



STATEMENT

BY

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MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

AT THE

GENERAL DEBATE

OF THE

SEVENTY-FIRST SESSION OF

THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Mr. President,

Allow me at the outset to congratulate you on your election as President of the seventy-first session of the General Assembly and to assure you of Belize's fullest support.

Thirty-five years ago this week Belize became a UN member state. Membership confirmed our independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and place amongst equals in this community of nations. Regretfully, however, membership did not resolve the territorial claim laid to our country some eighty years ago by Guatemala.

Our track record since our independence confirms that Belize holds sacrosanct the dignity of the human person, the principles of justice, equality, inclusivity, and the rule of law. Belizeans are inherently altruistic and compassionate. In the nascent years of our independence when civil war ravaged our Central American region, Belize was the beacon of hope and sanctuary of choice for thousands of refugees including Guatemalans desperately seeking to escape the scourge of war, poverty and oppression. In the process Belize welcomed thousands of refugees amounting to well in excess of thirty percent of our then population. Indeed even to this day the flow of migrants into our country continues unabated. Belize is a nation of migrants all living in unity, peace and harmony.

Our diversity, national identity and pride has long been a source of strength for our people. We have never cowered in the face of repeated threats to our security by our neighbour Guatemala. We remain steadfast in our resolve to protect and preserve our sovereignty and territorial integrity. Though many a peril lurks along our forested borders, and in our maritime and riverine territories, we determinedly protect and patrol our borders to ensure the safety and security of our homeland. Simultaneously our untiring diplomats strive mightily to resolve the longstanding territorial dispute, our paramount foreign policy goal, by utilizing every diplomatic channel and means at their disposal.

Regretfully, though not unpredictably, in the last eighteen months, there have been hostile incidents between civilian and military personnel of both Belize and Guatemala in the Sarstoon River, our southern border. Guatemalan naval personnel repeatedly impeded the peaceful ingress and egress of Belizeans both civilian and military on the River, wrongfully claiming the river to be theirs. However, as the northern side of the river is Belizean territory, the unimpeded use and enjoyment of that side of the river is the right of every Belizean citizen. Belize therefore promptly and properly protested each such attempt. Additionally, we engaged our Guatemalan counterparts in dialogue, under the good offices of the Secretary General of the Organization of American States with a view to putting a speedy end to that potentially perilous practice.

Simultaneously, the situation along our Western Border was also vexing. Continuous illegal entry by armed trespassers from Guatemala persisted despite the valiant efforts of our

border patrol to deter them. The trespassers engage with impunity day and night in the panning for gold, the hunting for wild game and birds, the pillaging of Mayan temples, illegal logging and the cultivation of crops including marijuana for commercial purpose. In the process our priceless forest is being decimated, our waters both potable and sea compromised and our coral reefs choked to death by sediments that run off the denuded mountainsides after each torrential downpour. Being fully cognizant of the devastating environmental impact which these practices are having in neighbouring countries and further afield Belize cannot afford to let the same happen to us. From time to time in the course of attempting to apprehend the trespassers, firearms are used by Belize security personnel and by the trespassers who are invariably armed.

Indeed between the period September 2014 to March 2016 a Belizean Tourist Policeman was killed and a Belize Defence Force Sergeant ambushed and shot though not fatally, by trespassers entering Belize from Guatemala.

Tragically, and much to Belize's regret, on the 20th April 2016, a Guatemalan minor was fatally shot and his father and brother injured when they came in contact with a Belizean patrol in one of our protected National Parks in the dead of night. An investigation was forthwith commenced by the Belize Police. Additionally, Officials of the OAS stationed at the Adjacency Zone between Belize and Guatemala also immediately commenced their own investigation. And, at the specific behest of the Government of Guatemala, Belize requested the Secretary General of the OAS to cause to be launched a special official independent investigation into the incident. The OAS commissioned two senior eminently qualified specialists to undertake that special investigation with the full knowledge and approval of the Guatemalan government. At the time of their appointment, Guatemala expressed no reservation as to their competence, suitability or otherwise to undertake that investigation. In August last, the Special Commission delivered its findings to the OAS Secretary General.

The Report discloses, that the deceased had been detained by security personnel in Belize a mere month prior to the incident. At the time of his detention he had in his possession, unlawfully, a .22 caliber rifle and wild game. He was neither mistreated, arrested nor prosecuted, but was promptly sent back safely to his country. The Report further discloses that the deceased, a brother, also a minor, and their father were knowingly and unlawfully well within Belizean territory on the night of the incident. And, that none of the wounds inflicted was caused by weapons carried by personnel of the Belize Defence Force. The wounds were inflicted by small caliber firearms carried on the night of the incident by two members of a local conservation Non Government Organization (NGO) that made up the Belize Patrol. Shots were fired by both groups - the Guatemalans and the Belizean joint patrol - on that ill fated night. And, the following morning, elements of the Guatemalan Army, along with civilians from a nearby Guatemalan village entered Belizean territory

illegally, visited the site, contaminated the scene, and withdrew and withheld evidentiary material that could have been useful to the investigation.

In the wake of the incident a fanatical public relations campaign was launched by Guatemala against Belize falsely alleging that the death of the minor was at the hands of the Belize Defence Force. In addition, the Guatemalan president publicly announced the amassing of troops along our Western and Southern borders.

However, the report of the Special Independent Commission chronicles what really took place on the night of the incident. Its objective, impartial findings of fact established the correctness of the Belize's position from the start and the wholly erroneous nature of the allegations leveled against our country by Guatemala. It completely absolves Belize of any and all blame for the incident. It makes manifest the wrongness of Guatemala's accusation against Belize and the personnel of Belize Defence Force. Guatemala has publicly and peremptorily rejected the Commission's report. However, it is certainly irresponsible, if not reprehensible and utterly unacceptable, that Guatemala should now seek to reject the results of a process which it had specifically requested and agreed to and which was conducted by OAS appointed independent third country professionals with impeccable credentials and with no axe to grind. And, the wanton threat of use of force by a nation against its neighbor is wholly uncalled for, recklessly dangerous, and in clear violation of the charter of this United Nations and can in no wise be countenanced.

Mr. President,

Belize's only wish is to live in peace and harmony with all our neighbours, including Guatemala. We fully appreciate that with each passing day with more and more Guatemalans trespassing into our country, despoiling our natural resources and engaging in illegal and destructive activities, the potential for violent incidents and conflicts becomes more and more probable and problematic. This situation makes for a prompt and peaceful end to this anachronistic and unfounded claim over our country an urgent imperative.

Mr. President,

Belize acknowledges the centrality of The United Nations in the multilateral order and as a uniting force for championing the common good. Its leadership likewise remains central to international peace and security, to development, and to the rule of law.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is truly a historical milestone for the entire world. Entrenched in the Belize Constitution is the essence of sustainable development. Our economic development has fully embraced the indivisibility of social and environment priorities. From the early 1990s Belize began to put in place development plans for its fledgling industries consistent with a progressive legal regime for environmental

protection. We were pioneers in ecotourism, and had, even prior to our independence, established environmental protected areas and fisheries co-operatives. Today over 36 percent of our territory is under some form of protected status. Indeed Belize is now mainstreaming climate change adaptation in its development policies, plans and investment strategies thereby transforming our engines of growth to more renewable and sustainable ones. We recently adopted a Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy which aligns our national priorities with the sustainable development goals. The holistic and people centered approach to development has long been Belize's trademark.

Complementary to these economic and environmental developments, Belize is incrementally providing free public education at primary and secondary levels; it has established a Maya Land Rights Commission to implement measures for the identification and protection of rights arising from Mayan customary land tenure; it is rolling out a national health insurance policy; and work is in progress to advance national efforts towards gender equality and equity.

The national debate on social issues took a precedential turn recently. A high court ruling held that Section 53 of our Criminal Code which criminalized consensual sexual acts between same sex partners is unconstitutional. The ruling also expands the definition of "sex" to include sexual orientation. However, in response to the request of a not inconsiderable segment of our population, our government has launched a limited appeal to the judgment challenging only the expanded definition of "sex" by the High Court.

Belize was among one of the first countries to sign and ratify the Paris Agreement in April 2016. We commend the United States and China for their leadership in doing so as well. We look forward to the day when its ratification will be completed and implementation commences.

Belize fully supports efforts under the auspices of the UN to design a new international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction and welcomes the decision to convene in June 2017 a high-level United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14.

In the spirit of inclusiveness, we urge that the Republic of China on Taiwan be accorded meaningful participation in the work of the United Nations. The Taiwanese government works assiduously in promoting international cooperation and development in line with the spirit and principles of the Millennium Development Goals. They have also fully embraced the Sustainable Development Goals. We urge the international community to welcome Taiwan's meaningful participation in the mechanisms, meetings, and activities of the UN specialized agencies including the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Setbacks in the global economy, externalities resulting from institutional policies (both public and private) to safeguard against financial and other security risks, the adverse impacts of climate change, the energy and food security crises, all have conspired against Belize's sustainable development trajectory. Today, our small nation is rebuilding in the aftermath of Hurricane Earl which in less than 8 hours debited some 5.5 per cent of our GDP.

Belize endorse the views and sentiments expressed by all other delegations in their pleas for urgent relief from the deleterious consequences of the decisions of global banks to withdraw correspondent banking relations from our financial institutions.

We keep upgrading our regulatory frameworks to ensure strict compliance with all relevant laws and best practices of the banking and financial sectors internationally.

Mr. President,

Belize celebrated its 35th anniversary of independence on the same day as the International Day of Peace. Peace and stability in our hemisphere are critical to the development and wellbeing of the peoples of the Americas. For that reason Belize remains concerned about the status of the controversy between Guyana and Venezuela. We urge the Secretary General of the United Nations to exercise urgently his authority under the 1966 Geneva Agreement for a choice of options that would bring the controversy to a judicial and definitive conclusion.

Belize strictly adheres to the principle of non interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In that regard we stand in solidarity with the Government and people of Venezuela in their efforts to resolve their domestic issues in accordance with their laws and constitution.

We remain very concerned about the unabated cholera epidemic in Haiti, and urges the United Nations to take all necessary steps to help the Haitian people end this terrible scourge occasioned by agents of the United Nations.

Belize welcomes the tremendous progress already made in the peace process in Colombia which we fully support. We look forward to an early and successful implementation.

We note with approbation the progress made in the bilateral relations between Cuba and the United States. Belize reiterates its call for an early end to the economic embargo against Cuba.

We join in the call for an early end to the tragic conflicts in Syria and Libya which are an affront to humanity.

We adhere fully to the right of peoples to self-determination and reiterate our solidarity with the struggle for liberation and independence of our Sahrawi brothers and sisters.

Belize is disheartened though not discouraged by the intractable Israeli – Palestinian conflict. We believe that the only just solution to the conflict is one which results in two sovereign and independent states within clearly defined territorial borders, both living peacefully and securely in perpetuity.

We stand in solidarity with South Korea in the face of North Korea's irresponsible experiment with nuclear and missile programmes, including the conducting of nuclear tests in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. We join the international community in condemning these actions which pose a clear and present danger not only to South Korea but to the entire world.

While we are heartened by the indefatigable efforts of the United Nations and other philanthropic and altruistic organizations and individuals to alleviate the suffering of migrants and other displaced persons worldwide, it is evident that much more needs to be done. We in Belize pledge to do all in our power and within our means to discharge our obligations to all suffering persons who seek our succor.

Mr. President,

In a country as small as Belize, in a world as big as ours, we are all citizens of planet earth, big or small. The policies we devise at any level must be reflective of this reality.

It is up to us leaders, working together, and shouldering our respective sovereign responsibilities, to guarantee that every nation, large and small, and every individual man woman or child, shall have a say in our noble endeavors for a more just, equitable, and secure world.

Our task is clear. Its attainment is not impossible but neither is it without difficulty. Let's get it done. Belize stands ready to do its part.

In conclusion Mr President, as Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon begins to prepare to demit office at the end of ten sterling years of service to the United Nations and indeed to the world at large, Belize takes this opportunity to thank him and to wish him every success in his post UN Secretary General's life.

Thank you.