

THURSDAY 30TH SEPTEMBER 2010

FAREWELL SPEECH BY THE HON. JUSTICE LUNGOLE-
AWICH

ON THE OCCASION OF RETIREMENT OF
THE HONOURABLE CHIEF JUSTICE ABDULAI CONTEH

My Lord Chief Justice

My Lords and Madam Justices

Hon. Attorney General

Solicitor General

Worship Magistrates

Director of Public Prosecutions

Excellencies High Commissioners, Ambassadors and other
members of the Diplomatic Corps

Learned Senior Counsel

Learned Attorneys

Commissioners of the Supreme Court and Justices of the
Peace

The Registrar and Staff

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Today we are assembled in large number in the Court of the Hon. Chief Justice, Dr. Abdulai Conteh, to bid farewell to His Lordship. It is a befitting acknowledgment of his long service to Belize. I thank you all for attending.

2. Personally, I would have preferred making a welcoming speech; nevertheless, it is an honour to have been given this opportunity on behalf of the Judiciary of Belize, to say words of farewell to Chief Justice Conteh. He has served as Chief Justice of Belize for eleven years. Serving in any top public office for that long is a rare achievement. From record, out of the previous ten Chief Justices, only one, Sir George Brown, served for a long period. He served for eight years. Most served for two years or less. I congratulate you My Lord for your achievement.

3. Ladies and gentlemen, let me make it clear that, as far as judges of the Supreme Court know, Chief Justice Conteh leaves office on retirement in accordance with the Constitution. I mention this because the impression has been created and promoted by some people and section of the press that, the Chief Justice is being forced out of office. I do not think anyone who has served in high public office would like to be remembered as someone who had to be forced out of office.

4. We in the courts go by evidence, especially first hand evidence. The first hand information that judges of the Supreme Court have is nothing of the sort. The Chief Justice has kept judges informed about his departure. On several occasions since the latter part of last year 2009, he informed judges that his retirement was

coming up this year 2010. Then this year in May, the Chief Justice informed judges that he would leave office in September. Two weeks ago he informed us that he would leave office on 30th September 2010, and that it was the date he chose to leave office. Individually, judges thanked the Chief Justice. Today, on request, the Chief Justice has been honoured with a Guard of Honour on the occasion of his retirement. I thank the Commissioner of Police and the officers who mounted the Guard of Honour this afternoon.

5. Ladies and gentlemen, some of you might know that the Hon. Dr. Conteh has had two careers at very high level; I do not rule out a third in the future. One career was in politics, and the other, on the bench of the Supreme Court of Belize as Chief Justice. He often mentioned that he had held various Cabinet posts including that of Attorney General, in the Government of

Sierra Leone, Africa. And we all know that he has been Chief Justice of Belize. Personally, I think that he loved his second career better. He excelled in the legal profession. All the judges and staff of the Supreme Court know that Dr. Conteh loved his job as Chief Justice, and he was a dedicated judge. We thank him for that.

6. Please excuse me to mention at this point, my personal experience, for which I sincerely thank Chief Justice Conteh. When I took up appointment on the bench of the Supreme Court of Belize, Chief Justice Conteh had been in office for only a short time. The following week, I learnt that the Judiciary had not been trusted, and that was the reason for appointing a new Chief Justice and two judges including myself, from outside Belize. At that time a judge of the Supreme Court was facing charges of dishonesty and other improper conducts.

The judge was later removed from office by His Excellency the Governor-General, in accordance with the law.

7. When I came to Belize, I had been a judge elsewhere for only five years, and had not seen in real life, a dishonest and corrupt judge. There was also worry of political interference in the air. My immediate thought was that I did not belong in that Judiciary; I did not wish to ruin my career by remaining in a judiciary with that reputation. I thought about breaking my two-year contract. The other judge appointed about the same time shared my concern.

8. As time passed there were some difficulties; there is no need to give details now. But I realized that the Chief Justice was working to correct the poor image of the

Judiciary. As the result I was prepared to wait and see. I had seen elsewhere that quick and especially premature departure from contract of employment was usually viewed adversely against the employee, and most of the time justifiably. The other judge was not so patient. He was released and left after 22 months to take up appointment as a judge in his native Barbados.

9. By 2007, the Chief Justice had managed to improve the image of the Judiciary to acceptable level. But there will always be some people, including a very small number of attorneys, who are stuck in the belief that judges and magistrates cannot act honestly, or can put aside political views when they carry out their duties. Judges and magistrates must not allow that prejudice to distract them from deciding cases fairly according to the evidence and law.

10. My Lord Chief Justice Conteh and Mrs. Conteh, the judges, magistrates and staff of the Judiciary of Belize do wish you a happy retirement, and wish you well in your future endeavours. If it is your intention to remain in Belize, I am sure you will be consulted by those in the legal profession from time to time. Should Your Lordship retire elsewhere, the many friends you have made in Belize will seek you out. Farewell, Chief Justice and Mrs. Conteh.

SAM LUNGOLE-AWICH

JUDGE, SUPREME COURT OF BELIZE

30th SEPTEMBER 2010, BELIZE CITY