



**PERMANENT MISSION OF BELIZE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

STATEMENT

By

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TO THE

**TWENTY-FIRST SPECIAL SESSION OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE OVERALL REVIEW
AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
PROGRAMME OF ACTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

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Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government and people of Belize I thank you for the opportunity to address this Special Session of the UN General Assembly and would like to express our warmest greetings to all the participating countries. Our sincere congratulations to the Secretary General of the Population Fund, to you, Mr. President, on your appointment, and to all those involved in the planning and organization of this special occasion. We feel privileged to be able to evaluate in a systematic manner our progress since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

Mr. President, Belize is located in Central America, bordered on the north and northwest by Mexico, on the west and south by Guatemala and on the east by the longest barrier reef in this hemisphere, and has a land area of approximately 9,000 square miles. The 1998 mid-year estimate put the country's population at around 240,000 persons. Although the land area and population size indicate a small country with a low population density, there are many problems associated with this situation. As reported in 1994, Belize continues to be an oasis of peace, justice and economic opportunity in this region. This environment attracts migrants, not only from neighboring countries but also from as far away as Asia. On the other hand, our country is confronted with a continuing stream of educated Belizeans migrating to more developed countries in North America and Europe. I must point out, however, that my government, through the Ministry of National Security, has recently made the decision to develop a comprehensive migration policy to address both immigration and emigration. As an example of its respect for human rights and to ensure social and economic integration of immigrants, Belize is presently implementing an Amnesty Program. So far almost 16,000 persons, the vast majority of whom are poor, have applied for permanent residency. We stand as a beacon in the world, Mr. President, of what a small country can do to assist the less fortunate of its neighbours. However, Belize's past and present actions, although humane, continue to put a strain on our already fragile economy, our social services and our environment. We will undoubtedly need the assistance and support of our partners in development to help us cope.

Although my country continues to experience a high population growth rate of around 2% per annum, and a large part is due to a natural increase, I am happy to report that the Total Fertility Rate of **Belizean** women has decreased from 4.7 to around 4.0 over the past five years. We admit, however, that this rate is still unacceptably high, since in many cases high fertility is not by choice but due to lack of awareness and availability of family planning services. My country has taken steps to address this issue. A National Health Plan addresses the need for a comprehensive reproductive health program and includes a family planning component that targets both male and female adults and youth. The goal of these reproductive health programs continues to be what it was in 1994: a choice in family planning matters and a reduction in **incidences** of maternal mortality and morbidity, sexually transmitted diseases and high birthrates among teenagers.

A disease of much concern to Belize, as in many other developing countries, is AIDS. Since 1994, when the rate of HIV/AIDS cases was 3.7 cases per 10,000 persons, the rate has climbed to 9.4 per 10,000 in 1998. This is an alarming situation that requires immediate and sustainable intervention. My Government is committed to developing a comprehensive AIDS

Policy that will arrest the growth of this scourge. This policy is being drafted in partnership with civil society, the private sector and our international partners in development and commands my Government's highest priority.

One of the important areas addressed by the ICPD Programme of Action and of which I am proud to say Belize has made considerable progress in, is that of Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment. Belize firmly ascribes to all international conventions dealing with this subject and in this regard my government clearly states that **“one of the tests of a society's value is the status its women enjoy. Where poverty prevails, where unemployment is rife and “opportunity” has a hollow sound, it is women who bear the brunt of the suffering. Until women are empowered to define and control their own destiny without being subject to discrimination and abuse, Belize can never be considered a just and democratic society.”**

Some of the steps taken which demonstrate my Government's commitment to this subject include:

- The completion of a Gender Equity and Equality Strategic Plan in 1999;
- The passing of a Sexual Harrassment Act in 1996, together with its supporting structures;
- The creation of a Domestic Violence Unit in the Police Department to ensure that women and children are treated with sensitivity;
- The passing of a Families and Children Act in 1998;
- Married Persons (Protection) Act, which addresses the issue of marital rape; and
- Strengthening of the Women's Department.

In 1998, my government inherited a situation of an unacceptably high unemployment rate of approximately 20% among women. We are committed to changing this situation. We can report that through programs which offer training in non-traditional areas, such as computer technology, and others that assure access to capital, women are being encouraged to become entrepreneurs and hence economically empowered. The recently established Small Business Bank reports that 37% of its loans, totaling 29% of disbursements, were made to women. A recently concluded agreement with the Inter-American Development Bank and our Social Investment Fund has earmarked over a million dollars for micro-enterprise development, 50% of which must be targetted towards women.

My government has also clearly stated, Mr. President, its commitment to increase the number of women in key leadership positions in the public service and other public bodies and has targeted 30% of all appointees to be women.

In the area of national policies and plans of action pertaining to Population and Development, Belize is proud to say that, in keeping with its commitment to this body in 1994, it now has a Population Unit established within the Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth and a draft National Population and Development Policy. The policy addresses all the priority issues identified in the ICPD+5 review. It will shortly be disseminated across all sectors of our society, in the form of workshops and consultations, to encourage the people's input. The Population Unit participates in relevant **fora** and committees to assure the integration of population variables in the national planning process.

To facilitate the Population Unit's work and to ensure a holistic and integrated approach to the development process in general, my government, with the assistance of our national and international development partners, is actively promoting mechanisms that will establish more dialogue and closer collaboration among the social sector ministries.

In concluding, Mr. President, although Belize has made considerable progress in the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, considerable constraints have also been experienced, important among which are inadequate human and financial resources. The Government of Belize, in its far-reaching vision, construes these as challenges rather than obstacles. My Government reiterates to this respectable body our commitment when we took office in August of 1998 to improve the economic and social well-being of all Belizeans and to honour and abide by all our international commitments and obligations. This is no easy feat and will undoubtedly require the cooperation, assistance and support of the international community, among which the United Nations stands tall.

I thank you.