



El Salvador v Honduras

The 1969 Football War

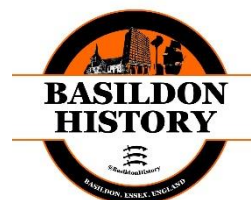
James Nason

Contents

3	Seeds of Conflict
5	The Spark Ignites
7	The 100 Hour War
9	Lasting Scars

Sources

- Council on Foreign Relations
- The Guardian
- Google Maps
- Journal of Latin American Studies
- Library of Congress
- Wikipedia



Seeds of Conflict

While popular memory attributes the 1969 conflict between El Salvador and Honduras solely to a series of football matches, the reality is far more complex. The "Football War," or "100 Hour War" as it is sometimes known, was merely the brutal culmination of decades of simmering tensions rooted in deep-seated issues of land, economics, and demographics. The beautiful game simply provided the inflammatory spark for a volatile situation.



At the core of the dispute was the stark demographic imbalance between the two Central American nations. El Salvador, despite being the smallest country in mainland Central America, was by the mid-20th century the most densely populated, with a rapidly growing populace and limited arable land. Its economy was heavily reliant on agriculture, particularly coffee, but opportunities for its burgeoning peasant class were scarce. Neighbouring Honduras, by contrast, was geographically much larger and sparsely populated, boasting vast tracts of undeveloped land. This disparity naturally led to a significant migration. For generations, hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans had crossed the porous, ill-defined border into Honduras, often settling on unused land and establishing farming communities. By 1969, estimates suggested that as many as

300,000 Salvadorans were living in Honduras, representing a substantial portion of El Salvador's population.

These Salvadoran immigrants often became productive members of Honduran society, but their presence also created friction. Honduran peasants, many of whom were also landless, increasingly resented the perceived competition for resources and jobs. This resentment was carefully stoked by the Honduran government and media, which began to portray Salvadorans as illegal squatters and a drain on national resources.

The economic relationship between the two nations, particularly within the framework of the Central American Common Market (CACM), further complicated matters. While the CACM aimed to foster regional economic integration, it inadvertently exacerbated the existing inequalities. El Salvador, with its more developed industrial sector, benefited significantly from free trade, exporting manufactured goods to Honduras. Honduras, primarily an exporter of agricultural products, found its nascent industries struggling to compete, leading to a trade imbalance and a sense of economic exploitation. As historian Walter LaFeber noted: *"The Common Market deepened, rather than solved, the problems arising from the differing levels of economic development."* (Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*).



The boiling point was reached with Honduran land reform efforts. In the late 1960s, driven by internal pressures from its own landless populace and agrarian reform laws, the Honduran government began to crack down on undocumented Salvadoran immigrants. They initiated programmes to redistribute land, often targeting plots occupied by Salvadorans, leading to mass evictions and brutal deportations. This created a burgeoning refugee crisis, as tens of thousands of desperate Salvadorans streamed back into their already crowded homeland, straining El Salvador's limited resources and igniting widespread public outrage. Reports of violence and discrimination against Salvadorans in Honduras inflamed public opinion in El Salvador, with newspapers publishing lurid accounts that fuelled nationalist fervour. The stage was tragically set for conflict, with the upcoming football matches merely providing the perfect, emotionally charged catalyst.

The Spark Ignites

Against the backdrop of simmering land disputes, economic grievances, and rising nationalism, a seemingly innocuous event ignited the powder keg: a series of football matches. In June 1969, El Salvador and Honduras were scheduled to play a two-leg qualifying series for the 1970 FIFA World Cup, with a third play-off match if required. What should have been a sporting contest quickly devolved into a flashpoint for intense nationalistic fervour and violence.

The first match took place on 8 June 1969 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. The atmosphere was incredibly hostile even before kick-off. Salvadoran fans and the team reported harassment, intimidation, and poor treatment upon their arrival. The Honduran crowd was boisterous, and a terrifying scene unfolded outside the Salvadoran team's hotel on the night before the match, with shouting, firecrackers, and even stones thrown. Honduras won the match 1-0. Following the game, reports circulated of attacks on Salvadoran immigrants in Honduras, adding a dangerous layer of real-world violence to the sporting rivalry.

A week later, on 15 June 1969, the return leg was played in San Salvador, El Salvador. The Salvadoran fans were equally fervent, and the Honduran team and supporters faced intense hostility. The Honduran national anthem was booed, and a tattered flag was reportedly burnt. El Salvador won the match decisively, 3-0. The aggression did not stop at the stadium gates; widespread rioting ensued in San Salvador, with Honduran property damaged and Honduran



residents attacked. The violence was so severe that some Honduran players required an armed escort to reach the airport. As the Honduran government reported to the Organisation of American States (OAS) later, there were "*inhuman acts of aggression against Honduran citizens and damage to Honduran property.*" (Organisation of American States, Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Events between Honduras and El Salvador).



The two nations were now tied, necessitating a decisive third play-off match. This final game was scheduled for 26 June 1969 in Mexico City, a neutral venue. El Salvador won this nail-biting encounter 3-2 after extra time, securing their place in the World Cup qualifiers. However, the outcome on the pitch was overshadowed by the escalating crisis. The violence in Honduras against

Salvadoran immigrants intensified dramatically in the days following the second match. Reports described mob attacks, looting of Salvadoran businesses, and brutal expulsions, forcing tens of thousands of Salvadorans to flee back to their home country. This mass

exodus of refugees, many arriving traumatised and destitute, generated immense public outrage and pressure on the Salvadoran government to act.

Both nations' media played a significant, and often inflammatory, role in fanning the flames. Newspapers in El Salvador ran sensational headlines and harrowing accounts of atrocities against their citizens in Honduras, often using highly nationalistic and militaristic language. Similarly, Honduran media depicted Salvadoran immigrants as invaders and the Salvadoran government as aggressive. This cycle of mutual recrimination and hyperbolic reporting created an environment where cooler heads struggled to prevail. On the very day of the play-off match, 26 June 1969, El Salvador formally severed diplomatic relations with Honduras, citing the ongoing violence and persecution of its citizens. The war, though not yet officially declared, had become all but inevitable.



The 100 Hour War

With diplomatic ties severed and tensions reaching a fever pitch, the underlying grievances between El Salvador and Honduras finally erupted into open warfare. On the evening of 14 July 1969, the Salvadoran military launched a coordinated offensive, marking the beginning of what would become famously known as the "100 Hour War" or the "Football War."

The Salvadoran strategy was swift and decisive. At approximately 18:00 (6 PM) on 14 July, the Salvadoran Air Force (FAS) initiated air strikes against Honduran military targets, including airfields at Toncontín International Airport near Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The Salvadoran air fleet, though small and consisting largely of older, piston-engined aircraft like modified P-51 Mustangs and even civilian Cessnas converted for bombing, achieved some early success in disrupting Honduran air capabilities. Simultaneously, the Salvadoran Army launched a ground invasion along two main fronts. Their primary objective was the economically vital Sula Valley, including San Pedro Sula, Honduras's industrial heartland. A secondary thrust aimed towards the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa. Salvadoran troops, many of whom were well-motivated and supported by a highly nationalistic public, made rapid initial advances, overwhelming some Honduran border defences.



Honduras, though initially caught off guard, quickly mobilised its forces and retaliated. The Honduran Air Force (FAH), also flying older aircraft, engaged the Salvadoran planes in dogfights, and both sides claimed aerial victories. Ground skirmishes were fierce, particularly in the border regions where both armies fought with a mix of light infantry, some improvised armoured vehicles, and artillery. The fighting was often intense but poorly coordinated, reflecting the relatively undeveloped military capabilities of both nations. As one historical account notes: *"The conflict itself was a limited affair, fought by two small, poorly equipped armies, but it was ferocious by local standards."* (Russell W. Ramsey, *The "Football War": An Analysis of the El Salvador–Honduras Conflict of 1969*, Air University Review, November–December 1980).

News of the conflict immediately caught the attention of the international community. The Organisation of American States (OAS), which had been attempting to mediate the escalating crisis for weeks, swiftly condemned the hostilities and called for an immediate ceasefire. Efforts by the OAS intensified, with diplomats working feverishly to halt the fighting and prevent further escalation. The pressure on El Salvador was particularly strong, as its forces had advanced deeper into Honduran territory.

The Football War featured some of the last recorded aerial dogfights between piston-engined fighter aircraft (such as the P-51 Mustang and F4U Corsair) in military history.

After roughly 100 hours of intense fighting, a ceasefire, brokered by the OAS, came into effect on the evening of 18 July 1969. Despite the ceasefire, the situation remained volatile, with Salvadoran forces still occupying parts of Honduras. The OAS demanded the immediate withdrawal of Salvadoran troops, but El Salvador initially refused, insisting on guarantees for the safety of Salvadoran citizens remaining in Honduras and compensation for those who had suffered losses. It took further diplomatic pressure and the threat of sanctions from the OAS for El Salvador to finally agree to withdraw its troops, which they began to do in early August 1969. The brief war was over, but its scars, both human and political, would linger for decades.

Lasting Scars

The ceasefire of 18 July 1969 brought an end to the "100 Hour War," but it did not bring peace or resolution. The brief but brutal conflict left a legacy of bitterness, displacement, and long-term instability in both El Salvador and Honduras, and across Central America.



The immediate aftermath was marked by a humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadoran refugees, many of whom had lived in Honduras for generations, were now displaced and destitute. El Salvador, already struggling with overpopulation, faced immense challenges in providing for these returning citizens. The Honduran government, while claiming it was acting within its rights, faced international condemnation for the violence and expulsions. The Organisation of American States (OAS) provided some humanitarian aid, but the scale of the crisis overwhelmed existing resources. As historian Philip L. Russell noted: *"The war created a refugee problem of major proportions, with hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans fleeing Honduras."* (Philip L. Russell, *El Salvador in Crisis*, 1984).

The war also had a devastating impact on the Central American Common Market (CACM). Trade between El Salvador and Honduras, already strained, ground to a complete halt. This disruption undermined the regional economic integration project, weakening the entire CACM structure and hindering economic development across Central America. The conflict exposed the fragility of regional cooperation and the deep-seated nationalistic tensions that could easily undermine economic partnerships.

The "Football War" further exacerbated internal tensions within El Salvador, contributing to the social unrest that would eventually explode into the Salvadoran Civil War (1979–1992). The influx of hundreds of thousands of impoverished refugees, coupled with existing land inequality and political repression, created a volatile environment. The violence and displacement caused by the war radicalised many Salvadorans, and the government's inability to effectively address their grievances fuelled resentment. The war, in a tragic irony, played a significant role in setting the stage for a much longer and bloodier conflict within El Salvador itself.



In Honduras, the war exposed the weaknesses of its military and government. The conflict revealed the country's vulnerability to external aggression and its inability to protect its own citizens, leading to a period of political instability and military reforms. The Honduran government also faced scrutiny for its role in the expulsions and the anti-Salvadoran rhetoric that had contributed to the conflict.

Despite the OAS-brokered ceasefire, a formal peace treaty between El Salvador and Honduras was not signed until 30 October 1980, more than a decade after the fighting ended. The treaty finally resolved some of the border disputes, but the deep-seated animosity and distrust between the two nations persisted for many years. The "Football War," though short, left long-lasting scars on both societies, impacting their economies, political landscapes, and social fabric for generations. It serves as a stark reminder of how seemingly small conflicts can have devastating and far-reaching consequences, particularly when rooted in deeper, unresolved issues of inequality and nationalism.