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| **LESSON 2: CENTRAL AMERICA**  How has change helped Central America grow? |
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| **BELIZE AND GUATEMALA**  Belize and Guatemala are the two northernmost countries in Central America. Both share a border with Mexico. Guatemala borders both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Belize borders only the Caribbean Sea. As a result, people live different ways of life.  **Belize**  Belize is the only English-speaking country in Central America. It was once a British colony known as British Honduras. It became independent in 1981. Many people in this lightly populated country have African roots.  Forestry was once an important industry in Belize, but is less important now. Shrimp caught along the Caribbean coast are mostly exported. Tourism is the country’s largest industry. Many tourists come to scuba-dive in Belize’s beautiful coastal waters.  **Guatemala**  Guatemala is a country of rugged mountains, thick forests, and blue lakes. It was once home to the Maya civilization. About half its people today are descendants of the Maya. Mayan languages are spoken alongside Spanish. Other Guatemalans are of mixed Native American and Spanish origin. Guatemala has fertile soil that is good for farming, but a small group of people own most of the land.  Guatemala experienced a terrible civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. Poor farmers, Native Americans, and rebel groups united to fight the government. They demanded changes that would give them land and better lives. The fighting finally ended in 1996 after many people had been killed. |

**Fighting for Her People**

During the civil war, many Maya Indians were killed. Among those killed were family and friends of Rigoberta Menchu. This led Menchu to dedicate her life to helping Native Americans fight for their rights.

In 1992 Menchu won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. When she accepted the prize, she said that bringing about peace is very hard work. Today, she promotes better cultural understanding by bringing together people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Some Guatemalans emigrate to Mexico, Canada, and the United States. About half a million Guatemalans live in the United States. Many send money to Guatemala to support their family members living there.

**PLACES**

In Guatemala, the **Maya Biosphere Reserve**was created in 1990 to help preserve the largest rain forest in Central America. The Guatemalan government has encouraged tourists from other countries to visit the reserve. The interest of tourists might help protect these fragile areas from threats, such as cutting down trees and drilling for oil.

**COSTA RICA AND PANAMA**

Costa Rica and Panama are two of the most developed countries in the area. Both have strong economies and a **literacy rate**, or percentage of people who can read and write, close to that of the United States.

**Costa Rica**

Costa Rica overthrew its military government in the late 1940s. Since then, a stable democratic government has ruled. There have been no civil wars or conflicts with other countries. Costa Rica has no army—only a police force to maintain law and order.

In 1987 Óscar Arias, the president of Costa Rica, worked to get the Central American Peace Accord signed. This was a plan to bring about democracy and peace in the region. President Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for this important work.

Costa Rica has fewer poor people than other Central American countries. One reason is its higher literacy rate. Workers who can read well can be more productive, earn higher incomes, and enjoy a higher standard of living than people with poor literacy skills.

**Primary Sources**

“Because our country is a country of teachers, we closed the army camps, and our children go with books under their arms, not with rifles under their arms. We reject violence. . . .”

A section from a speech by Óscar Arias, 1987

**Panama**

For 85 years, the United States controlled the canal that it built across Panama in 1914. In 1989 Manuel Noriega, Panama’s leader, was found guilty of selling and shipping illegal drugs. He also worried Americans because he rejected the results of an election in which his side lost. To make sure that Panama remained friendly to the United States, U.S. troops invaded Panama in 1989. Noriega was removed from power.

On December 31, 1999, the United States took an important step to end its long political involvement in Central America. It gave full control of the Panama Canal to Panama. Americans honored a treaty that was signed by both countries 22 years earlier.

Today, Panama earns much money from shipping companies that carry goods between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The city of Colón has become a busy trading port. As a result, Panama has turned into an important banking center for Central America.

**Citizenship**

**Working for the Common Good**

Óscar Arias founded the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress. The foundation and its Peace Museum have strengthened peace in Central America. Like Arias, you can work for the common good in your community. You can volunteer at a senior citizen center. You can help people who have lost their homes in natural disasters or help clean up parks in your neighborhood.

Write About It Make a plan for a project at your school that would help everyone. List jobs for students in every grade.

**THREE TROUBLED COUNTRIES**

During the last century, most Central American governments were ruled by brutal dictators. Some military dictatorships were juntas. A **junta** is a group of military officers that rule as a group. Usually the head of the group acts as leader of the country. Rebel groups in Central America formed to overthrow dictators and juntas in the 1970s.

**Nicaragua**

As you read in Unit 5, in 1979 the Sandinistas led a revolution in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas improved Nicaragua’s literacy rate, health care, education, childcare, and unions. But not everyone liked the Sandinista government. The government began to take control of the economy and to limit the freedom of the press. A rebel group called the Contras opposed the government and gained support from the United States. The U.S. government feared that Nicaragua would form ties with its enemies of the United States. The Contras started a war to try to overthrow the government. Many people died during the war.

In 1990 Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega agreed to hold free elections in Nicaragua to end the civil war. Ortega lost the 1990 election, but sixteen years later he won the 2006 election.

**El Salvador and Honduras**

In 1980 El Salvador fell into civil war when a new military junta came to power promising reforms. This new junta had U.S. support, but many rebel groups opposed it. These groups united and received support from other countries. The war lasted 12 years, and thousands of people were killed. The war ended in 1992 with a peace agreement. Today, El Salvador has two political parties that share power and hold democratic elections.

Although Honduras did not have a civil war, its army secretly killed many of those opposed to the government. In 2006 a new president, Manuel Zelaya, was elected. He has promised to fight problems of corruption and gang violence.

**Natural Disasters**

Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras have also dealt with horrible natural disasters. In 1998 Hurricane Mitch swept over these countries, killing thousands of people. Mitch destroyed homes, bridges, and roads— causing billions of dollars in damage. El Salvador has also suffered a major earthquake and drought.