



# **International Boundary Study**

No. 174 – April 15, 1985

## **Brazil – Colombia Boundary**

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**INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY**

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## **BRAZIL – COLOMBIA BOUNDARY**

### **BOUNDARY BRIEF**

From the Venezuelan tripoint at the thalweg of the Rio Negro southeast of San Jose Island, the Brazil - Colombia boundary follows an irregular counterclockwise route to the Peruvian tripoint on the Amazon. The boundary was delimited in two treaties. A 1907 Brazil - Colombia treaty established the line from the Rio Negro northwestward along the Amazon - Orinoco watershed divide, then generally southward along various river courses and straight-line segments to the mouth of the Rio Apaporis. A 1928 agreement delimited the Apaporis - Amazon segment of the boundary as a geodesic line identical to its Brazilian - Peruvian antecedent after Colombia gained undisputed sovereignty over the area. Demarcated throughout, the boundary is approximately 1,643 kilometers long.

### **COLONIAL BACKGROUND**

Within a century after the discovery of the New World, both Spanish and Portuguese explorers had visited the Amazon Basin. Operating from their foothold at the mouth of the Amazon on the eastern bulge of Brazil, Portuguese adventurers made good use of the Amazon as a route into the sparsely populated and relatively unknown interior, home to numerous indigenous Indian groups. As was the custom, wherever they went these explorers claimed the land for Portugal (leaving aside the question of precisely what the limits of the claim might be).

Spanish activity, starting from the Andes, was sporadic and took longer to reach the Basin in any consistent fashion. Fewer riverine routes were available to the Spanish, and the Andean highlands impeded access to the region. Also, although the occasional Spanish explorer certainly ventured into the frontier region, where suzerainty of any sort was uncertain, Spanish attention remained focused on the exploitation of the indigenous populations of the highlands, the site of important Spanish cities in the New World.

The effort to establish specific national control over the Amazon Basin occupied Spain, Portugal, and their colonies and successor states for more than 400 years. The earliest attempt to create a dividing between the incipient New World domains of Portugal and Spain was the Treaty of Tordesillas. That treaty, signed in 1494 at the behest of Pope Alexander VI, bisected the world by means of a line drawn west of the Cape Verde Islands. Although the exact location of the line is debatable, by any interpretation it provided Portugal with a foothold in easternmost Brazil and gave Spain a free hand to colonize and exploit territory west of the line; that is, most of the Western Hemisphere including the majority of the Amazon Basin.

It was from these vantage points that conflicting Spanish and Portuguese activity and contested claims of sovereignty were played out in the interior of South America. Protestant Europe paid little attention to the Papal Bull and pressed its own claims to Amazonia. As the pace of European rivalry for control in the region increased, Spain and

Portugal sought to settle their differences over possession of the South American interior to stave off inroads from other competitors.

The Treaty of Madrid was the first major attempt to draw boundaries in the Amazon, an area still uncharted for the most part. The 1750 treaty recognized the push of Portuguese settlement and occupation west from the Atlantic littoral, calling for an interior boundary line from the confluence of the Rio Yavari and Rio Marañon to the westernmost mouth of the Rio Caqueta, thousands of kilometers inland from the line drawn by the Treaty of Tordesillas.

Subsequent bilateral boundary commissions attempting to survey the treaty line encountered myriad difficulties including armed opposition from Indians. Another major problem for the commissions was internal disagreements. In the north in the vicinity of the contemporary Brazil - Colombia, Brazil - Peru, and Brazil - Venezuela frontiers, the commissioners trekked through miles of difficult terrain only to meet, quarrel, and separate on several occasions. In 1761 a Spanish - Portuguese convention suspended the boundary surveys.

The Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1777 attempted to define anew the limits of Spanish and Portuguese possessions in South America. The accord resurrected essentially the same line described in the 1750 Treaty of Madrid. Once again, however, boundary commissions charged with demarcating the boundary quarreled interminably. They accomplished little beyond adding to the existing confusion by unilaterally erecting provisional markers in misnamed or disputed locations. In 1801, Portugal abrogated the 1777 accord after suffering a declaration of war from Spain, at the time an ally of France.

### **EARLY 19TH CENTURY BOUNDARY MAKING**

During the early 19th century, newly independent Gran Colombia (modern Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador) and the Brazilian Empire under Dom Pedro II made several attempts to define an acceptable boundary. All these efforts proved unsuccessful. Two major factors worked against the delimitation of mutually acceptable boundaries between Brazil and Colombia. The first was the lack of reliable information on the geography of the frontier zone. As heir to Portuguese documents and maps of the area, Brazil was probably better informed as to the location and course of the many rivers that were proposed as dividing landmarks. This Brazilian advantage increased Colombia's fears; it hesitated to designate certain rivers or watersheds as boundary turning points without knowing precisely what was being relinquished and what was being gained. This problem vexed diplomats and impaired boundary commissions until well into the 20th century.

A more critical impediment to the establishment of a common Brazil - Colombia boundary stemmed from conflicting territorial claims among other Spanish successor states and between these nations and Brazil. In particular, Colombia's border with Brazil was affected by the status of its disputes with Venezuela in the upper Rio Negro and with Peru in the middle Amazon. Even before the independence period, uncertainty over the precise

location of Viceroyalty boundaries was common. Doubts persisted after the emergence of Gran Colombia, but, at the time, the disputes were primarily internecine. As Gran Colombia devolved in the decades immediately after the independence period, the border disagreements took on more significance, in some cases dominating relations between the newly formed states.

### **BRAZILIAN AGREEMENT WITH PERU AND VENEZUELA AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE BRAZIL - COLOMBIA BOUNDARY**

Nonetheless, before Colombia had resolved its territorial dispute with Venezuela, Brazil and Venezuela had managed to negotiate a boundary treaty. An accord signed in 1859 delimited a boundary that included the Rio Memachi - Rio Negro sector of the contemporary Brazil - Colombia border.

Colombia protested the agreement, despite the inclusion of a clause stating that the accord should in no way prejudice Colombia's claims to the area. In 1891, after an unsuccessful decade of arbitration by the King of Spain and his assignees, Colombia was awarded sovereignty over an area west of the Rio Negro as far south as San Jose Island on the Rio Negro. Thus, Brazil and Venezuela ceased to abut west of the Rio Negro, the only area where mixed Brazilian - Venezuelan boundary commissions had worked after the 1859 boundary accord.

Only after the turn of the century were Brazil and Colombia able to agree on a line delimiting a common boundary in this long-disputed area. In 1907, a treaty signed in Bogota established the border from the Stone of Cocuy opposite San Jose Island on the Rio Negro to the Apaporis - Caqueta confluence. This treaty, the first successful Brazilian - Colombian boundary accord, recognized Colombia's suzerainty over the territory previously disputed between Colombia and Venezuela by christening the defunct Brazil - Venezuela, Rio Memachi - Rio Negro boundary as the easternmost sector of the new Brazil - Colombia border. It also formalized the boundary in its central sector where conflicts over control of the frontier had been limited almost exclusively to Brazil and Colombia.

The southeastern sector of the Brazil-Colombia boundary emerged from an antecedent line between Brazil and Peru. In 1851, at a time when Peru appeared dominant in a disputed zone between the Amazon in the south and the Apaporis - Caqueta confluence in the north, Brazil and Peru had delimited a common boundary between the Brazilian settlement of Tabatinga and the mouth of the Rio Apaporis. Disputing Peru's claim of sovereignty and control, Colombia protested the accord. In the decades that followed the Brazil - Peru agreement, the struggle between Colombia and Peru to establish uncontested control over the disputed Amazon/Apaporis - Caqueta region intensified. Eventually, the matter was settled in Colombia's favor. In a 1922 Colombia - Peru agreement, Peru relinquished all claims to the disputed territory.

A decade later, however, the dispute was rekindled when Peruvian irregulars occupied Leticia. The conflict was finally settled in 1934 by the League of Nations, which restored the provisions of the 1922 accord.

Because the 1922 Colombia - Peru peace accord obliterated an established binational boundary, Brazil considered the agreement prejudicial to its interests and protested the new arrangement. Soon after, at the behest of U.S. Secretary of State Charles Hughes, Brazil withdrew the protest and agreed to sign a treaty accepting the portion of the old Brazil - Peru line between Tabatinga and the mouth of the Rio Apaporis as the new common boundary with Colombia. The treaty resulting from this agreement was signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1928 and completed the delimitation of the Brazil - Colombia boundary.

### **GEOGRAPHIC SETTING**

The Brazil - Colombia boundary is in an isolated, heavily forested, tropical zone. Rainfall occurs year round and totals up to 3,000 mm. With the exception of scattered hill areas in the eastern sector, near Rio Tomo and Cerro Caparro, the boundary is entirely lowland with demarcation pillars rarely located higher than 200 meters. Midway through its irregular counterclockwise traverse from the Rio Negro, the boundary crosses the Equator.

The boundary line cuts through the traditional homelands of several Indian groups including the Maku, Peba, Tucuna, and Tucano. For the most part these tribes are subsistence agriculturalists living in semipermanent villages scattered throughout the frontier zone. Their concern over the existence of an international boundary appears to be nil and they cross the line with impunity in age-old patterns of migration and subsistence activity.

In the boundary's equatorial swath, between the Rio Uaupes (Vaupes) and the Rio Caqueta, the Tucanoan people practice slash-and-burn agriculture in the heavily wooded, eastward sloping terrain, striated by cataract-laden streams. The Tucano, like most of the tribes of the region, cultivate manioc and prepare it as food in the form of cakes or dried flour. They supplement their diets with bow-caught fish and wild foods collected in the frontier forest. The coca bush also is cultivated, and the ancient practice of allowing powdered coca mixed with leaf ash to dissolve slowly in the mouth is common among most tribes in the western Amazon Basin.

Largely bypassed by the outside world because of their severe isolation and the difficulty in penetrating the region, the frontier tribes have recently begun to feel the press of civilization through renewed efforts from Colombia and, especially, Brazil to integrate their remote patrimonies into their effective national territories. Outmigration, assimilation, and continued high death rates, a result of imported diseases, have reduced the total number of indigenous people living in the frontier region to fewer than 8,000.

Nowhere is the population density of the border zone more than two persons per sq. km. Border settlements are few, widely spaced, and typically small. Tabatinga, with a population of fewer than 6,000 (1980 est.), is the largest Brazilian town near the border.

Located on the north bank of the Solimoes (as the Brazilians call the Amazon upstream from Manaus), Tabatinga provides a ground link to Colombia via a dirt road to Leticia. The latter, the region's major entrepot and market center, is a rapidly growing settlement of more than 16,000 and the focus of a meager, but somewhat promising, tourist industry based on the exotic flora and fauna of the jungle hinterlands.

### **BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT**

Article I of the 1907 "Treaty Relating to Boundaries, Transit and Inland Navigation" describes the boundary between the upper Rio Negro and the Apaporis - Caqueta confluence as follows:

"From the island of San Jose, opposite the Stone of Cocuy, [the boundary] runs toward the East as far as the right bank of the Rio Negro, which it shall cut in latitude 1° 13' 51.76" North, and in longitude 7° 16' 25.9" East of the meridian of Bogota, or 23° 39' 11.51" West of that of Rio de Janeiro; thence in a straight line to the head of the little river Macacuny; a tributary on the right bank of the Rio Negro lying wholly in Colombian territory;

From the head of the Macacuny the frontier shall follow the watershed...between the river Xie and that of the river Tomo...;

The frontier shall continue in an easterly direction, winding along the highest part of the ground separating the waters flowing north from those flowing south, as far as the hill of (Cerro) Caparro, and thence, still following the watershed...as far as the principal source of the Memachi...;

From the principal source of the Memachi, the frontier line shall follow the highest points of the ground, as far as the principal source of that tributary of the Cuiari which lies nearest to the head of the Memachi, following the course of the above-mentioned tributary as far as its junction with the Cuiari;

From this junction, the frontier line shall descend the course (thalweg) of the Cuiari as far as the point where the Pegua, its tributary on the left bank, enters its, and from the confluence of the Pegua and Cuiari the frontier line shall follow the parallel of the said confluence to the West until it meets the meridian through the junction of the Kerary (Querari) and the Vaupes;

On meeting the meridian through the confluence of the rivers Kerary and Vaupes, the frontier line shall follow the course (thalweg) of the latter in an easterly direction as far as its source in about longitude 69° 30' East of Greenwich, following the meridian of this source as far as the Taraira (Traira), thence following the course of the Taraira as far as its junction with the Apaporis, and the course of the Apaporis until it discharges into the Caqueta, where the portion of the frontier fixed by the present Treaty comes to an end..."

The treaty also called for a mixed commission to begin the demarcation of the boundary within one year of the exchange of ratifications. The commission, however, never met. This portion of the boundary was demarcated only after the 1928 treaty entered into force.

The remainder of the border was delimited in the 1928 "Treaty Regarding Frontiers and Inland Navigation" signed in Rio de Janeiro. This treaty described the Apaporis - Tabatinga portion of the boundary as follows:

"The frontier between Colombia and Brazil from the confluence of the river Apaporis with the river Yapura (Japura) or Caqueta, the end of the line laid down in the treaty of the 24th April, 1907 shall be a straight line which, starting from the said confluence, continues as far as the Brazilian town of Tabatinga, on the left bank of the river Amazon."

This line had been similarly described in the 1851 agreement between Brazil and Peru, an agreement protested by Colombia. Its delineation in the Rio treaty signaled the end of almost a century of Colombian - Peruvian conflict over sovereignty west of the boundary.

The 1928 treaty established a mixed commission to demarcate the boundary throughout its length, including the segment delimited in the 1907 accord. To facilitate the commission's work and to help ensure that the boundary would indeed be demarcated, the commissioners were empowered to make modifications and concessions in the line provided that they were "indispensable to enable the line to be clearly and permanently fixed" or were recognized by the two parties "to be clearly convenient to both."

During the course of the demarcation work, from 1930 to 1936, this language was utilized to make several adjustments in the boundary, particularly in the 1907 segment. For the most part, these changes were necessary because the original descriptions had relied on faulty maps inaccurately depicting the locations of certain rivers, their headwaters and confluences, and watershed divides.

A significant disagreement arose, for example, over the sector of the boundary between the Rio Papuri and the Rio Taraira, a poorly charted region. According to the treaty, the boundary was to follow the thalweg of the Papuri to its source at 69° 30' W. Long. and then follow that meridian south to its intersection with the Taraira. In surveying the region, however, it was found that the headwaters of the Papuri were well to the west of the designated meridian. In fact the Papuri headwaters were located on a meridian which, if followed south, would pass west of, and not intersect, the Taraira.

The Colombians naturally argued in favor of strict adherence to the treaty language and the Brazilians in favor of using the new, more accurate geographic information. Eventually, a compromise line drawn along the meridian of the headwaters of the Taraira (70° 02' 37" E. Long.) was delineated by the mixed commission.



The commission's work was completed to the satisfaction of both countries and acknowledged by notes exchanged in June 1937. The final report allocated all river islands on the basis of the thalweg with the exception of San Jose Island in the Rio Negro which was split between Brazil (southern half) and Colombia. Large-scale maps depicting the course of the delineated thalweg in relevant riverine segments of the boundary are contained in a narrative of the commission's work and collection of official minutes entitled Arreglo de Limites Entre la Republica de Colombia y la Republica de los Estados Unidos del Brasil published by the Oficina de Longitudes y Fronteras, Bogota, Colombia, in 1946. Demarcated throughout by numerous markers of varying height and composition, the final, 1,643 kms boundary line is composed of river thalwegs for 808 kms, straight line segments 612 for kms, and watershed divides for 223 kms.

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

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