

IWIR

FILE: CORPE Belize

Mayan-Kekchi Committee
of Toledo District.

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Dear Marie:

I enclose a letter from Venancio Chock, a Kekchi Indian member of the Mayan-Kekchi Committee of Toledo District, the southernmost district of Belize (formerly known as British Honduras).

The Mayan-Kekchi Committee is striving to establish links with Indian organizations in other countries of the Americas and to obtain fairer treatment from the Belizean Government for the Indians of Belize, who number about 12,000 out of the country's total population of about 140,000.

8.5%

Having heard your spirited defence of human rights for Indians in Latin America, given at the U.B.C.I.C.'s Penticton Conference, in April, I suggested to Venancio and to Cirilo Caliz, the representative who was denied a passport to go to Geneva, that your organization might be able to help in some way.

I probably don't have the correct name for your committee (or council), but its purpose seems to be in line with what the Kekchis and Mopan Mayas are seeking.

Cirilo and Venancio, particularly Cirilo, have bitter feelings towards the Government of Premier George Price, which governs Belize in all matters except defence and foreign affairs, but at the same time they share George Price's determination to resist all attempts by the Guatemalan Government to annex a slice of Belize. In fact, they suspect that Price is not as firmly opposed to Guatemalan intrigues and threats as he claims to be.

My personal impression is that Premier Price is determined to maintain the territorial integrity of Belize. Between 1950 and 1954, before Belize obtained internal self-government, he apparently did have secret talks with members of the Arbenz Government in Guatemala, but this was the only democratically elected government that Guatemala has ever had, the only government that not merely allowed but urged Indians to vote and that drew its support from Guatemala's overwhelmingly Indian majority. After the C.I.A. contrived the coup of 1954 and the new Guatemalan junta struck all "illiterates" off the voting rolls, thereby disenfranchising about 80% of the electorate, including nearly all the Indians, George Price has consistently opposed the succession of Guatemalan governments.

Price doesn't appear to understand the Indians' viewpoint and seems to regard their protests as something between ingratitude and treachery. He argues that the Creole majority and the Black Caribs (who trace their origin to 18th-century intermarriage of Carib Indian women and African ex-slaves) are, like the Indians, descended from the exploited, not from the exploiters, and he appeals to all ethnic groups to unite as Belizeans.

Most of the Creoles and Black Caribs, however, are urban dwellers. Their towns may be small and the services meagre by North American standards, but their lives are much easier than those of the Indians, who are generally admitted to be the hardest workers in the country. For their small numbers, the Indians of Belize

produce a disproportionately large share of the crops that sustain the country's economy and keep down the cost of living for the townspeople. Beans and rice are the staple foods of Belize, but most of the beans and a very high proportion of the rice are grown by the Kekchi Indians, who comprise only about 3% of the population.

It is a marked feature of industrial revolutions, from 18th-century Britain to 19th-century Japan and 20th-century U.S.S.R. and Latin America, that the agricultural workers bear the heaviest burden, in low crop prices and inadequate social services, to sustain higher expenditure in towns. What Premier Price has not grasped is that the Indians see very clearly that they are bearing the main burden of Belize's rather haphazard efforts to industrialize.

Though the Kekchis and Mayas are exceptionally energetic in work and play (I've never seen soccer played with greater speed and vigour than by Kekchis who have just backpacked their loads to the village after a long day's hard work in their rice fields, 3 or 4 miles away by tortuous forest trails), they are on average much smaller than the Creoles and Black Caribs, who tend to treat them with a social paternalism that does not encourage Indians to forget that they are Indians.

As long as Guatemala keeps troops along the border, threatening to march in if the small British defence forces are withdrawn, Belize is unlikely to become a fully independent state. While Premier Price wants independence together with territorial guarantees, that no other country is prepared to give, the Indians do not want Belize to become independent of Britain at all. As a minority, they are more at ease with a distant government in London than with the exercise of full sovereignty from Belmopan. The only thing that might change this attitude would be a clear indication that the Belizean Government is prepared to allow Indians the security of livelihood and the social and economic opportunities that other Belizeans have.

An example of what the Indians fear is their uncertain future in the rain forest, the area that sustained the ancient Mayan cultures of a thousand to two thousand years ago, the area that their Kekchi and Mopán Mayan descendants today cultivate much more effectively than anyone else. The land they till is a reserve, for which they pay a small rental, and there is some suspicion that the Government would like to encourage settlement of Creoles and Black Caribs in the area, in order to break down inter-ethnic divisions, at a time when the increasing Indian population needs all its traditional space. Scientists warn that rain forests throughout the tropical world are rapidly disappearing, so the Indians must be prepared to adapt to environmental changes. From what I have seen over the last dozen years, the Kekchis and Mopán Mayas are more rational and resourceful in adapting to enforced changes than are most Canadians, but they need time to plan, time to prepare, and some minimal help from the Government in tackling new problems. Specifically, they need access to the development loans that other Belizeans have.

Although the Indians of the area are renowned for their diligence, honesty, and reliability, they lack one essential when they seek loans for agricultural development: they own no land that can be offered as collateral. Elsewhere in Belize, large loans, often derived from overseas aid programmes, are being squandered by non-Indians who happen to have land titles. It is not just the Indians who suffer as a result. The whole country suffers when the very people, who have proved themselves best able to increase Belize's agricultural output are denied the opportunities available to others.

Now I don't know if your organization has any contact with C.I.D.A. Perhaps the recently announced budget cuts make this a poor time to approach C.I.D.A., or

maybe C.I.D.A.'s need to use its smaller funds much more effectively could make this a good time. At any rate, if C.I.D.A., or some other overseas aid organization, could be persuaded to make an objective economic survey of agricultural investment potential in Belize, the conclusions would probably be that for sound economic reasons, quite apart from social considerations, investment should be directed towards the Kekchís and Mayas.

Over the last 12 years I have seen a remarkable development of Indian commitment to systematic planning, of practical uses of functional literacy, and of interest in their ancient Mayan ancestors. In 1966 it was difficult to find a Kekchí who knew the way to the 1200-year old ceremonial centre of Lubaantún, just 2 miles from San Miguel. Now I'm constantly trying to satisfy requests for still more copies of the Scientific American, containing articles on Lubaantún and on other aspects of ancient Mayan cultures in Belize and the surrounding lands. Booklets I brought on improved methods of rice cultivation are eagerly studied. These are people who are genuinely enthusiastic about community development of their own devising, but they have nothing to compare with the help that Zambia's Ministry of Rural Development used to offer.

You and your organization may not be able to do much to bring immediate help to the Mayan-Kekchí Committee and the Indians of Belize, but any help you can provide would be welcome. Apart from help towards improving their lot, the Committee would appreciate the opening up of communications with Indians in Canada. Few people in Canada know where Belize is, let alone that Kekchís and Mopan Mayas live there.

The issues are not as clear-cut in Belize as in Guatemala, Bolivia, or Ecuador. Belize does have a democratic government, that represents more or less the views of the majority of the population, and the opposition leaders who will try to unseat it in the 1979 general election are unlikely to follow policies more favourable to Indians than George Price's. There are no extremes of wealth and poverty, and there is much less corruption than in neighbouring states, probably less than in Canadian government. There is little evidence of conscious desire by the Belizean Government or by other segments of the population to repress Indians; instead, there is widespread inability to understand that Indians are being given a raw deal. Other Belizeans who applaud the work ethics and moral codes of the Indians are slow to realize that praise is no substitute for fairer shares and equal opportunities.

The great Mayan ceremonial centres of Altun Há, Xunántunich, Lubaantún, and Niela Punít (just discovered, 9 miles N.E. of San Miguel) are proudly hailed as national shrines, but the Government seems unaware that the descendants of the builders may feel closer links with Belize's past and a sense of identity that other Belizeans cannot share.

Any general condemnation of Price's Government is likely to do more harm than good, because Guatemala would certainly use it to discredit the most prominent opponent of Guatemala's territorial claims. Since the slice of land (perhaps about 400 square miles) that Guatemala is keenest to grab is populated entirely by Kekchís, descendants of people who fled from Guatemalan oppression during the last eighty years, the Indians would be the main losers.

The Guatemalan Government is brazen enough to try to pass itself off to international, particularly to U.S., opinion as the defender of Belize's Indians from George Price. It has been U.S. support, sometimes overt, sometimes tacit, that has allowed Guatemala to maintain claims that are so flimsy that she refuses to submit them to any international court. Though the U.N. has voted overwhelmingly to give Belize moral backing, it is still conceivable that the U.S.A. could hail the

Guatemalan regime as the champion of human rights and tip the scales against Price, who is very unpopular in Washington, and the Kekchís.

If some miracle were to allow genuine democracy to take over in Guatemala, it would become the only country in the Americas ruled by Indians, and then, of course, the Kekchís and Mayas of Belize would have a much more attractive prospect, but the odds are heavily against such a miracle, and so the Indians of Belize are adamantly opposed to Guatemalan pretensions.

You will see that Venancio and Cirilo have asked that any reply be in a plain envelope, addressed to Castulo Cus, San Pedro Columbia, Toledo District, Belize, C.A. The reason is that Cirilo has strong reason to suspect that foreign mail to him will be opened by Government officials. He has already been castigated by Price as a "traitor" and a "bush liar" and threatened with jail. Cirilo is a self-educated man, a voracious reader of material relevant to Indian advancement, unusually articulate in English, and possessed of outstanding leadership qualities. Venancio is quieter, though just as dedicated, and has not incurred so much anger from Government, but his name, as he says in the letter, is known to the Government. He was one of three Indians in Toledo District to whom the regional co-ordinator for the Peace Corps brought the latest contingent from the U.S.A. for a few hours' briefing on Indian life in Belize.

Since I wish to continue revisiting the Kekchís, year after year for decades to come, I do not want to incur the suspicions of the Government of Belize. Having sent a brief to the British Foreign Office after reading, last Xmas, of its apparent readiness to make concessions to Guatemala for the sake of peace, I am in good standing with the Belizean Government at present. That is why I prefer not to become known as an intermediary for Cirilo and Venancio. Otherwise, I might find, on reaching the Belizean border next year, that I'm listed as a prohibited immigrant.

So that is the situation. It is not an easy one to handle, and I do not know what, if anything, you may be able to do. If you do find it possible to help, however, you can be certain that your efforts will be well appreciated by Indians in Toledo District. Just to complete the picture, there is another group of Belizean Indians, the Yucatán Mayas, living 200 miles to the north, far beyond the Maya Mountains, in a land of markedly lower rainfall. They have closer links with their fellow Yucatán Mayas in Mexico than with the Kekchís and Mopán Mayas of the south.