**Prime Minister’s Remarks for**

**Signing Ceremony**

**December 17, 2014**

**Placencia**

We are happy that you are all here with us for what is truly a historic moment in the relations between Belize and Guatemala. Today you bear witness to the signing of 13 Agreements, which cover a range of cooperation issues that will benefit the peoples of our two countries and, by extension, the region as a whole.

How did we get here?

First we got here because both of us desire to live in peace, side by side in friendly neighbourly relations. Second, after decades of unsuccessful negotiations the time had come for us to enhance our cooperation and build confidence between our governments and peoples. So we agreed to implement The 2005 Agreement on Confidence Building Measures, which had set out a list of cooperation areas to be actioned via the work of the Belize-Guatemala Joint Commission. And the word became flesh, so to speak, after our two Foreign Ministers met at the beginning of this year and formalized the Roadmap's Work Plan.

Nobel Laureate and former president of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias Sanchez is known for his famous quotation “I like to build bridges… not walls.” A similar spirit informed the approach of our Foreign Ministers, as evidenced in their joint communique issued last January after a meeting in Belize City. That was what led to the urgent pace of this year's many activities, crowned now by this giant step marked by today's ceremony.

Arias also said that “Peace, requires us to work and live together.” That requirement is met in these agreements, which provide practical modalities for closer collaboration and the strengthening of fraternal ties.

One example of already established relations between our two peoples, is in the area of education. On a daily basis over 800 Guatemalan children cross from Melchor de Mencos into Benque Viejo del Carmen to go to school here in Belize. Side by side these Guatemalan and Belizean children learn and play, never for a moment concerned about boundaries or claims. Likewise, many young Belizeans travel every year to Guatemala City to enroll in institutions of higher learning as a launchpad for successful careers in various fields. These arrangements in education have benefited both countries and can serve now as a spur to the implementation of the new agreements.

Among the new frameworks we are today initiating, perhaps none is as critical as that mandating cooperation in the all-important area of environmental preservation. Both Parties will seek to work together now in conserving the environment and maintaining the integrity of protected areas. As you know, Belize and Guatemala are home to the second largest tropical rainforest in the Western Hemisphere, the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains Biosphere Reserve. In partnership with NGO communities, like Friends for Conservation in Belize and Association Balam in Guatemala, both countries commit to do everything possible to halt and reverse the terrible degradation that is taking place.

Our also already established partial scope agreement in trade continues to benefit farmers, merchants and investors on both sides. The challenge now is to broaden its scope and take the necessary measures to reduce non-tariff barriers and promote greater cross-border economic interaction. President Perez Molina and I agree that the mutual prosperity that can redound from this, would be a great incentive in helping to secure the peace dividend.

Altogether then, from energy to culture, tourism to migrant workers, these agreements mark a seminal moment in our relations and bring us a great distance closer to the long overdue settlement of the dispute.

Of course we cannot overstate the indispensable role of our hemispheric organization, the Organization of American States (OAS),in helping to make all this possible.

I therefore say to you, Mr. Secretary General, that your work and that of the entire team involved in this process is both a fulfillment of your general mandate, and a testament to the particular commitment of the OAS to Belize and to Guatemala. I want to especially recognize the tireless work of your Special Representative Ambassador Raul Lago, and head of the Fund for Peace Magdalena Talamas. On behalf of the Belizean people I thank you.

But the greatest measure of congratulations must, I think, be reserved for the two Foreign Ministers and their teams in the Joint Commission. They and their negotiators have managed this process in a most skillful and timely manner and set us firmly on course to enhance relations, increase goodwill, and draw us closer to that day when we confine the claim permanently to ash heap of history.

Your Excellences, ladies and Gentlemen: President Perez Molina and I are happy to serve as witnesses to this epochal event and I now invite our Ministers of Foreign Affairs to proceed to the signing of these Agreements.

I thank you.