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OPENING REMARKS

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**PRESENTATION OF THE NATIONAL REPORT OF BELIZE -- SECOND CYCLE UPR
OCTOBER 28, 2013**

Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Observer delegations,

Permit me at the outset to congratulate you Mr. President and the members of your Bureau on your excellent stewardship of this 17th Session of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review. I also wish to acknowledge the Troika selected for the Review of Belize, and we look forward to working with them in the coming days.

The UPR has proved to be one of the singular outcomes of the 2006 UN human rights reform initiative. That every Member State of the UN has participated actively and constructively, in the first cycle, is a testament to the collective respect for the UPR process and the global commitment to human rights. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, both at home and abroad, is a cornerstone of Belize's domestic and foreign policy.

Mr. President, four years ago I had the honour, on behalf of my government, to present the first national human rights report of Belize. I am pleased to return on this occasion to present the second national human rights report, and to share the progress we have made over the last four years as well as to discuss frankly the challenges which we continue to confront.

For Belize the preparation of our UPR report has provided us with an unparalleled opportunity to reflect on the meaning of human rights in the context of our own national development, on the status of the implementation of our international human rights obligations, and on the duty of our government in this respect. Drafting the report has enabled a stocktaking of government's and civil society's efforts to make human rights real and meaningful for the average Belizean.

In drafting the national report, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinated with the full range of government ministries and with our civil society partners. This report reflects inputs from the Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation, the Attorney General's Ministry, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. A number of NGOs were also consulted during the process including the Women's Issues Network of Belize, the Human Rights Commission of Belize, the Belize Council of Churches, the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches, the United Belize Advocacy Movement and the YMCA. Once the final draft of the report was ready, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs convened a validation workshop with government and non-governmental agencies to share the report and receive final comments. The report was subjected to spirited debate. Thereafter, the final Report was

submitted to Cabinet, the highest policy body of Government, which gave their unqualified endorsement.

Structure of the Report

The structure of the second national report of Belize conforms to the guidelines contained in Human Rights Council Decision 17/119. Accordingly the Report discusses the state of human rights in Belize, both in terms of areas of achievements and challenges, as well focuses on efforts to implement the recommendations made by Members of the Council during the first review as outlined in HRC/12/4.

National Context

Mr. President, Belize is a small, developing country with a population of about 316,000 people. We face all the challenges of a small state: vulnerability to exogenous shocks, dependence on eroding preferential terms of trade, the vagaries of climate change, and high external debt.

According to the recent Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS), household poverty increased from 25% in 2002 to 33% in 2009 and the indigence rate increased from 10.8% to 15.8%.

Belize is a multicultural society; with diverse groups co-existing peacefully. 64% of our population are under the age of 29 years. Belize has a low population density, with the majority of the population residing in rural areas, including at remote locations.

We are proud of our democratic traditions and the fundamental freedoms that are enshrined in our constitution. Labour union activism and citizen participation are defining features of our colonial and post-independence history. Respect for rule of law and judicial independence are hallmarks of our judiciary.

Legal and Institutional Architecture

Mr. President, Belize is a party to the majority of international human rights treaties, including the regional human rights treaties of the Inter American system. The Government of Belize takes seriously its obligation to implement the treaties to which Belize is a party. To this end a number of national laws, referenced in Annex I of the Report, form the framework of the national human rights regime. This national framework is anchored firmly in the Constitution which affirms the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Belizeans and the equal and inalienable rights of all persons.

At the frontline of Government's efforts to promote and protect human rights is the Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation. Four quasi-government agencies have specialized functions with the purpose of ensuring the protection of key

vulnerable populations. The National Committee for Families and Children is tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and advancing issues relating to the interests and protection of children and their families. The National AIDS Commission coordinates a multi stakeholder response to addressing the policy, legislative and practical challenges relating to HIV/AIDS. The National Council on Aging advocates for the rights of older persons. The National Women's Commission oversees the implementation of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Belem do Para Convention as well as the implementation of the Revised National Gender Policy.

Following on recommendations received during the first review, Government has moved to strengthen the Office of the Ombudsman, which has independent powers to investigate citizen complaints and seek redress. The Office of the Ombudsman continues to enjoy the confidence of Belizeans as evidenced by the number of persons who access the Office.

Government has also invested significantly in strengthening the Legal Aid Office, both in terms of resources and capacity, with the singular purpose of ensuring that all Belizeans have access to justice. And we hope to expand the services of the Legal Aid Office to all districts and to employ an attorney dedicated to juvenile justice. We recognize that the national courts remain indispensable arbiters of human rights matters and we are emboldened by the confidence of Belizeans to access the judicial system to ensure that their human rights are vindicated and protected. This is essential to the fortification of our democracy and to the consolidation of a culture of human rights.

Another important actor in promoting and protecting human rights in Belize is our civil society. Their advocacy work has been instrumental in sustaining a national discussion about the rights of citizens, the national human rights framework and the role of Government.

Human Rights and Development

Mr. President, human rights must be realized in all its dimensions: legal, social, political and economic. In this regard, the Government of Belize has taken a rights based approach to development. Respect for human rights is a guiding principle of Horizon 2030, our national development blueprint. For Belize, national development and the full realization of the human rights of all Belizeans are two sides of the same coin. We believe that all Belizeans must be assured of a certain minimum standard of living, which serves as a common basis for the full enjoyment of all human rights.

Belize subscribes fully to the aspirations of the Millennium Development Goals, and we have since 2000 worked assiduously, in concert with our development partners, to meet the goals and the indicators. We have done fairly well in meeting our education and health targets particularly in achieving universal primary education, literacy, proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, access to antiretroviral medication by persons living with HIV, the reduction of death rates associated with malaria, and access to improved drinking water source. We will consolidate the progress achieved and continue to address the pending issues.

Belize is actively participating in the inter-governmental discussions on the post 2015 agenda and we are commencing the realignment of our national development plans in anticipation of the new global development framework.

The Government of Belize is acutely aware that persistent pockets of poverty continue to pose a challenge to development; poverty then remains an obstacle to the full realization of all human rights of all Belizeans. Poverty alleviation and the expansion of economic opportunities are the overarching objectives of our national development strategy and action plans.

Key Issues : Social Protection

Mr. President, it therefore stands to reason that the theme of social protection permeates this second national report of Belize. Over the past five years considerable efforts have been invested in the reform of our social protection systems particularly focusing on the modernization of social safety net programmes. The Government of Belize has sought to guarantee social protection to key population groups including older persons, children, people living with HIV/AIDS, women, and youths.

At the center of Government's efforts are a number of targeted interventions designed to support the poorest segments of the population in the areas of health and education. These programmes are the National Health Insurance, the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme known as Building Opportunities for Social Transformation, a Food Pantry Programme and education subsidies for eligible students. The National Health Insurance scheme provides free and low cost access to health care for those living in south-side Belize City and southern Belize, the poorest areas of the largest city and of the country respectively.

The Building Opportunities for Social Transformation (BOOST), is a Conditional Cash Transfer programme. BOOST provides cash grants to poor and indigent individuals and families. The cash transfers serve as an incentive to keep children in school and ensure that they are up to date with their immunization protocols. Boys in the target families are given a slightly larger benefit than girls as an added incentive to remain in school, since Ministry of Education data indicate that dropout rates are higher among boys beginning in the sixth year of basic education. The most recent data from the Ministry of Human Development indicate that there were some 8,600 beneficiaries. We are most proud of our high rates of bankarization among our beneficiaries with 96% of these beneficiaries receiving benefits through credit unions. This is one of the highest bankarization rates in the world for this type of programme. The positive effect of the BOOST programme was confirmed by a 2012 World Bank evaluation that concluded that the programme was showing some good results.

The Food Pantry Programme provides a weekly basket of basic food items to beneficiaries at half the market price. There are over 3,000 families currently benefitting.

Mr. President let me now briefly highlight a number of achievements, of which further details are contained in our report. Health care and income security are the primary concerns for the elderly. To this end the Government of Belize continues to support the Non Contributory Pension for older persons which provides coverage to approximately a quarter of our elderly population. Additionally, 48% of the elderly population has access to the National Health Insurance scheme.

We have made significant gains in addressing the multiple challenges associated with HIV/AIDS. Notwithstanding, a small increase in new infections in 2012, for four years previously new infections rates were on the decline in Belize. Our Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission Programme has a coverage rate of 95%. Government continues to provide universal access to antiretroviral treatment. With the support of the Global Fund access to psycho-social support services to persons living with the disease has been expanded and orphans and vulnerable children have been targeted as BOOST beneficiaries in the districts with the highest infection rates. In tandem with our civil society partners, Government also continues to sensitize the general population on HIV issues, targeting in particular adolescent females and most at risk populations. The Ministry of Health and the National AIDS Commission continue to carefully study the new evolving patterns of the HIV epidemic so that our national efforts are targeted to these most at risk populations.

Implementation of Recommendations

Treaty Issues

Mr. President, during the first UPR, Belize received a number of recommendations from Members of the Council. The National Report discusses extensively Belize's efforts to implement those recommendations that we accepted. Let me now highlight some of our accomplishments in this regard.

As I have noted before, Belize is in fact a party to many of the multilateral human rights treaties. While Government has endeavored to ensure implementation of all the treaties to which Belize is a party, we are mindful that reporting remains a major challenge. The Attorney General's Ministry has established an International Legal Affairs Department to, inter alia, provide advice on treaty obligations which will in turn inform consideration of joining new treaties. The necessary implementing infrastructure should be in place before assuming new obligations. Government continues to study closely the treaties recommended by Members of the Council on the last occasion. I am happy to report however, that in 2011, Belize acceded to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We will continue to work towards completing processes already underway for accession to the major international human rights treaties that are still pending.

I have outlined before the existing institutional structure for human rights at the national level. The feasibility of establishing a new architecture or a national human rights institution in

accordance with the Paris Principles is a challenge in the present economic context of strained resources. Our priority however of ensuring compliance with our human rights obligations and that treaty provisions are being implemented remains undiminished. Since the first UPR cycle, and with the assistance of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, we have convened a number of workshops to build technical capacity and instituted an inter-ministerial mechanism to coordinate the preparation of reports to the Human Rights Treaty Bodies.

Mr. President, indeed the challenge of timely reporting is not unique to us. I daresay it is a common malady among all small states. We therefore encourage the Human Rights Council and other UN Treaty Bodies to continue streamlining the process in an effort to ease the reporting burden of small countries with limited resources.

Domestic Legislation

Mr. President, in the context of our ongoing national efforts to continuously improve the legislative framework to ensure the protection of human rights of all Belizeans, and taking on board a number of recommendations emanating from the first UPR review of Belize, Parliament has enacted new laws.

We have for example earlier this year enacted improved domestic legislation implementing The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. Parliament has also passed the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Prohibition Act in order to implement the provisions of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

The Education and Training Act which entered into force in 2010 now prohibits corporal punishment in schools. Amendments to the Labour Act treating with the issues of age of admission to work are pending for consideration. Additionally, a draft Occupational Health and Safety Act to prohibit the involvement of children in hazardous work, The ILO Conventions and other international standards, is also pending consideration.

Women's Rights

Mr. President, during the first UPR we received a number of recommendations relating to the promotion and protection of the rights of women. Those recommendations focused on sexual and reproductive health, labour, and gender based violence. In 2005 Government launched a Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy which has led to a coordinated approach to promote and protect the sexual and reproductive rights of women by, inter alia, improving access to healthcare and to information. In 2010 UNFPA in collaboration with a number of other partners conducted an assessment of the linkage between sexual and reproductive health and HIV in Belize and found that Belize has a comprehensive and supportive national policy framework.

We have adopted a similar comprehensive approach to addressing gender-based violence. As I had mentioned at the first UPR, we have strengthen domestic legislation and the range of

protections available to men and women. To complement the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act, the Women's Department has rolled out a National Gender-based Violence Action plan, a Domestic Violence Protocol for Police Officers has been revised and a number of user-friendly publications have been distributed to ensure that victims of gender-based violence are fully aware of their rights and the support services available to them.

In terms of labour related issues, the Women's Department continues to organize a number of training courses for women to build their capacity to engage in the marketplace and to develop skills to enable them to generate their own income. The Decent Work Agenda currently being implemented by the Labour Department focuses on women and youth.

Mr. President, one of the major initiatives of the Government of Belize is the revision of the National Gender Policy. The Revised Gender Policy was endorsed by Cabinet in March 2013. The revised policy builds on the 2002 Policy, it focuses on strategies to reduce gender disparities in five key areas: Health, Education/Skills Training, Wealth and Employment Generation, Violence Producing Conditions and Power and Decision-making. As all good policies should, the Revised National Gender Policy was the subject of spirited debate, among Belizeans. It provided an opportunity for a truly national dialogue about gender relations, diversity and human rights. I note also that the Revised National Gender Policy has piqued the interest of a number of Members of this Council who submitted advance questions relating to the Policy. The implementation of the Gender Policy is ongoing.

Children's Issues

Mr. President, as I noted at the outset, Belize has a very young population. Therefore, protecting the rights of children and providing opportunities for our youths are a high priority of the Government of Belize.

Following on the recommendations of the first UPR cycle, significant improvements have been made to the national birth registration system to ensure greater access. Birth registration is now at 95% and approaching universal coverage.

Improving access to quality education continues to be a major focus of Government's efforts. While universal access to primary education appears to be within reach, challenges remain at the pre-school, secondary and tertiary levels. Government has embarked on an ambitious reform programme to transform the education sector. The 2010 Education and Training Act provides the legal framework for these reforms. Other components of the reform programme include the second school financing reform to achieve a more equitable distribution of public resources and a Teacher Education Programme to raise the quality of teacher performance in the classroom.

Government has invested significantly in providing opportunities for employment and for rehabilitation for youth, particularly those at risk youth.

Indigenous Rights

Mr. President, the Mayas of Southern Belize exemplify human rights in action. In July 2013, the Court of Appeals of Belize affirmed that the Mayas are entitled to indigenous title and the rights thereunder in respect of the lands they occupy. However, this high Court did not affirm the Government's duty to give effect to those rights by the remedies offered by the lower court. Consequently, Government has been in communication with the representatives of the Mayas to determine a mutually agreeable framework for the implementation of the judgment of the Court of Appeals. Government of course respects and is bounded by decisions of the Court.

The Government of Belize continues to be concerned about persistent pockets of poverty and low social indicators in the Toledo District, where the majority of Mayas lived. A number of targeted interventions have been implemented to provide assistance and support to the Mayas including the "Improving Children's Health and Nutrition in Poor Mayan Communities in Toledo" project, which has a very high rate of coverage.

advance questions

Mr. President, I now turn to the advance questions submitted by Members of the Council, relating to issues which I have not otherwise addressed in the course of this statement.

Belize is a steadfast supporter of the International Criminal Court, and one of the earliest depositors of the instrument of ratification of the Rome Statute, indeed we were the 8th country to deposit. Another demonstration of our commitment is that we participate actively in the assembly of State Parties and have along with Trinidad and Tobago proposed an amendment to the Rome Statute to expand the crimes under the Court's jurisdiction to include international drug trafficking. Although Belize does not yet have in place a single comprehensive legislation to implement the Rome Statute, existing domestic laws do respond to our obligations under the Rome Statute including the Genocide Act and several other pieces of legislation that treat with crimes under the Court's jurisdiction.

We are encouraged by the recent pace of ratifications of the Kampala Amendments by the other State Parties to the Rome Statute. Belize is currently reviewing these Amendments and we welcome the offer of Liechtenstein to provide technical assistance to support our Government's consideration of the amendments.

Despite our best endeavors and intentions we were unable to submit a full national report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and this continues to be a work in progress.

The Constitution of Belize prohibits discrimination against all persons and affirms that "all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law." The Prime Minister of Belize has reiterated that Government will not "shirk its duty to ensure that all citizens, without exception, enjoy the full protection of the law." We

note in this context, as well, an advance question regarding a section of the Criminal Code of Belize which criminalizes sodomy. The section of the Criminal Code is now *sub judice*, and I am compelled to respectfully refrain from speculating on the outcome.

Closing

Mr. President, in introducing the Second National Human Rights Report of Belize I have sought to highlight a number of areas in which we believe we have made significant progress in promoting, protecting and ensuring the human rights of all persons who live within the borders of Belize. The inextricable link between development and human rights is the recurring theme of my presentation and of the national report. Belize is a small state, facing severe economic and financial constraints in the context of the global financial crisis. Our Government is proud that despite resource challenges, we have found ways to increase investments in the social and economic development of our country to enable Belizeans to actualize their social and economic human rights as well as their civil, political and cultural rights, which are firmly entrenched in our Constitution.

Mr. President, I have no doubt that room for improvement exists. And we welcome the opportunity provided by this Review to engage in a good faith discussion with Members of the Council on how to further strengthen the system of protections.

My delegation is fully prepared to engage in the interactive dialogue.

Thank you

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