



Belize

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2000](#)

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Belize is a parliamentary democracy with a constitution enacted in 1981 upon independence from the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister, a cabinet of ministers, and a legislative assembly govern the country. The Governor General represents Queen Elizabeth II in the largely ceremonial role of head of state. Prime Minister Said Musa's People's United Party (PUP) holds 26 of the 29 seats in the House of Representatives. The Government generally respects the constitutional provisions for an independent judiciary; however, at times the judiciary is subject to political influence.

The Police Department has primary responsibility for law enforcement and maintenance of order. The Belize Defense Force (BDF) is responsible for external security but, when deemed appropriate by civilian authorities, may be tasked to assist the police department. Both the police and the BDF report to the Minister of National Security and are responsible to and controlled by civilian authorities. There were reports of abuse by the police.

The economy is primarily agricultural, although tourism has become the principal source of foreign exchange earnings. The agricultural sector is heavily dependent upon preferential access to export markets for sugar and for bananas. The Government favors free enterprise and generally encourages investment, although domestic investors are given preferential treatment over foreign investors in a number of key economic sectors. Preliminary estimates of annual gross domestic product growth placed it at 6.2 percent in real terms. Annual per capita income was \$2,771.

The Government generally respected many of its citizens' human rights; however, there were problems in several areas. Principal human rights abuses include several extrajudicial killings, occasional brutality and use of excessive force by the police when making arrests, poor prison conditions, allegations of arbitrary arrest and detention, lengthy pretrial detention, political influence on the judiciary, and judicial limits on freedom of the press. Violence and discrimination against women, abuse of children, and employer mistreatment of undocumented foreign workers also were problems. There were instances of trafficking in persons.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no political killings by the security forces; however, there were three instances of extrajudicial killing.

On January 24, six BDF soldiers shot and killed Samuel Ramirez, a Guatemalan farmer, near the border between the two countries. A public Commission of Inquiry ruled that Ramirez had attacked the soldiers and that the killing was justifiable.

On February 24, an off-duty police officer with a machete chased Kelvin "Brambles" Barrow into the sea, where Barrow drowned. The Ombudsman presented a report to the National Assembly, and the case was before the Department of the Public Prosecutor (DPP) at year's end.

On March 17, Hattieville prison inmates rioted. During the riot, a guard shot and killed one inmate. The Ombudsman's investigation revealed that the officer was delinquent, and the matter was before the DPP at year's end.

In September 1999, 38-year-old Daniel Tillett died while in police custody, after being arrested for fighting in public. On February 14, the Director of Public Prosecutions issued instructions to the Police Commission to proceed to indictment of the officer-in-charge, Jesus Cantun. At year's end, he was in jail awaiting trial.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits torture or other inhuman punishment; however, the police occasionally used excessive force when making arrests. The Government's Ombudsman stated that the second and third most common complaints that his office receives involve police misconduct and brutality and misconduct on the part of Department of Corrections personnel. The Ombudsman estimated that at year's end, his office would have approximately 10 pending cases of this type.

The Police Department's internal affairs and discipline section, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Ombudsman's office, and on occasion, special independent commissions appointed by the Prime Minister, investigate allegations of abuse by officials. When the Internal Affairs Division was established in 1995, it received 50 complaints against police officers; in 1999, the number had increased to 299. The increase may reflect an increase in abuse by officials as well as an increase in the public's willingness to report such abuses.

On February 14, a police officer shot and wounded a BDF soldier in Orange Walk Town. Witnesses claimed that the two men were involved in a verbal altercation. When the soldier pulled his machete, the police officer drew his firearm and shot the soldier in the abdomen. The exiting bullet struck an innocent bystander. Both victims recovered from their wounds. The officer was arrested and suspended from the force; at year's end, the Ombudsman was investigating the incident.

On April 4, police shot escaped prisoner Darrel "Bagga" Jones. All investigations determined this to be a justified use of force.

On May 20, while on duty at the national agriculture and trade show, a police officer shot and wounded a man. Immediately prior to the shooting, the sergeant in charge ordered the officer not to shoot. The victim had been brandishing a piece of cardboard that had a dead snake glued to it. The authorities suspended the officer from duty, and the Ombudsman was conducting an investigation at year's end.

On August 27, two national team soccer players claimed that police beat them while they were handcuffed in Orange Walk Town. Police Commissioner Hughington Williams suspended the chief inspector for the district, James Magdaleno, and assistant inspector Eli Salazar, pending the outcome of the investigation. Williams also took disciplinary action against constables Roger Briceno, Mateo Carrillo, and A. Coc. The matter still was before the police internal affairs division at year's end.

In April 1999, two Guatemalan men, Hector Balcarcel and Ricardo Guzman, were detained at the Guatemala-Belize border. They were taken into police custody, allegedly detained for 5 days, and Balcarcel allegedly was tortured. Balcarcel's report to the Human Rights Commission and the Guatemalan embassy claimed that he was stripped, handcuffed, burned with a lighter and habanero peppers on his genitals, beaten with a stick, and forced to drink his own urine. After an internal investigation, the police determined that these allegations were false. An internal review of this investigation still was underway at year's end.

In June 1999, the authorities arrested a police constable and charged him with extortion and corruptly soliciting a reward. They relieved him of duty and put him on trial in the Supreme Court; the court found him guilty and sentenced him to pay a fine.

On March 16, two inmates at the Hattieville prison, Nehru Smith and Bert Elijos, were sentenced to receive corporal punishment in accordance with prison rules for assaulting and nearly killing another inmate. Smith and Elijos received 12 and 6 tamarind lashes respectively. The Minister of Prisons gave official support and approval for the floggings. On March 31, the newly reappointed prison governor stated that the floggings were necessary, but that while he was in charge, no other prisoners would be punished in that fashion.

On March 17, between 300 and 400 prisoners at Hattieville reacted to the floggings by rioting. During the riot, one prisoner was killed, and three were hospitalized with gunshot wounds (see Section 1.a.). The matter still was before the DPP at year's end.

On August 28, an inmate at the Hattieville correctional facility was given 12 lashes for stabbing a fellow inmate in the neck during an altercation over \$2 (bz\$4). A visiting judge sentenced the prisoner to the lashings following a hearing. The punishment was administered in accordance with prison rules, despite the new prison governor's earlier vow that floggings would not occur.

Prison conditions are poor. Conditions at the Hattieville Department of Corrections--the country's only prison--have deteriorated continually since it opened in 1993. Although designed to house 500 inmates, it houses 745 male inmates and 20 female inmates, resulting in approximately 6 inmates in each 6-by-9 foot cell. The majority of prison accommodations do not have showers or toilets. Instead, inmates are provided with 5-gallon buckets. The prison psychiatrist provides mental health services for inmates. There is no separate facility for inmates with mental illnesses. First-time offenders are housed in the same building as those who commit capital crimes. Noncitizens constitute approximately 15 to 20 percent of the prison population. There are rare reports of human rights abuses in the form of physical brutality by prison wardens. Incidents of gang- and drug-related violence in the prison are on the rise. Frequent prison breaks, confiscation of weapons, and reports of beatings have occurred throughout the prison's history. Prison authorities estimated that they confiscated more than 1,500 deadly weapons by year's end. The authorities reported that there were 53 prison escapes during the year; all but 3 escapees were captured by year's end.

The prison includes a separate facility for women.

The Government took steps to curb recidivism and focus on rehabilitation. The Youth Enhancement Agency (YEA) houses over 60 youths between the ages of 13 and 25, who participate in rehabilitation and job training programs. Prison authorities provided training for inmates in basic skilled trades such as carpentry. Increasingly, youthful offenders are transferred from the main prison to the YEA facilities. A job-training program at a citrus farm employs 44 inmates. There is a time-off program for good behavior.

The Government permits prison visits by independent human rights monitors.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest or detention, and the Government observes these provisions to a degree; however, there were occasional accusations of arbitrary arrest and detention.

The law requires the police to inform a detainee of the cause of detention within 48 hours of arrest and to bring the person before a court to be charged formally within 72 hours. In practice the authorities normally inform detainees immediately of the charges against them. Bail is granted in all but the most serious cases. In cases involving narcotics, the police cannot grant bail, but a magistrate's court may do so after a full hearing. There are persistent allegations that security forces hold detainees for 72 hours and release them, but upon release, arrest them again. In May the newly appointed Supreme Court Chief Justice published and promulgated "The Judges' Rules," which outline a code of conduct to which police officers must adhere when dealing with arrested persons. Many detainees cannot afford bail, and backlogs in the docket often cause considerable delays and postponement of hearings, resulting in an overcrowded prison, and at times prolonged incarceration before trial.

The Constitution forbids exile, and it does not occur in practice.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respects this provision in practice; however, at times the judiciary is subject to political influence. The appearance of judicial independence from the executive branch is compromised because some foreign judges and the Director of Public Prosecutions must negotiate renewal of their contracts with the Government and thus may be vulnerable to political interference. In February the Government appointed a new Supreme Court Chief Justice, Abdullai Conteh, a jurist from Sierra Leone.

The judiciary consists of the magistrate's courts, the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals, and a family court that handles cases of child abuse, domestic violence, and child support. Those convicted by either a magistrate's court or the Supreme Court may appeal to the Court of Appeals. In exceptional cases, including those resulting in a capital sentence, the convicted party may make a final appeal to the Privy Council in the

United Kingdom.

Persons accused of civil or criminal offenses have constitutional rights to presumption of innocence, protection against self-incrimination, defense by counsel, a public trial, and appeal. Legal counsel for indigent defendants is provided by the State only for capital crimes. In April 1999, the Government appointed an attorney to the Legal Aid Center to improve and strengthen legal aid services to the public. The judicial system is constrained by a severe lack of trained personnel, and police officers often act as prosecutors in the magistrate's courts.

Trial by jury is mandatory in capital cases.

A Political Reform Commission recommended that the family court be placed at the same level as the magistrate's courts, a recommendation that the Government adopted. However, trials in cases that come before the family court generally are private. The convicted party in family court may appeal to the Supreme Court. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial unless the opposing party fears for his or her safety. In such a case, the court grants interim provisions under which both parties are addressed individually during a 5-day period.

There are lengthy trial backlogs in the judicial system. One factor commonly cited is the low pay offered to judges, resulting in high turnover rates. In addition an inordinate number of significant narcotics-related cases are taking years to resolve. In these cases, defendants often are released on minimal bail payments. In April 1999, two retired judges were named to the Supreme Court in a temporary capacity to help reduce backlogs. At year's end, only three justices served on the Supreme Court, instead of the full complement of five.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Constitution prohibits such practices, government authorities generally respect these prohibitions, and violators are subject to legal action. However, there were several cases in which the previous government exercised its power under the right of eminent domain in an arbitrary manner. Such cases take years to resolve in the courts.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and the Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press but also permits the authorities to make "reasonable provisions" in the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health. These provisions include forbidding any citizen to question the validity of the financial disclosure statements submitted by public officials. Anyone who questions these statements orally or in writing outside a rigidly prescribed procedure is subject to a fine of up to \$2,500 (bz\$5,000), or imprisonment of up to 3 years, or both.

A wide range of viewpoints is presented publicly, usually without government interference, in seven privately owned weekly newspapers, three of which are affiliated directly with major political parties. There is no daily press. All newspapers are subject to the constraints of libel laws.

There are a range of privately owned commercial radio stations. In addition to these local stations, there are two British military stations that broadcast news directly from London. Popular radio call-in programs are lively and feature open criticism of and comments on government and political matters.

There are eight privately owned television broadcasting stations, including several cable networks in Belize City and the major towns. The Government's Belize Information Service issues press releases and maintains an Internet web site. Two independent television stations produce local news and feature programs. The Belize Broadcasting Authority regulates broadcasting and asserts its right to preview certain broadcasts, such as those with political content, and to delete any defamatory or personally libelous material from political broadcasts.

The law provides for academic freedom, and the Government respects it in practice.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of assembly, and the Government respects it in practice. Political parties and other groups with political objectives freely hold rallies and mass meetings. The organizers of public meetings must obtain a permit 36 hours in advance of the meetings; such permits are not denied for political reasons and are granted routinely in practice.

The Constitution permits citizens to form and join associations of their choosing, both political and nonpolitical, and the Government respects these provisions in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

The law provides for granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations. The Government's Refugee Department officially closed on December 31, 1999. Since then, the UNHCR has relied upon a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) to monitor the status of asylees and to represent its interests. There were 12 refugees receiving UNHCR assistance and awaiting the opportunity to apply for asylum in the country. Most are African, originating from Nigeria or Sierra Leone.

The previous administration appointed members to an eligibility committee to review applications for asylum. The committee, which included a UNHCR representative, met on a weekly basis. In 1998 the Government turned down 30 requests for asylum. The Government has not established an eligibility committee since the change of administration in 1998. The Government has not accepted applications and no mechanism exists to adjudicate asylum requests. There is no legislation that formalizes the asylum process. The Government last honored the principle of first asylum in the case of four persons in 1995.

In the wake of the civil conflicts in Central America in the 1980's, over 40,000 predominantly Hispanic migrants came to Belize, many of them entering illegally and living without documentation. In May 1999, the Government instituted a 6-week amnesty initiative whereby undocumented migrants were eligible to obtain legal residency, provided: They had lived in Belize continuously for 4 years, married a Belizean citizen or had a stable common-law association, had Belizean children, or, if female, were at least 4 months pregnant. The amnesty is expected to benefit about 5,000 UNHCR-registered asylees, as well as 13,000 others. Officials continued processing amnesty applications during the year.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change their Government

Belize is a democracy governed by a national assembly with executive direction from a cabinet of ministers headed by Prime Minister Said Musa. The law requires national elections every 5 years. The Government changed hands in August 1998 when the PUP won 26 of 29 seats in the House of Representatives in free and fair elections.

All elections are held by secret ballot, and suffrage is universal for citizens 18 years of age and older. National political parties include the People's United Party, the United Democratic Party (UDP), and the National Alliance for Belizean Rights (NABR). The country's ethnic diversity is reflected in each party's membership.

No laws impede participation of women in politics; however, they are somewhat underrepresented in electoral politics due to both tradition and socioeconomic factors. Voters elected 2 women to the 29-seat House of Representatives, and the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate, both appointed, are women. Women also hold a number of other appointive offices, including four of nine senate seats, one cabinet position, and three are permanent secretaries in ministries. The Chief Elections Officer is also a woman.

There are no laws impeding participation by indigenous people or minority groups in politics. There are Mestizo, Creole, Maya, and Garifuna representatives in Parliament.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The Human Rights Commission of Belize (HRCB), an NGO affiliated with regional human rights organizations and partly funded by the UNHCR, operates without government restriction on a wide range of issues, including migrant and agricultural workers' rights and cases of alleged police abuse. The HRCB publishes human rights complaints and urges police and other governmental bodies to act upon them. The HRCB gained prominence through media reports about its workshops and seminars that educate citizens about human rights.

International human rights groups operate freely as well. Government officials generally are cooperative and responsive to their activities.

The Government's Ombudsman, a position created in 1999, stated that his office receives an average of two to three complaints of human rights violations per week. The second and third most common complaints his office receives involve police misconduct and brutality and misconduct on the part of Department of Corrections' personnel. The Ombudsman estimated that at year's end, his office would have approximately 10 pending cases of this type.

In his first annual report, the Ombudsman highlighted three primary concerns: unprofessional police behavior; lack of response by public officials to the Ombudsman's formal inquiries; and public officials' lack of knowledge regarding provisions of the Ombudsman Act. The report stated that the office had received 213 formal complaints (about all types of perceived abuse by government agencies) in its first 7 months of existence; of which the 3-person office had resolved 134 cases.

On May 9, the Office of the Ombudsman and the HRCB signed a memorandum of understanding coordinating efforts to curb human rights abuses.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The country is multiracial and multiethnic, and the Government actively promotes tolerance and cross-cultural understanding. Discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds is illegal and rare, although ethnic tension, particularly resentment of recently arrived Central American and Asian immigrants, continued to be a problem. The Government continues to reserve certain professions for citizens, granting permits and licenses to noncitizens only in specific cases. These occupations include fishing, souvenir manufacturing, sightseeing tours, accounting, insurance, real estate, and legal services.

Women

Violence against women is a problem. Based on reported cases, the Ministry of Human Development, Women, and Civil Society estimated that there were about 1,000 domestic violence cases during the year. A shelter for battered women offers short-term housing. The Belize Organization for Women and Development, an NGO, advises women on their rights and provides counseling. Laws prohibit rape and sexual harassment, but few offenders are charged and convicted. In October 1999, an expanded criminal code outlawed marital rape. Shortly thereafter, the Police Department created a police family violence unit in order to combat spousal abuse.

Despite constitutional provisions for equality, women face social and economic prejudice. Women find it more difficult than men to obtain business and agricultural financing and other resources. Most employed women are concentrated in female-dominated occupations with traditionally low status and wages. The Women's Bureau in the Ministry of Human Development, Women, and Civil Society is charged with developing programs to improve the status of women. That Ministry estimated that women would receive 35 percent of all small business loans during the year. A number of officially registered women's groups work closely with various government ministries in promoting social awareness programs. Women have access to education and are active in all spheres of national life, but relatively few hold top managerial positions. However, women head the Belize Business Bureau, Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Belize Citrus Growers Association, several prominent environmental NGO's, and the Belize Rotary Club. The law mandates equal pay for equal work, but female workers often earn less than men in similar jobs. There are no legal impediments to women owning or managing land or other real property.

There were reports that women have been trafficked for purposes of prostitution (see Sections 6.c. and 6.f.).

Children

Education is compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 15. After children finish their primary education, they may enter a secondary school, the government-run apprenticeship program, or a vocational institution. However, these programs have room for only about one-half of the children finishing primary school;

competition for spaces in secondary school is intense. Education is nominally free, but various school, book, and uniform fees place education out of reach for many poor children.

The Family Services Division in the Ministry of Human Development, Women, and Civil Society is devoted primarily to children's issues. The division coordinates programs for children who are victims of domestic violence, advocates remedies in specific cases before the family court, conducts public education campaigns, investigates cases of trafficking in children (see Section 6.f.), and works with NGO's and UNICEF to promote children's welfare. The National Committee for Families and Children includes a representative from the Ministry of Human Development, Women, and Civil Society.

Child abuse is not considered to be widespread or a societal problem. In 1998 Parliament passed the Families and Children Act, and in 1999 the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NOPCA) published a handbook for the public that outlined in plain language provisions of the law. The law allows authorities to remove a child legally from an abusive home environment, removes the limit placed on child support that a parent must pay, and allows men to file for support, as well as women. It requires parents to maintain and support a child until he or she reaches the age of 18, compared with the previous law's mandate of support up to the age of 16. The law also accepts DNA testing as legal proof of paternity and maternity. It requires that all adoptions be reported to the Human Development Department of the Ministry of Human Development, Women, and Civil Society, and that prospective parents be screened before they may adopt a child. The NOPCA instituted a nationwide telephone help line to encourage discourse and reduce abuse.

There were some reports that children were trafficked for the purpose of forced prostitution (see Sections 6.c. and 6.f.).

People with Disabilities

The law does not provide specifically for accessibility for disabled persons or prohibit job discrimination against them. The Government's Disability Services Unit, as well as a number of NGO's, such as the Belize Association of and for Persons with Disabilities and the Belize Center for the Visually Impaired, provide assistance to physically disabled persons. Disabled children have access to government special education facilities, although the requirements to enter such programs are strict.

Indigenous People

Among the country's indigenous people, the Mopan and Ke'kchi are grouped under the general term Maya, although their leaders say that they should be identified as the Masenal, meaning "common people." The Maya have sought official recognition of their communal claims to land, but the Government has been reluctant to single out one ethnic group for special consideration. The Government has designated 77,000 acres as 9 separate Mayan reserves; however, Mayan leaders claim that the Maya have an ancestral claim to a total of 500,000 acres. The Maya have formed cultural councils and other groups to advance their interests, sometimes with the collaboration of NGO's concerned with environmental and indigenous issues. Several Mayan organizations have filed suit to force the Government to recognize the Maya's ancestral land rights and to prevent further granting of logging concessions on the disputed land.

On October 12, the Government and the Mayan People of Southern Belize signed a collective agreement to address the grievances set forth in a petition by Mayan community leaders in the summer of 1998.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

By law and in practice, workers generally are free to establish and join trade unions. Eleven independent unions, whose members constitute approximately 11 percent of the labor force, represent a cross-section of white-collar, blue-collar, and professional workers, including most civil service employees. However, several of these unions are inactive. The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Public Services, and Labor recognizes unions after they file with the Registrar's Office. The law empowers members to draft the bylaws and the constitutions of their unions, and they are free to elect officers from among the membership at large. Unions that choose not to hold elections may act as representatives for their membership, but the national Trade Union Congress permits only unions that hold free and annual elections of officers to join its ranks. Both law and precedent effectively protect unions against dissolution or suspension by administrative authority.

The law permits unions to strike and does not require them to give notice before going on strike.

Although no unions are affiliated officially with political parties, several are sympathetic to one or the other of the two main parties (the PUP and the UDP).

Unions freely exercise the right to form federations and confederations and affiliate with international organizations.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for collective bargaining and unions practice it freely throughout the country. Employers and unions set wages in free negotiations, or, more commonly, employers simply establish them. The Labor Commissioner or his representative acts as a mediator in deadlocked collective bargaining negotiations between labor and management, offering nonbinding counsel to both sides. Historically the Commissioner's guidance has been accepted voluntarily. However, should either union or management choose not to accept the Commissioner's decision, both are entitled to a legal hearing of the case, provided that it is linked to some provision of civil or criminal law.

The Constitution prohibits antiunion discrimination both before and after a union is registered. Unions may organize freely, but the law does not require employers to recognize a union as a bargaining agent. For example, although the registered Banana Workers Union actively advocated worker rights, it was not recognized by the banana industry's growers association due to low membership. Some employers have been known to block union organization by terminating the employment of key union sympathizers, usually on grounds purportedly unrelated to union activities. Effective redress is extremely difficult to obtain in such situations. Technically, a worker can file a complaint with the Labor Department, but in practice it is virtually impossible to prove that a termination was due to union activity.

The Labor Code applies in the country's export processing zones (EPZ's). There are no unions in the EPZ's, reflecting the general weakness of organized labor in the country.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The Constitution and laws forbid forced, compulsory or bonded labor, including that performed by children, and generally it is not known to occur; however, there were reports that women were trafficked and infrequent reports that children also were trafficked for the purpose of forced prostitution (see Section 6.f.).

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The Labor Act prohibits all employment of children under age 12, and prohibits employment of children between the ages of 12 and 14, before the end of school hours on official school days. The minimum age for employment is 17 years for work near hazardous machinery. Inspectors from the Departments of Labor and Education enforce this regulation. During the year, truancy officers, who historically have borne the brunt of the enforcement burden, were more active. The law requires children between the ages of 5 and 15 to attend school, but there are many truants and dropouts. According to the Central Statistics Office, in the 1990's, 46 percent of children did not complete primary school, and 10 percent of those children never enrolled in school at all. On March 21, the Government ratified International Labor Organization Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labor.

Laws prohibit forced and bonded labor by children, and in general the Government effectively enforces this prohibition; however, there were infrequent reports of trafficking in children for purposes of prostitution (see Sections 6.c. and 6.f.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The minimum wage is \$1.12 (bz\$2.25), except in export industries, where it is \$1.00 (bz\$2.00) per hour. For domestic workers in private households and shop assistants in stores where liquor is not consumed, the rate is \$0.87 (bz\$1.75) per hour. The minimum wage law does not cover workers paid on a piecework basis. The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Public Services, and Labor is charged with enforcing the legal minimum wage, which generally is respected in practice. The minimum wage as sole source of income does not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. Most salaried workers receive more than the minimum wage.

The law sets the normal workweek at no more than 6 days or 45 hours. It requires payment for overtime work, 13 public holidays, an annual vacation of 2 weeks, and sick leave for up to 16 days. An employee is eligible for severance pay provided that he was employed continuously for at least 5 years.

The exploitation of undocumented Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran workers, particularly young service workers and possibly some agricultural workers, continued to be a problem. Banana farm owners slowly are moving the housing they provide for their workers away from the fields where poisonous pesticides are sprayed. Health clinics in the region report that the most frequently treated ailments are pesticide-related skin conditions. Company-provided housing often lacks electricity and water. The Government, the HRCB, and other concerned citizens all focus on this problem; however, since turnover rates of banana workers are so high, organizing this segment of the work force is difficult.

A patchwork of health and safety regulations covers numerous industries, and the Labor Department in the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Public Services, and Labor enforces these regulations to varying degrees. Enforcement is not universal, and the ministries commit their limited inspection and investigative resources principally to urban and more accessible rural areas where labor, health, and safety complaints have been registered. Workers have the legal right to remove themselves from a dangerous workplace situation without jeopardy to continued employment.

f. Trafficking in Persons

Although the law does not specifically prohibit trafficking in persons, it does proscribe procurement for the purpose of prostitution. Nonetheless, one dance hall owner reportedly recruited women from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to work as prostitutes by promising them jobs as dancers, waitresses, or domestics. Upon arrival, the employer allegedly takes their passports, forces them to engage in prostitution, and holds their wages. The police have investigated, but had not made any arrests by year's end, nor had the Government taken any other steps to address this practice.

The Ministry of Human Development, Women, and Civil Society, the police department, and--in cases involving migrant children--the Ministry of National Security and Immigration investigate and attempt to remedy cases that involve trafficking in children (see Section 5). According to a spokesperson from the Human Development Department, there were infrequent reports of trafficking in children for the purpose of prostitution; most involved migrant children.

[End.]