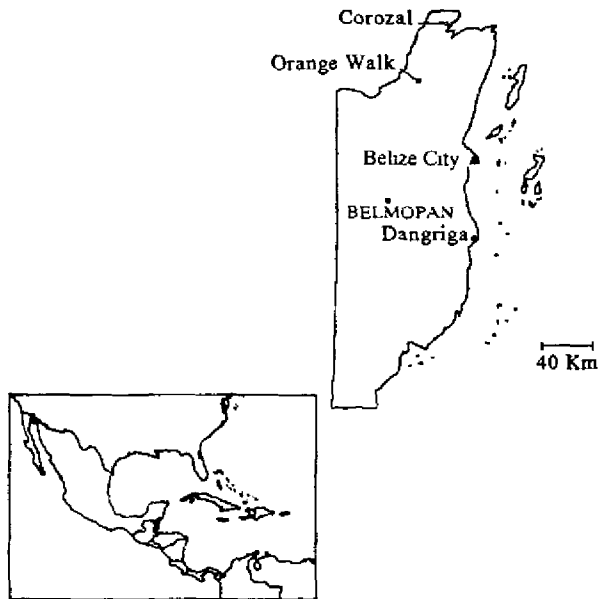

CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO



BELIZE



Capital: Belmopan
Area: 22,960 km²
Population: 192,877 (1991) (a)
Population density: 8.4/km²
Urban population: 48% (b)
Per-capita GDP in US\$: 1,720 (1988) (c)
Life expectancy at birth: 69.5 years (d)
Infant mortality rate: 23‰ live births (1990) (e)
Illiteracy: 5% (f)
Population under poverty line: Not available
Human Development Index 1992: 0.665 (73rd) (g)¹

A multiethnic nation consolidating its independence and improving its development

Belize is Central America's most recent state to obtain independence, from the United Kingdom in September 1981. During the 1980s Belize had to consolidate its independence as a sovereign state and its economic self-sufficiency by dealing with three major problems in a difficult and troublesome regional and international context: the economic crisis, which affected the region as a whole and created serious difficulties in maintaining relatively satisfactory social development indicators; the arrival of Central American refugees and immigrants; and Guatemala's attempts to absorb Belize. The economic crisis was manifested in diminishing trade, the decline the national product experienced during the first half of the decade because of the economy's dependence on

its single crop, sugar, and the growing deficit in the trade balance, which was in part caused by food imports. Between 1987 and 1989, despite Belize's agricultural potential, food and beverage products represented between 20% and 30% of the country's imports. Moreover, sugar, a heritage from the colonial economy, represented 60% of exports at the start of the 1980s and 32% in 1992² and there were major problems in selling it in an increasingly saturated world market, even though Belize has enjoyed trade preferences from the European Community (EC) and a sugar quota in the United States market. External debt has also been a cause—as well as a consequence—of the crisis and led Belize to reach agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1984.

The Government's response to the crisis, especially after Manuel Esquivel's conservative Government assumed power in 1984, has been a neoliberal economic policy which has promoted diversification in exports with emphasis on nontraditional products, foreign investment, and tourism. The economy showed strong growth after 1987, with rates of 13% in 1987 and 6.8% in 1988,³ despite which the policies of that period were very unpopular. That was one of the reasons why Esquivel's party lost its majority in the 1989 elections and a new Government, headed by George Price, a social democrat and Prime Minister from 1981-1984, came to power. The new Government essentially retained the economic policy directions of its predecessor, and since then tourism and nontraditional exports have been the most dynamic sectors of the economy.

The second problem has been the arrival of several thousand Central American refugees and immigrants—especially Guatemalans and Salvadorans—who, though few in absolute terms, have come to represent a sizable proportion of Belize's small population and have changed the ethnocultural balance of a country known for its diversity of races, languages, and cultures. Belize has thus suffered the impact of the region's political crisis and conflicts, despite which and in contrast to the other countries in Central America, violence and conflict—apart from ordinary crime and that associated with drug trafficking—have been and are alien to Belize. In this context we must note the democratic stability which has characterized the country and its satisfactory human rights situation, which are without parallel in the region despite some mild restrictions on freedom of expression and a few instances of abuse against refugees.

Finally, the historical territorial claims of Guatemala, whose Government did not recognize the new state until 1991, have been a threat to Belize's territorial integrity and sovereignty. That threat was particularly serious during the early 1980s when Guatemala was ruled by military Governments, and it has been the reason for the continuance of a United Kingdom military presence in the country following its independence.

The open recognition of Belize by the Guatemalan Government headed by Jorge Serrano Elías has helped clear the way for improved relations between the two neighboring countries.

A final problem of growing importance and recent appearance is the boom in drug trafficking. Some estimates hold that opiate production has come to generate more than \$100 million annually, which represented 85% of the country's exports in 1989. Marijuana crop spraying operations by the Government, supported by Mexico and the United States, have so far not been able to put an end to this illegal activity, whose growth represents a serious threat to the future in terms of violence and security.

In the 1990s many of the challenges which Belize faced during the first decade of its history as an independent nation continue. Consolidation of the economy and a trend toward growth, now sustained by a favorable turn in foreign markets, will to a good extent depend on the country's options as to regional integration. Because of its geographic position and the composition of its population, Belize belongs to two important geographic spheres and communities: on one hand, the English-speaking Caribbean, to which cultural ties and membership in the Commonwealth and since 1973 in the Caribbean Common Market (CARICOM) unite it, and on the other, Central America, to which it is closest geographically and with which it shares certain problems. In some ways it is also distant from and marginal to both. In any case, there is a growing consensus about the development challenges in Belize's future which point it toward greater integration in the Central American sphere and context and so imply abandonment of its traditional "splendid isolation" and awareness of its nature as a bridge between the two subregions. Accordingly, the convergence of George Price's Government since 1990 with Central American coordination and integration bodies is significant. The crucial challenge lies in the area of social development since there is a need to improve the population's employment, health, education, and social protection indicators. Finally, the gradual assimilation of the population of foreign origin, whether

refugees or immigrants, will also be a major challenge in coming years. The nation's low population density and multiethnic character will doubtless facilitate this task. Difficulties may be found, however, in both the sphere of social development, since the population is making greater demands for educational and health services, and in assimilation policies and models under way which, if they do not respect the peculiarities of each of the communities and cultures, may make their coexistence difficult.

Employment situation and the labor market

According to 1991 census data, the agricultural sector provided employment to 16.4% of workers. The manufacturing sector did so for 5.7%, the service sector accounted for 26%, 7% worked in commerce, and 2.7% in tourism.⁴ Compared to the 1980 census, there was a significant fall in the population employed in agriculture, which was 20% in 1980.

In 1991, 49.9% of the population older than 15 years worked (76% of men and 23.2% of women), and there were no significant differences in the proportion between urban and rural areas except for women; in urban areas 32.6% of them worked, and in rural ones, 12.8%. The 1984 employment survey—made when the crisis was at its height—showed a national unemployment rate of 14%, though there were considerable differences depending on district and sex. Nationally, male joblessness was 9.1% and the female rate was 24.1%. Three districts were below the national average: Corozal (8.4%), Orange Walk (9.8%), and Cayo (10.3%). Belize and Toledo slightly exceeded the average with rates of 16.1% and 17%, respectively, while Stann Creek faced the worst situation, with an unemployment rate of 33.7%.⁵ In considering this problem, however, account must also be taken of the refugee and undocumented population. If the approximately 25,000 undocumented people living in Belize were unemployed, the problem might have been much more serious.⁶ The 1991 census did not specifi-

cally examine the joblessness phenomenon, as a result of which the 4% open unemployment rate which its results suggest at first glance is not only an estimate but moreover may be a serious underestimate. According to calculations based on rates of labor participation from the census itself, it is reckoned that the real unemployment rate is about 19.6%.⁷

There have been no serious studies of the informal economy, but there is agreement that it grew rapidly during the 1980s and continues to grow during the 1990s as the response of low-income groups to the crisis, as the increase in illegal trade along the Mexican and Guatemalan borders, the growing market in illicit drugs, street trade, and the foreign exchange black market show. This kind of activity is directly related to the increasing number of Central American immigrants in Belize.

A traditional escape from joblessness has been emigration to the United States (85% of emigrants) and, to a lesser extent, Canada and other countries. It is thought that one in eight Belizeans emigrated between 1979 and 1989, and that the majority entered their destination country illegally. Most are young urban adults who speak English and Garifuna (the language of a people of the same name who are descendants of the Caribs of the eastern Caribbean and Africans who had escaped from slavery), are largely blacks, and have some education. Belize, Cayo, and Stann Creek (especially the town of Dangriga) seem to be the districts experiencing the greatest emigration abroad.⁸ The emigration of 1,400 to 1,600 people yearly has alleviated pressure on employment, but it has made Belize a victim of brain drain. Remittances which such emigrants send back to the country are important to the economy since they represent between 12% and 15% of the GDP.⁹

The poverty situation

Although the problem of poverty facing many Belizeans is essentially the same as that in other Central American countries, its incidence and

manifestations as well as the attempts made to solve it have been quite different when compared to the rest of Latin America in that the poverty is not as dramatic and society is not as polarized about the solutions and policies to be tried. This explains the lesser international attention paid to the country on this score, which does not obviate the need to pay requisite attention to the problem.

Lack of information makes it hard to identify the number of Belizeans living in absolute poverty. It was determined in 1983 that the districts of Toledo and Stann Creek were the poorest and those which had the areas of greatest rural poverty. Cayo and Orange Walk were in an intermediate position, and Corozal and Belize were the districts where the poverty incidence was lowest. Nevertheless, Belize City has the country's greatest concentration of urban poverty. The 1991 census provides income data which are consistent with those of 1983 and are significant in determining the incidence of poverty, though it must be realized that they refer only to the working population and do not take into account the 20% of the population who cannot find jobs. In 1991, 2.2% of employees earned annual incomes of less than B\$1,439, 5.6% earned between B\$1,440 and B\$2,879, and 11.3% earned between B\$2,880 and B\$4,319. Rural areas in general and the districts of Toledo (10% of whose workers earned less than B\$1,439), Stann Creek, and Corozal are worse than the national average, while Belize has significantly smaller proportions of population in these income categories. This does not mean that there are wage differences from one district to another, but that the best jobs are in Belize District while those requiring less training are concentrated in rural districts such as those mentioned.¹⁰

The Government of Belize collaborates with various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the realm of social policy and consults them when formulating policies, especially as to implementing the Ministry of Social Services' 1990-1995 Macroeconomic Plan at the community level and also regarding refugee matters.

Health, environmental sanitation, nutrition, and food security

Belize's mortality profile shows both a predominance of noncommunicable chronic diseases as the leading cause of death in the population in general, which characterizes developed countries, and a certain proportion of intestinal infections and respiratory diseases in child mortality, a trait of poor countries. This shows that there is much room for improvement in health

Between 1984 and 1987 the general mortality rate fell from 4.6% to 3.9% of the population. In 1987, conditions of the perinatal period were the leading cause of death, while the second, third, fourth, and fifth were pulmonary and heart diseases, cancer, and cerebrovascular conditions, respectively. The number of deaths caused by cardiovascular diseases and cancer has increased among adolescents and adults. Cervical cancer caused 40% of deaths in adolescent and adult women. The most common cause of hospitalization in this group was maternal morbidity; specifically, complications of pregnancy and abortion,¹¹ and the latter represented 6% to 8% of admissions. There were 870 abortions in 1988

In recent years prenatal care has had a coverage of about 66% and has averaged three pregnancy consultations per woman. Seventy-six percent of deliveries were in health establishments and 19% were attended by traditional midwives. From 1980 to 1988 maternal mortality averaged 0.49‰ live births, which meant about seven deaths yearly from this cause.¹² According to United Nations data, the infant mortality rate in 1990 was 23‰ live births, and the mortality rate in children under five years was 29‰ live births.¹³ Postnatal care coverage is only 14%. In 1988 the three chief causes of infant mortality, as we have noted, were conditions of the perinatal period, respiratory diseases, and infectious and parasitic diseases, most of which were intestinal. The incidence of intestinal infections has fallen sharply because of the growing use of oral rehydration therapy (ORT). Measles, whooping cough, and tetanus have almost disappeared as causes of child mortality because of the broad coverage

achieved by the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) as a result of a national campaign carried out in 1986. Measles coverage was 81% in 1990.¹⁴ To a large extent, these improvements have been due to joint efforts by the Government and the health campaigns of United Nations agencies.

The five infectious diseases with most cases in 1986 were malaria, gastroenteritis, gonorrhea, syphilis, and chickenpox. Malaria is endemic in Belize. In collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Government has significantly reduced the number of cases, but even so they continued to number around 3,000 per year until 1990.¹⁵ Twenty-nine cholera cases and one death had been recorded by mid-1992.¹⁶

The first AIDS cases were recorded in 1986. Thirty-seven cases were recorded from then until December 1991. Eight deaths had occurred by March 1991.¹⁷ The incidence of the disease is relatively low compared to both Central America and the English-speaking Caribbean, though it is thought that the data available underestimate its true numbers.

For the first time, the 1991 census included data about the handicapped population, which was 6.7% of the whole.¹⁸ In 1989 there were still no specialized health services for the population older than 65 years except for an infirmary providing care for the abandoned elderly. It has been pointed out that this age group requires greater attention in health policies.¹⁹

Belize's health care infrastructure consists of 31 health posts and six district primary hospitals, the basis of primary health care (PHC) in the country. The hospital in Belize City, which has 186 beds, is the only one in the country with equipment for secondary care of acute cases, but it is very dilapidated and has inadequate and obsolete equipment: it lacks an intensive care unit, respirators, and ultrasound equipment as well as enough beds, which means that it is overstretched. The EC has assured financing for a new hospital whose construction was to begin in 1990. The 88-bed Rockview hospital specializes in

mental health. There are also three private clinics and two operated by various organizations. In 1990, in sum, the country had 604 hospital beds—407 for general medicine and 62 for obstetrics²⁰—and a health center for every 5,200 inhabitants.

Ninety-three percent of the population having direct access to health services is urban. Only 8.9% of the rural population has direct access, however, while 3% has unreliable access and 24% lacks coverage of any kind.²¹ The refugee population has increased the burden on the country's health infrastructure. Public health services have been almost free. Public expenditure on health increased from 2.7% of the GDP in 1982 to 2.9% in 1987, while expenditure per capita rose from \$29 to \$32 in the same period.²²

In 1988, two-thirds of physicians and dentists and all nurses in the country were in state practice. The Ministry of Health has noted that lack of professionals is an obstacle to the development of its programs. Belize has no certified psychiatrist despite the fact that 2,000 psychiatric patients are cared for annually and 100 are hospitalized in services considered poor.

The Government has drawn up a National Health Plan for 1990-1994 which establishes priority care groups: mothers and children, people with low incomes, the disabled, the elderly, and those living in uncovered areas. Preventing and treating diseases of high prevalence are also priorities. All this is through comprehensive preventive and curative strategies emphasizing the local level, decentralization, and interinstitutional coordination at both the governmental level and with NGOs. The Government of Belize has included in the 1991-1995 PPS/CAP initiative, Health and Peace for Development and Democracy, a portfolio of projects stressing the training of professionals, management, and drug supply, strengthening PHC through district hospitals, malaria prevention and control, and care of women of childbearing age.

In 1991, according to census data, 37.5% of Belize's households had potable water connections, whether directly (19.5%) or from public outlets (18%). Although the proportion of house-

holds with potable water connections was twice that in 1980, it is still considered low. Many households (15% in 1991) depended on surface waters to obtain drinking water. Supply is a serious problem because of water pollution. More than half of the households (51.3% nationally and 77% in rural areas) use septic tanks as sanitary facilities. Sixteen percent of households are connected to sewerage systems. Only Belmopan has a sewerage system embracing the entire city, while Belize City has a canal system which, begun as a drainage system, has wound up being an open-air sewerage system.²³

Although there is no detailed information in this regard, it is thought that approximately 8% of male and female infants less than one year old are affected by moderate or severe malnutrition. This proportion climbs to 19% in the one- to four-year age range and is probably higher in the country's two poorest districts in the south. It is also higher in refugee communities. In the Valley of Peace, where there is a community under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 64% of boys and girls suffered from malnutrition of some degree.

Between 1986 and 1988, 42.3% of the food consumed in the country was imported.²⁴ Food imports accounted for 30% of the country's total imports in 1987 and 20% in 1989.²⁵ The main goal of the Government's policy to improve food supply has so far been to achieve greater self-sufficiency in order to reduce the price of the basic food basket. It has not been possible to fulfill this objective, in part because the policy has contradicted other policies to promote agricultural exports. Export agriculture has tended to dominate the production of basic foods. Still, there is significant agricultural potential to be developed since only 15% to 20% of the potentially arable land is in production. This potential can only be developed if the low social esteem accorded farming, especially among young people, is overcome.

Belize: a multiethnic society

Except for indigenous Mayas (the Mopan Mayas), Belize's population comes from other areas and forms an ethnic mosaic in which mestizos and creoles are the dominant groups. This is due to the colonial origins of the country, which for several centuries remained a British enclave dedicated to production of mahogany and later sugar and molasses. The creole population of African origin, imported by British colonialism, is mixed with mestizo and Kekchi Mayan migrants, the last group from the Alta and Baja Verapaz departments of Guatemala. Recently, Chinese immigration from Hong Kong has increased due to governmental policies which grant naturalization in exchange for a specific amount of investment.²⁶

The 1991 census showed that the largest ethnocultural group was mestizos (43.6%), followed by creoles of African descent (29.8%), Garifuna (6.6%), Kekchi Mayas (4.3%), Mopan Mayas (3.7%), Hindus (3.5%), and other Maya groups and German and Dutch Mennonites (3.1% each). There are also significant Chinese, European, Syrian, and Lebanese minorities. The mestizo population is much more numerous in the districts of Corozal (74%) and Orange Walk (71%), while creoles are in the majority in Belize District as well, generally speaking, as urban areas. Stann Creek has a notable concentration of Garifuna (36%), and Mayan groups represent 62.8% of the population in Toledo.²⁷ Many Belizeans speak more than one language, though more than half (54%) claim to speak English "very well."²⁸

The 1980 census categorized 39% of the population as creole, 33% as mestizos, 8% as Garifuna or Caribs, and 10% in three different Mayan groups. Although the categories used do not resemble those of the most recent census, it is clear that there has been a shift in the ethnic balance in favor of the mestizo group, which is now in the majority.

Although Belize prides itself on being a multiracial and multicultural society without ethnic problems, prejudice and discrimination among the

different groups exist to some extent. The principal antagonisms have been between creoles and mestizos and between creoles and Garifuna—antagonisms rooted in history which are visible in the persistence of negative stereotypes and an occasional accusation of discrimination due to ethnicity. The arrival of 30,000 Central American immigrants of mestizo-Mayan ethnicity and their higher population growth rate are increasing interethnic prejudices, so that black Belizeans are increasingly worried because the "Latinization" of Belize means a change in the "ethnic balance" to their disadvantage. This reality makes it necessary to initiate cultural and educational policies promoting intercultural familiarization in order to create a national identity based on ethnic pluralism which go beyond simple policies of "integrating" migrants and refugees, and so prevent such concerns from exploding into confrontation.

The housing situation

Ninety percent of Belize's dwellings, according to a housing study conducted by the Government in 1970, were of questionable or clearly poor construction. A more recent study showed that in the mid-1980s, 19% of dwellings in Belize City were shoddy or very shoddy and 36% were in good or very good condition. Maintaining housing quality would involve immediate attention to 19% of dwellings and some improvements in 60% of the rest. The 1991 census, which embraced a total of approximately 38,000 households, showed that five or more persons lived in 50% of them, while in rural areas that proportion was 56%. Sixty-three percent of dwellings had two or fewer bedrooms—evidence of a serious overcrowding problem. Many homes are built on piles against flooding, and 60.8% of the buildings are of wood. Around 2.5% of dwellings (5% in rural areas and 14% in Corozal) were considered "temporary" because of their makeshift construction, and a quarter of rural dwellings had earthen floors.²⁹ Electricity was found in 67.2% of dwellings, though in rural areas that proportion

was much smaller—39.7%, compared to 94% in urban areas.

The education situation

In 1980, 11% of children under five years attended preschool centers and 85% of children of school age attended primary school, though only half of those who finished primary school were able to attend secondary school for lack of places and high fees. Thirteen percent of those older than 15 years were in professional studies of some kind. The educational system is mixed: most centers are operated by religious congregations, which receive 80% of their operating costs from the Government.³⁰ The education system experienced various problems during the 1980s. Lack of trained teachers was one of the most important. In 1987 only 44% of primary school teachers nationally and 27% in rural areas, where half of primary school entrants lived, were adequately trained for their work. Among the causes of this problem is the low wages teachers have been receiving. Another problem has been the lack of teaching materials for bilingual education since less than a third of children speak English as their mother tongue. Finally, supervision and control mechanisms have been quite weak and programs and policies are not implemented because of lack of support and follow-up from the educational authorities.³¹

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the adult literacy rate was 95% and the average number of years of schooling was 4.6 per person in 1990.³² The results of the 1991 census suggest, however, that the adult literacy rate might have been appreciably lower—between 70% and 80%. The 1991 census also provides data about educational coverage in urban and rural areas and in different districts which show both the disadvantageous situation of rural areas compared to urban ones and the fact that persons who have received more schooling tend to migrate to cities: the secondary level was reached by 21.6% of the urban population compared to 6.5% of rural residents and by 22.9% of the

population in Belize District compared to 6.2% in Toledo District.

Women, children, and young people

The 1991 census showed that 16% of the population was between 0 and 4 years old, 27.8% between 5 and 14 years, and 20% between 15 and 24 years. Together, persons under 24 years of age represent almost 40% of the population. Unemployment affects young people and women in particular. Although there are no exact data, it is estimated that the unemployment rate among young people and women is double that among men. In the case of young people this situation has been related to growing juvenile delinquency.³³ Lack of training is identified by young people as the main reason for the high level of unemployment affecting them. As for women, a quarter of the work force was unemployed in 1986, a proportion two and a half times higher than male unemployment. If it is realized that many unemployed women are completely responsible for raising several children without help from a husband or partner, the situation is even more worrisome. The 1991 census showed that 22% of households were headed by women.³⁴ Related to this problem is the scarcity of day care centers, of which there are not enough (seven centers cover about 100 children) and they are expensive. Neither the Government nor employers subsidize them.

Domestic violence against women is a "chronic cultural problem," according to human rights reports. There is a women's organization, Women Against Violence (WAV), which works against such practices. Since 1986 the Government has also had a specific department for dealing with women's problems, with a developmental focus, within the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development. Other organizations, such as the Breast is Best League (BIB), Belize Rural Women's Association (BRWA), and the Belize Organization for Women and Development (BOWAND) also work in this field.

One of the most serious problems among young people is consumption of drugs, mainly marijuana and cocaine. Surveys by local educational institutions have found proportions of occasional or habitual cocaine consumption of 22% at the Junior College and 3% in the High School. Twenty-eight percent of the students at the Junior College and 7% of those in the High School were found to consume marijuana to some extent. Marijuana continues to be available in the local market despite the destruction of illegal crops and subsequent arrests. Educational and preventive campaigns have been conducted which have been criticized for not being effective in the long run and not being aimed at the causes of drug consumption, which young people themselves have identified in surveys as unemployment and the frustration caused by their problems in entering the labor market.³⁵ There are no programs for treating drug addicts except those operated by Le Patriarche, an international NGO doing such work. The Ministry of Health has proposed creating a rehabilitation center in 1991.

Emigration results in many children being left in the charge of neighbors, grandparents, or relatives. In consequence, mistreatment and neglect of children are a problem in the marginal urban population. A few programs have been undertaken to deal with such abuses, and a Family Court has been established for this kind of problem.

Refugees

During the last decade some 25,000 Central American immigrants, mostly from Guatemala and El Salvador, and the equivalent of 15% of Belize's population, settled in the country, especially in the agricultural districts of Toledo, Cayo, and Orange Walk bordering on Guatemala. Most did so between 1979 and 1985. Only 5,000 had been officially recognized as refugees by the Government up to May 1989.

The 1991 census revealed that more than 25,500 people living in Belize had been born in another country. This figure showed that previous estimates about the arrival of refugees and immi-

grants—which had been above 30,000—were excessive because they included children born in Belize to Central American parents. Forty-one percent came from Guatemala and 22% from El Salvador.³⁶ Most refugees and immigrants are landless farmers who reach Belize without means, have an average age of 30 years and much less schooling than the average in Belize, and are more often men than women. Most have occupied land and a few are tenants, employed on farms, or in construction, and receive very low wages. An exception is the hundred families who are part of the UNHCR project in the Valley of Peace who have bought land.

The concerns of Belizeans about the refugees extend to matters such as the impact that they have on the limited budget and infrastructure of Belize's social services and labor market; more serious is the lack of understanding that some Belizeans show to the problems that have caused the refugee situation and their perception that refugees are tilting the "ethnic balance" toward mestizos and bring with them traits from other countries which may "contaminate" the rest of the population. In the final instance there is a tendency to believe that traffic in marijuana, the resurgence of crime, unemployment, and the malaria epidemic are probably a result of the influx of refugees. In any event, the Government's policy favors integrating the refugees into Belizean society on the basis of both humanitarian and realistic principles, although cases of deportation have occurred, including a massive one of 172 undocumented persons. Integration projects have to be beneficial for both the immigrants and Belizeans. In 1990 the Government signed the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol on the status of refugees and reaffirmed its willingness to work with UNHCR, friendly Governments, and NGOs. It also made clear its desire to promote voluntary repatriation once peace is restored in the region.

UNHCR, the Government of Belize, local NGOs such as BARD, BRWA, the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR), the Red Cross, and the Catholic Church, and foreign NGOs such as Youth with a Mission and the Pan Ameri-

can Development Foundation, and cooperation agencies in developed countries and the United Nations System conduct assistance and development programs for refugees. In the context of the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA), \$10 million has been budgeted for projects in Belize,³⁷ of which \$5 million was being disbursed in mid-1991.³⁸

The environment and vulnerability to disasters

Contamination of surface waters and aquifers by agricultural chemicals and household and industrial wastes is Belize's main pollution problem. Other environmental problems are deforestation, changes in coastal areas (especially mangrove swamps), and soil degradation resulting from export agriculture and the "slash and burn" cropping practices of migrants, refugees, and farmers in the backlands. Belize's forests have been the least altered in the Central American region in the last two decades (from 1970 to 1990 Belize lost 3% of its natural forest cover), as a result of which its value in terms of its natural endowment and biodiversity is greater.³⁹ Laws on preserving the environment have been promulgated but are not enforced for lack of specific implementing regulations and standards. Hurricanes and floods represent the greatest risk of disaster for Belize. Floods occasionally damage bridges and highways during the rainy season, leaving large parts of the country inaccessible, as occurred in December 1979 after a period of torrential rains. Although the country is in an area of earthquake risk, earth tremors have not occurred, though those that have affected Guatemala have been felt in Belize.

Hurricanes have been a recurring phenomenon because of Belize's geographic position. The 1931 hurricane, perhaps the worst in this century, resulted in 3,000 deaths and missing persons. Hurricane Janet in 1955 affected 20,000 people. In 1961 Hattie caused 262 deaths, and in 1978 Greta severely damaged banana and citrus plantations in Stann Creek. Because of this risk, Belize

now has one of the best meteorological units in the subregion and a Disaster Plan embracing the phases before and after a hurricane in which governmental agencies such as the Central Emergency Office and the Red Cross participate, though it has not been tested in practice because the country has not experienced a severe hurricane since Greta. Although such preparation means that there may be little loss of human life, damage to property and the economy may be devastating, especially in coastal areas, keys, and Belize City because of its coastal location and the fragility of its buildings. Because of the high proportion of houses built of wood, fires are one of the most common emergencies. At times they have burned down a large number of dwellings, as happened in 1982 in Belize City.

The impact of assistance and cooperation policies and institutions on development

In 1987, Belize received \$24 million in concessional credits and donations as official development aid (ODA) from countries belonging to the Committee on Development Aid (CDA) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), international organizations, and other ODA sources. In 1988 the amount was \$25 million; in 1989, \$29 million, and in 1990, \$21 million.⁴⁰ These amounts are of great importance to the country's development since they equal 7.1% of its GDP. In practice, ODA finances most of the country's investment budget.

Refugee programs identified in the CIREFCA context have received more than \$5 million. The major donors of ODA for refugee programs have been Italy, through the Displaced Persons and

Refugee Program (PRODERE), the EC, the Caribbean Development Bank (CARIBANK), Spain, and Sweden.⁴¹ Other important donors have been the United States, through USAID and the Peace Corps, Canada, and the United Kingdom. USAID has a strong technical staff, and it has been noted that its credits and donations have been characterized by many conditions, which means that USAID has a certain amount of control over the Government's policies. The Peace Corps has the highest ratio of volunteers to inhabitants in the world in Belize, where it has a staff of 140 persons.⁴² United Nations agencies with representation and programs in Belize are PAHO, UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and UNDP.

The number of NGOs in the country has grown greatly in recent years. The Council on Voluntary Social Services (CVSS) is an umbrella organization comprising several local NGOs such as the Salvation Army, Red Cross of Belize, YWCA, and the Breast is Best League. Local community development is the customary activity of several NGOs such as BOWAND, BRWA, and BARD, mentioned above, and Help for Progress. The Belize Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives (BFAC) grants credits and provides technical and field support to peasant cooperative marketing. The Cayo Centre for Development and Cooperation (CCDC) is active in public education. SPEAR conducts research on Belizean affairs and public education activities. The Association of National Development Agencies (ANDA) has been organized by six of the organizations noted above—BARD, Help, BEST, BRWA, SPEAR, and BFAC—for coordination and communication purposes. Many of these NGOs receive funds from international NGOs and Governments. USAID provides this kind of support to NGOs that work in the field of family planning and drug education, among other activities.