

The provision of national security is one of the most important functions of a government. The absence of adequate national security leads to instability and directly affects economic growth, democracy, the rule of law and the delivery of social services.

Upon the officers and soldiers of the Belize Defence Force, standing shoulder to shoulder, falls the central responsibility of the national security of Belize. They execute this responsibility primarily in two ways: defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belize and providing immeasurable support to the civil authorities in the maintenance of law and order.

The consolidation of Belize's sovereignty and the resolution of the Belize-Guatemala issue are, at the same time, both foreign policy and national security priorities. The Belize Defence Force plays a key role in this. During the past year, in execution of the confidence-building measures under the Belize-Guatemala Transition Agreement of February 7th 2003, the BDF engaged in a number of joint meetings with the Guatemala Armed Forces (GAF), alternately in Belize and Guatemala.

These meetings resulted in coordinated patrols in the Adjacency Zone. The practical result of this is the building of cordial relations between both forces and the reduction of tension in the border area. Through aerial reconnaissance by the air wing and extensive foot patrols, the BDF maintains active oversight of the remote land border regions of Belize to deter encroachments and illegal settlements in Belize.

Until the Belize-Guatemala issue is finally and comprehensively resolved, the primary focus of our defence force will be to meet the stated foreign policy and national security objectives of Belize.

At the same time, we are very much aware that our security structures have to be flexible enough to combat the new 21st century security threats. There is an emerging consensus that, in this region, for example, trans-national, organized crime and narcotics and arms trafficking present a greater danger to our national security than the possibility of invasion by a neighbouring state.

This view carries much weight. The end of the cold war, the emergence of regional economic integration movements, the prominence of hemispheric mechanisms for the resolution of disputes between states and the spread of representative democracy in the region, taken together, are influencing a change in regional security structures and priorities.

***The Declaration on Security in the Americas* that came out of the OAS Special Conference on Security held in Mexico City in October of last year identified illicit trafficking in arms, asset laundering, organized crime and drug-trafficking as threats to hemispheric security. The declaration specifically recognizes the importance of Inter-American institutions and mechanisms in conflict prevention and resolution and the importance of confidence-building measures as a fundamental component of the hemisphere's security architecture.**

As a small state, it is in Belize's national security and foreign policy interests that the role and importance of international law and institutions like the OAS and the UN in resolving disputes be respected. The stronger these are the safer we consider ourselves to be.

We place emphasis on the formation of strategic partnerships as a component of our security arrangements. For example we have a State Partnership Program between Louisiana and Belize. Through this program and with the assistance from our other international partners like the United Kingdom and the United States of America we receive substantial military assistance and training for which we are grateful.

Last year we signed the 1995 Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America which is regarded as a model regional security instrument. This treaty aims at achieving a reasonable balance of forces in Central America and promoting peace and stability in the region through a program of communication and confidence-building measures among the militaries of Central America. This year we will consider membership of the Inter-American Defence Board, an Inter-American institution open to members of the OAS whose aim is the promotion of hemispheric peace and security.

In Belize, the BDF has proven itself to be agile, potent and professional in adapting itself to meet new security threats even as it executes its primary function of defending our border and protecting our territorial integrity.

The BDF continues to support the Police Department in maintaining law and order. Joint patrols have increased in Belize City and three mobile composite patrols operate along the Northern, Western and Southern Highways.

The BDF has also supported the Police with the destruction of thousands of marijuana plants. Additionally, the BDF has supported the Forestry Department with the protection of forestry resources; the Customs Department in preventing trafficking in uncustomed goods; the tourism industry in providing security operations at more remote tourist sites. Support is also provided in response to national emergencies and bomb threats.

A small but impressive Air Wing conducted a total of 330 flying hours last year. Their air reccees directly accounted for the identification – and eventual destruction – of 90% of marijuana plants destroyed in this country last year. The Air Wing also plays a critical role in search and rescue operations, tracking of suspected drug vessels and emergency medical evacuation throughout Belize.

Similarly the Maritime Wing has been active with patrols in our territorial waters and rivers enforcing fisheries protection laws and supporting the police in search of suspected drug vessels. The Maritime Wing has also undertaken several search and rescue missions at sea.

I am therefore honoured to be here today celebrating this 26th anniversary with the officers and soldiers of the BDF and their families. You should all feel justly proud. There is no doubt that you are the embodiment of our national security. Upon the formidable shoulders of the BDF rests the stability and economic prosperity of Belize. Under the command of Brigadier-General Borland, you continue to maintain the respect, trust, confidence and admiration of the people of Belize.

I extend congratulations to the 46 men and 7 women of Recruit Intake No. 45 who are graduating today after 16 weeks of rigorous training in military discipline, weapon handling, field craft, map reading, foot drill, first aid and conventional and internal security. I congratulate as well those who will receive awards and be recognized for their outstanding service and contribution to the development of the BDF.

