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SCCP

## 124-year-old dispute ending

Guatemala has finally abandoned its 124-year-old claim to the neighbouring territory of Belize (formerly British Honduras) in Central America. The main obstacle to processing the independence of Belize is now removed and Britain which reluctantly administers the territory is now free to go ahead with convening a constitutional conference to realise its long-standing aim to withdraw and give the people of Belize full independence.

In fact, the Belizeans, themselves, wanted their homeland to be completely decolonised long ago but feared that without adequate security, independence would be meaningless in view of the sustained threats by Guatemala to use force to back up its claim.

Indeed, Britain has on a number of occasions had to rush reinforcements to Belize following threatening military movements by Guatemalan forces near the Belizean border. At present, Britain maintains some 2,000 troops in Belize with Harrier, Puma and Gazelle aircraft. This costs the British Treasury about £26 million a year — a burden that Whitehall will obviously be glad to be rid of or to have substantially reduced. However, as Britain's Deputy Foreign Secretary, Mr Nicholas Ridley, said, Britain will maintain economic aid to Belize and take every step necessary to reinforce Belizean independence as well as security.

What Guatemala has gained by giving up its claim appears to be more or less what it was fundamentally after in the first place — access to the waters of the Caribbean Sea and port facilities. The agreement signed by Guatemala, Belize and Britain — to be formalised later in a treaty between the two former countries — gives Guatemala a little more, apparently to avoid new disputes between Belize and Guatemala in the future and, conceivably, to win popular support for the agreement in Guatemala itself.

In return for Guatemala giving up territorial claims against Belize, the agreement provides a guarantee of navigation rights for Guatemala in the Caribbean apart from port facilities in Belize and a mutual pledge by the two countries not to allow their territories to be used as bases for subversion against either of them. Guatemala has in the past accused Belize of allowing anti-Guatemalan guerillas to operate from the latter's territory.

Guatemala is also to be given use of two uninhabited Belizean islets which will remain under Belizean sovereignty.

For access to the sea and to Belizean ports, Guatemala will have free use of a road from its border to the Belizean coast. Other future benefits, according to the agreement, provides Guatemala with access to potential offshore oil deposits and opportunities for joint ventures with Belize in oil exploration, fishing and shipping.

The compromises which facilitated the agreement shows that co-operation and flexibility are more productive than confrontation. Guatemala is to secure what it has been basically seeking since 1957; Belize is to receive recognition as an independent sovereign state by Guatemala and Britain is to be relieved of the burden of its last colony in the Caribbean.

More important to the region, a source of conflict has been eliminated. Mexico, for instance, has threatened to revive its own dormant claim to Belize should Guatemala invade the latter.

The only hurdle to overcome now concerns the Guatemalan constitution which includes Belize within the territorial domain of Guatemala. In a region where there has been so much unrest, tension, violence and bloodshed, notably El Salvador, it is pleasing that one flashpoint has been eliminated.

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## FRAMEWORK FOR AN INDEPENDENT BELIZE

There are still plenty of difficulties to be overcome before there is a full settlement of the Belize question. But this week's announcement of the terms of the agreement between Britain, Guatemala and Belize marks a big step forward on an issue that has been an irritant for many years. In the normal course of events Belize should have been independent long ago. It could not move to independence, however, because Guatemala, basing itself on arguments that went back to the period of the Spanish colonial empire, claimed it as part of its own territory. And Britain, faced with periodic military build-ups on the Guatemalan side of the border, has had to keep some 1,600 troops in Belize in order to deter a possible invasion.

In the agreement that they have now signed, the Guatemalans have given up their claim to Belize; and they have done so without getting a strip of territory in compensation. Cession of territory was something they had pressed for hard, in the past, and the Labour Government discussed it with them before an outcry here and in Belize put a stop to the idea. But in the latest round of negotiations it was

made clear to the Guatemalans that there could be no question of handing over any territory. Instead, they were offered a number of economic advantages—free port facilities in Belize, territorial seas which will give them access to the Caribbean from their own north-eastern ports, the right to joint exploration for oil—and these they have now accepted, at least in principle.

The agreement still has to be turned into a treaty, and the heads of agreement which have been accepted in London translated into firm commitments. The whole package has also to be approved both in Belize and Guatemala, which will not be straightforward in either country. In Belize the main opposition party, the United Democratic Party, has accused the government of a "sell-out", and there was a riot this week after a demonstration by its youth wing. In Guatemala the agreement has been attacked by the National Liberation Movement, a rightist party, in much the same terms. But there is a fair chance that in both countries the terms of the agreement will eventually be accepted.

The main issue still to be settled is the defence of Belize, and whether British troops should re-

main after independence. In the past, Britain has taken the line that it could not assume responsibility for defending Belize after it became independent. But more recently it has let it be known that it was in fact prepared to protect Belize if Guatemala continued to threaten it after independence; and it was arguably that, coupled with the declared intention of bringing Belize to independence before the end of this year, which persuaded the Guatemalans to negotiate.

The hope must be that a treaty will in due course be signed, based on the London agreement, which will usher in civilized relations between Belize and Guatemala, so that defence will no longer be such a burning issue. It will be hard for Belize to be completely confident about its larger neighbour, with its record of political instability and its appalling policies of repression; and that means that Britain cannot entirely wash its hands of events in that part of Central America. But Guatemala has found itself almost entirely isolated in its claims on Belize. It also has serious difficulties of its own, at a time of upheaval in much of Central America, and can hardly want to add to them by going to war over Belize.

In the immediate crisis, the Atlantic Salmon Trust and its policy deserve the active support of everybody interested in the future of this valuable fish.

Yours faithfully,  
TED HUGHES,  
Moorstown,  
Winklesigh,  
Devon.  
March 4.

### Reporting

From the Rev. Sylvia Smith  
Mr. I feel I should like to say to Mr Alan that the house was built by the culprits were ago I was in the company of an old youths.  
One of my teachers in the school I was in more trouble black because families are white in that Asian families

### Fight on the beaches

From Mr Ted Hughes

Sir, Mr P. M. Barlow's letter (February 20) emphasising that the surrender of our inshore fisheries "is up to the beaches" to foreign fishing fleets would also include as far as the stocks of salmon and sea-trout are concerned—the surrender of our rivers, should the sur-

tightly controlled each year on each river till the full breeding complement has escaped upstream. The results began to show by 1977 when the total Alaskan catch climbed to 49 million salmon. In 1980, the figure was estimated at 100 million. The Icelandic returns tell a similar tale.

What Alaska and Iceland have in common is that they claim absolute