

**Statement to the Commission on Population and Development
Acting as Preparatory Committee for the Special Session
of the General Assembly**

As written



PERMANENT MISSION OF BELIZE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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Statement by

Mrs. I. Myrtle Palacio

Chairperson

National Committee for Families and Children

Government of Belize

to the Preparatory Committee of the Special Session of the
General Assembly for the review and appraisal of the
implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action

March 26, 1999

New York

Mr. Chairman, Belize with a population of 225,000 on a 9,000 sq. mile expanse, is committed to the ICPD Programme of Action. At The Hague Forum in February, Belize was afforded the opportunity to share the progress made, as well as the constraints in our efforts with the ICPD Programme of Action. My intervention this morning is to bring to the attention of this Conference two matters that needs serious reflection. One is the issue of migration-both international and internal. The other is the omission of indigenous peoples a group at risk from the Draft. I am even more adamant in my anguish in the former as it comes at the heels of the address made by Dr. Nafis Sadik on Tuesday, as follows: "International migration is a highly volatile issue ... however, the technical meeting on migration ... found that although here has been some progress ... the data base on international migration is too poor and the knowledge base regarding movements of people too thin to form the basis for proposals towards a collective approach."

The issue of migration is pivotal to Belize's population and development efforts as it imposes challenges and constraints that impinge directly on population and development matters. Our international migration pattern is unique in that Belize is both a sending and receiving country. As a receiving country, the immigrants to Belize come from much larger countries; are people at risk-unskilled, young, some are indigenous persons; and are from neighbouring countries, making movements continuous.

The last ten years have seen a significant increase in foreign-born persons, from 8.6% to 28%. Some 89% of these are primarily unskilled males from the neighbouring communities, and 8% from developed countries. Approximately 68% serve as a pool for cheap labour in the agriculture sector, a major foreign exchange earner in Belize.

Mr. Chairman, Belize had an "open door" policy, the most lenient immigration policy in the region and possibly the world. Although the new policy statements seeks to address part of this, the long term effects of the old policy is yet unknown.

As a sending country over 60,000 skilled African Belizeans fled to North America for economic reasons, since the late 1960's. This continues today, but primarily for younger Belizeans to permanently join relatives, leaving the elderly behind. A profile of emigrants indicate that they are young females (56%,15-24), of secondary and tertiary school level (54%), and migrate primarily to the United States (86%). While remittances in 1986 from abroad amounted to 7.3% of GNP-in 1986, it has now dwindled to 1995. This is an indication of the permanence of the move.

Internal migration, that is rural to urban movements, is primarily for economic reasons, but this area requires a thorough investigation. But whole families vacate their rural communities for the larger urban centers, in search of wage labour. They leave behind a subsistence food producing economy, permit land to be unproductive, and embrace a marginal capitalism. One third of the inter-district movements of locals converge on Belize City, an area that is below sea level and therefore prone to devastation by natural disasters.

The challenge to population and development brought on by migration is just emerging. Some of which I shared at The Hague Forum February are: the decline in literacy and numeracy, the overwhelming demand for housing, the overwhelming demand for social services such as education and health, and the leaderlessness due to brain drain suffered by the rural communities. However other effects of migration that challenge population and development are: the radical ethnic shift, from a predominantly Black to a predominantly Mestizo; and the extremes in demographic alterations. It is imperative that action be focused on investigations, not only to document Peoples movements, but to compare countries' policies on migration, access in-depth information needed to arrive at causes and the structural factors that contribute to movements, and the implications for integration to the receiving countries.

Lastly, some 12% of Belize's population comprise of three distinct indigenous groups. This group is at risk for all themes in the Draft Paper prepared by this learned Commission, so their omission is obvious. I would humbly suggest that this conference keep in mind the plight of the indigenous peoples. Also for states to acknowledge their rights in terms of protection of their culture, belief systems, rights to land, language, etc. Many countries have ratified the appropriate international UN instruments on this.

In concluding Mr. Chairman, Belize reaffirms its commitment to the goals of the ICPD+5. Belize would like to acknowledge its international donor partners, UNFPA, WHO/PAHO, UNICEF for their timely assistance.