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LISBON - The "Group of Friends of Olivença" in Portugal welcomed this year's edition of the CIA World Factbook, because it lists an all but forgotten claim to the small Portuguese town of Olivença in its chapter on international border disputes.

The World Factbook, published by the CIA (the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency) states that "Portugal has periodically reasserted claims to territories around the Portuguese town of Olivença."

Olivença, the Portuguese town, is mentioned in the publication's section on "international disputes", along with the Spanish enclave of Gibraltar, to which Spain lays claim, the Moroccan cities of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coast, the state of Kashmir in northern India, over which there is an ongoing conflict with Pakistan, and the Serbian province of Kosovo.

While the "Group of Friends of Olivença" rejoiced to see that their claim to that town of 11,000 had received international recognition, the Spanish press ridiculed the CIA for including the town in The World Factbook.

But there were also complaints in Spain that the publication encouraged the Portuguese movements that continue to demand that the town be handed back to Portugal.

At an official level, both Lisbon and Madrid have basically ignored the case?

The only exception was a short statement by then-foreign minister of Portugal -- who resigned this month for other reasons -- in which he called on his compatriots to stay calm, and underlined the excellent relations between the two Iberian nations.

The foreign minister also pointed out that Spain is the top foreign investor in Portugal.

But the "Group of Friends of Olivença" responded immediately that "A policy of good neighbourliness...cannot be built on mistakes and resentment. "Portugal must finally understand that the time has come to place the question of Olivença on the Portuguese-Spanish diplomatic agenda, and demand compliance with international law," said the group's statement.

However, the dispute should not be brought up at the United Nations, Antonio Márques, the president of the "Group of Friends of Olivença" and an assistant state prosecutor, told IPS.

"This problem should be resolved within the framework of our bilateral relations," he argued. "The issue should not be pulled out of context. It should be brought up in other forums only if there is resistance on the part of Spain; and in that case it should be the Portuguese state, not us, that raises the question.

Other groups of citizens want to take the case to the European Union or the U.N., but "our organisation, which has more than 600 members, and no political affiliation -- our members range from right to the Communists -- has nothing to do with those initiatives," he said.

The press in the two southern European countries has given heavy coverage to a case that until now was only followed in Portugal by a handful of nationalists belonging to groups that are nostalgic for the country's glorious past(??!).

After the case was included in The World Factbook, the leading Portuguese newspapers began to dedicate space to the Olivença question.

One letter -- the Portuguese "ç" or the Spanish "z" -- represents 750 square kms of territory, 11,000 inhabitants, the definitive demarcation of a 20-km stretch of border, and above all, the wounded pride of a nation.

The origins of the old fortress town, located to the south of the city of Badajoz in the western Spanish region of Extremadura, a few kms from the border between Portugal and Spain, date back to the year 1230, when the King of Leon, Alfonso IX, reconquered Badajoz from the Moors, who invaded the peninsula in 711.

In the same era, the flourishing kingdom of Castille suffered a series of setbacks that weakened it, while Portugal became an emerging power in the western portion of the Iberian peninsula.

The lack of clear borders and Lisbon's constant demands forced King Fernando IV of Castille to sign the Treaty of Alcañices in 1295, which ceded Olivença to Portugal.

The militarily strategic border enclave remained in the hands of Portugal for five centuries, until Spanish troops backed by France drove the Portuguese out in 1801. Madrid's sovereignty over Olivença was established by the Treaty of Badajoz.

In 1807, France and Spain made a secret pact to invade Portugal and

divide the territory between the two countries. The prince -- later king -- of Portugal, Joao VI, in exile in the then-Portuguese colony of Brazil due to the Napoleonic invasion, found out about the pact between Spain and France, declared the Treaty of Badajoz invalid, and demanded that Olivença be handed back to Portugal.

Once France and its Spanish ally were defeated, Portugal requested the annulment of the Treaty of Badajoz and insisted that Olivença be handed back over -- a demand contained in article 105 of the 1815 Vienna Treaty, which came out of the Vienna Congress held after the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. Nearly two centuries later, the Portuguese town of Olivença is still a part of Spain(?). At an official level, Lisbon has not demanded that Spain comply with the Vienna Treaty.

Olivença is located in one poorest regions, and the standard of living is considerably below the national average.

Those who visit Olivença today will find a city of Portuguese construction. The palaces are just like the ones that can be seen in the old city in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, or in Macao, a former Portuguese overseas territory that reverted back to China in 1999.

The fortified walls are identical to the ones the Portuguese built in northeastern Brazil, the Kenyan town of Mombasa, the port of Goa in western India, or Luanda, the capital of Angola.

But the Portuguese architecture coexists with typical Spanish customs, such as accompanying a cold glass of beer with "pipas" (sunflower seeds) while discussing bulls, listening to flamenco and "cante jondo", sleeping the afternoon siesta, and dining at 11:00 at night.

Márques pointed out that during the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1975), "the Portuguese language was banned, and was only spoken in the privacy of the home." School was taught only in Spanish.

The 1995 municipal census found that 3,645 people -- 34 percent of the population at the time -- normally spoke Portuguese rather than Spanish, although all of them were bilingual. Most of them were over the age of 50.

The proportion of Portuguese speakers had plunged from just over 60 percent in 1960.

But Márques added that "among today's generation of young people, whose mother tongue was not Portuguese, we see an interesting trend of returning to their Portuguese roots."

For example, youngsters often "shout out phrases in Portuguese" when complaining or protesting to the police or other authorities, he said.

In an article published last month in the Extremadura newspaper El Periódico, Spanish analyst Juan Zambrano wrote that "the step taken by U.S. 'intelligence' has drawn astonished reactions, and even incredulous laughter.

"The inclusion of the imaginary conflict on the list of international border disputes places it, according to the CIA, at the level of conflicts like the one between India and Pakistan over the region of Kashmir, or the one between Israelis and Palestinians over the Gaza Strip," said Zambrano. Ignacio Sánchez, a member of the regional government of Extremadura, said he at first thought it might be a joke. "What the CIA has once more demonstrated is that it doesn't understand a thing about what is happening outside the borders of the United States."

Olivença "is not on the agenda of either the Spanish or the Portuguese governments, and as far as I know, there is no territorial conflict" between the two countries, added Sánchez, but, is not true.

Mayor of Olivença Ramón Rocha said "I've taken this question as a joke, because I haven't seen any terrorists around here yet" (Is essential??).

In a more serious tone, Rocha added that the CIA, despite the gravity of the situation in Iraq or in several countries in Africa, "had nothing more important to add to this year's report than an imaginary(?) dispute over" this small town.

The Madrid daily El Mundo wrote in late September that the government "did not expect a strategic ally like the United States to drop this bomb, a low blow that could have serious consequences if it escapes from the realm of diplomacy."

This month, Olivença also merited an editorial in the on-line Portuguese daily Diário Digital, by the assistant director of the weekly publication Expresso, Fernando Madrinha.

"Spain signed the Vienna Treaty, but never lived up to the obligation it assumed. The Portuguese state allowed the case to fall into oblivion, which meant the fait accompli became a practically unsolvable historic fact," wrote Madrinha.

In an earlier edition, Expresso stated that "if political realism were fate," the former Portuguese colony of East Timor "would still be Indonesian, and Estonia would still be Russian."

According to Madrinha, "the case (of Olivença) should not be written off as closed," nor seen as merely "a remote, lost cause forwarded by a group of lunatics." (END/IPS/EU)
