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RESEARCH REPORT

UNODA (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs)

‘’Achieving the Demilitarization of the Venezuela-Guyana Conflict’’

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Basic Overview of the Issue

The Guyana-Venezuela border dispute centers on the Essequibo region, a resource-rich area that has been a point of contention since the 19th century. The conflict traces its roots back to the 1899 Arbitral Award, which established the border between the two countries. Venezuela has long contested the validity of this ruling, claiming that the award was the result of a flawed and unjust process. In recent years, the dispute has intensified due to significant discoveries of oil and natural resources in the disputed area.

The conflict took a new turn when, in 2018, Guyana brought the case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), seeking a final legal resolution. In 2023, the ICJ ruled that it had the jurisdiction to hear the case, despite Venezuela's objections. Tensions escalated as both countries took opposing stances on the matter, with Venezuela questioning the ICJ's authority and pursuing a referendum to annex the disputed region. In December 2023, Venezuela conducted a referendum regarding the status of the Essequibo region. Despite reported low voter turnout, the Venezuelan government claimed support for annexing the territory. This unilateral action has been a focal point in international discussions and legal proceedings. In response to escalating tensions, the United Nations Secretary-General facilitated a meeting between the Presidents of Guyana and Venezuela in December 2023. The leaders committed to resolving the dispute peacefully and in accordance with international law, explicitly renouncing the use of force.

As of early 2024, the dispute and diplomatic efforts remain ongoing. The ICJ continues to deliberate on the case's merits, with a final decision yet to be issued. Both nations have maintained diplomatic engagement while reinforcing their positions on the ground. Organizations, including the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), remain actively involved in monitoring the situation. While these organizations have issued statements urging both countries to uphold international law and refrain from actions that could heighten tensions, the United Nations plays a central role in encouraging continued dialogue and peaceful negotiation between Guyana and Venezuela: The UN's involvement includes promoting confidence-building measures, such as humanitarian aid and cross-border cooperation, to foster trust and prevent

further escalation.

The international community remains committed to ensuring that both parties work toward a peaceful, legal resolution.

Explanation of Important Terms

Territorial Integrity: The principle under international law that sovereign states have the right to defend their borders and all territory within them from external aggression.

Sovereignty: The authority of a state to govern itself without interference from external bodies. Sovereignty emphasizes a state's capacity for internal regulation and independent foreign relationship management.

Diplomatic Recognition: The formal acknowledgment by one state of another state's government. In the context of the Guyana-Venezuela dispute, it refers to Venezuela's lack of recognition of Guyana's control over the Essequibo region.

Arbitral Tribunal: A legal body composed of arbitrators to resolve a dispute between two or more parties outside a traditional court. The 1899 arbitration regarding the Essequibo boundary between Venezuela and Britain (representing British Guiana) is a key historical example.

Provisional Measures: Temporary orders given by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or other courts to prevent harm while a case is pending. Guyana's request for provisional measures to stop Venezuela's referendum on the Essequibo region was a crucial aspect of the legal proceedings.

Geostrategic Importance: The significance of a location in terms of its strategic military, economic, or political advantages. The Essequibo region is seen as geostrategically important due to its natural resources, especially oil.

Post-colonial Border Disputes: Conflicts over borders that were drawn during colonial rule but not settled after independence. The Guyana-Venezuela dispute is an example of a post-colonial border dispute, rooted in colonial-era decisions.

Jurisdictional Challenge: A legal issue raised about whether a court has the authority to rule on a case. Venezuela raised jurisdictional challenges before the International Court of Justice to prevent it from adjudicating the dispute.

International Arbitration: The process of resolving disputes between states through a neutral third party. The 1899 arbitration regarding the Essequibo boundary between Venezuela and Britain (representing British Guiana) can be an example.

Detailed Background of the Issue

The Guyana-Venezuela border dispute, centered on the Essequibo region, has a complex history marked by colonial legacies, international arbitration, and evolving geopolitical dynamics.

a. Colonial Origins and Early Disputes

In the early 19th century, the British Empire acquired the colony of British Guiana (now Guyana) through treaties with the Netherlands. The western boundary was undefined, leading to the appointment of surveyor Robert Schomburgk in 1840 to delineate the border. His 1841 "Schomburgk Line" claimed nearly 80,000 square kilometers, encroaching into territory claimed by Venezuela. This action ignited the first formal dispute between Venezuela and the British Empire.

b. The 1899 Arbitration and Aftermath

The dispute escalated, prompting international arbitration. In 1899, an arbitral tribunal awarded the contested territory to British Guiana, a decision that Venezuela later contested, alleging bias and unfairness. This led to the 1966 Geneva Agreement, which established a framework for resolving the dispute through peaceful means.

c. Recent Developments

In December 2023, Venezuela conducted a referendum regarding the status of the Essequibo region. Despite reported low voter turnout, the Venezuelan government claimed overwhelming support for annexing the territory. This unilateral action has been a focal point in international discussions and legal proceedings. In response to escalating tensions, the

United Nations Secretary-General facilitated a meeting between the Presidents of Guyana and Venezuela in December 2023. The leaders committed to resolving the dispute peacefully and in accordance with international law, explicitly renouncing the use of force. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been involved in adjudicating the dispute. In April 2023, the ICJ dismissed Venezuela's preliminary objections, affirming its jurisdiction to adjudicate the dispute concerning the validity of the 1899 Arbitral Award. Subsequently, in November 2023, the ICJ held public hearings on Guyana's request for provisional measures, aiming to prevent unilateral actions by Venezuela in the contested area. The Court's summary of the order from December 1, 2023, emphasizes that the validity of the 1899 Award and the definitive settlement of the land boundary dispute are matters to be decided at the merits stage.

Major Parties Involved

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has played a significant role in the Guyana-Venezuela border dispute, both historically and in recent developments. Historically, as the colonial power governing British Guiana (now Guyana), the UK was a principal party in the 1899 Arbitral Award that delineated the boundary between British Guiana and Venezuela. This award has been a central point of contention, with Venezuela later challenging its validity. In the contemporary context, the UK has expressed support for Guyana's territorial integrity. In December 2023, the UK government condemned Venezuela's actions concerning the Essequibo region, describing them as "unjustified" and calling for their cessation. Additionally, the UK's Minister for the Americas, Caribbean, and Overseas Territories welcomed an agreement between Guyana and Venezuela to de-escalate tensions, reaffirming the UK's commitment to upholding Guyana's territorial integrity. Demonstrating tangible support, a British warship, HMS Trent, arrived in Guyana in December 2023 amid rising tensions, a move that coincided with Venezuela conducting military exercises near the disputed border. These actions underscore the UK's ongoing involvement and support for a peaceful resolution to the dispute.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ)

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) got involved when Guyana brought the case to

the ICJ for seeking a final legal resolution. In 2023, the ICJ dismissed Venezuela's preliminary objections and confirmed its jurisdiction to hear the case. Tensions escalated when Guyana requested provisional measures to prevent Venezuela's planned referendum on annexing Essequibo. Despite the ICJ's order to halt the referendum, Venezuela proceeded on December 3, 2023, with overwhelming public support for rejecting the Court's jurisdiction and claiming the territory. The United Nations Security Council addressed the dispute in a closed meeting, while further tensions arose in December 2024 when Guyana protested Venezuela's construction of a bridge on disputed land. In January 2025, Guyana sought additional ICJ intervention to prevent Venezuelan elections in the contested region. The ICJ continues to deliberate, with a final ruling expected by 2026, as it works to uphold international law and prevent conflict escalation.

United States

In December 2023, the U.S. government expressed unequivocal support for Guyana's sovereignty, condemning Venezuela's threats to annex the oil-rich territory. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized that the controversy should be resolved through peaceful and legal means, not unilateral actions. To demonstrate its commitment, the U.S. conducted joint aerial surveillance exercises with the Guyanese Defense Force in December 2023, aiming to enhance regional security amid escalating tensions. Additionally, the U.S. government has been providing military expertise to Guyana, assisting in bolstering its defense capabilities. Despite these measures, Guyana has clarified that it does not plan to host a U.S. military base on its soil, reaffirming its commitment to peaceful resolution of the dispute. The U.S. continues to advocate for a diplomatic and lawful settlement to the Guyana-Venezuela border controversy, emphasizing that such disputes cannot be resolved through unilateral referendums or aggressive posturing.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM)

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) is a regional intergovernmental organization founded in 1973 by 15 Caribbean nations, including Guyana. The primary purpose of CARICOM is to promote economic integration, cooperation, and coordination among its member states on issues like trade, development, security, and social welfare. As Guyana is a CARICOM member, the organization has played a supportive role in advocating for

Guyana's territorial integrity and sovereignty over the Essequibo region. CARICOM has reaffirmed its support for Guyana in the context of the border dispute, encouraging both parties to resolve the issue peacefully, ideally through international legal mechanisms such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ). While CARICOM has been supportive of Guyana, its ability to influence Venezuela has been limited. The organization's influence is mainly regional, and its members are often focused on trade and development issues rather than directly confronting a neighboring country's territorial claims.

The Organization of American States (OAS)

The Organization of American States (OAS) is a regional organization founded in 1948 with the primary goal of promoting peace, justice, solidarity, and collaboration among the countries of the Americas. The OAS consists of 35 member states, including Guyana and Venezuela, and works on various issues such as democracy, human rights, security, and development. The OAS has periodically expressed concern over the border dispute between Guyana and Venezuela. In past years, the organization has urged both countries to settle their differences peacefully and to respect international law. While the OAS does not have the power to impose binding resolutions, its role has been mostly diplomatic, encouraging dialogue and multilateral cooperation to avoid escalation. The OAS has faced challenges in taking effective action due to Venezuela's reluctance to participate in its discussions and the complex political dynamics within the organization, with some member states supporting one side or the other.

The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)

The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was founded in 2008 with the goal of promoting regional integration and cooperation in South America. It consisted of 12 South American countries, including both Guyana and Venezuela. UNASUR aimed to strengthen political dialogue, social development, and regional security. In the past, UNASUR had played a role in facilitating dialogue between Guyana and Venezuela. In particular, the organization worked to de-escalate tensions and promote diplomatic negotiations. UNASUR supported peaceful negotiations and expressed solidarity with Guyana, but it was not a decisive player in the conflict.

Brazil

In recent years, Brazil has emphasized the importance of peace and stability in South America, often taking a diplomatic stance in favor of Guyana. The Brazilian government has been actively involved in promoting dialogue between Guyana and Venezuela and has consistently rejected any form of military confrontation over the disputed Essequibo region. Additionally, Brazil has sought to maintain its neutrality while offering support through diplomatic channels and by strengthening its relations with Guyana. A notable instance of Brazil's involvement occurred when senior military officers from the Guyana Defence Force (GDF) and the Brazilian Armed Forces held military exchanges. This cooperation with Guyana also underlines Brazil's role in regional security and its broader goal of fostering peaceful conflict resolution in South America.

Chronology of Important Events

October 23, 2023	Venezuela Announces a Referendum.
November 4, 2023	Guyana's main opposition party, Alliance for Change, called on for a ban on Venezuelans with Guyanese citizenship from voting in elections.
November 23, 2023	Representatives of both Venezuela and Guyana asked in a hearing held at the ICJ. (Guyana requested that the referendum be repealed, alleging that Venezuela intended to annex the territory, a request that the Venezuelan government rejected.)
November 23, 2023	Reported Military Buildup (Senior military officers from the Guyana Defence Force and the Brazilian Armed Forces met for a military exchange. Brazil has been a strong supporter of Guyana in the border dispute)
December 3, 2023	The Venezuelan government organised a referendum asking to support its position in the dispute.

December 5, 2023	Militarisation of the Brazilian Border
December 6, 2023	A Guyana Defence Force Helicopter Crash
December 7, 2023	US Military Involvement
December 14, 2023	Diplomatic Discussions (High representatives of Venezuela and Guyana met and agreed to not use any force and to not escalate tensions over Esequiba.)
December 17, 2023	UK Military Involvement
February 2, 2024	Venezuelan Troop Buildup

Relevant International Documents

Note to Correspondents on the Border Controversy between Guyana and Venezuela, November 21, 2017, Note to Correspondents on the Border Controversy between Guyana and Venezuela

Statement on the border controversy between Guyana and Venezuela, January 10, 2018, Statement on the border controversy between Guyana and Venezuela

Statement attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on the border controversy between Guyana and Venezuela, January 30, 2018, Statement attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on the border controversy between Guyana and Venezuela

Letters from the Permanent Representative of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, 6 December 2023, Letters from the Permanent Representative of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council

Official communiqué of the Security Council regarding the territorial dispute between Guyana and Venezuela over the Essequibo region in Guyana, 9 April 2024, Official communiqué of the Security Council regarding the territorial dispute between Guyana and Venezuela over the Essequibo region in Guyana

Security Council Press Statement on Guyana–Venezuela Situation, April 15, 2024, Security Council Press Statement on Guyana–Venezuela Situation

International Court of Justice Guyana v. Venezuela Case Summary, 18 December 2020, International Court of Justice Guyana v. Venezuela Case Summary

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

a. The Geneva Agreement (1966)

One of the first major international attempts to resolve the dispute occurred in 1966, when the Geneva Agreement was signed between the governments of Venezuela and the United Kingdom (representing British Guiana) and later Guyana, following the country's independence in 1966. This agreement called for the establishment of a mixed commission to explore possible solutions to the dispute. However, this agreement did not provide a definitive solution, and the issue remained unresolved. The Geneva Agreement set the stage for future negotiations, but the lack of binding measures limited its effectiveness.

b. The 2007 UN Secretary-General's Statement

In 2007, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, sought to revive the Geneva Agreement process by calling for renewed efforts to resolve the dispute. He facilitated a meeting between Guyana and Venezuela, where both parties reaffirmed their commitment to peace and dialogue. However, the meeting did not result in any significant breakthrough, as Venezuela continued to assert its claim over the Essequibo region. This marked a turning point, as the UN Secretary-General expressed concern over the lack of progress and the potential for escalating tensions. Following this, both nations were urged to consider a peaceful resolution through legal means, which eventually led to the referral to the ICJ.

c. The ICJ Jurisdiction Ruling (2018)

In 2018, the dispute entered a new phase when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on its jurisdiction to hear the case. Venezuela had challenged the Court's authority to adjudicate the matter, arguing that it should remain a bilateral dispute, to be resolved through negotiation. The ICJ dismissed Venezuela's objections and reaffirmed its jurisdiction, setting the stage for a legal resolution. This was a crucial development, as it marked the shift from diplomatic negotiations to a more formalized, binding legal process. Venezuela's rejection of the ICJ's jurisdiction, however, continued to create challenges, as the country did not fully participate in the legal proceedings.

d. The 2023 Referendum and the ICJ's Response

In December 2023, Venezuela conducted a referendum in which the majority of Venezuelan voters rejected the ICJ's jurisdiction and claimed the Essequibo region as Venezuelan territory. Guyana strongly protested this action, arguing that it violated the ICJ's order and international law. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) held a closed meeting on the issue, urging both parties to respect the ICJ's process and refrain from unilateral actions. However, Venezuela's continued defiance of the ICJ's jurisdiction raised concerns about the effectiveness of international efforts. Guyana, in response, sought further ICJ intervention in January 2025, requesting additional provisional measures to prevent Venezuela from holding elections in the disputed region.

e. Venezuela's Rejection of the ICJ's Jurisdiction

Despite the ICJ's involvement, Venezuela rejected the Court's jurisdiction in 2018 and has consistently argued that the dispute should be resolved through bilateral negotiations and not by international adjudication. This has created a significant barrier to the effectiveness of the UN's strategy, as Venezuela's non-compliance with the ICJ's rulings threatens the credibility of the international judicial system. The United Nations has been largely unable to persuade Venezuela to fully participate in the legal process, leading to a stalled resolution process.

f. The Good Offices Process (1980s–Present)

The Good Offices Process was initiated by the United Nations in the 1980s when diplomatic talks between Guyana and Venezuela stalled. Under this process, the UN Secretary-General was tasked with facilitating dialogue between the two countries in an attempt to mediate a peaceful resolution. The Good Offices were meant to guide both parties toward a mutually agreeable settlement, with the possibility of involving the ICJ if the issue could not be resolved bilaterally. This process had several rounds of talks, but failed to produce a resolution, largely due to Venezuela's refusal to accept any solution that did not involve its territorial claim. Over the years, Guyana and Venezuela's positions became increasingly polarized, making mediation difficult. Despite the efforts, the Good Offices Process was ultimately unsuccessful.

g. The Role of Regional Organizations

The Organization of American States (OAS) has expressed concern about the dispute and urged both sides to resolve the issue peacefully. However, the OAS has lacked the authority to enforce any resolutions, and its efforts have largely been symbolic. Additionally, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) have attempted to facilitate dialogue, but their involvement has been limited by Venezuela's refusal to accept outside mediation.

Solution Alternatives

a. Bilateral Negotiation with Confidence-Building Measures

Promoting direct talks between Guyana and Venezuela, supported by confidence-building measures (CBMs), could help ease tensions and foster cooperation. These CBMs may include humanitarian initiatives, trade agreements, and joint resource management in the disputed region, such as collaborative development of oil and mineral resources overseen by an independent body. Measures like military transparency and economic partnerships can further reduce tensions and build trust. Direct engagement offers flexibility in addressing underlying issues. Although deeply entrenched political positions and mutual distrust may pose challenges, sustained CBMs can improve relations over time.

b. Regional Security and Economic Cooperation

Establishing a regional security and economic cooperation framework involving Venezuela, Guyana, and other South American countries—possibly through UNASUR or a new regional initiative—could foster peaceful relations. This framework could focus on collaborative economic projects, environmental protection in the disputed region, and shared security measures. By creating economic interdependence through joint ventures like river management or oil exploration, both countries may be incentivized to prioritize cooperation over territorial claims. Such economic collaboration could promote long-term stability and peaceful coexistence. However, achieving regional consensus remains challenging, especially given Venezuela's political crisis and the historical tensions surrounding the border.

c. UN Peacekeeping Mission

In the event of heightened tensions or military confrontations, deploying a UN Peacekeeping Force could help monitor the situation and maintain the status quo without escalation. The mission would focus on preventing violence, ensuring compliance with ceasefire agreements, and providing a neutral presence along the disputed border areas. By de-escalating military threats, the peacekeeping force could reduce tensions and reassure both parties of the international community's commitment to peace. However, deploying peacekeepers requires the consent of both countries.

d. Non-binding Regional Consultations and De-escalation Strategy

Launching non-binding regional consultations, involving South American countries both within and outside the dispute, could provide a platform for peaceful dialogue and solution-oriented discussions. These consultations would focus on de-escalation tactics, joint economic ventures, and environmental sustainability, promoting cooperation without imposing binding decisions. By fostering conversations about the shared history of the border dispute, a regional forum could encourage peaceful coexistence and explore creative solutions. While this approach offers opportunities for compromise and consensus-building, its effectiveness depends on both parties' commitment to resolving the conflict peacefully.

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Useful Links:

- **United Nations-Peace and Security,** UN's Role in International Disputes
- **United Nations-Secretary General,** United Nations
- **United Nations-Peace, Dignity and Equality on a Healthy Planet,** United Nations
- **United Nations Digital Library,** UN Digital Library
- **International Court of Justice (ICJ),** ICJ Official Website
- **Organization of American States (OAS),** OAS Official Website
- **CARICOM - Caribbean Community,** CARICOM Official Website
- **UNASUR - Union of South American Nations,** UNASUR Official Website
- **United States Department of State - Venezuela,** US Department of State: Venezuela Relations
- **CIA World Factbook,** CIA World Factbook: Guyana
- **CIA World Factbook,** CIA World Factbook: Venezuela
- **United Nations Security Council - Border Conflicts and Disputes,** UN Security Council Resolutions
- **The Guardian - Venezuela and Guyana Territorial Dispute,** The Guardian: Venezuela-Guyana Conflict
- **BBC News-Essequibo: Venezuelans back claim to Guyana-controlled oil region,** BBC News
- **Timeline of Guyana/Venezuela Border Controversy-** INEWSGUYANA
- **Good Offices Mediation Effort to Resolve Guyana-Venezuela Border Controversy-** United Nations