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Thanks to the Alcaldes, the entire community, and all those who stand in solidarity with our struggle. Your presence here demonstrates an important level of commitment to our people, our future and our continued struggle as a young nation.

But what exactly is our struggle?

Typically our struggle is described as a struggle for indigenous rights. And it is true that we are struggling to have our rights as indigenous people recognized—including, importantly, our right to land. But this is not the only way to understand our struggle.

All over the world, all throughout history, people have engaged in countless struggles for their **dignity**, for **equality**, for **respectful and just societies**, for democratic power relations, for a livable planet.

We can draw lines between these different struggles, as if these struggles were separate and belonged to distinct social groups. But the distinctions would be false and we would only lose sight of something important: that **our struggle is for a better world**, one that is more just and where there exists the possibility of many worlds. In this sense there has only ever been **one struggle**.

Let me put it even more bluntly. This whole movement is fundamentally about changing our society, making a better Belize—and in that way, a better world.

So let us speak more concretely about what we have been doing, our vision and its real meaning for Belizeans.

We begin with land. As you know, our struggle has long centered on land—on securing the land that we have customarily and historically used to produce our livelihoods. To Belizeans who are not Maya it may appear that we are trying to get something for ourselves. But consider it from another perspective. We are only insisting on what we already have. If you boil the entire legal case down to a basic principal, it is: Thou Shall Not Steal. Thou Shall Not Steal land from the poor farmer. That is what the Supreme Court said, in simple language.

Why are powerful people in Belize so threatened by our claim to secure the land that we have always used? The simple answer is that they do not want to see people who have long been marginalized – be they Maya or any other group – stand up for themselves and refuse to allow the continued theft or plunder of our land and resources by the powerful. Not only this. They try to set us against each other by suggesting that respecting the dignity of one group is a violation of another group; That recognizing the rights of one

violates the rights of the other; that recognizing the rights of land to one means that the rest of us cannot get land.

We reject this. And we would like to thank those who have reached to us and sent messages of solidarity to us, such as the following, sent to us by some Garifuna leaders this week:

[We face] an attack on the right to communal[,] land, to practicing autonomy within your communities. These are the rights we have as Indigenous people that scare the powerful. ... Only when it suits them politically, do we ever have the government or the support of the educated and powerful. And so we must unite and we must seek good allies and support.

We agree completely and we appreciate this crucial message from our Garifuna brothers in Liyawada Cerro. Thank you brothers of St. Vicente Block/Serru Garifuna Communal Lands! This struggle is for you too.

As you know, the Maya communities persist in using the land in ways that are not simply driven by the market. I say this not to romanticize the Maya communities (where poverty does exist) or to suggest that we do not live in a capitalist society—clearly, we do. But the fact is that in most of the Maya communities the land is still managed in common by the community. In other words, land for us is not just a commodity. (a product for sale) The very idea that we could continue to live with the land, and each other, in a dignified way, that is not defined by the market, that respects our ties to our Earth as something greater than a means to an end, that is not just a way to make a dollar, or as mere real estate—this idea threatens the elites and the powerful of this society, who have always enriched themselves by controlling, and selling the land.

This dynamic was powerfully expressed in an editorial by Evan X Hyde:

It is not politically sensible for us at this newspaper to support the Maya against the majority, oligarchical position, but Amandala does so support the Maya. We have always fought against the European-inspired idea that our African and Maya ancestors were savages and barbarians and cannibals. On Partridge Street, we are allies of the Maya. We have the same enemies that the Maya do – modern, rapacious, murderous capitalism introduced by the Europeans and sustained by the neo-Europeans.

This brings us to the critical question of democracy. Belize is formally democratic but as you know, our political system does not really work democratically. Ordinary Belizeans do not have power. Our votes are bought and sold. Real power lies with the Minister. Divide and conquer controls the constituency. This is a system that is left over from the colonial days.

We reject this and offer to Belizeans an entirely different conception of politics. Direct democracy working through community meetings where everyone has a voice. Our

village leaders, the alcaldes, are elected without political parties, rotating through office at the behest of the villagers. According to our customs, decision-making authority does not rest unilaterally in the elected alcaldes, but rather vests in the village collectively. The village meeting is the fundamental authority and primary decision-making body. The alcalde represents the will of the village.

Let me also cite a wonderful essay by my brother and comrade, Garifuna thinker Jerry Enriquez, “Why the Maya won,” published this past April in the Amandala:

The success of the Mayas from their decades of struggle provides valuable lessons for all Belizeans. For one, the strength of their indigenous communal leadership and governing institutions (like the alcalde system and Maya Leadership Alliance) were very important for maintaining support for one another and to sustain the pursuit of their vision. Through their established leadership system they were able to access international resources and support for the protection of their rights.

Through successive PUP and UDP administrations, the Maya leadership was also able to keep politics in its place in order to avoid the compromising attachment to one political party or another, as has been the weakness of few other councils. Such detachment and their internal cohesion were important for the leadership to keep focused and ensure that their investments of time, energies, and other resources are not held hostage to divisive party politics.

The collective ownership of the struggle by the Maya leadership united them to a common cause as well as to their community, traditions and culture. Because they lived their customary land rights as part of their culture, the ideas they brought forward were not an external imposition. They owned their vision and acted to achieve it. ... Given that their rights were not respected by the government, ... they knew that it was they themselves who have to assert the protection of their rights.

The Maya’s belief that they can change their situation was also very critical. When people believe that nothing can be changed, or that someone else “out there” or “up there” should do the work to change their situation, they will never organize or act to make things happen, However, when people believe that it is up to them to change their situation, they will act accordingly. ...

As Belizeans savour the victory of the Mayas as a victory for all, especially marginalized Belizeans, we must all strive to continue to understand the forces that detract people from supporting one another to fulfil their rights and dignity. Belizeans cannot allow these forces to destroy the rights of all to a better life. The road ahead will be one of reconciliation among all parties and for emerging leadership to be nurtured.

I hope that even those Belizeans who are a bit skeptical about our movement recognize that, basically, we are mobilizing and educating and organizing people without making

any apologies for who or what we are. If Belize is going to become a better place, we all recognize that it will require activating and mobilizing Belizeans so that ordinary people have the ability and confidence to actively participate in governing every aspect of our society. Frankly speaking, we Belizeans have not built the social movements we need to transform our society. We offer ourselves, with all our limitations, as one element of a broader movement, in solidarity with all the others to come. In this sense we are a struggle of women, of poor people, of those who lose their children because they cannot afford medicine, a struggle of those who cannot access land even under the current order of things, of the workers and caneros and unions and all those who seek a **dignified livelihood**, of the dispossessed and downtrodden, to whom we say: **we are in solidarity with you. We do not come to lead you, but to offer you our vision of a world of many worlds, where no one is excluded, where dignity and justice are guaranteed to all.**

Sometimes people may wonder wouldn't it be easier for indigenous peoples to just get on with the play, check in their identities and become ordinary citizens, just learn English so you avoid being labeled Guatemalan, forget you native Q'eqchi or Mopan, forget about communal property..... perhaps, but that would mean giving up our identity and our responsibility of creating a better world for our children and for all the children of Belize. So, despite 500 plus years of oppression and marginalization, we continue to imagine and pursue alternative ways of being, ways of organizing our societies, alternative ways of relating to each other and our environment. Alternatives to dehumanizing colonial and neocolonial models. It is not that we have the answers: but we believe like our forefathers that we must try. In creating human beings our creators tried three times, two times they failed, in the third they succeeded. In creating a just and inclusive nation we may fall along the way but just as the creators in Maya cosmology, we can only succeed by joining our words and our thoughts and our hearts.

Where are we today? With the April 2015 agreement, the legal battle is complete. The Maya won, simply put. WE the Maya of southern Belize are land owners. The real meaning of the CCJ agreement is that the Government has recognized that it has lost the legal debate, that the Government recognizes Maya rights to land. On the ground, however, you know we face many difficulties. Recently we have been set back as the Government has sought to divide us. But we win with unity and a dignified struggle. That is all we have ever had and that is all we will ever have.

How is our new Belize going to look like now? How is it going to look like with the Maya people as land owners?

Message to Maya – let us remain united, non-violent, peace makers struggling for justice and we will win again, they cannot break us, they can only make us stronger when we unite.

Message to Belizeans – this is a struggle for you too. We all find our selves under a historical legacy of oppression, marginalization cuts across all ethnicities. The Maya struggle is Belize's struggle

Message to the Government – You have not changed our rhythm! Your attack has renewed our resolve as a people and the world is watching, so is Q'awa Tuzul Taqa. Our people are a part of this Belize and everyday we will become an even greater part of the leadership of this blessed country!

Message to the Media – Thank you for continuing to strive for the most professional journalism possible. For taking the time to visit us in our villages, for following both sides of every story and for remaining calm and collected as you report what some could easily sensationalize. This is your responsibility as a child of this soil!

Now finally, Everyone of us has a task! We must all stand to defend our lives, our future, our children. Don't wait for anyone to do it for you, brothers, sisters, mothers, take your stand!

Thank you.