



BELIZE PRESS OFFICE

• Phone: 822-0094 or 0092

• Fax: 822-2671

• website: www.belize.gov.bz

Independence Day Address 2020 By Prime Minister of Belize Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow

I have been delivering Independence day speeches for over twenty years now, either as Leader of the Opposition or as Prime Minister. I do so one last time today in circumstances that are the most taxing in a generation.

Of course, Governance is never a smooth continuum. The general caprices of human affairs are multiplied ten times over in matters of state. For our country, then, the poetic notion that we are ultimately bound for glory has always been accompanied by the prosaic everyday struggle actually to scale the heights; to regain our foothold when we slip; to clamber back up; to resume our climb towards what we see as the summit of our destiny.

Every Independence Day's stock taking, therefore, has acknowledged that success is not linear. Unfailingly, though, the ledger has confirmed more progress than problems; that our hard work and optimism and talent mark us in the end as sure to prevail.

Now, however, we are confronted by a confidence-buckler of a pandemic, one that is as relentless as it is devastating. It appeared in the early days that we had it pretty much licked. Given this latest surge, however, we may be forgiven for thinking it somewhat like the American game of whack-a-mole. I remember the debate that raged about the reopening of the PGIA. Many of us feared that the return of the tourists would mean importing the virus, multiple cases of foreign infection. As it turned out, though, our problem proved not to be external. Like that old horror movie trope, the scary thing was not what was threatening to invade from without our tightly shuttered home. It was rather the danger from within: the jumpers and the contrabandistas, obstinately and repeatedly going across our supposedly sealed borders to places where the proliferation and danger were astounding. That was the principal source of the importation; and it was exacerbated by the heedless in-country behavior of too many: the partying with Dionysian abandon, the ignoring of the mask wearing and social distancing and public gathering rules.

Notwithstanding all this, I am certain that we will defeat this covid-19. Even as I speak there is qualified good news. That is because the testing record over the last month or so, shows a trending week-over-week percentage deceleration of positive cases. The phenomenon of indiscipline, the lax or wilful behaviour that contributed to the new outbreaks, is, I think, receding. The rapid tests that will allow for ease of mass detection and contact tracing, are steadily becoming more reliable; and the vaccines that will provide immunity now appear within reach. Remember that at the virtual global meeting recently convened by the WHO, 30 Heads of State pledged, as a matter of the greatest urgency, an additional 37 billion dollars to accelerate development, production and equal access to Covid-19 tests, treatment and vaccines.

All this is a huge plus to our own reset here at home. There is little doubt that our minds are now wonderfully concentrated in terms of the necessary behavioral changes, the enhanced surveillance to ensure that we better look out for ourselves and each other. Thus, I am firmly convinced that it is now just a matter of time till we come safely to shore.

When that happens, when these trials and tribulations are in the rear view mirror, this generation will be remembered and celebrated as ultimately having thwarted one of the foulest periods of Belizean history.

Of course, we will always lament that so many of our people have been afflicted. We will always grieve for those fallen to the plague. Likewise, we will not gloss over our shortcomings, our blank fear at the start as we struggled with a phenomenon that none could have imagined, for which none could have prepared. But we will ever know that during our greatest trial we once more found our heroes: our nurses and doctors and health inspectors and immigration and customs officers; our police and our soldiers and our coast guard and all those that defend the ramparts against this insidious scourge. We fought and are fighting what is not even tactile, what seems spectral but is all too real. It is a virus no bigger than a mote of dust, something we can't touch or feel or see. Still, it has felled us in numbers, rich and poor and high and low.

It is an irony of ironies, though, that this merciless leveler is also a great elevator. In basic ways, it has validated our humanity and our Belizeanness. We have come together as one. We have lifted each other up. We have found new ways of doing things. We have called forth those great national reserves of resilience and courage. We are carried aloft by our front line workers, those that sometimes clock 24 hour shifts. We are inspired by the hardscrabble creativity of everyday people: the tacos and tamales makers, the coconut huskers and

juicers, those women and men that have gone from street side hawking to internet vending in order to preserve their livelihood and feed their families.

In the end, the selflessness of the many is far outdoing the selfishness of the few. We have thus remained unconquered. No coronavirus storm, no Hurricane Nana, is able ultimately to defeat our core values, scar our Belizean culture or deface the spectacular physical and spiritual beauty of this our own, our native land.

So, it has been, and is, a test for the ages. But as never before in our lifetimes, Belizeans have risen to the challenge. People and Government, politicians of all stripes, business and labour, social workers and NGOs, all are doing their share. No one can doubt that against this phantasmal enemy, we are deploying our united best.

The role of the Administration in all this has been, perforce, an outsized one. The ravages of the pathogen have confounded even the most developed countries, the most advanced scientists the world over. More so for small countries, where flaws and gaps are magnified a thousand fold. I nevertheless put it to you today that in fighting this pandemic our authorities have done a creditable job despite the loss, so far, of more than a third of fiscal revenues. No doubt propelled by the example of so many brave and resourceful citizens, GOB has striven mightily to do its duty; in particular to discharge its core function of attempting to assist all, especially the so-called least of our brethren. We have been able to unlock funds, both locally and internationally that, while never enough, have been plentiful. Thus, it is that 39,129 households have received, and continue to receive, packages under our food assistance program. This has been at a cost of 20 million dollars; and with another 20 million coming from OFID, we are doubling the amount of beneficiary families.

Our very important Unemployment Relief Program was implemented right at the start of the pandemic. We borrowed 75 million dollars from the Central Bank of Belize to do this, and spent 35 million to assist 40 thousand persons during the four-month period of phase 1 of the project. The number of persons assisted included both those that had lost their jobs because of the pandemic, and longer term unemployed.

Phase 2 of the URP has now started and Government has made an even greater commitment. On the basis of funds left over from Phase 1 plus what has been secured from the IDB and what is to be had from CABEI, we will be able to assist another 50 thousand unemployed for an additional period that should last through December.

We have, because we sorted out kinks and Phase 2 is moving far more rapidly than Phase 1, already made first payments to 20 thousand of the new applicants.

We have also programmed 10 million dollars for loans, grants and subsidies to the MSME sector. This is money that (together with another 10 million used to start the food rollout) we took from the 75 million dollar CBB loan. It is, though, all being replenished with the new IFI flows.

Agriculture, as one of our economic mainstays, is also featuring prominently in our assistance portfolio. 16 million dollars has been allocated for cash disbursements and resource financing to our farmers. These include particularly small and women farmers, and the payouts are already being processed.

The current 3128 household recipients of subsidies from Government's longstanding Conditional Cash Transfer program, also known as BOOST, are now getting increases in their stipends. Also, GOB has procured another 26 million dollars from the World Bank with which to start BOOST 2.0, more formally known as Belize Covid 19 Cash Transfer. This will add 10,500 more households to the program with the funding sufficient to cover them for an initial six-month period.

Perhaps most important of all, 20 million dollars has been approved by the IDB for procuring additional health sector supplies, refurbishing facilities, taking on more personnel and paying the promised bonus to health workers.

In the middle of all this, Government has also succeeded in making good, month after month, on the entirety of salaries for every single Public Officer.

In most cases, as well, major capital projects have continued, preserving those jobs created in consequence of our hallmark infrastructure expansion.

All our schools are now reopening and Government is fronting 7 million dollars to purchase 15 thousand tablets to aid in the online learning for secondary level students. This is money that we will recoup from the IDB.

Finally, the tourism sector is benefiting from a CDB/DFC 10 million dollar working capital line. The loans are at low interest rates partially subsidised by Government.

This, then, is our proud record of comprehensive outreach and social protection during the pandemic.

I thank all those international and bilateral partners, including Taiwan, that have helped to make it possible; and I say that it is proof positive that Government acted with a comprehensive purpose from the outset to deal with the economic fallout from the crisis.

This was, I also repeat, matched by our efforts to protect health and safeguard lives. We preemptively discontinued cruise ship arrivals even before closing the PGIA. We directed a national lockdown in the initial stage and we have subsequently isolated, as necessary, cluster-affected communities. We have tested aggressively; and we have legislated comprehensively the required behavioural safety infrastructure and surveillance. At every juncture Government has consulted broadly. We formed the National Oversight Committee right at the start, and have always sought the best available local and international scientific advice to guide our decision making.

Naturally, the story is not yet ended, the saga not yet over. No one need doubt, though, that we will overcome. We declare this as a certainty, and our assurance is real. This is because it is based not just on stirring rhetoric or a Belizean call to arms. Neither is it based on platitudes. Rather, it is rooted in how far we have already come, and in the recognition of the need for the serious, sustained, programmatic action that will bring the necessary further success. That required action is local and global. It will demand comprehensive debt relief-bilateral, multilateral and commercial; and It will necessitate massive financial support from the IFIs, especially the Bretton Woods twins. Such assistance cannot be tied to normal-times conditionalities that are punitive and will hamper, rather than empower, recovery.

Fortunately, those that control the levers of international power and the global economy, seem to get it. Already in the citadels of planetary decision making, the calls are growing for a post-pandemic order that will pay special attention to equitability and the needs of countries such as ours.

There is a recognition of worldwide interdependence notwithstanding the asymmetries of size. There is an acceptance of the imperative for differentiated treatment of small states. There is the embedding of the humanizing element needed to curb the inequalities of the old regime.

In the end, though, Belize's ultimate triumph will depend most on Belize itself. Our recovery, our tourism and agriculture and manufacturing and services rebound, will oblige us to work harder than ever, make more sacrifices than ever. Most particularly, we will now be mandated to deploy in fullest measure those innate talents, that Belizean capacity, which we proudly possess in demonstrated plenty.

So, for me, I leave with the certain knowledge that we can do it; that we will prevail because our leaders- political and spiritual and social- are all united in their love for Belize, their will to rescue our country.

Whoever comes next, then, will surely operate on the basis that it is vision, dedication and faith in Divine Providence that will bring us to safe harbour.

And so, Hail and farewell. I thank all for the unmatched privilege of having been allowed to serve this country; and God bless Belize!

Que viva nuestra Independencia, y que Dios nos bendiga.