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**Electoral Observation Mission – Belize General Elections
November 4, 2015
Verbal Report to the OAS Permanent Council**

On November 4, 2015, over 71% of Belize's 196,587 registered voters went to the polls for National Elections. This occasion marked the second time that Belize had invited the OAS to carry out an Electoral Observation Mission. In response to that invitation, the OAS assembled and deployed 13 international observers from 11 countries. On Election Day, observers were able to visit all six of the country's political districts and more than 72% of the country's 225 polling stations.

Final results in the General Elections gave 19 seats in the parliament to the incumbent United Democratic Party (UDP) and the remaining 12 seats to the People's United Party (PUP). It was a highly competitive election. On November 5, the Honorable Dean Barrow, leader of the UDP, was sworn in for his third term as Prime Minister of Belize.

Pre-electoral period

Seven days before the November 4 elections, a core group of observers, including the Chief of the Mission, arrived in Belize to observe electoral preparations, and to meet with government authorities, party leaders, candidates, civic organizations, religious bodies and members of the resident diplomatic community.

The OAS Mission noted the significant preparations made by Belize's electoral authorities ahead of the election to develop procedures and systems that generated a generally inclusive and clean electoral process. The Mission further noted that this was the fourth electoral process held in Belize in 2015, following two bye-elections and municipal/local government elections. The Mission commends the open lines of communication between electoral authorities and political parties throughout the pre-electoral period, which was exemplified by the resolution of various pre-election issues, such as that relating to the register of proxy voters.

Members of the Mission did however substantiate instances of defacing of campaign materials, and recorded concerns raised regarding the security of poll workers on the day of elections,

including threats reported by the Chief Elections Officer against herself and her family ahead of the elections.

The OAS Electoral Observation Mission would like to highlight the following issues noted during the pre-electoral period: the participation of women and young persons, campaign financing, electoral management and voter registration.

1. Women play a significant role in the Belizean political process. They occupy high-level positions in public service, including electoral administration, and also serve as appointed senators. Both major political parties have women as secretaries-general. The OAS Mission was therefore pleased to note the continued high levels of participation by women in most areas of the political process, but noted that despite an increase in the number of female candidates, there remained a significantly low ratio of female to male candidates contesting the election – 11 females in a pool of 88 candidates - or 12.5%. In a similar vein, the Mission commended the enthusiastic involvement of youth in the campaign, but noted that this trend evidenced itself in large measure in the use of social media, and did not translate into significant numbers of youth as candidates. .
2. The Mission heard concerns regarding various elements of the voting process, including the size and integrity of the Voters List, and allegations regarding the high number of transfers, which appeared to some, given the numbers, to leave insufficient time for adequate substantiation. Concern was also expressed regarding the composition of the Proxy Register and the timeframe for political parties to have access to a final version of the register prior to the election. The Mission notes that since the 2012 General and Municipal Elections, the voters list grew by some 20,000 new voters. Several stakeholders expressed the need for a total re-registration of voters, as required following the conclusion of the last census in 2010. However, the Mission was informed that the re-registration is due to take place in 2017 according to the current law. Additionally, the report of the 2012 EOM emphasized the need for the Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) to update the country's electoral boundaries in order to effect greater equity in the number of electors across electoral divisions. The 2015 EOM noted that the issue persists.
3. There are two electoral authorities in Belize, namely the Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) and the Elections and Boundaries Department (EBD). While the full remit and purview of these two bodies are separate and clearly defined in the constitution, the EOM has observed that, given the lack of financial and human resources, as well the existence of an administrative structure that could be further enhanced, the effective lines of implementation could benefit from a more robust definition of responsibilities. This would render a more seamless operation in each of the bodies and overcome the perception of partisanship associated with the confirmation of appointees. The Mission considers that the current framework of electoral administration leads to some confusion as to roles of each body and is a potential limitation on the neutrality of the electoral process.

4. Several stakeholders mentioned the lack of campaign financing legislation in Belize, a recommendation emanating from the 2012 EOM report, and referenced the potential impact of campaign financing on the transparency of the electoral process. The Mission also noted a perception of limited differentiation between the state and the governing party in terms of the use of resources during the campaign. The Mission observed that the current legislative framework, which does not recognize political parties as legal entities or regulate their financing, contributed to a lack of clarity about the distinction between the state and governing party in terms of campaign resources. Given the absence of limits on private donations in Belize, the Mission reiterates the importance of requiring parties to disclose contributions and expenditures as a mechanism to enhance transparency.

Election Day observations

On Election Day, the OAS observers noted that the polls opened on time in all of the observed locations, that all essential materials had arrived, and that the poll workers ensured the smooth flow of the process. In addition, electors, security forces and party agents were present and engaged in all observed locations, demonstrating their commitment to the exercise of the process. The Mission was pleased to see that all polling stations were placed on ground level to accommodate the elderly and voters with disabilities, and that such voters were given priority access. The OAS Mission noted significant voter turnout early in the day along with the nearly complete presence of party agents from the United Democratic Party (UDP), the Peoples United Party (PUP) and the Belize Progressive Party (BPP) at the observed stations. Despite some long lines outside the polling stations at the beginning of the day, voters were patient and orderly in waiting to cast their ballots.

During the voting process, the Mission noted that, prior to indicating their preference on the ballot, voters had to dip their finger into the indelible ink and then place the ballot in the ballot box. While this is the prescribed order of the process per the Representation of the Peoples Act, the Mission was concerned that this practice could possibly result in ballots being smeared, with an uncertain indication of the voter's choice, and resulting in an invalid vote.

Members of the OAS/EOM also observed the persistence of an issue raised in the report of the 2012 EOM relative to campaigning taking place well within the established 100 yard limit from polling centers. The issue of campaigning in and around polling stations constituted a concern for the Mission. Belizean law permits canvassing and the distribution of pre-marked sample ballots within voting centers and allows campaign advertising in the vicinity of polling stations. On Election Day, the active presence of large groups of political party supporters outside of voting centers, could produce an environment that would make it uncomfortable for some voters to express their preferences without feeling outside pressure. In one instance, the Mission received reports of a party activist distributing money outside of the voting center to certain voters. Such activity could well be interpreted as vote-buying, which is against the law.

The Mission observed that the polls closed at the pre-determined 6:00 PM, and that all requisite procedures were adhered to.

Tabulation and processing of results

Transition from voting to vote-counting was seamless. This was the result of an improved methodology which included the simultaneous counting of ballots, as well as the keen collaboration among poll workers, party agents and other officials in the process.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Based on the information gathered by the OAS Electoral Observation Mission during its time in Belize, the Mission would like to offer the following recommendations to improve the efficiency of the well-established and generally well-managed Belizean electoral system:

1. The Promotion of Women's and Youth Participation in the Electoral Process

The OAS Electoral Observation Mission recommends that efforts be made by the political parties and the government to promote the participation of women in electoral competition and to create avenues to encourage the participation of youth at all levels of the political process, providing training programs and mentorship for women and young political leaders. This may include:

- Continued support for the "Women in Politics Project" training program being carried out by the National Women's Commission.
- The promotion of additional programs to train women and young people to stand as candidates for elections.
- The development of legal mechanisms to guarantee the participation of female candidates in party conventions and to incorporate women leaders into key decision-making positions within political parties

2. Re-Registration of Voters and Review of the Electoral Framework

In order to ensure greater integrity and confidence in the Voters list, the OAS Mission recommends that a comprehensive re-registration of voters be undertaken in accordance with the Representation of the Peoples Act, as recommended by the OAS/EOM in 2012 and that a clear deadline be established for registration of proxy voters prior to the election to allow sufficient time for electoral authorities to properly compile a final Proxy Register prior to the day of election.

The Mission reiterates the recommendation of the 2012 EOM Report with respect to the need for adjustments to the electoral boundaries, and for differentiation in the responsibilities of the Electoral and Boundaries Commission and those of the Electoral and Boundaries Department which continues to fall under a Government Ministry.

Further, in order to strengthen the autonomy of electoral management and to ensure adequate oversight, the Mission recommends that the elected authorities, political parties and other stakeholders review the current electoral legal framework to clarify and strengthen the process, and adopt measures to enhance the neutrality of electoral administration and the selection of Commissioners. Additionally, efforts should be made to protect the ability of voters to exercise their franchise without outside pressure, particularly stricter and more uniform enforcement of the law that prohibits political activity within a 100-yard boundary around polling stations.

3. Regulation of Campaign Finance

In order to allow voters to make a more informed decision and to ensure more equity in electoral competition, the OAS Electoral Observation Mission reiterates its recommendation made in the 2012 EOM Report that legislation governing campaign financing be enacted, and that the dormant Integrity Commission be revived or another similar mechanism established to oversee and supervise financial inflows during the campaigns.

Conclusion:

The Belizean authorities deserve praise for organizing a smooth election day. The OAS Electoral Observation Mission congratulates the people of Belize for their high voter turnout and for the peaceful manner in which they carried out one of the principal responsibilities of citizens in all democracies. The Mission also wishes to congratulate Belize's public servants for the dedication and professionalism with which they carried out these elections.

The OAS Mission wishes to express its thanks to the Government of Belize for the invitation to observe the process and to the Electoral and Boundaries Commission and the Electoral and Boundaries Department, for their cooperation during the Mission's stay in the country. In addition, the Mission thanks the governments of Argentina, France, South Korea and the United States for their contributions which made this electoral observation mission possible.