

Drug Intelligence Brief



DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION
INTELLIGENCE DIVISION

March 2000

BELIZE-COUNTRY BRIEF

DEA Office Responsible Belize Country Office

Population 230,000 (as of November 1998)

Area 22,965 square kilometers
(8,867 square miles)

Capital Belmopan

Type of Government Constitutional Monarchy with
Elected Prime Minister

Top Government Officials

Prime Minister Said Musa

Deputy Prime Minister Johnny Briceño

Official Head of State HM Queen Elizabeth II

Governor General Sir Colville Young



Drug Statistics in Belize 1992 - 1999

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Cocaine (kilograms)	850	10	141	840	87	2,691	40	37.1
Marijuana (kilograms)	570	380	200	40	200	262	1,557	392
Cannabis plants eradicated	23,971	69,381	12,777	162,567	128,281	294,712	202,803	270,136
Drug arrests	1,529	1,731	1,674	1,524	1,766	1,701	1,743	2,369

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Belize was settled by British loggers and their Caribbean workers in the seventeenth century, but was not formally declared a British colony until 1862. Belize's modern history began in 1954, when the British Administration held territorial elections that were won by the local People's United Party. After protracted negotiations with Guatemala, the British granted independence to Belize in 1981. Guatemala had never formally recognized the British settlement of Belize and maintained that the area rightfully was part of Guatemala's territory. Guatemala's territorial claim to Belize has overshadowed all other foreign policy issues facing Belize's leaders. In 1999, there were several incidents along the border involving confrontations between Guatemalan citizens and Belize security forces, which included allegations of physical abuse inflicted by Belizean Defense Forces (BDF) against Guatemalan nationals.

Belize is unique in Central America because of its very small population and British colonial history. Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom is the formal head of state, although Belize has its own elected parliament. English is the official language. The country's population is divided between the descendants of African slaves and the descendants of Spanish-speaking Central American immigrants, who currently make up half of Belize's population.

OVERVIEW

Belize remains a country of concern for U.S. drug enforcement authorities. The Government of Belize (GOB) recognizes the threat posed by drug trafficking and works closely with the United States on narcotics control and other international crime issues, primarily through the efforts of the Belize Police Force (BPF) and the BDF. Cocaine and marijuana are the two main drugs exported from Belize to the United States. There is no opium poppy production in Belize, although some Colombian traffickers include heroin as part of larger cocaine shipments.

Belize, which borders Mexico and Guatemala to the west and the Caribbean Sea to the east, is a transit country for the movement of drugs, particularly cocaine, from South America to the United States. The geography and proximity of Belize to Mexico make Belize an ideal transshipment point for drugs destined for the United States. This situation is exacerbated further by the country's limited police presence and poorly guarded land borders. Air and maritime trafficking are the primary methods of cocaine smuggling for Belizean, Mexican, and Colombian organizations operating along the Belizean coast. Drug traffickers also use the western region of Belize to smuggle cocaine from neighboring Guatemala.

Major Belizean drug traffickers operate along Glove's Reef and South Water Cay, both of which are located in southern Belizean waters, and store drug shipments on Ambergris Cay, located near Chetumal, Mexico. Traffickers increasingly use maritime operations in conjunction with aircraft "wet-drops" or off-loads from sea vessels to smuggle drug shipments into Belizean waters. Cocaine, air-dropped off the coast of Belize, is transported to the Belizean mainland or Mexico by small "go-fast" boats, stored, and then shipped onward to the United States.

CULTIVATION AND PRODUCTION

Cannabis is illegally cultivated and harvested in Belize. Marijuana is produced and consumed in small amounts locally. Large-scale marijuana production in Belize first became evident in the late 1970s. When effective eradication reduced the quantity of marijuana production in Belize in the late 1980s, narco-traffickers imported large amounts of marijuana from neighboring Guatemala in mid 1991 for export to the United States. When law enforcement efforts reduced the amount of imported marijuana, drug traffickers renewed production of marijuana in the jungles of Belize.

Cultivation of cannabis, ranging from 500 to several thousand plants, has been detected mainly in the Orange Walk District. Cannabis growers often locate in remote areas and abandon the plants until harvest time; thus avoiding the risk of being arrested during eradication programs. To avoid aerial detection, drug cultivators often interplant young cannabis seedlings with corn plants. Another common method of planting called the "underbrush" method, removes small trees and bushes, but leaves taller ones in place to hide the plants from aerial detection. Cannabis fields usually are located far from the homes of those who cultivate them. This results in relatively few arrests despite the large numbers of plants detected and destroyed. Because the BDF requires a day to reach identified cannabis sites by foot, this allows any cultivators near the fields plenty of time to escape.

Although the GOB neither conducts nor allows spray missions for the eradication of cannabis, it continues to cooperate and encourage aerial reconnaissance missions followed by manual eradication by police and the BDF. The GOB views manual eradication of cannabis fields and seedlings as more effective and environmentally sound than spraying. Manual eradication targeted modest-sized fields ranging from 500 to several thousand plants. The total number of cannabis plants destroyed during 1999 was 300,900. During 1998, 178,719 plants were destroyed with 294,712 plants destroyed in 1997. While still significant, cannabis cultivation in Belize is currently much lower than it was in the early 1980s, when the country ranked fourth in the world wide production of marijuana and was a major source of marijuana for the United States. For example, in 1983, the GOB eradicated almost 6 million cannabis plants.

Although Mexicans are known to purchase marijuana in Belize in bulk quantities, intelligence reporting does not indicate that Belize is currently a primary source of marijuana for the United States. A large portion of the marijuana produced in Belize is destined for local consumption. There is no evidence that Belize is a producer or processor of cocaine HCl or heroin.

CHEMICALS/PROCESSING

There is no evidence of trafficking in precursor chemicals in Belize, nor are there many industries in Belize requiring the use of precursor chemicals. However, the GOB, in support of the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Drugs, has developed a precursor chemical program.

DRUG TRAFFICKING TRENDS

Belize is an important transit country for drugs flowing out of Colombia into Mexico, given its contiguous borders with Guatemala and Mexico, long unprotected coastline, thousands of cays, and rudimentary infrastructure for combating drug trafficking. Belize continues to be an important land, air, and sea transshipment point for cocaine, heroin, and, to a lesser extent, marijuana destined for the United States and Europe. Belize is characterized by a long, unprotected coastline, remote jungles, and uncontrolled territorial waters dotted with numerous small cays, that provide cover for drug trafficking operations. The bulk of the cocaine enters Belize via the coast, either brought from Colombia by go-fast boats or air-dropped into the vicinity of the cays for subsequent recovery by go-fast boats. Air traffic originates from South and Central America, primarily using Belize as an intermediate stop to refuel with local traffickers providing logistical support and security.

Cocaine first surfaced in Belize in 1985, when an airplane laden with cocaine from Colombia crash-landed in the Orange Walk District in northern Belize. Several local drug traffickers stole cocaine and sold it locally. Seeing the potential profits in cocaine, some marijuana traffickers changed their operations to the more profitable business of working with Colombian groups to import cocaine from Colombia for further transshipment to the United States. The cocaine flow into Belize increased along with local abuse of crack cocaine.

Movement of cocaine via maritime vessel through Belizean waters is the preferred means of cocaine transportation in the country. Go-fast boats are the primary method of maritime cocaine transportation. These boats originate in Colombia (frequently from San Andres Island) or other Central American countries, and transport cocaine north into Belizean waters at night. Go-fast boats are refueled or unloaded by support teams, which usually use a different location for each operation. Drug traffickers in Belize are known to rotate their operations from the Northern Districts to the Southern Districts in order to avoid detection. In the south, traffickers resort to maritime transshipments, and, in the north, traffickers use

aircraft and maritime operations in the area of Ambergris Cay. Maritime operations are used in conjunction with aircraft wet-drops or off-loads from sea vessels. Support groups provide fuel, boats, safehouses, and alternate transportation for Colombian go-fast boats. Cocaine from larger Colombian go-fast boats is sometimes transferred to smaller go-fast boats in Belizean waters for transport to Belize, Guatemala, or Mexico.

As collaboration between Colombian drug cartels and Mexican drug cartels increased in the late 1990s, there was an increase in the Mexican drug trafficking presence in Belize. Mexican activities included the masterminding of clandestine aircraft and sea vessel drug running operations in Belize, with the material support of local Belizean drug traffickers. Several known Belizean traffickers own or control airfields and support drug flights by providing fuel and security for which they are paid in cocaine by international traffickers. Although traffickers refuel aircraft in Belize, they normally do not off-load their shipments while on the ground. There has been a significant decline in the use of general aviation aircraft to transport and off-load cocaine in Belizean territory, but cocaine increasingly is being dropped by aircraft. Traffickers either wet-drop loads of cocaine near Belize's cays, or drop loads into the Orange Walk District for overland transportation into Mexico.

Drug traffickers also transport cocaine through Belize by land. Most of the cocaine transported overland to or through Belize is hidden in containers or concealed in bulk commercial shipments, such as lumber or concrete. Cargo smuggled into Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador via maritime vessels also is shipped overland to Belize or Mexico for onward transshipment. The primary inbound crossing sites, which account for most of the overland traffic, are from the Peten area of Guatemala. Besides the formal border crossings, there are numerous dirt roads crossing the border which are accessible by four-wheel drive vehicles. The Peten Region still is forested heavily along both sides of the Guatemala-Belize Border and offers a large region to drug traffickers for both the cultivation of cannabis and for transporting drugs such as cocaine undetected.

Drug traffickers also transport cocaine through Belize to Mexico via containerized cargo. Belize has two seaports capable of berthing container shipments. A common practice for drug traffickers is to conceal cocaine in fresh fruit and seafood—both major exports. Vessels transporting food rarely are checked thoroughly by customs due to the perishability of the foodstuffs and the inability of customs to pay for the cargo, should no drugs be found and the goods ruined.

Only 37.1 kilograms of cocaine were seized in Belize during 1999. This is similar to the figure of 40 kilograms seized in 1998. These most recent seizure numbers contrast strongly with 1997 figures, when the GOB seized a record 2.7 metric tons of cocaine. Most of the cocaine seized in 1997 resulted from the capture of two go-fast boats. The most significant 1997 seizure in Belize occurred in March near South Water Cay in southern Belizean waters. In this incident, authorities seized a 32-foot Colombian boat containing 52 bales of cocaine, totaling 1,323 kilograms of cocaine. In addition, in May 1997, authorities seized 1,183 kilograms of cocaine in an unattended fiberglass boat in the Turneffe Islands.

Larger Belizean traffickers transport multihundred-kilogram loads of cocaine for Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Most Belizean trafficking organizations are small, tightly knit groups, and their members often are related. A larger trafficker often divides a large cocaine shipment among several smaller groups to transport it, thus minimizing his risk. Some organizations act solely as support teams to refuel aircraft and go-fast boats, or to transport cocaine overland. Smaller trafficking organizations and support groups usually are paid in cocaine instead of cash.

Small quantities of cocaine are converted into “crack” cocaine for internal distribution on the streets of Belize City and other parts of the country. Local trafficking groups that support international traffickers receive payment for their services in cocaine, which they must dispose of in the domestic market through crack sales.

DRUG ABUSE

The GOB considers crack cocaine use to be the largest internal drug problem because of the associated criminal activities that accompany hard drug abuse. International cocaine traffickers pay their Belizean counterparts in cocaine, which local trafficking organizations, in turn, convert to crack for sale in Belize City and other urban areas.

Demand reduction began in 1989 and is coordinated by the National Drug Abuse Control Council (NDACC), which works in close collaboration with the community to provide drug abuse education, information, counseling, rehabilitation, and outreach.

MONEY LAUNDERING

Belize is not considered an important regional financial center, but it is striving to establish offshore banking, which could open the country to potential money laundering. Belize is a minor player in international offshore financial services because of its late entry into that sector.

The Offshore Banking Act and the Money Laundering Prevention Act were finalized in August 1996. The Offshore Banking Act followed several laws that began building an offshore services sector in Belize. This started with the passage of the International Business Companies Act in 1990 and the Trusts Act in 1992. However, Belizean law enforcement authorities have yet to seize any assets or try a single case under the new law.

In June 1996, Belize passed its first Money Laundering Prevention Law, which was implemented in August 1996. The law covers individuals and institutions, including banks and offshore banks, that assist and collaborate in money laundering activity. Banks and other financial institutions are required under the law to keep records of all financial transactions for a period of 5 years and to open these records for inspection. Institutions that fail to comply with the new law could have their licenses revoked and also would be subject to a fine of up to US\$50,000. Under the new law, penalties include fines beginning at US\$25,000 and confiscation of property from those people and organizations violating the law. Penalties also include jail sentences for periods of not less than 3 years. Offenses covered by the law include: blackmail, counterfeiting, drug trafficking and related offenses, extortion, false accounting, forgery, fraud, illegal deposit taking, robbery, and theft involving more than US\$10,000.

COUNTERDRUG ENFORCEMENT

The GOB recognizes the country’s vulnerability to smugglers because of its geography and is working to combat drug trafficking, primarily through the BDF and the BPF. The BPF has established the Violent Crimes Counter Narcotics Intelligence Unit and the National Anti-Narcotic Intelligence Unit, which focus on drug investigations and drug interdiction. The BPF coordinates the Joint Information Collection Center (JICC).

The Ministry of National Security has increased its attention to anti-narcotics matters, and the Belizean Police Commissioner has demonstrated a lack of tolerance of corruption with a series of suspensions and the dismissal of 27 officers believed to be involved in corruption and drug trafficking in 1998. Belizean leaders have remained concerned about corruption and are seeking to eliminate corrupt officials from public institutions. Belizean security forces traditionally have been hampered by the lack of manpower, training, and equipment as well as corruption within the ranks and Belize's long, unprotected borders. However, efforts to incrementally build the security force infrastructure have been largely successful. In 1998, improved equipment and training, combined with determined leadership within the GOB, have improved overall counternarcotics performance. A new police commissioner named in September 1999 is working to create a counternarcotics task force.

The BPF formed a money laundering unit within its National Criminal Investigation Branch to work in collaboration with the Central Bank of Belize in 1997. The unit is composed of two trained officers.

The U.S. Government is helping Belize develop a sustainable infrastructure that will allow the GOB to combat its drug problems effectively. The GOB has requested and received the support of elements of the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. military for counternarcotics activities and training. The new counternarcotics task force will be the first law enforcement entity in Belize dedicated exclusively to combating drug trafficking. The task force will include a DEA special agent, co-located with Belizean police officials, who will provide training and technical assistance to assist in establishing the unit.

While the U.S. Government no longer considers Belize a major transit country, Belize continues to be a country of concern for the United States. In 1999, U.S. Government support included equipment and training for several units of the police department, including the Canine Unit, the Dragon Unit, the Violent Crimes and Intelligence Unit, and the JICC. U.S. Government assistance also has provided partial funding to renovate the district police headquarters in Belize City and to construct the JICC headquarters in Belmopan. Both the U.S. Coast Guard and the military also have provided support and training for anti-narcotics activities in Belize.

LEGISLATION, TREATIES, CONVENTIONS

Belize signed a maritime counterdrug agreement with the United States in 1992 with provisions for a ship-rider program. Work is underway between the United States and the GOB to add an overflight agreement to the existing shiprider agreement, and also to establish an international asset sharing program. In March 1997, the GOB ratified a stolen car treaty with the U.S. Government. In September 1997, the GOB signed the National Crime Information Center Pilot Project Assessment Agreement, which allows the sharing of information and data between the United States and Belize.

Belize joined 19 other Caribbean and Central American countries in signing a memorandum of understanding on the prevention and control of money laundering. This formalized Belize's membership in the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force (CFATF).

Belize has extradited Belizean nationals under the 1972 United States–United Kingdom treaty. Three persons were extradited by Belize to the United States, and other extraditions may follow. One suspect appealed an extradition order to the Belize Court of Appeal, which ruled that the 1972 United States–United Kingdom treaty applies in Belize and is constitutional.

Belize acceded to the 1988 United Nations Drug Convention in October 1996. This stipulation was an element in the certification decision of 1996 by the U.S. Government.

CONCLUSIONS/PROJECTIONS

The sharp contrast between the small amount of cocaine seized in 1998 and 1999 with the large amount seized in 1997 does not indicate a reduction in the amount of cocaine passing through Belize and its territorial waters. Nearly all of the cocaine seized in 1997 came from seizures of two go-fast boats; no such seizures were made in 1998 or 1999.

Both Belize and Guatemala, the former with no Pacific frontage and the latter with a very small Caribbean frontage, are the only two countries in Central America that share land borders with Mexico. Both Belize and Guatemala have experienced a large increase of drug transshipments either across, or through, their territories into Mexico. Cocaine traffickers increasingly will utilize Belizean land routes, air space, and territorial waters for drug shipments into the foreseeable future.

Securing convictions for drug trafficking violations in Belize remains a problem. The Belizean Judiciary and the Prosecutor's Office are understaffed, poorly equipped and trained, and historically have been ineffective. In December 1997, the Supreme Court Chief Justice was forced to retire after he overturned the sentences and released four Colombian cocaine traffickers on questionable grounds. However, he was later reassigned to the position of overseeing judicial reform for the country. Lacking an effective national policy, corruption in the judicial system will continue and may increase as traffickers increase their influence.

Support from the current government in Belize for international cooperation in cocaine interdiction and marijuana eradication appears to be strong. The government's ability to follow through with their stated commitment over the next 5 years will be critical to prevent Belize from becoming a principle smuggling route for traffickers.

This report was prepared by the Mexico/Central America Unit of the Office of International Intelligence. Comments and requests for copies are welcome and may be directed to the Intelligence Production Unit, Intelligence Division, DEA Headquarters, at (202) 307-8726.