

STATEMENT OF BELIZE
70th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

7-11 October 2019

Your Excellency, High Commissioner,

Chair, Excellencies,

Much has been said today on the incredible complexity of the global migration and refugee flows. Over the past year the situation has been particularly challenging for the Central America and Caribbean region, dominating our regional agenda. In the North of Central America organized crime, corruption, and states' limited capacity to provide basic services, have all contributed to an escalating situation of chronic violence and insecurity, leading to an increasing trend of forced displacement as recently exemplified by the unprecedented mass exodus of Central American migrants heading inexorably to the North.

Climate change has also become an important contributing factor, threatening the very existence of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and low-lying coastal regions. Rising sea levels erode coastlines and submerge entire islands, irreparably changing States' territories and forcing people out of their homes. In extreme scenarios, it may lead to the external displacement of entire populations -potentially rendering them stateless.

Excellencies,

The Government of Belize, acknowledging the existence of challenges and understanding the importance of refugee protection as a basic human rights issue, continues to take concrete steps to accelerate progress to ensure that all within Belize enjoy their human rights and are protected through the rule of law.

We welcome and thank UNHCR for establishing a renewed country presence in Belize as of 2016 and for its continued strong engagement in strengthening capacities in our country's refugee

institutions. UNHCR's role in providing for basic needs of asylum seekers, and in supporting Belizean host communities, cannot be overestimated.

Building on UNHCR's support and under the ambit of the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and its innovative "Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework", on 27 October 2017 Belize signed on to the San Pedro Sula Declaration on the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS). By so doing, Belize committed to work jointly with other MIRPS states of origin, transit, and destination, to strengthen protection and enhance solutions for persons with protection needs, and to develop and promote sub-regional responsibility-sharing mechanisms.

Excellencies,

Belize has a long and proud history of welcoming migrants. In the early 80's and 90's Belize boldly opened its borders to provide hope, safety and security to the thousands of men, women, and children literally running for their lives. This action precipitated a major change in the demography of our population, a change peacefully facilitated due to the positive contributions that these new Belizeans made to the growth and development of their new home.

We acknowledge that the process of determining requests for refugee status does not move swiftly as thus far 28 refugees have been formally recognized through the reactivated asylum process. To this end, we continue the work of eliminating bottlenecks identified in the process including pursuing an amendment to the Refugees Act to extend the 14 day deadline to access the asylum system; and identifying possible measures to allow asylum seekers to become employable without being compelled to withdraw from the asylum process.

This notwithstanding, registered asylum seekers have access to education and health care and are protected against forceable removal. Access to primary education is ensured through the Education Act which makes primary education compulsory for every child below the age of 15 irrespective of their legal status.

Furthermore, the Constitution of Belize guarantees that any individual born in Belize, notwithstanding the immigration status of the parents, is automatically a Belizean. Any individual born in any jurisdiction or any undefined jurisdiction, having ONE parent as a Belizean, is automatically deemed to be a Belizean citizen by descent.

With respect to Belize's contribution to end statelessness, we are only 4% short of achieving universal birth registration coverage. Belize pledges to expand current efforts to make birth registration more accessible and efficient thereby ensuring **no one is left behind**.

Excellencies,

In closing, allow me to reiterate that Belize is ready and willing to continue working with our international partners to rid our region and the world of the most tragic consequences of the migration and refugee challenges, while upholding its human rights obligations.

Thank you!

