

BELIZE FACTS AND FIGURES

By: Frantz Smith

SECTION: PART II: THE PEOPLE OF BELIZE AND THEIR HISTORY/INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM

Guatemalan Aggression and the Internationalization of the Problem

The task of attaining independence was difficult because of the Guatemalan claim. The Guatemalan government threatened to invade if Belize got independence.

Prior to 1962, only the British and the Guatemalans negotiated about the future of Belize. Attaining self government in 1964 meant that Belizeans would participate in the negotiations with the Guatemalans who were going through a period of political upheaval and military rule.

In 1972 Guatemala was able to convince the then right wing government of El Salvador to agree to a plan to invade Belize to settle their countries' landless peasants. British intelligence in the region got to know of this plan and the spies informed the British Government that an emergency deployment of troops was needed because an invasion was imminent. Within a few days, the British aircraft carrier, the *Ark Royal* and 809 Royal Naval Air Squadron (RNAS) were dispatched from the North Atlantic to Belize. The *Ark Royal* raced to Bermuda, then two Buccaneers jets from the Phoenix squadron were launched to make one of their longest journeys of its type. In a six-hour round trip, the two Buccaneers jets flew over Belize. This show of force dissuaded the Guatemalans.

Three years later, in 1975, satellite images confirmed rumors reaching British spies and Belizean undercover police in Benque that Guatemala was amassing troops on the border. The British responded by deploying troops, a battery of 105mm field guns, anti-aircraft missile units, six Harrier jets and a frigate. At the same time that the Guatemalans were amassing their invasion force, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake hit Guatemala City killing 26,000 persons and derailing their invasion plans.

Thus, by 1975, the Belizean government had made little progress in the challenge of negotiating a settlement to the Guatemalan claim. Around this time, George Price was advised by Salim Ahmed Salim, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tanzania, that Belize should seek solidarity from nations that were not familiar with its case by "internationalizing" the claim. This was precisely what Mr. Price proceeded to do.

The first regional group of nations that supported Belize's quest for independence was the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). From early on, one of the staunchest supporters was also Cuba. The Commonwealth of Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement also supported Belize from the early 1970s.

Because of this overwhelming support, the first United Nations Resolution regarding Belize's independence was passed with 110 countries in favor, 16 abstentions and 9 votes against Belize in 1975. The countries that voted against Belize were Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Morocco, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. Cuba was the

only Latin American country that voted for Belize. The Latin Americans were the bloc of votes that the Belize Government was committed to swing.

Remembering the advice of Salim Ahmed Salim of Tanzania, George Price, along with other Ministers and diplomats of Belize including Assad Shoman, Robert Leslie and Shirley Harvey, embarked on missions to befriend and “court” the Latin American countries that had abstained or voted against Belize in 1975.

The first opportunity to forge a friendship with a Latin American country was presented in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1976. The occasion was a meeting of Non-Aligned countries. At this meeting, General Omar Torrijos, the President of Panama, was making the case for Panama to regain control of the Panama Canal. Also scheduled to attend the meeting was Belize’s Premier George Price who was making the case for the independence of the country. The two leaders stayed at the same hotel and made arrangements for an informal meeting. Price explained the problem to Torrijos who became convinced that Belize had a just cause. The two men formed a close friendship and agreed to work together and publically support each other’s cause. Thus, when the next United Nations Resolution was voted on, Panama voted for Belize. The Panamanian President also made his private plane available to Mr. Price to further the Belize campaign. The following year, Mexico voted for Belize, and by 1979, Costa Rica and Nicaragua also voted in favor of Belize.

In November of 1980, the most important convert was secured when the USA, which had abstained since 1975, elected to vote in favor of Belize. The USA President who changed the American vote was President Jimmy Carter. Hence, United Nations Resolution 35/20 was passed, and the next year, Belize achieved independence. The Organization of American States also changed its stance and supported the United Nations resolution to accept Belizean independence and territorial integrity.