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## Intelligence Report

*Office of Resources, Trade, and Technology*



# Latin America: Compendium of Boundaries and Territorial Disputes

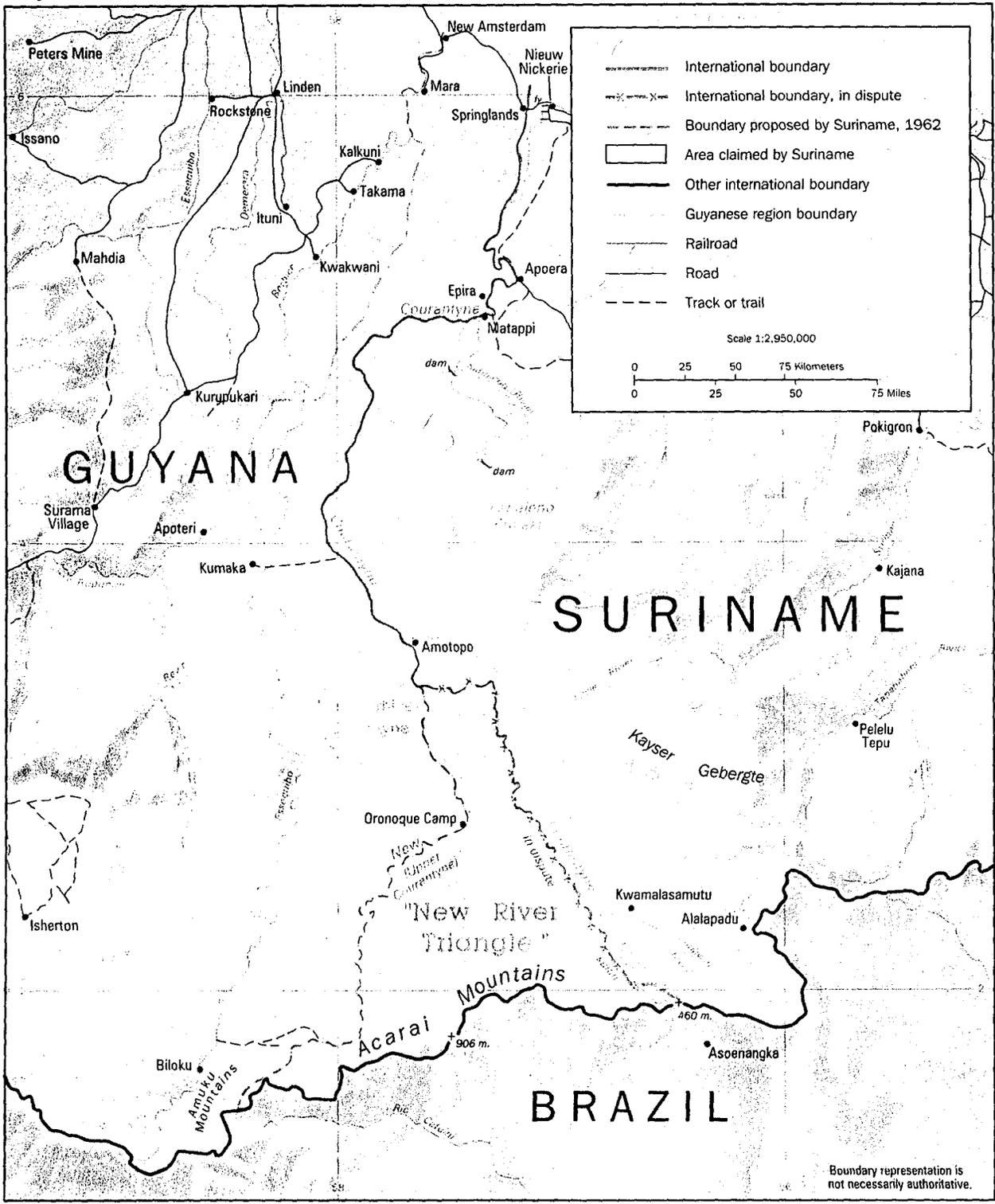
*A Research Paper*

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### Guyana-Suriname Boundary



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**Introduction**

The current territorial and boundary dispute between Guyana and Suriname is based on a historical disagreement over which of two tributaries forms the principal source of the Courantyne River. Although the British and Dutch colonial powers had long agreed that the Courantyne Kutari (Koetari Rivier) constituted the southern third of the border between their colonies, discovery of a major left-bank tributary, the New River, prompted Dutch claims late in the 19th century to the "New River Triangle," or approximately 15,000 sq km of territory lying between the two tributaries. This area is still claimed by Suriname but administered and controlled by Guyana. [redacted]

**Border Basics**

The de facto Guyana-Suriname boundary follows the Courantyne River inland for 709 km from the Atlantic Ocean to its headwaters at the triborder with Brazil. The boundary lies along the high water mark on the river's left bank, although Guyana has navigational rights to the waterway. A dispute exists over the southern third of the border, based on which one of two principal tributaries represents the main source of the river. The disputed territory—some 15,000 sq km in area—lying between the two tributaries and bordered by the watershed that marks the boundary with Brazil is known as the New River Triangle. This area is claimed by Suriname but administered by Guyana. [redacted]

Most of the border area consists of lowlands covered by dense tropical rain forest and swamps. Exceptions occur along the coast and for a short distance upstream, mostly on the Guyana side of the river, where rice and sugarcane plantations are situated. In portions of the higher uplands, scrub or savanna replaces the tropical forests. In the interior, elevations increase gradually to about 200 meters, and a few isolated hills reach 300 to 400 meters. [redacted]

With minor exceptions, the border area is sparsely populated. In addition to the few agricultural settlements near the coast, there are widely scattered logging camps, small farms, and riverbank settlements

of Amerindians for some 200 km upstream. Aside from an occasional military post, the remainder of the border area is practically uninhabited. [redacted]

The Courantyne River and a few logging trails are the main means of transport in the border area. The river is navigable by coastal ships for about 100 km upstream, until rapids, falls, and mazes of boulders force portages and use of small river boats. [redacted] beyond Apoera, travel by heavier ships is restricted primarily to the rainy season. [redacted]

**Historical Background**

The Guyana-Suriname border dispute originated in the 17th century as a conflict between two Dutch colonies: Dutch Guiana, which became Suriname, and the Dutch territory of Berbice, which became East Berbice-Corentyne, the easternmost region in Guyana. The two colonies disputed control of fertile coastal lands west of the Courantyne River. In 1794, the metropolitan government in Amsterdam ruled that Berbice extended to the west bank of the Courantyne and its presumed headwaters stream, the Kutari (Koetari Rivier), and the governors of the two areas confirmed this arrangement in 1800. Around this time, however, Britain seized many of the Dutch settlements, and in 1814 the Dutch ceded what is now Guyana to the British, who named it British Guiana. Although no treaty was signed, in 1831 the two colonial powers agreed that the Courantyne formed the border. [redacted]

Because most of the territory was unexplored and unmapped, London commissioned Robert Schomburgk, a Prussian geographer-naturalist, to survey and map the borders of British Guiana. Schomburgk undertook this task between 1839 and 1842. His interpretation of the Courantyne and what was believed to be its headwaters, the Kutari (Koetari Rivier), as forming the boundary between Dutch and British Guiana became the basis of maps published by both colonial powers during the remainder of the 19th century. [redacted]

✓ In 1871, however, another explorer, the British geologist Bannington Brown, discovered a major left-bank tributary, the New River, that carried more water and was of greater length than the Courantyne-Kutari (Koetari Rivier). Brown's discovery became the basis for Dutch claims to the land west of the Kutari (Koetari Rivier) made in 1898. British reaction to the Dutch claim was that the Courantyne-Kutari (Koetari Rivier) had long been recognized as the border and that subsequent discoveries did not change earlier arrangements. Despite the Dutch claims, the boundary controversy remained quiet for some decades, partly because a Dutch geographer in the 1920s claimed that the New River basin was significantly smaller than that of the Courantyne-Kutari (Koetari Rivier)—thus raising the question of whether flow or basin size should be the main criterion used to determine the Courantyne's source. [redacted]

✓ In the next decade, the two colonial powers attempted to settle their dispute. During the period 1929-30, the Netherlands offered to agree to the Courantyne-Kutari (Koetari Rivier) alignment if Britain would agree that the boundary would follow the western bank of the river. London agreed, and negotiations led to a draft boundary treaty in 1939. This was never signed, however, because of the outbreak of World War II. A treaty had been signed in 1936 establishing the tripoint of the Guyana-Suriname-Brazil boundary in accordance with the Netherlands' suggestion that the boundary line should be drawn from the source of the Kutari (Koetari Rivier) until it intersected the Brazilian watershed. The definitive map of the trijunction was signed by the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Brazil. [redacted]

✓ According to academic sources, the Netherlands' position on the boundary changed after the war. In 1962, the Dutch discarded the Courantyne-Kutari (Koetari Rivier) alignment in favor of the New River and proposed adoption of a midline river boundary. The Dutch also unilaterally renamed the New River the "Upper Courantyne." Britain rejected the Dutch proposals. Before Guyana gained independence from Britain in May 1966, the Dutch Colonial government of Suriname advised London to place on record that the boundary between Guyana and Suriname was in dispute. [redacted]

✓ Despite initial Guyanese-Dutch discussions on the boundary issue, in the years following Guyana's independence several incidents occurred in the disputed territory that led to an increase in polemics. In 1967, Guyana evicted a number of Surinamese, reportedly workers tending a water metering station on the New River. In 1969 a more serious incident took place when Guyana Defense Force units forced Surinamese troops from a post, including an airstrip, that had been established in the disputed territory. Diplomatic efforts to decrease tensions led to a joint communique issued in June 1970 that called for demilitarization of the disputed area and establishment of a mixed commission to develop economic and cultural cooperation. During the 1970s, a subgroup continued efforts to resolve the boundary problem, although little progress was made. [redacted]

Although Suriname restated its claim to the New River Triangle upon gaining independence in 1975, the two countries downplayed their border dispute for many years thereafter. During the late 1970s, as academic sources observe, a dispute with Guyana over fishing rights offshore and on the Courantyne was resolved through bilateral discussions. Between 1984 and 1987, in the face of a rebellion by the Maroons or Bush Negroes in Suriname, Guyana and the Surinamese military regime agreed to cooperate on improving security along the Courantyne. [redacted]

### Recent Developments ✓

In March 1989, according to news media reports, Presidents Hoyte of Guyana and Shankar of Suriname agreed that resolution of the dispute should be raised to a priority level. In addition to the dispute itself, as further press reports indicated, redemarcation of the boundary along the west bank of the Courantyne had become necessary because of heavy siltation, and in August a joint commission was reactivated to address boundary issues. The two presidents also held discussions on controlling the flow of contraband and narcotics across the Courantyne. [redacted]

Meanwhile, it also became evident that the presence of oil deposits in waters off Guyana near Suriname required clarification of the two countries' maritime boundary. Suriname agreed to withhold objections to licenses issued by Guyana for oil exploration in the disputed maritime area. In return, [redacted]

[redacted] Guyana agreed, in spite of environmental concerns, to allow Suriname to proceed with a hydroelectric project on the Kabalebo Rivier, a tributary of the Courantyne River. Negotiations in July 1994 to discuss joint exploitation of offshore resources floundered over the definition of the area in question; Guyana termed it an area of overlap, and Suriname called it an area of dispute. Nonetheless, the two sides agreed to meet again to try to solve the issue of oil concessions in the area. [redacted]

[redacted]

Suriname's foreign policy under President Venetiaan—elected in September 1991—has prevented the unresolved border disputes with Guyana from disrupting improved bilateral relations. Although narcotics trafficking and smuggling still plague the border, both countries are cooperating to control these problems. An October 1993 agreement between the Surinamese National Army and the Guyana Defense Force to improve relations among border forces is another indication of good will on both sides. [redacted]

[redacted] Finally, growing democratization in Suriname, and Suriname's participation in regional integration programs in the Caribbean and Amazon regions, have also contributed to a climate for amicable resolution of the boundary issues. [redacted]