Building a Border Accord

IN A NEUTRAL AREA at a border crossing between Belize and Guatemala, a small OAS field office helps defuse day-to-day tensions that may arise as the result of a longstanding territorial differendum between the two countries. The office monitors compliance with “confidence-building measures” that have been agreed to by both countries, verifies any reported incidents, and promotes greater understanding between communities in the area (for further information, see page 14).

"This mission has played a critical role in verification and fostering better relations, and it deserves the continued support of the member states," Assistant Secretary General Albert Ramdin said, following a visit to the office in September.

The small OAS General Secretariat office was established three years ago between immigration checkpoints at the most traveled crossing, connecting Benque Viejo, Belize, and Melchor de Mencos, Guatemala. The OAS staff of nine—two international employees, the others Belizeans or Guatemalans—can walk to lunch in either country.

The office sits in what is called the Belize-Guatemala Adjacency Zone—a vertical strip extending one kilometer on either side of an invisible line whose coordinates were determined several years ago, through negotiations held under the auspices of the OAS. The line stretches from Agua Turbias, where Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico meet, to Gracias a Dios in the south.

In the middle of the dense rain forest that covers much of this region, it is not always easy to tell where one side begins or ends. In the case of a reported incident—such as the detention of a citizen of one country by authorities from another—the first step is to establish exactly where it took place. The OAS office uses handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment for this purpose, which it has also provided to authorities on both sides. The Pan American Institute of Geography and History, a specialized OAS agency, provides technical support.

When an incident arises, the OAS dispatches someone to interview the parties involved and check the facts. Some areas are too remote for a vehicle and must be reached on foot or by mule. In cases where the jungle is impenetrable, the mission sometimes receives helicopter support, through the Belize Defence Force (BDF).

Once the OAS determines the nature of the occurrence, it reports to Belizean and Guatemalan authorities. The OAS office works closely with the BDF and the Guatemalan Army, coordinating joint patrols to avoid misunderstandings. It is also in permanent contact with the foreign ministries of both countries.
Miguel Ángel Trinidad, an Argentine national who heads the OAS field office, said that prompt, impartial verification often prevents small incidents from escalating into larger diplomatic problems. Under the confidence-building measures they have adopted, the countries can take any disagreements to the OAS Secretary General.

Besides verification, the OAS field office also organizes some joint community events in the Adjacency Zone, to further cultural understanding on both sides, and offers English courses to Guatemalan authorities and Spanish to Belizeans. The OAS office has received support from several donor countries, including Great Britain, the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

One key effort in the last two years involved relocating more than thirty Guatemalan families who had settled in the Belizean-administered area of the Adjacency Zone. The OAS built the community of Nueva Juda on the side managed by Guatemala, including a school for more than two hundred children. Further south, as part of another project, the OAS plans to build a school in the village of Arenal, where the Adjacency Line runs through the middle of a soccer field.

In terms of the big picture, the OAS General Secretariat in Washington continues to assist Belize and Guatemala in seeking to resolve their territorial differences, which dates back to the nineteenth century. In September 2005, Belize and Guatemala signed a framework agreement establishing negotiation and confidence-building measures designed to maintain friendly bilateral relations until a permanent solution is reached, and in February of this year, they agreed to a proposal by Secretary General José Miguel Insulza to begin a process of negotiation on the maritime aspects.

In the meantime, Trinidad believes that day to day, the office in the Adjacency Zone is fulfilling a fundamental mandate laid out in the OAS Charter: “to prevent possible causes of difficulties and to ensure the pacific settlement of disputes that may arise among the member states.”

—Janelle Conaway

Guyana’s Peaceful Election Process

In GUYANA, the vote that returned President Bharrat Jagdeo and his People’s Progressive Party/Civic coalition to power last August 28 was conducted, as the OAS Electoral Observation Mission said in a preliminary report, “in a manner that does credit to all concerned.”

Besides local Guyanese election observers, the international community played a critical monitoring role, supported by observation teams from the OAS, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Commonwealth, and the Carter Center.

The OAS had been engaged in the pre-electoral process since early May, meeting with a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the process—from the main parties to the smaller political parties, civil society, religious organizations, the media, the Private Sector Commission, and the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM).

The immediate aftermath of calm was an opportunity for Guyana’s citizens and their political leaders, along with a host of other key players, to work together to move the country forward. “The acceptance of the results by all political parties created that environment of peace,” says Assistant Secretary General Albert R. Ramdin, who led the 123 OAS observers on election day.

Among preliminary OAS recommendations is that the GECOM structure needs to be reexamined to make it a more professional, nonpartisan, independent institution. This is a significant point, says Ramdin, as other elections, such as local government elections, still remain to be organized. In the meantime, the local government minister has just announced that municipal and local government elections would be held next year.

—Ian Edwards