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PRESS RELEASE

Update on COVID-19: Repatriation Programme

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The Ministry of Foreign Affairs shares the following update as the first point of contact for the programme for the controlled repatriation of Belizeans who are stranded abroad due to travel restrictions imposed to contain COVID-19.

On May 18, 2020, the controlled repatriation programme began with the opening of the process for stranded and displaced Belizeans to complete an application. <https://repatriation.covid19.bz/Forms/Landing>

The COVID-19 Repatriation Committee, comprising of the ministries responsible for Health, Foreign Affairs, Immigration, Human Development, and ultimately, National Security, organized the domestic arrangements for repatriation including identification and site assessments of the quarantine facilities, negotiation of rates, training, assigning health officers and Belize Defence Force Officers for the returning Belizeans, as well as COVID-19 testing.

To date, 570 applications have been received from Belizeans abroad who wish to return home. Of the applications received, 239 were from Belizeans in the USA seeking to return home, 35 are in Mexico, 32 in Guatemala, 20 in Peru, 19 in Cuba, 19 in Honduras, 17 in the UK, 14 in El Salvador, 11 across France, Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Ireland and The Netherlands, six in Guyana, six in Taiwan, 11 in Jamaica, four in Costa Rica, one in Panama, seven in India, four in Bolivia, three in Barbados, two in Colombia, one in Lebanon, one in Saudi Arabia, one in United Arab Emirates, one in The Philippines, one in Nigeria, and one travelled from Tanzania.

Belizeans are spread over the world but generally in smaller numbers than would make repatriation flights possible - such as those in Guyana, India, and Barbados. Wherever possible, assistance is being sought through Belize's embassies and consulates to identify alternative flights, join in other existing repatriation programmes, and are providing assistance on a regular basis. Many countries, like Belize itself, have been or are in various stages of a state of emergency, lockdown, or border and airport closures. This has impacted how and when Belizeans may be able to move - in some cases special requests can be made while in others these are denied depending on greater public health concerns.

Applications continue to be received daily. Applications are screened and sorted, with priority according to persons with chronic medical conditions, those in acute distress, persons at higher risk from being affected by COVID-19, persons in acute financial or other distress, and persons traveling with young

children. Applications are then reviewed by the COVID-19 Repatriation Committee which recommends applicants for repatriation. Final approval rests with the Minister of National Security. Belizeans approved for repatriation are so notified and are required to inform the COVID-19 Repatriation Committee of the date, mode of return and port of entry.

Returning Belizeans are screened by the Quarantine Authority prior to being transported to an approved quarantine facility, where they stay for 14 days and will be tested in order to obtain approval to return to their homes.

The Minister of National Security has to date, approved the return of 168 Belizeans. The first two groups of repatriated Belizeans have left quarantine after all confirming negative for COVID-19.

Re-entry has been phased and cautious in order to protect those most vulnerable already in Belize and the general populace already here as well as those seeking to return. At this time, strong advice requires entries of groups in cycles which will require applicants to wait for approval before moving for the protection of all. It is important to acknowledge the anxiety and strain felt by Belizeans that are displaced and stranded abroad. COVID-19 has affected every sector of Belize and all of our lives in very dramatic ways. This means that the Government of Belize must very carefully balance its wish to have our Belizeans home against the reality of what can be safely accomplished at this time. There are no easy answers. To those waiting for approval, please know that every effort is being made in the background for your return to Belize.

Belizeans who are stranded abroad and wish to return home can apply by submitting completed COVID-19 screening and Belize controlled repatriation forms which can be found at <https://www.covid19.bz>.

Those returning are asked to participate with Belizeans already here in preventing the spread of COVID-19 by practicing good hygiene and recommendations below:

- Quarantine saves lives - please see this as an act of service to your family, friends and community
- Wear masks properly
- Keep hands away from the eyes, nose and mouth
- Make a habit of social distancing of six feet as much as possible
- Refrain from old practices of shaking hands or hugging
- Regularly wash hands or use hand sanitizers
- Cough or sneeze into elbows instead of into the air

The virus depends on us to spread – let's not give it the chance.

Ends