed reporting from Caracas, Venezuela
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HACIA LA ZONA EN RECLAMACION DEL ESEQUIBO 1981

Durante la Semana Santa de 1981, estábamos encargados del Ministerio de la Juventud y Deportes durante la Presidencia de Luis Herrera Campins, y como una actividad adicional del programa de los “Campamentos de Frontera”, penetramos a pie 50 kilómetros en la Zona en Reclamación del Esequibo y llegamos cerca de Mathews Ridge acompañado entre otros por Luis Alberto Carnicero y el Dr. Enrique Suárez (ahora famoso oftalmólogo) que nos acompañan en esta fotografía tomada en Guarampin. Después realizamos una veintena de vuelos para reconocer todas las ciudades y filmar todos los aeródromos que había en la Zona en Reclamación del Esequibo junto a Enrique Martín Cuervo y el Cap. Enrique Fernández; lo que nos permitió preparar un documental para que el GPO. (Grupo de Planificación Operacional) de Min. Defensa conociera cuán desarrollado se encontraba ese territorio que estábamos reclamando. El vecino país nos acusó de haber realizado “un Acto de Guerra” y la envidia y la mezquindad local impidieron que continuáramos con la investigación. Ya pasaron 34 años y no se hizo nada de lo que sugerimos entonces.....!