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ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND
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By Hon. Faith Babb, Minister of State

in the Ministry of Human Development, BELIZE

Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman,

First I would like to offer my Government's sincerest
congratulations to you, Mr. President on your election to preside over
this momentous conference. I am confident that your wisdom and

experience will guide us successfully through the present meeting.

Permit me too, Mr. President to express my Government's deep gratitude to the Secretary General of the Population Fund, Dr. Nafis Sadik, and her colleagues for their tireless efforts in organizing this monumental conference. This conference is of an unprecedented nature. The subjects we discuss are of great moment and of transcending importance. It is a great credit to our world organization, of which Belize is a proud member. Let me therefore not forget also to acknowledge with great satisfaction the kindness and hospitality shown by the people and government of the host country, Egypt.

My country, Belize, is located on the mainland of CENTRAL AMERICA, bounded on the north by Mexico, on the west and south by Guatemala and on the east by the Caribbean sea. As reflected in the 1991 Census of population and housing, Belize has an estimated population of just over 200, 000. The population growth rate has recently been quite high, around 2.6% per annum. If this rate should prevail, it is estimated that the population will double in twenty six (26) years, in other words by the years 2020. The population growth of Belize has historically been strongly influenced by migration - both emigration and immigration. Most recently, the significance of immigration has increased. Of equal importance however, is the prevailing high total fertility rate of 4.7 children per woman. Permit me to add here, however, that this rate has declined from around 5.9 children per women in 1980

Mr. President, like so many other developing countries today Belize faces several serious population related problems. Most of these problems are linked, either directly or indirectly, to the demographic structure of the population. A key feature of this structure is the youth of the population: a large proportion, 44 percent, is below the

age of 14 years. This very young population implies large dependency ratios. In fact, with a further 5% of the population over 65 years, this leaves only 51% for possible entry into the labour force.

Closely allied to the problem directly caused by the demographic structure of the population, are the serious and ever increasing problems related to the prevailing high rates of YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT. Based on the ongoing labour force surveys, it is estimated that unemployment among Belizean youths aged 15 to 24 years is over 21% and continues to rise. Added to this, however, is the large number of youths who classify themselves as economically inactive and who, by definition, are completely excluded from the labour force, and consequently do not enter into the calculation of unemployment rates at all. A large number of these youths in both categories have formed gangs. Gang related activities have become a serious social and law enforcement problem. In addition, as one would expect of these circumstances, the sale, use and abuse of weapons and illegal substances is rampant among gang members and other youths.

Mr. President, we are fully aware that the demographic structure is an important but, not the sole root cause of these social problems. The other causes are many and varied. They range from the break down of the family structure and values, to the influence of foreign media, and to the systematic defects in the enforcement of law and order. Mr. president, we might try to pass on traditional family values to this group of young adults. We might also take other remedial actions. However, whatever we do, we would still not be able to fully arrest the problem of gangs within the next twelve (12) years. This is because existing gang members and other anti-social members of this cohort of 12-24 would not pass through this critical phase for some twelve (12) years. Regrettably, then, this problem will be with us for some time

Closely connected to the structure of our population as well, are the serious problems of TEEN or ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY and ILLEGAL ABORTION particularly among teenagers. Available statistics show that some 21% of all births are delivered to females aged 14 to 19. Considerable and significant evidence is emerging in support of the popular belief that illegal abortions are rampant among teenagers. Many of these reach our hospitals where they are reported and recorded as 'Miscarriages.' This, of course, impairs the statistical utility of these recorded data. Nevertheless, there is a concensus that the problem of TEEN PREGNANCY is worsening, to the extent that a substantial number of young females are having to postpone their secondary education or to discontinue it completely. This includes cases where school unfortunately refuse to permit recent mothers from resuming their studies. We must arrest this problem before it becomes endemic. A study to gather more reliable data on the subject has recently been completed and, the data are now being analysed.

The problem of TEEN PREGNANCY highlights the need for the promotion and improvement of FAMILY PLANNING and FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION. It is important that Family Planning services be made available everywhere for those who want them. I am happy to report to this meeting Mr. President, that my government is much more supportive of FAMILY PLANNING than has been in the past. My government endorsed the right to family planning "as long as the couples or individuals involved desire it'. The government's role here is therefore to inform, educate and communicate with the potential users for them to make an informed choice. However, never will the government of Belize coerce people one way or the other. In this regard then, we call on the international community to cooperate and assist us and such NGO's as the BELIZE FAMILY

LIFE ASSOCIATION, to ensure that all individuals and couples are aware of safe services, and that they all have easy access if they so wish.

Mr. President, on the issue of ABORTION, I am happy to tell this gathering that the government of Belize opposes ABORTION on DEMAND.

The final population problem which currently plagues Belize relates to the area of MIGRATION. Belize continues to lose our small number of highly skilled Belizeans - even those who have been assisted by the government in obtaining their training. It is obvious that to stem the brain drain, it is important to offer more incentives. Mr. President, we are doing all we can to accomplish this. However, this remedy presupposes high and sustained economic growth. Again, we call on the international community to assist countries like Belize to find solutions to this problem which is common in developing countries. In this connection, we would like to note that Belize's relatively high nominal per capita income is misleading in assessing developmental level. This is on account of Belize's substantial social, demographic and especially, her infrastructural problems. It must be recalled, Mr. President, that Belize is a relatively large country, compared with its small and dispersed population.

Immigration is the other side of the migration coin. Mr. President, immigration has also wreaked havoc on our limited resources and on the economy of Belize. This grave problem commenced in the early 1980's with the wars and civil unrest in countries of the Central American sub-region. Mr. President, I am proud to report that in earlier days, and even during recent periods of severe turmoil, Belize has always been an oasis of peace, tranquility and justice. As such, my country has been a magnet for many thousands of citizens of our sister Central American countries who have been forced to flee their country of

origin. Our Refugee Office recently reported that there are now approximately 10,000 registered refugees who satisfy the criteria of the Refugee Convention. However, the more worrying problem is the estimated 20,000 more undocumented migrants who do not satisfy the criteria and have settled in Belize. Many of these are, in fact, economic migrants. Aside from the grave stress which all of these people impose on our social services, most have a limited level of education and therefore contribute only minimally to the agricultural sector of the economy. Some of the undocumented migrants may have slightly higher levels of skill in other sectors, for example in the construction sector. However, local employers exploit these limited skills and pay these people much lower wages. This results in severe unemployment problems among those members of the host population who make their livelihood in this sector. Immigration is therefore one of Belize's major population related problems. We again call for international cooperation.

Mr. President, there is an aspect of the Programme of Action which gives concern to the Belize delegation. It is the call for the receiving countries to assist "migrant workers" in getting their families to join them. Mr. President, if that term includes undocumented workers, then it must be acknowledged that at times we have extreme difficulty complying with this mandate, since 10 to 15 percent of our population already consists of such workers.

Mr. President, the draft Programme of Action for this conference is closely in line with the Port of Spain Declaration, the Caribbean's subregional declaration on the issue of Population and Development, to which our government is a primary party. Most importantly, however, we have committed ourselves to immediate implementation of the Programme of Action adopted in Cairo. As a first step, our technical personnel will

immediately embark on the drafting of a comprehensive POPULATION POLICY, and the establishment of a POPULATION COUNCIL involving a broad cross-section of society. The Population Council will monitor and guide the implementation of the policy.

Mr. President, finally I would like to reiterate Belize's unqualified support of the efforts of the United Nations

-to significantly improve the QUALITY of LIFE of "succeeding - generations", in full sustainability on this planet which we - would call "One World"

-to promote universal CARING and SHARING

-to EMPOWER BOTH WOMEN and men to make their own reproductive choices and plan their own lives, in mutual love and respect.

MR. PRESIDENT, I THANK YOU.

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