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Leaders of Guyana and Venezuela Commit to Peaceful Resolution of Border Dispute, But Resolution Long Way Off

Presidents Irfaan Ali and Nicholas Maduro meet in St. Vincent & the Grenadines

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A highly-anticipated meeting between the leaders of Guyana and Venezuela on Thursday produced a joint declaration committing the two nations to resolving the tense Essequibo border dispute through peaceful dialogue.

President Irfaan Ali of Guyana and President Nicholas Maduro of Venezuela met in St. Vincent & the Grenadines on Thursday, at the behest of Vincentian Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves and Dominica's Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit. The meeting was attended by regional leaders of

several countries in the region, under the auspices of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The personal envoy of President Ignacio "Lula" Da Silva of Brazil was also present at the summit, as well as observers from the United Nations, Colombia and Honduras.

The meeting culminated with the Joint Declaration of Argyle for Dialogue and Peace Between Guyana and Venezuela, an 11-point bulletin that commits the two nations to their continued upholding of Latin America and the Caribbean as a zone of peace.

The first clause of the joint declaration is a promise that "Guyana and Venezuela, directly or indirectly, will not threaten or use force against one another in any circumstances, including those consequential to any existing controversies between the two States."

The second clause commits the two countries to resolve any disputes between them "in accordance with international law, including the Geneva Agreement dated February 17, 1966." That agreement acknowledges Venezuela's rejection of the disputed 1899 arbitral award ceding the Essequibo region to Guyana, but does not pronounce one way or another on the claim by the two nations – only promising to find a permanent solution between the feuding parties.

Similarly, the Argyle declaration makes no attempt to move closer to a resolution of the dispute, instead noting each side's position; that Guyana wants to resolve the border controversy through the International Court of Justice, and that Venezuela rejects the jurisdiction of the ICJ in this matter.

To resolve these seemingly intractable positions, the Argyle declaration calls for a joint commission of the foreign ministers and technical teams from both countries to be "immediately established" to "address matters as mutually agreed," and will submit an update to both presidents within three months.

Prime Ministers Gonsalves and Skerrit, as well as President Da Silva, will continue to play their roles as interlocutors in the matter, and the joint declaration contemplates a follow-up meeting within the next three months, this time in Brazil.

While several regional leaders welcomed the joint declaration as the first step towards easing rising tensions and finding a mutually agreeable solution to the 125-year old border dispute, the language in Argyle makes it clear that the journey towards a peaceful resolution will be a long one.