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CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

THE DISPUTE WITH GUATEMALA OVER BELIZE:

PROGRESS OF NEGOTIATIONS

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN
AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

1. As authorised by the Committee at their meeting on 2 April, negotiations were resumed with the Guatemalans in May when Mr Nicholas Ridley met the Guatemalan Foreign Minister in Bermuda. This was followed by a meeting of officials in New York in July. The Belize Government was represented at both meetings. The Guatemalan Foreign Minister visited the United Kingdom in June. Mr Ridley returned this visit in August. No negotiation took place during these visits but they contributed to the negotiating atmosphere. We have had a number of separate discussions with Premier Price, who has also had a meeting of his own with the Guatemalan Foreign Minister, with a British observer present. A further Ministerial meeting is now agreed for 13 October in New York.

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2. Due, we believe, to their international isolation and their concern over internal security, the Guatemalans have adopted a more pragmatic approach than hitherto. In Bermuda they sought a substantial slice of territory in the south of Belize, coupled with arrangements for collaboration in the security field. We told them firmly that territorial cession (apart from some adjustment of the maritime line in the south) was unacceptable to Belize. We made it clear that though we continued to prefer a negotiated settlement, failure to achieve this would not deter us from granting Belize independence.

3. At the New York meeting in July, the Guatemalans floated the idea that (a) Belize might go to independence within its present boundaries, leaving eventual sovereignty over the area in southern Belize claimed by Guatemala to be decided later by means of a plebiscite; and that (b) the Bay of Amatique (covering both Belizean and Guatemalan waters) might be jointly administered. In return for thus apparently abandoning their immediate territorial claim they sought a token concession in the shape of sovereignty over some of the southernmost cays.

4. Such an arrangement might have provided the framework for a settlement. The Belize Government however have rejected both elements on the grounds that they would infringe their sovereignty and territorial integrity, even without the cession of any of the cays.

5. While we cannot be sure until we have tried, it appears unlikely that the Guatemalans can be persuaded to make still further concessions notwithstanding the importance they attach to an agreement and to securing their eastern frontier. We judge that they will prefer no agreement at all to one which they would regard as humiliating. We must therefore approach the next round with small prospect of a negotiated settlement.

6. An indefinite extension of the status quo is not an option acceptable to us (for the reasons advanced in my memorandum OD 8031). If we cannot achieve a negotiated settlement, our objective must be to secure Guatemalan agreement either (a) to continue to negotiate with us in parallel with the independence process or (b) to discontinue negotiations and resume them directly with the Belizeans

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after independence. Neither option may be negotiable but we will certainly try.

7. If we fail, then the negotiations will simply end, we hope in not too bad an atmosphere. We shall have to assess the risk of a violent Guatemalan reaction before starting the process of taking Belize to independence. If we could get tacit acceptance by the Guatemalans of Belizean independence, the Guatemalans, in their own interests, would probably take no action prejudicial to the development of harmonious relations between the two countries. But their domestic considerations might dictate at least a show of sabre-rattling. In either case further reinforcement of the garrison would probably become necessary.

8. Without a negotiated settlement the Belizeans would need, and have requested, military protection during the transition to independence and for a period thereafter. They have been told that the United Kingdom could not provide this unconditionally: that we require their full cooperation in our negotiating strategy: and that, in any case, a British garrison could remain in Belize for only a strictly limited period and on clearly defined terms. In the longer term the Belizeans would have to rely on building up the Belize Defence Force (in which we can help) and on the security provided by established membership of the United Nations.

9. We have agreed with the Guatemalans that the substance of the negotiations is confidential. Negotiating tactics also dictate playing our cards close to our chest. For the present we must not take either Belize's international supporters or our friends fully into our confidence. We have also to restrain the Belizeans who are keen to start canvassing a draft resolution for this year's United Nations debate. We envisage that this will be stronger than last year's and it will include a target date for independence to which we can respond by calling a Constitutional Conference. But the precise wording must be considered in the light of our meeting with the Guatemalans on 13 October.

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10. I will submit a further report after the October meeting with the Guatemalans at which point a discussion in Committee may be needed, since final decisions may then have to be made in relation to the future of Belize.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
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