Guyana’s Border Disputes with Venezuela and Suriname

Robert Ramraj
Professor

Department of Social Sciences
Winston-Salem State University
Winston-Salem, NC 27110

ABSTRACT

Guyana is currently actively engaged in border disputes with Venezuela on its western border, and with Suriname to its east. The first dispute involves an area of over 50,000 square miles or two-thirds of Guyana. The Surinamese claim to Guyanan territory covers over 5,000 square miles. One source of dispute is that borders were drawn when Guyana and Suriname were colonies of Britain and the Netherlands respectively. Vast proven untapped resources including minerals (oil, gold, diamonds, bauxite and manganese), tropical hardwood forests and fishing grounds are present in the disputed regions. While diplomacy and negotiations have been employed often, Suriname, in 2000, utilised military action to eject oil exploration rigs from offshore Guyanese territory in the Corentyne area. Tensions with Venezuela have increased following events after a cyanide spill in the Essequibo River in the mid-nineties. Venezuela also objected to Guyana granting permission to a North American company to establish a space vehicle launching station in Essequibo.

KEY WORDS: Venezuela, Suriname, Essequibo River, Corentyne River, geopolitics, border issues

INTRODUCTION

Guyana (formerly British Guiana) is located on the northeastern shoulder of South America, between one and nine degrees north latitude and 56 and 61.5 degrees west longitude. It is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the south and west by Brazil, on the west by Venezuela, and on the east by Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana) (Fig. 1). The Caribbean island of Trinidad is situated approximately 365 miles to the northwest. The dense tropical rain forests of northwestern Guyana are, unfortunately, the location where Jim Jones and his followers (and Congressman Leo Ryan of California) were killed in 1978.

After the three British colonies of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice united to become the single country of British Gui-
ana in 1831, Britain governed its only South American possession for over a century. On May 26, 1966, Britain peace­fully granted that country its independ­ence. The post-independence name of "Guyana" was adopted because the word means "land of many waters," a fact which was recognised by the Amerindi­ans who first settled there thousands of years ago.

In 1991, Guyana's population, com­posed predominantly of descendents of East Indian indentured servants and Af­rican slaves, totalled 724,000 (National

Census Report: Guyana, 1991). East Indians and African (Blacks) now comprise 49 and 33 percent respectively of the popu­lation while those of mixed ancestry account for 13 percent. After rapid in­creases, particularly during the period from 1946 through 1960, the country's population has stabilized, a consequence of low fertility rates and very high out­migration rates, particularly to the United States and Canada.

Guyana, extremely rich in natural re­sources, is a producer and exporter of ag­ricultural products including rice, sugar
and coffee, and minerals such as gold, diamonds and bauxite. The manganese mines (vast deposits of the mineral still exist), formerly managed by Reynolds Aluminum Corporation, are no longer operational and the manganese river port was the same used by Jim Jones and his followers. Most of Guyana is covered with tropical rain forests and it is not surprising that tropical hardwoods are a major source of foreign exchange. The potential is great for hydroelectric development. The country is also an exporter of fish and shrimp, particularly those caught in the Atlantic offshore in a booming trawler industry. Drilling for oil offshore in the Corentyne region was thwarted by Surinamese gunboats. Surinamese authorities claim the oil fields to be part of their territory.

Political and Economic Affiliations

Guyana has embraced the policy of active political, social, cultural and economic participation on a global and regional level, and as such, is a member of several regional and international organisations including the United Nations, the British Commonwealth of which the Queen of England is the head, and was even a member of the now defunct ten nation English-speaking West Indies Federation. It is also currently a member of CARICOM (an economic community of nations in the Caribbean region previously known as CARIFTA), and the recently-formed Association of Caribbean States (ACS). After several years of observer status in the Organisation of American States, (OAS), Guyana gained full membership to that hemispheric body in 1991.

Border Disputes

Guyana is currently engaged in two border disputes with its neighbours—Venezuela to the west and Suriname to the east. Venezuela claims about two-thirds or approximately 50,000 square miles of Guyana’s territory or all lands located west of the Essequibo River. Suriname claims about 5000 square miles in the New River Triangle region in southern Berbice county (Fig. 2).

GUYANA-VENEZUELA BORDER DISPUTE

Venezuela is steadfastly claiming 50,000 square miles of Guyanese territory (all areas west of the Essequibo River) for itself. This territorial dispute, the more important of the two by far, is alive and well and both countries have been talking and are actively talking about this dispute.

It is necessary to provide a brief history of the Guyana-Venezuela border dispute here. Shortly after Guiana (the old spelling is deliberately used here) was ceded to Britain at the London Convention in 1814, Robert Schomburg, an explorer, historian and land surveyor, was requested by the British government in 1835 to map the boundaries of Guiana. Venezuela protested when the complete map was published in 1840, claiming that the entire area west of the Essequibo River belonged to it, not to Guyana. Although Britain and Venezuela held negotiations about the dispute, the only decision which was reached was that neither of the two countries would occupy the disputed territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1981).

The discovery of gold in the nineteenth century and the presence of huge areas of valuable forest and savannas in Essequibo were other incentives for Venezuela wanting the disputed territory. In October 1894, Venezuelan forces crossed the border into British Guiana and established a post; the British colonial police and magistrate left without putting up any resistance (Jeffrey, 1992-1993). When British miners commenced to extract gold from Essequibo, Venezuela protested, then eventually broke diplomatic relations with Britain in 1887. Venezuela succeeded in getting help from President Grover Cleveland of the United States. For a few days, Britain and the United States came close to war over that border dispute (Daly, 1975). However, on February 2, 1897, an international arbitration tribunal began deliberations on the matter. With the intention of providing a fair and just settlement be-
FIGURE 2. Areas of Guyana claimed by Venezuela and Suriname.
tween Great Britain and the United States, the two parties signed the “Award of the Tribunal of Arbitration” on October 3, 1899. As a result of that agreement, Venezuela gained some land—about 5,000 square miles or six percent of British Guiana in the Northwest District near the mouth of the Orinoco River.

Venezuela very strongly questioned the decision of the Tribunal of Arbitration in 1965 by reopening the border issue. That country was infuriated because it perceived that it was treated unfairly by the Tribunal which comprised of two Americans, a Russian and two British negotiators. The Tribunal voted 3-2 in favor of Guyana. However in 1944, Mellett-Provost, an American lawyer, suggested that there was a conspiracy against Venezuela. He claimed that Britain and Russia “made a bargain” (Daly, 1975) and that they cut a “deal” (Jeffrey, 1992–1993), an allegation which added fuel to an already flaming fire.

Prior to British Guiana getting its independence from Britain in 1966, representatives from the three countries (Britain, British Guiana and Venezuela) met at a conference and discussed the claim once again in 1965. Referred to as the Geneva Agreement, the parties involved agreed that a Guyana/Venezuela Mixed Commission would be formed, that there would be no violence and that after four years, a report would be submitted to the United Nations.

Venezuela is very persistent about pressing its claim to Guyanese territory. In October, 1966 a skirmish broke out (gunfire was exchanged but there were no fatalities) between the Guyana Defence Force (Guyana’s army) and the Venezuelan Army at Ankoko Island in the Cuyuni River when Venezuela occupied Guyana’s half of that island. (The Cuyuni River forms the international boundary between those two South American countries; Ankoko Island in that river is shared by those two neighbors). That occupation still continues until today. It should be noted that on December 13, 1965, 10 months prior to the invasion, the Legislative Assembly of the State of Bolivar in Venezuela (whose eastern bound-
Venezuelan harassment of Guyanese citizens culminated in the arrest and detention for two days of the Commissioner of the Guyana Geology and Mines, Brian Sucre, and some other Guyanese mining officials who were in the area on state business. In a three-hour long face-to-face interview with Mr. Sucre in June, 2000, the Commissioner stated that he and the other detainees were well treated by Venezuelan authorities and that the Venezuelans who apprehended them were very sensitive to and aware of the border situation (Sucre, 2000). The Sucre incident prompted Clement Rohee, the Guyana Minister for Foreign Affairs, to “call in” the Venezuelan Ambassador to Guyana, Enrique Barrios, to discuss the issue (Guyana Review, December, 1994). One undesirable consequence of that incident was the closure by Venezuela of the border which resulted in the inability of Guyanese and other miners to obtain fuel and food from sources across the border, without which their mining and related businesses would cease to function. A diplomatic nightmare was created for the Guyana government when the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) planned to meet with Venezuelan authorities. The Venezuelan Embassy in Georgetown set the meeting for April 1, 1996 and stated that representatives from that country’s Border Commission, Ministries of Trade and Defence, and oil industry would be in attendance. The Guyana government intervened before any such meeting took place.

Venezuela is very skeptical of conducting border talks with its neighbours. For example, Venezuelan officials oppose any arbitration in its border dispute with Columbia largely because of the “bad experience” they have had with the British arbitration of that Guyana territory which Venezuela claims (Guyana Review, October, 1995). After the Omai disaster in which cyanide, utilized in gold mining operations in Guyana, was spilled in the Essequibo River in 1995, Venezuela reacted angrily, calling it a unilateral and irrational exploitation of the Essequibo region.” A Venezuelan government statement added “The government of Vene-

zuela, not withstanding its good relations with the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, reiterates its firm opposition to this indiscriminate policy of mining and timber concessions, as well as any action taken by the Guyana government which permanently and irreversibly alters the very region over which we claim sovereignty.” In March, 1995, Guyana politely refused a Venezuelan government offer made by Foreign Minister Burelli Rivas to jointly develop the Essequibo in exchange for a “practical proposal” for the settlement of the territorial controversy. (Caribbean Daylight, September 30, 1996). Had Guyana accepted the offer, it would have had to cede some territory.

In August, 1995, the late President Cheddie Jagan of Guyana and ex-President Rafael Caldera of Venezuela met in Trinidad at the first heads of government of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). The main topic of conversation was the border dispute which was alluded to as the “demarcation of continental and maritime boundaries” between the two countries.

Some seemingly insignificant matters are reminders to Guyana that a border problem still remains. Brazilian “garempeiros” (miners who illegally enter Guyana, illegally mine for gold, illegally occupy Guyanese territory and even marry Guyanese women and sire their children, most of whom speak Portuguese, but no English or Guyanese dialects) are often arrested and tried by Guyanese authorities. Sentences do not deter these “gar-empeiros.” Guyanese miners in the Cuyuni district (Cuyuni is another large river and region of Guyana) are often subject to “shakedowns” by the Venezuelan military who often open fire at the Guyanese. In some cases, Guyanese miners have to fly the Venezuelan flag in order to avoid being fired upon by Venezuelan guardsmen (Guyana Review, October, 1996).

In 1989, Sir Alister McIntyre of Grenada was appointed as special UN Mediator in the Guyana-Venezuela border dispute. McIntyre, whose appointment received the blessing of the United Nations, agreed to serve as “Good Offi-
cer” or Personal Representative of the

McIntyre has recognized that many technical aspects of the issue such as environmental and developmental implications and the delimitation of maritime boundaries need to be meticulously studied. During a four-day visit to Guyana in July 1997, the “Good Officer” held talks with several groups and individuals including President Sam Hinds, the Parliament Committee on Border and Foreign Affairs, opposition political parties and representatives from the private sector, Trades Union Congress, and the Guyana Council of Churches. After serving faithfully for several years, McIntyre retired and was replaced by Oliver Jackson as “Good Officer” in the late 1990s.

GUYANA-SURINAME BORDER DISPUTE

After Suriname obtained its independence from The Netherlands in 1975, it claimed the New River Triangle, an area of more than 5,000 square miles of Guyana’s territory as its own (Fig. 2). Suriname has contended that the New River is the continuation of the Corentyne River and not a branch of the Corentyne. Guyana strongly contends that the New River is indeed, a branch of the Corentyne. According to Suriname, therefore, the border between the two countries should be the New River and not the Corentyne. This act by Suriname is inconsistent with the fact that in 1936, Holland had acknowledged that the Kutari River was the true source of the Corentyne River, and together with Britain and Brazil, had established a trijunction point at the headwaters of the Kutari, marking the spot where British Guiana, Brazil and Dutch Guiana intersected (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1968). This map is used by all international organisations.

In the late 1960s, Suriname, with its eye on Guyana’s bauxite, forest wealth, possibly oil and other resources, secretly sent surveyors into the New River Area. The Guyana police evicted those transgressors. However, the Surinamese persisted by bringing in heavy equipment such as bulldozers and jeeps. Then they built a large military camp, named “Tigri.” Before dawn on August 19, 1969 two Guyanese aircraft (one piloted by Majors Roland da Silva and Michael Chan-A-Sue and the other by Majors Philip Jardim and Anthony Mekdeici) with 22 armed soldiers on each retook the New River Triangle. Although the invaders placed drums on the airport and set fires to get decreased visibility, the Guyanese planes successfully landed. There was some shooting and the Surinamese fled by boat. A Surinamese who drowned when his boat overturned in the swift-flowing river was the only fatality. The New River Triangle was recaptured by Guyana (Chan-A-Sue, 1994).

The tension continued between both countries as they both engaged in low-level hostilities towards each other such as seizing fishing boats and trawlers and locking up fishermen. The dispute still remains unsettled. In 2000, Suriname gunboats prevented oil drilling operations, initiated by Guyana, to take place at the estuary of the Corentyne River. This event is discussed in some detail subsequently.

In 1986, the Guyana-Suriname Cooperation Council was established to promote cooperation between the two countries. However, when the Commission met in 1994 in Paramaribo, Suriname’s capital, the minutes of the meeting were not signed because Suriname inserted a reference to its territorial claim against Guyana into the document (Chan-A-Sue, 1994). The fifth meeting of the Council occurred in Georgetown during April-May, 1997. Much of the meeting was taken up by developmental issues and bilateral relations such as technical cooperation in oil exploration, hydroelectricity, bauxite and forestry, and the transborder smuggling of goods and drugs across the Corentyne River (Caribbean Daylight, November 14, 1998).

In 1995, Suriname published a map of that country which included the Guyana part of the territory which is in dispute. Obviously, the Guyanese were incensed by that provocative action. The Surina-
mese Foreign Minister, Subhas Mungra, however, called the map a “normal” map of his country which had been produced over the last 50 years and which is used by all (Guyana Review, August, 1995). On July 19, 1995, Guyana’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Clement Rohee, held a press conference at which he expressed his country’s outrage at the publication of the map and other related developments.

It is not surprising that the “borders war” has continued into the twenty-first century. What may be considered the most serious development about Guyana’s border issues with both Suriname and Venezuela occurred in 2000, involving CGX drilling operations. In May, 2000, CGX Energy Inc., a Canadian oil drilling company, set up an oil rig off the Corentyne coast to explore for oil on Guyana’s behalf. Suriname claimed that those oil drilling operations were in its territorial waters and on June 3, two Surinamese gunboats forcibly evicted CGX’s drilling platform from its location, prompting a war of words between the two countries. At least three meetings at the ministerial level between Guyana and Suriname were held in Trinidad. Guyana asked CARICOM (the Caribbean Community) to issue a verbal sanction against Suriname for its “unjustified and unprovoked resort to military force” in a territorial dispute (Guyana Chronicle, June 20, 2000) Clement Rohee, Guyana’s Foreign Affairs Minister, warned Suriname that Guyana will keep its options open and will not hesitate to seek recourse to other appropriate processes to find a solution to the matter (Guyana Chronicle, June 19, 2000). CGX, however, started to explore for oil at a location called Horseshoe (located in Berbice and definitely within Guyanese territorial waters) where operations were unsuccessful.

In May 2000, the Guyana government and a Texas-based U.S. company (Beal Aerospace Technologies Incorporated) signed an agreement allowing Beal to launch commercial rockets from a site in northwestern Guyana. Venezuela opposed the Beal deal, calling it an “unfriendly act.” Venezuela claimed, too, that the space site in Guyana will be used for U.S. military purposes. Beal eventually terminated the Beal agreement in late 2000 after pressure was exerted from both Venezuela and internal opposition groups in Guyana (Ramraj, 2001).

Guyana is busy seeking international support for its border claims against her neighbors. She informed the U.S. and Canadian governments about the territorial dispute with Suriname (Guyana Chronicle, June 19, 2000). Guyana has also sought international support and solidarity from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) by requesting in September, 1998 that the international body help to resolve the border issue with Venezuela (Caribbean Daylight, September 16, 1998). Also in 1998, Clement Rohee (Guyana’s Foreign Minister) stated that he would clarify reports that Suriname intended to take its border dispute about the New River Triangle area to the United Nations Caribbean Daylight, August 21, 1998).

Suriname has not budged even a millimeter on the matter. Its arrogance was clearly demonstrated when it requested from Guyana a copy of the agreement between CGX and Guyana and also demanded that the agreement be scrapped. Suriname’s refusal of Guyana’s offer to share oil resources from CGX’s operations was interpreted by the Surinamese rulers as a concession by Guyana (Guyana Review, July, 2000). Suriname’s military defiance violated the principle of no-use of force to settle disputes between member countries of CARICOM. It is ironic that Guyana spearheaded the way for Suriname’s entry into that Caribbean organization.

CONCLUSION

The border disputes between Guyana and its neighbors to the east and west keep dragging on. Military actions, military threats, verbal attacks and arrests and detentions have been some undesirable consequences. Diplomacy, meetings, third party intervention and international action have been employed to diffuse the situation. Although Venezuela and Guyana were among the attendees at the first conference of South American Presidents in Brazil in September, 2000,
where regional integration and economic cooperation were discussed, Guyana was not among the countries in the region to whom Venezuela granted concessions in the form of cheaper-than-market prices for oil. There seems to be no easy solution to the problem, and events over the past year have certainly provided no reason for optimism for the Guyana-Venezuela situation.

However, since mid-2001, the relation is improving between Guyana and Suriname. This is largely attributed to the fact that Suriname elected a new president this year. At the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Heads of Government Summit held in Bahamas in July, Presidents Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana and Runaldo Venetiaan of Suriname pledged “peace and cooperation” and Venetiaan stressed that “even the border dispute will sink with the passage of time in the face of global challenges against poor states (Caribbean Daylight, July 6, 2001). But unlike the year before, CARICOM Heads did not discuss the border dispute between Guyana and Suriname. Instead, border disputes between Belize and Guatemala and Guyana and Venezuela were central issues.

Relations are also warming between Guyana and Brazil. In addition to leaders of those countries talking at the Rio Group Summit in Chile in August of 2001, the Guyana–Brazil Partial Scope Agreement was signed during the same month (Guyana Review, September, 2001). Under that agreement Brazil will wave duty on a range of Guyanese goods entering northeastern Brazil, while Guyana will waive duties on some equipment and products entering Guyana. Let’s hope that this is the beginning of a permanent harmonious relationship.

LITERATURE CITED