

# A RE-RUN OF AN OLD BELIZE MOVIE

by Peter Doughty

THE DESPATCH of British infantry reinforcements and RAF Harrier jumpjets to Belize — formerly British Honduras — is almost like a replay of a very old movie. Britain has been trying to get the colony off its back for a long time and for much longer Guatemala has been threatening to take it over.

The boundaries of Belize are the result of a historical muddle and no way has yet been found by which Britain could withdraw without Guatemala — and even possibly Mexico, which also has a claim — moving in.

The Commonwealth Caribbean countries solidly support the insistence of the Belize Chief Minister George Price that his present borders be guaranteed after independence.

At the Kingston (Jamaica) heads of government conference last May, these countries won support for their view from just about all the other Commonwealth countries.

Now, the UN, Britain and these Commonwealth countries have suggested new and early independence talks between London and Guatemala. (Cuba, too, is backing the move — probably as a result of Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley's recent visit to Havana.) Talks held earlier this year broke down.

Price went to Kingston to lobby support from the

Commonwealth leaders and the communique afterwards showed that he had got it: "Heads of government offered their full support for the aspirations of the people of Belize for early independence... (They) urged the parties to take all necessary action for a speedy community through the United Nations in accordance with the principle of the self-determination of peoples as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations."

During the drafting, a phrase about "territorial integrity" was dropped because Britain was doubtful whether, if the matter went for international legal decision, some part of the colony might be lost because of the confused history of the region. The new United Nations resolution, however, includes the phrase.

The US has some leverage in the situation since it has close commercial ties with Guatemala. It has been exerting pressure behind the scenes to cool Guatemala. But it has not wanted to take a public stand because it fears that this would provoke Guatemala into bringing the matter to the Organisation of American States and propose a resolution it could not vote on. Most of Latin America backs Guatemala's claims.

The latest crisis results from provocative statements by Guatemala politicians. Vice President Sandoval Alarcon said a few weeks ago: "Guatemala will not

accept the independence of Belize even if it costs Guatemalan lives."

It is 300 years since the British began to settle in the area. They gave it a constitution 200 years ago, and a formal legislative assembly more than 100 years ago.

Under a treaty in 1859 Guatemala and Britain appointed joint commissioners to settle the southern boundary, but the operation fell through because Guatemala said Britain had not fulfilled an obligation to build a road from Belize to Guatemala City.

In 1929 joint commissioners were again appointed. Guatemala made the same complaint about the lack of a road. It argued smugglers could be better

controlled if the road existed.

Then Guatemala made a series of proposals: Britain to sell all British Honduras to it for £400,000 (HK\$4.4 million); Britain to pay Guatemala £400,000 and give it a strip of land so that her department of Peten had an outlet to the sea; Guatemala to forego all claims and Britain to pay £50,000 (HK\$550,000) with interest from 1859.

Britain rejected all these proposals and in 1937 Guatemala said the matter should be submitted to the arbitration of the American president. Britain asked for the permanent court of international justice to be arbiter instead. Guatemala would not agree.

In 1940 President Ubico of Guatemala said "Efforts

to incorporate British Honduras with Guatemala would be suspended." In 1948 Guatemala planned a coup against British Honduras. Britain sent a cruiser to Belize with troops to protect British lives and the coup did not happen.

In 1965 Britain, Guatemala and British Honduras put the Guatemalan claim to a mediator appointed by the US president. His proposal, made in 1968 in the form of a draft treaty, was unacceptable to the British Honduras government by that time led by George Price, of the People's United Party.

And as Britain had always said that a settlement of the dispute must be agreed by the colony's government it did not go ahead with the treaty.

In 1972 Britain sent the aircraft carrier Ark Royal to Belize and its Phantom planes made a show of force over the colony following reports of military activity on the Guatemalan border. Now comes a repeat performance, this time with jumpjets.

However, the situation could be more serious now because an American firm prospecting in Belize may find oil at any time. Also, rich phosphate deposits lie off the colony.

Guatemala's army has 12,000 men and its air force 13 planes. About one third of its troops are now said to be within 15 miles of the Belize border.

Belize is a small colony — roughly oblong in shape, 174 miles long and 68 miles wide. It has 130,000 inhabitants — mostly negroes with some Chinese, East Indians and Arabs.

It produces timber, sugar, citrus and rice and there is also dairy farming and fishing. In 1961 Hurricane Hattie destroyed half Belize City. A new capital, Belmopan, has been built 50 miles inland. — Gemini

