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Independence Day Address by the
Rt. Honorable Dean Barrow, Prime Minister
September 21, 2019
Belmopan

Today we again come together as one to celebrate the summit of all our achievements; the high point of our existence; the attainment of our Independence. It is an Independence that has meant the enshrinement of Belize as a sovereign, indivisible nation: one with our territory inviolable and our democracy impregnable.

As we reflect on what is ever a glorious annual anniversary, it is good to recall that our Independence was hard won. We had to fight, though not physically, for our freedom. We had to wage a long, arduous diplomatic struggle against overwhelming odds. So, we remember as usual this year the tenacity and strength of our campaign. And we do so for the customary purpose of infusing our celebration with the passion, pride and patriotism deserved by this apogee of our history, this triumph of our self-determination.

But this year there is another reason for specially calling to mind the soaring success that led to that first Independence Day. It is because we had occasion just in May of this year to revive and replicate the spirit and courage of 1981. The ICJ campaign was an exercise that produced strong feelings and what could have been destabilizing divisions. There was contention and conviction aplenty on both sides. And the decision to be made was fraught with questions and what ifs in almost equal measure to those of a generation and a half ago. But in 2019, as in 1981, the perdurability of Belizean Democracy, the exceptional maturity of our people, once again brought us through. In an exemplary manner, in the most transparent fashion, the nation took a position respected ultimately by all at home and praised mightily by countries abroad. Whichever way individual Belizeans voted, the verdict proved a national one obtained in a manner that was the envy of many. It stood as an affirmation to the world of core Belizean values, of respect for one another and, above all, the predominance of the rule of law.

So now we have been fortified by this second experience of existential decision-making. We have twice achieved apotheosis. And wisdom and maturity 2.0 proved that the highest honours with which we passed our first test, was no fluke. We have two times attained that beauty that, the Poet Coleridge said, is unity in variety. Accordingly, we have earned the right on this and every Independence Day to proclaim with the greatest certainty that our country is unalterably rooted in democratic practice and a democratic polity. We will never come loose from these sacrosanct historical moorings.

Of course, there will ever be stresses and strains. We justly think of ourselves as a kind of paradise of integration and social harmony. But we cannot escape the challenges of the neighborhood in which we live. We drink in the natural beauty of our country and we know that we are situated in an idyllic locale. But the indescribable charm of our particular Central American/Caribbean sweet spot, comes at a cost. Our very location makes us a target for those that use us as a transit route for sundry illegalities from various proximate countries to the magnet market of the United States. That flow

includes persons. And as the door is slammed shut on the Northern Triangle migrants fleeing their countries but now prevented from reaching the US, Belize becomes an alternative escape destination. How we, with our resource constraints and our own gang sub culture, deal with this conundrum, is one of the pressing issues of our time. It is one with which the country's National Security Council is currently fully engaged.

Everyday challenges notwithstanding, we continue to live in a good country. And one testament to that is the economic headway that 2019 has so far brought. Given the fears of a global slowdown precipitated by the trade wars and other geopolitical realities, Belize's economic performance in the first quarter of this year has been reassuring. GDP grew in the three months from January through March, by an unusual 5.2%. And the even better accompanying news was that the unemployment rate fell to a historic low of 7.6%. Admittedly, second quarter GDP greatly lagged the first quarter and an actual decline of 0.8% was recorded. But when the two quarters are put together, in aggregate we are still much ahead of par and much ahead of peers in the region.

Growth and development, however, have always been recognized as two different things. One does not necessarily include the other and in fact they can sometimes sharply diverge. When Belize therefore experiences a happy confluence of growth and development proceeding in tandem; of increased GDP resulting in increased jobs; of more people being put to work and being lifted out of poverty, it is indeed a conjuncture of which we can be proud.

Even as we celebrate these encouraging metrics, though, we are constantly reminded of the fragility of progress. Agriculture, commodities, services. These are our mainstays and by and large they undergird a successful economy. But how quickly things can change, how lightening fast shocks can occur! And this was made unmistakably clear once more by events of the past few months. Thus, the shots that so randomly and senselessly killed the tourist in San Pedro, were heard around the tourism world. As well, one of the longest droughts in recent memory has severely affected crops and livestock, leading to losses in excess of 50 million dollars. Finally, the hole in our offshore financial services industry left by the liquidation of Atlantic International Bank, was a gaping one.

Indeed, so severe was this combination of adverse circumstances that we may be forgiven for thinking that the Deity was subjecting us to an Abrahamic test. If so, then just like that Old Testament Patriarch we have not been found wanting. Our history, our destiny, our Maya grandeur and modern glory, mean that we will always persevere, always prevail. Thus, in all cases we have acted quickly to contain fallout. Tourism, notwithstanding the sargassum plague, the global economic downturn and the Boeing aircraft recall, is still as of end August seeing a year-on-year increase in both cruise calls and overnight arrivals. The former is up 4.7% and the latter 4% over 2018.

Regarding the financial sector, no AIBL contagion has spread to any other Belizean Bank, domestic or offshore. GOB and the Central Bank moved as fast as we could to deal with the consequences of the FTC charges against AIBL. The in-principle settlement negotiated with the FTC officials has now been approved by the FTC Commissioners. So while it was impossible to save AIBL itself, the overall sanctity of our Banking sector was preserved and our jurisdiction spared any further ramifications. Indeed, Atlantic Bank Domestic, now the biggest bank in Belize, is embarking on expanded, activist lending in new sectors of the economy, most notably agro processing. This new market intervention could not have come at a better time since it will fold nicely into the capacious new export market that our Partial Scope agreement with Taiwan will provide. In fact there is currently a combination of the cheapest financing available to the private sector in two decades, plus an ambitious, multi-year National Financial Inclusion Strategy launched by the CBB. All this should spur credit growth, nurture employment, and nourish the expansion of medium and micro enterprises.

As to the drought, a joint effort on the part of the CBB, the Government of Belize and the commercial financial institutions, produced a raft of remedial measures designed to help the recovery of our farming sector. We spoke to the package in detail at the press conference earlier this week. But just to repeat the major takeaways, the relaxation of certain regulatory strictures will allow the commercial banks and other lenders to offer restructured, extended repayment terms on current loans, and fresh financing to our farmers. And there will also be small livelihood grants, subsidized inputs and targeted duty exemptions to assist with upgraded irrigation and necessary equipment.

Additionally, the new Mexican Administration has now agreed to cut all red tape so that the export of Belizean cattle (as well affected by the drought) to Mexico can finally begin no later than this December.

One last point about the drought. Its effect on our hydro plants and the supply of electricity could not have come at a worse time. Up to three years ago our main sourcing of energy from CFE in Mexico was going great guns. Prices were cheap and supply plentiful. But as of 2018 things changed drastically. From between 8 and 10 cents per KWh, the cost jumped to 14 US cents per KWh. Besides, the supply amount was also curtailed. Thus, we can't move speedily enough to do something about the situation. Accordingly, our majority owned BEL is now finalizing plans to replace a big portion of CFE energy with 40 MWs of local solar-powered energy. And this is no mañana enterprise. The PPA for the first 30 MWs of the new solar source will be signed before the end of October, and the plant ready to start producing energy within a year. Meantime BEL continues aggressively to expand access to grid electricity countrywide. Since 2013 over 4,500 households in 184 communities became connected to BEL. And just for the first half of 2019 over 340 households were hooked up in 10 constituencies. By the end of October an additional 192 homes in Bullet Tree Falls and Seven Miles will be brought on line. And most exciting of all, testament to Belizean advances and innovation, our country will soon see the introduction of electric vehicles. Again, BEL will lead the way, embarking shortly on a pilot project to introduce such vehicles to its own Belize City fleet. The company has already secured funds for a study on how best to roll out the charging stations that will be needed to service the electric vehicles. Dramatic news indeed, I think all will agree.

Coming back to agriculture, a bright spot is certainly going to be the start of the new hemp industry in our country. Global fascination with hemp, thought by so many to contain almost magical healing properties, means that Belize with ideal growing conditions will be excellently positioned to take advantage of the limitless world market. It is a market for the export of both raw hemp and the hemp-based medicinal products that so many foreign investors are lined up to manufacture in our country. And in furtherance of this Administration's gospel, we have ensured that the little man, the small farmer, is not left behind. Thus, licenses will be given to growers that wish to cultivate as little as one acre.

Overall on this September 21, 2019, then, I declare with every confidence that our prospects are good. This blessed choice, this noble spot will always ultimately stand us in excellent stead. And together with the Almighty's bounty that is the physical richness of our native land, there is the oft proven, now legendary, Belizean resilience and resolve. Altogether a fine conjuncture, a grand construct, a wonderful plinth of grit and character and nature's benevolence. We therefore plough straight ahead regardless of the vicissitudes and vagaries that must attend every nation's social and economic trajectory. So we march on, buoyed by our conviction that ultimately we are fortune's child. And we search endlessly for new initiatives, for ways of making life better and vindicating our faith in our Belizean destiny.

One such trailblazer is the partnership in education that we have struck with the nationally owned BTL. Known as the DigiLearn Project, this joint venture between GOB and BTL will see the introduction of a cloud platform and service that facilitates digital teaching and online learning. Already a pilot project has been completed

involving nine high schools. Over 360 students participated and each of the schools has endorsed DigiLearn for their institution. Accordingly, DigiLearn will now be rolled out to 43 secondary schools starting this month. And ultimately GOB through BTL will provide a free laptop and digital classroom to every student in every high school in our country. The goal is to complete all this over the next five years, with the laptop computers provided not just to every student but to each teacher and each Administrator. Of course, Government will not stop to count the financial cost of all this because come hell or high water this revolution in Belizean education must get done.

We are also going to expand what has become another staple of our educational outreach: the annual subsidies to high school students, currently given for the first two years of the secondary program. Now, every student in every Government high school in every District will actually receive that Government subsidy for the entirety of their high school careers, from First Form straight through to Fourth Form.

In another thread making up this skein of overall Belizean advance, the whole population of our country will benefit from greatly improved public services as our e-governance rollout begins. The objective here is to make all GOB services easily accessible to all Belizeans through a central online portal. This will ultimately eliminate the need for physical attendance at offices and cut out the time wasted and the papers filed and the cabinets endlessly piled one on top of the other. 70% of our citizenry now enjoy mobile internet access and, thus, measurable Public Service deliverables will soon become an eminently countable metric.

All of this, of course, will be to complement, to make whole, our overall vision for progress and social advance. And one thing will remain central to that vision. It is our sleeves-rolled-up, manos-a-la-obra infrastructure drive. For us there is just no beating public works as the stimulant of preference for jobs and growth. That current 7% unemployment statistic, the lowest in a decade, is all the validation anyone could ever ask for. So it is forward always with our heavy-duty project portfolio. And the Coastal road and the roads to Caracol and Sarteneja and Progresso and the refurbishing of the Philip Goldson Highway from Mile 20 to the Northern Border are all in train; and at a value of over 300 million dollars or 8% of GDP. The mighty transformation enterprise moves on, my friends. And there will be no stopping until we reach the full expanse of our infrastructural promised land.

Earlier on I spoke about the situation with gangs and crime and violence that continues to plague us. Here again GOB is in action. We found the money to pay for the new Police recruit intake, all 200 odd of them. But this is only the beginning. Every effort will be made in various ways to strengthen citizen security in Belize City and the District Towns. Here again our nationalized BTL will play a key role as it partners with the Belize Police Department to turn, first, the old Capital into a safe City. We are looking at the purchase, via BTL, of at least 200 new cameras that come with advanced facial and license plate recognition software. But we are also exploring with the Taiwanese their willingness to help based on the model safe cities program they have already pioneered in their own country. One way or another, smart solutions will make for increased monitoring, interactions with not just the police but fire and ambulance services, and lead to better policing and a dramatic increase overall in citizen security.

However, the social conditions that breed the sub culture that blights particularly our urban areas will not soon go away. So even as we do all we can robustly to combat crime from the enforcement point of view, we also strive to remake our society in an egalitarian and progressive way. Fighting poverty, it is clear, is the best way to fight crime.

In this context I am delighted to trumpet the fact that the Belize City Southside Poverty Alleviation Project Phase 3 is now in full swing. This is a project, to the total value of 12 million dollars, that will see one hundred houses either newly built or improved for needy families in the targeted constituencies. Landfill has been distributed to countless

homes and the social and street infrastructure components to improve neighbourhoods and lives will wrap up this last leg of what has been a transformative, multi-year initiative. Needless to say, our food pantry program increases every year, even if incrementally. It, together with BOOST, will remain the anchor of our pro-poor policies, uplifting continuously the lives of disadvantaged Belizeans.

I close by calling on all to relish this anniversary of our Independence. Please do so by way of the merrymaking and fun that are so richly deserved. But please also do so by way of giving thanks for the providential favour of our spectacular land, our extraordinary, bejeweled resources. And let us be particularly grateful for the special qualities of our Belizean people: their industry, their creativity, their gusto, their ganas. But above all for that inexhaustible humanity, solidarity, fellow feeling, that has perhaps been the brightest aspect of our development as a gold star nation, a beacon in Central America and the Caribbean. Let this gratitude make boundless our determination to love, treasure and defend this singularly and spectacularly beautiful nation. After all, it constitutes a patrimony that is second to none anywhere in the whole wide world.

Happy Independence and God bless Belize.

Feliz dia de la Independencia y que viva Belize.