The Executive Committee and Council of the World Archaeological Congress express concern about the treatment of Maya citizens of Belize in their struggle to protect their material and cultural heritage and exercise their legally established land rights. We write regarding the recent damage to the archaeological site of Uxbenka and the subsequent unlawful arrest of Maya village leaders. Rather than arresting the violator of the Uxbenka site, the police arrested the Maya leaders who sought to defend it.

The incident at Santa Cruz follows the world-shocking destruction of Nohmul, continued reports on rampant looting of Maya sites in the Belizean Chiquibul region, and in many other parts of the country. In this context it is of serious concern to the Congress that customary attempts to stem destruction were impeded and even punished. Considering the degree to which Belize depends on the archaeological wealth provided by ancestral Maya to support tourism, it would seem prudent to support descendant communities that take responsibility for site protection and preservation. Many countries across the world have come to acknowledge that the rights of stewardship for archaeological sites fall most clearly to descendant communities, and procedures to ensure human rights protections for Indigenous peoples and their cultural property are parts of national codes and international treaties.

The World Archaeological Congress is an international organization that supports the rights of Indigenous and descendant communities to preserve and protect their heritage according to their own sensibilities and cultural values, as indicated in the Tamaki Makau-rau Accord adopted in 2006. Among our membership we number Indigenous people from many countries, as well as specialists in many fields related to heritage. The WAC membership recognizes the difficulties posed by heritage management for Belize. We advocate for the priority of human rights in all questions of heritage.

In Belize the courts have consistently found that the Maya and Qʼeqchiʼ people of Belize have rights to control the use of their communities and their land. The World Archaeological Congress urges the government of Belize to recognize these rights and support of the cultural property rights of all people.

BACKGROUND  The World Archaeological Congress is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization and is the only elected international body of practising archaeologists. WAC holds an international congress every four years to promote the exchange of the results of
archaeological research; professional training and public education for disadvantaged nations, groups and communities; the empowerment and betterment of Indigenous groups and First Nations peoples; and the conservation of archaeological sites.

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