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## Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow's New Year Address 2018

My Fellow Belizeans,

I drive, almost on a daily basis, that portion of the Philip Goldson Highway between the Buttonwood Boulevard roundabout and the Benny's roundabout. And latterly I have been struck by how, to the accompaniment of jackhammers and drain-digging and detritus-clearing, a four-at some points six-lane expressway is taking increasing shape on that stretch of road. It has the makings of an impressive piece of infrastructure. And it is, of course, to be joined up with what has already been done between the Airport Link Road and the Haulover Bridge; and with what is also to be done coming all the way in to the Belcan overpass. The work originates at the PGIA junction, and its importance for tourism and development is underlined by its connectivity via Belize City to the West and South in one direction, and the North in another.

Government is constantly improving the major roads network in all three areas. And in turn, they are becoming magnets for increased visitor traffic as well as agricultural expansion and innovation. And that is why I reference our new, autobahn-like marvel. It serves as physical and metaphorical emblem of our visible and continuing progress for Belize, a progress we all will strive to consolidate and make better in 2018.

2017 was certainly an improvement over 2016, not least in the fact that the year just past saw a return to all-important GDP and economic growth. Exports were up an impressive 13% in the first 9 months, and a historically low year-over-year inflation rate, pegged at just 1.2%, continued. The importance of this in preserving the purchasing power of the Belize dollar, helping to fight poverty and growing the middle class, cannot be overstated. It is in that same context that we view 2017's final tranche in the three-year salary adjustment package for Public Officers and Teachers. No other country in the region has so generously rewarded Government employees, and of this we are immensely proud. Also, the Statistical Institute of Belize just released very encouraging Labour Force information. According to the Institute, unemployment fell to 9.7% in September of 2017. This was down from the 11.1% in September 2016, and was extremely welcome year end news.

But in ways additional to finance and the economy, we enjoyed our fair share of positive things in 2017. We were spared the terrible wrath of the killer storms that devastated our sister Caribbean countries. And we were not selfish in our good fortune, dispatching a contingent of BDF soldiers to assist with security and reconstruction in (perhaps) worst hit Dominica.

Early in 2017 we also succeeded in restructuring the SuperBond. We thereby escaped the threatened draining of our recurrent revenues and foreign reserves, and the imminent strangulation of our ability to service our people and economy. We had a bumper sugar crop, increased our access to export markets in the non-traditional areas of chicken, grains, processed meat and even ice cream. And tourism continued its magnificent star turn as the highest flyer of all. Indeed, as at the end of November 2017, overnight

tourism had increased by 9.5% over the same period for 2016. And cruise calls went up by 3.7%, netting both an overall increase and, for the second year running, topping the 1 million visitor mark.

Physical infrastructure, creating jobs and raising standards of living, is a well-established hallmark of this Administration. And 2017 saw the drive continue. In Belize City the Civic Center is now proud accomplishment; and climate resilient reconstruction of that all-important Faber's Road Link from the George Price Highway to the Belize City Port is in full swing.

In the South a contract has been awarded for the resurfacing of the Placencia main artery from the airstrip to the point, and the Hopkins Main Street is being upgraded for 2.6 million dollars. Five hundred households and thirteen banana farms in 27 communities in Southern Belize were connected to the national power grid and now have access to safe and reliable electricity. Water systems are being rehabilitated in Hopkins, Pomona, Hummingbird and Middlesex. And construction of Polyclinics in Bella Vista and Independence are at their start points. Phase I of the Hummingbird Highway reconstruction is finished, and tenders go out soon for the Phase 2 replacement of all the old narrow bridges and railway tracks.

In the West the work continues on the repair and widening of the George Price Highway between Three Flags and Santa Elena. And I just received a letter from the Director-General of OFID confirming an offer of a 40 million US financing package for construction of the entire Caracol Road. We had thought we would need several partners to fund a project of this magnitude, which will greatly add to the overall tourism vision and open up the natural and environmental wonder of that entire area including Mountain Pine Ridge. We are very thankful that OFID has come through on its own. And we think the private sector will be especially excited at the potential now for attracting tens of millions of dollars in new investments for the construction and development of lodges, villas and properties in a section of the country currently still largely untapped. There are, of course, also positive security implications for this Caracol Road project.

In the North the building of the Corozal Wholesale Market is underway, and so is the expansion of the Orange Walk Town Farmers Market. New classrooms have also been gifted to Trial Farm and San Jose in Orange Walk, and San Pedro in Corozal, all of which is complemented by the thousands of students benefiting from Government's scholarship and tuition assistance programs. Also in the North, we are going to re-do the entire length of the Philip Goldson Highway from about Sand Hill to the Santa Elena Border.

Countrywide, we are reaching out rurally with the replenishments to the Social Investment Fund and The Basic Needs Trust Fund which we have procured. From those funds Orange Walk Technical High School will be renovated and Rural Water Systems will be upgraded in a far-flung grid of improvement stretching from Bullet Tree, Cristo Rey and Georgeville in the West, to Silk Grass and Crique Jute in the South, and Consejo and Libertad in the North.

Now clearly physical infrastructure is a primary option for this Government. But another form of infrastructure is becoming of critical importance, and that is technology infrastructure. We have now embraced technology as a foundation tool with which to deploy greater governance efficiency and transparency. Accordingly, 75% of Government ministries are now interconnected via our secure network. As well, Public Officers are being provided with the resources to improve collaboration and productivity. Also, we are investing in special software to overhaul the management of Belize's identity system. A new platform will improve the integrity and speed of delivery of official documents such as birth certificates, passports and voter IDs. In fact,

fraud will be next to impossible with the authentication process we will now be pioneering.

Of course, 2018-just like 2017 or any other year-will not be only sweetness and light. In fact, the November CCJ judgment arising out of that murkiest, most opaque, and most malevolent of conspiracies that birthed the UHS millstone, will follow us into the New Year. Since the matter will be going to Parliament on January 5, I will not say too much here. But we, Belize, this nation, must come out of this with honour, with dignity. And we can't do that if we were simply to fold, to place our tails between our legs without account or even explanation from those who perpetrated this most monstrous of back stabs.

But the spirit which will not allow this to happen is the same spirit that will see off any other challenge to our country. So we go into 2018 with loins girded up; with the confidence that comes from knowing that we overcame in 2017; with the enthusiasm that accompanies the plenitude of projects unfurling even now: the under-construction Wyndham hotel in North Ambergris; the coming Belize City Hilton hotel on the Foreshore site of the old Bellevue; the second international airport; the national Broadband plan; the recovery of shrimping and its expansion from South to North with the new ponds in Libertad; the injection of additional foreign capital in citrus; the banana recovery that is in part keyed by new investment from Sumitomo/Fyffes, including the purchase of the old Sorenson Receivership farms and financing the Big Creek Port dredging/expansion so the fruit can be loaded directly from shore to ship; the surge in non-traditional exports to both CARICOM and Central America; the quantum social sector leap in construction of new classrooms and new water systems and new health posts; and the marching army of infrastructure projects, exemplified also in our Cities and Towns by, for instance, the new San Ignacio/Santa Elena Town Hall; the Commercial Center renovation in Belize City; the paving of additional streets in Dangriga, Belmopan, Punta Gorda and Corozal; and the construction explosion in San Pedro.

Armed with all this, lifted by all this, we greet Monday's dawning with strong voice and full cry: Happy New Year, and God Bless Belize.