



**Interim Statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group  
Belize Referendum**

**9 May 2019**

**Statement by Rt Hon Hubert A. Ingraham  
Former Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas  
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The people of Belize, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for coming.

This is an interim statement, and as such provides an initial assessment of the Referendum process as we observed it. The Final Report, setting out our full findings on the entire process and our recommendations, will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General and will be made public in due course.

**2. BACKGROUND**

The Commonwealth Observer Group was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary General, The Rt. Hon. Patricia Scotland QC, following an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belize to observe the Referendum originally scheduled for 10 April 2019, and later re-scheduled for 8 May 2019.

Members of the Commonwealth Observer Group are from the following countries: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Jamaica, Kenya, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and the United Kingdom.

**The historical and political environment**

Your Referendum was a truly historic and watershed national moment.

It was held in accordance with the Special Agreement between Belize and Guatemala.

The Observer Group first deployed in Belize on 3 April 2019. The Group had briefings from key Belizean stakeholders including the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, Political Parties, Chief Elections Officer, the Referendum Unit, Referendum Commission, the Police, legal experts, as well as representatives of civil society, trade unions and private sector groups. The Group also held meetings with the CARICOM Observer mission.

The Referendum had been challenged before the Supreme Court of Belize on a number of grounds. This led to an injunction being issued by the Supreme Court delaying the referendum originally scheduled for 10 April 2019. An appeal to the Court of Appeal to have the injunction lifted was lost by a majority vote. Following the postponement of the Referendum, the Observer Group departed Belize on 9 April 2019.

Subsequently, the Parliament passed the Belize Territorial Dispute Referendum Bill on the 12 and 15 April 2019. It was assented to by the Governor General and gazetted on 16 April 2019, and afterwards a new Referendum date of 8 May 2019 was set.

The Group returned to Belize on 4 May 2019 and held further discussions with key stakeholders.

### **Some issues raised with the Observer Group**

There were several issues raised with the Observer Group as matters of concern. Significant concerns raised included:

1. Some potential voters reportedly being denied the franchise as a result of inability to produce required voter re-registration documents from the Office of Vital Statistics.
2. The adequacy and sufficiency of voter education.
3. The lack of regulations and appropriate provisions for legal challenges in the Belize Referendum Dispute Referendum Act, 2019.

### **Deployment and Referendum Day**

The Group deployed across Belize from 7 May 2019, covering Belize City, Belize District, Cayo, Stan Creek, Toledo, Orange Walk and Corozal. Observers met with election officials, police and monitors. We also met with regional observers, to build a comprehensive picture of the conduct of the process. We also observed the Elections and Boundaries Commission preparations for the distribution of sensitive and non-sensitive materials.

### **Campaign**

The Group commends the electorate and the authorities for the calm that prevailed throughout the pre-polling period, notwithstanding the intensity and robust discussions that took place in the media during the campaign.

We commend the Referendum Commission and the Referendum Unit, and all those who contributed to the public information campaign.

### **3. INITIAL OBSERVATIONS**

These are the initial observations of the Commonwealth Observer Group:

1. All of the polling stations we observed opened on time, with polling staff, voting materials, security and monitors present.

The prescribed opening procedures were followed. The majority of polling staff visited were female.

2. The set-up of polling stations was adequate and most were accessible to persons with disabilities.

Information Centres which assisted voters to locate their polling stations and distribute Voters' cards, were a positive innovation for which we commend the Election and Boundaries Department.

3. Voting followed the prescribed procedures. Voters requiring assistance, or with disability, and the elderly were given preferential access at polling stations. The overwhelming majority of voters found their names on the Voters' lists.

4. The prescribed procedures with respect to the count and tabulation were followed. Monitors were present and witnessed the process.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Our initial conclusions therefore are as follows:

1. The Referendum held on 8 May 2019 was credible, transparent and inclusive.

2. Belizeans who took part in the process had the opportunity to express their will and exercise their franchise. The Referendum outcome reflects the view of the majority of Belizeans who voted.

3. We wish to particularly commend the Returning and Presiding Officers and Polling staff who displayed professionalism in discharging their duties.

4. We also wish to commend the Referendum Unit and Referendum Commission, Civil Society Organizations, monitors, the media, and the Police for their respective roles in ensuring the success of the Referendum.

5. We commend Belize for the laudable 65 percent of registered voters who turned out for the Referendum.

6. We encourage Belizean stakeholders to conduct a post-referendum review to further strengthen Belize's governance institutions. In this regard, some recommendations will be contained in our full Report.

ENDS

## Terms of Reference of the Commonwealth Observer Group

*The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belize.*

*The Group is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the referendum process as a whole.*

*The Group will determine in its own judgement whether the referendum has been conducted according to the standards for democratic referenda to which the member state has committed itself, with reference to national referendum-related legislation and relevant regional, Commonwealth, including its Charter, and other international commitments.*

*The Group is to act impartially and independently. It has no executive role; its function is not to supervise but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgement accordingly. It would also be free to propose to the authorities concerned such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of such referenda.*

*The Group is to submit a report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of Belize, the Elections and Boundaries Commission and the Election and Boundaries Department of Belize, political leaders, and thereafter Commonwealth member governments.”*

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**For more information, or to organise media interviews, please contact:**

**Martin Kasirye, Adviser and Head, Electoral Support Section, Governance and Peace Directorate Commonwealth Secretariat.**

Tel: +44 7850298928 Mob (Belize): +501 639 0315

Email: [m.kasirye@commonwealth.int](mailto:m.kasirye@commonwealth.int)

### **Note to Editors**

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