

Hearings Begin in Maritime Dispute Between Bolivia and Chile



The Hague, May 4 (teleSUR-RHC)--The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague is formally hearing arguments on Monday regarding the maritime border dispute brought forward by Bolivia against Chile.

The court will first hear former Chilean ambassador to the United States, Felipe Bulnes, who will defend the position of the Chilean state, insisting that the border issues were settled as part of an agreement between the countries signed in 1904.

Bolivia, presently a landlocked country, disputes the demarcation of its border with Chile. The country lost its coastline and resource-rich desert land during the War of the Pacific (1879-83), resulting in Chile annexing territory.

Arguments from the Bolivian delegation are expected to be heard on Wednesday. According to written arguments, the Bolivian state believes that its petition before the ICJ is independent of the treaty of 1904, arguing also that Chile's repeated statements asserting Bolivia's "sovereign access to the sea" carry legal weight.

The oral hearing represents the second stage of the process and will continue throughout the week. The ICJ will be deciding if the case falls under its jurisdiction and will have until the end of the year to make a decision.

Chile's government has on several occasions questioned the jurisdiction of the court in this matter. Nonetheless, both Bolivian President Evo Morales and Chilean President Michelle Bachelet have previously said their governments would respect a ruling from the ICJ court on a border dispute. "The Hague is the most effective way to reach a solution in the maritime dispute between our two countries," said Carlos Mesa, the Bolivian representative on the matter.

The maritime dispute has long been a source of tension between Bolivia and Chile, with exchanges regarding the issue often bristling with thinly-veiled threats. However as recently as last week, Jorge Sabag, the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Chilean House of Representatives, said, "Chile has fared better with weapons than with diplomacy," when asked about the upcoming proceeding at the Hague. Chile has previously lost disputes regarding its borders at the ICJ, including the loss of 55,800 square miles of waters to Peru.

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