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CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

BELIZE

Memorandum by the Secretary of State  
for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

1. As proposed in my minute to the Prime Minister of 23 April Nicholas Ridley visited Belize from 4-7 May. He met a wide range of representative groups and had useful and timely influence on public thinking about independence issues. Though there is dissatisfaction with Premier Price's autocratic style of government, which has unfavourably influenced public reaction to the Heads of Agreement, popular opinion seems still to be firmly in favour of early independence.
2. During his visit Mr Ridley had no alternative but to endorse Price's commitment to a referendum on the terms of the eventual settlement with Guatemala though Price was warned that HMG's response, should Belize reject a reasonable treaty of settlement, could not be taken for granted. We would have to take a hard look at whether, in these circumstances, we would be prepared to keep British forces in Belize. We retain a say in the wording of any referendum.
3. Price pressed for an announcement of 21 September as a date for independence and some of his Ministers have declared that, come what may, Belize will declare independence on that date. It seems that some of them were fearful of any concessions to Guatemala, so they intended to obtain a public announcement of an independence date, in order to filibuster negotiations beyond /independence,

independence, provoke Guatemala to break them off, and so bind the United Kingdom into the continuing defence of Belize. But Nicholas Ridley made no commitment to any date and stressed that negotiations must be concluded before independence, though he told Price that we continue to plan for it as soon as possible and in any event before the end of 1981.

4. Mr Ridley, accompanied by Price, had a good meeting in Washington on 8 May with the Guatemalan Foreign Minister who indicated that the Guatemalans were ready to move ahead with negotiation of a final settlement. Price also, bowing to Nicholas Ridley's timetable, committed himself to a constructive attitude to negotiations. These began in New York on 20 May at official level, but with the Belize Government represented by three Ministers. Although invited, the Belize Opposition chose not to attend. Initial indications are that the Guatemalans and Belizeans intend to negotiate seriously and constructively and we are cautiously hopeful that this meeting will result in agreement over most points with any particularly difficult areas to be dealt with at a further round in London.

5. Whilst in Washington, Mr Ridley also had a useful meeting with the American Administration and briefed them on the latest position. He has also seen the Commonwealth Secretary General who has agreed to continue backing our efforts to reach a settlement with Guatemala.

6. Within Belize, despite efforts by Price to use the security forces to under-pin his own position and that of his Government, the Governor lifted the State of Emergency on 8 May. The situation is now quiet and under control. Further disturbances cannot be ruled out; there are elements on both the government and Opposition side who are ready to resort to violence. The recent events showed some disorganisation within the security forces but steps are being taken to correct this.

7. I shall report further after the present negotiations.