



## **Independence Day Address 2006**

**Delivered by Rt. Hon. Said Musa, Prime Minister, Belize on the  
Occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence of Belize  
21 September 2006, Belmopan, Belize**

It was 25 years ago today that Belizeans achieved their aspirations nurtured over many years to rid themselves of colonial status and become a sovereign independent State with security and territorial integrity.

This was made possible above all because so many Belizeans had, over the centuries since the settlement was established by British logwood cutters, struggled for their rights, first against slavery and later against colonialism.

And after the tide of anti-colonialism built up and spread in the world, after the First World War, the Great Depression and the Second World War, Belizeans took hold of their fate with the establishment of the nationalist movement in the form of the People's United Party, created to bring political and economic independence to Belize.

The defeat of colonialism in Africa and Asia, beginning in 1947, made it possible for Belize to become independent in the 1960s, but the Guatemalan claim to Belize threatened our security and territorial integrity, delaying our independence until 1981.

At that time, there were some who thought we were not ready for independence, and Belize entered Statehood as a divided nation; one of our principal tasks then was to build national unity around the idea of BELIZE, an independent State. We had to build the conviction among all Belizeans that not only were we ready willing and able to take our destiny into our own hands, but that if we did not seize the moment then, when the international conjuncture was favourable to our aspirations, we would risk not ever gaining our rightful place in the world.

Today we have acquired an unprecedented degree of national unity, with the two political parties working closely to resolve the still existing Guatemalan claim to our territory. Not only do we have a united Negotiating Team that works in total unity but we also have as our Ambassador in Guatemala, the most critical post for this issue, a ranking member of the Opposition party.

And the fruits of unity are paying dividends: just over a year ago the Framework Agreement between Belize, Guatemala and the Organization of American States was signed, paving the way for the dispute to be definitively resolved by referring it, after referenda in both countries, to an international judicial tribunal.

And today I can state with some degree of optimism that the Agreement is now working well, and that sooner rather than later we will have reached a stage where we can expect to put that age-old problem behind us, where we can feel secure within our borders and where we can work in harmony with our neighbour to resolve our common problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

And no-one would deny that this is the biggest task that faces us as we look forward to the next twenty-five years. In 1980, our population was less than 150 thousand; today we are double that, close to 300 thousand. Back then our Gross Domestic Product was 365 million dollars. Today the GDP of Belize is 2 billion 210 million dollars (2.2 billion).

Twenty five years ago the GDP per capita was \$2,582. Today it is \$7,623.

Back then the economy was based mainly on agricultural production. Today it has diversified significantly with tourism playing a predominant role. Our people have far greater access to education, home ownership, health care and job opportunities than ever before. New and modern infrastructure connects all regions of our country and once remote villages to towns and cities. The vast majority now have access to clean drinking water and a stable supply of electricity.

Yes, our nation has grown significantly these past 25 years. Independence has indeed brought more development and growth.

Admittedly, that growth has been uneven, and today about a third of our people are classified as poor. That is why I said in the State of the Nation address on Monday that "Freedom from want for those living at the margins of society is still our great challenge... Our goal now must be to build a fairer, gentler society – a society of social justice where the fruits of development are spread more equitably with the opportunity for all to work and prosper in a secure future."

The possibility for us to build a secure future was gained when we became an independent nation in 1981, a victory that was only possible because enough Belizeans said to themselves "I'll forget about myself for a while and see what my country needs...", and worked tirelessly to internationalise the cause of Belize for territorial integrity, security and independence. That selfless and devoted attitude is epitomised in life and work of the Father of the Nation and National Hero, George Price.

But we cannot forget, too, that our secure independence was made possible then because of the international support we achieved in a very short time through the efforts of our internationalization

initiative. The countries of the non-aligned movement gave us strong support. Indeed it was that movement, the Summit of which I addressed and expressed our gratitude to just last Friday in Havana , whose solidarity allowed us to garner significant support in the very first year we floated a resolution at the United Nations, in 1975. Important too for us was the unconditional support given by the CARICOM countries and by the member States of the Commonwealth.

Today I want to concentrate briefly on the person who made a most important contribution to our gaining support for our independence from the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas – Omar Torrijos of Panama . At that time, he was engaged in the struggle to regain Panamanian territory under foreign occupation in what was known as the Panama Canal Zone . He actually gained this objective in 1977, with the signing of the Torrijos-Carter treaty giving Panama full control over the canal in the year 2000. In negotiating the treaty, Torrijos famously said "I don't want to go into history; I want to go into the Canal Zone ." But what distinguished Omar Torrijos was his willingness not only to struggle for the cause of his own people, but also to help others in the region to gain their own rightful objectives.

In 1975, all the countries of Central America, including Panama , had signed a declaration supporting Guatemala 's pretensions to Belizean territory. But once Torrijos learnt the true facts about Belize and of our struggle to be neither British nor Guatemalan but Belizean, he gave all his support to our cause. He first announced this at the Non Aligned Summit in 1976, and then had Panama vote for the Belize resolution at the United Nations. This was a fatal blow to Guatemala 's hitherto solid support from Latin America, and its military government recognised this when it broke diplomatic relations with Panama because of its support for Belize .

And Torrijos did much more than just give his country's support; he put his facilities at our disposal to help us gain support from other countries in the Americas.

Torrijos would have been a most distinguished guest of honour at our Independence Day ceremonies on 21 September 1981, but instead he was killed in a tragic plane crash on 31 July of that year.

The tragic death of Omar Torrijos was a major blow to movements throughout the region that were seeking to achieve real independence and democracy in their countries, and many have felt that it was not an accident. Most recently, former U.S. businessman John Perkins alleges in his book Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, that Torrijos was assassinated with a bomb planted aboard his aircraft.

Today, Omar's son, Martin Torrijos, is the elected President of Panama, and is negotiating a major expansion of the Canal, which will be submitted to a referendum in Panama next month. We are grateful that he has taken the time out of his busy schedule to honor us with his presence here today, and to receive on behalf of his father a small token of our gratitude for the indispensable part he played in making possible our independence with territorial integrity and security on 21 September 1981.

In conferring on Omar Torrijos, posthumously, the Order of Belize, let us, like Omar, look beyond the horizon, beyond the immediate troubles and strife we are faced with today, and discern a brighter day, a better future, confident that, in the words of another great leader of our region, Un mundo mejor es posible... a better world is possible.

But that possibility can only be realized if we are united as Belizeans to work together for that better future. The world of today is much more complex, and much more disadvantageous to small countries, than it was in 1981. Today it is much more difficult to make our independence meaningful, as decisions that directly affect us are made in the boardrooms of huge transnational companies and in the capitals of highly developed countries.

Those same countries force so-called free trade upon us while spending one billion dollars a day on agricultural subsidies, thereby destroying our chances of competing in their markets. Drug trafficking and organized crime flourish to feed the appetites of people in some of these rich countries, severely affecting governability in small countries like Belize that are used as transshipment points.

Yes, the problems appear insurmountable but they are not; the goal of creating a new and fairer world may seem impossible but it is not. The aspiration we nurtured in 1981 of providing decent work and a decent life for all Belizeans may seem unreachable but it is not.

We can triumph over adversity, we can win that better world we all aspire to, but only if we are steadfast in our principles of justice and equality, only if we stand together among ourselves and with others in the world fighting for the same cause. Because it remains true that *Un pueblo unido, jamás será vencido...* a united people will never be conquered. Let us resolve, on this 25th anniversary of our independence, to unite and fight to make that independence meaningful and to build a better future for all our children.

A Happy Independence Day to all!