

NGO Briefing - Mitch  
Pres. Hall - OE@B 450  
November 24, 1998

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**  
**Remarks During NGO Briefing on Hurricane Mitch**  
**The White House - OEOB 450**  
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Thank you. Thank you all. I too want to welcome Senator Domenici and Senator DeWine and Senator Landrieu. We're very grateful to have you here. Any long-term effort will require a great deal of careful thought, deliberation and support from the Congress. And I was pleased that not only did some members accompany Mrs. Gore, but others will be going down in the days and weeks ahead, which I think is really important to show all of us in the most direct way possible what is at stake. I want to thank Maria Echeveste and Hattie Babbitt, General Maher and Marge Tosouris, and my friend Tipper Gore, all of whom have given you a lot to think about and a lot to chew over. I just want to add a few points.

I did just return from a visit to Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. I also visited the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and I want to mention them because they both still face long-term challenges of reconstruction as a result of Hurricane Georges. They lost a great deal of their agricultural capacity. They had a lot of damage to irrigation systems, to housing. They lost lives. They have a lot of shelter needs. So I think we also have to keep them in mind, because clearly they too are faced with an enormous monetary challenge that will be difficult for them to bear alone.

I met with the presidents of each of the countries who briefed me on the extent of the damage, the loss of life they sustained, the emergency responses that they were involved in, and spoke about the long-term needs and hopes. I was also very proud to meet with our American troops at Soto Cano, in El Salvador and Guatemala, and in Haiti, and I can report to you that they are very positive, their morale is high about what they're doing because they can see the results of what is happening as they not only save lives, but begin to work on reconstruction. I also visited with a lot of our aid workers, Peace Corps volunteers, and representatives from many NGO's in this room and others who are doing extraordinary work in providing food, medical supplies, and helping in the rebuilding effort.

Obviously it is critically important in each of these countries to assist in the coordination of these services. There is lots coming in. There is an enormous international outpouring of concern. I can't really think of any other recent international disaster that has had such a universal international response. Just while I was in those countries, President Chirac from France visited the four Central American countries that I visited. There was a Japanese plane on the tarmac in Honduras delivering supplies. The Mexican military had taken over large sections of various of the countries to provide reconstruction, law and order, and other services. So there is an enormous effort that includes European countries, other Latin American countries, and even Asian countries.

One of the challenges that these countries face is coordinating all of that aid, making sure that it is well used, that it meets the purposes for which it is intended. I was impressed in each of the Central American countries that they seem to be aware of this problem, and are dealing with it. In Nicaragua, for example, the president has turned over the coordination to the church. In Guatemala, they had a very well organized emergency response effort that they explained to me in a briefing. But I think as we go on, one of the ways that we will be working with them is to help them sort out and obtain the best possible coordinated response from the many, many efforts that you and others are involved in.

I also was pleased to announce additional relief from our government. As you probably know, the President announced \$70 million in relief assistance on November 5th. That support has now grown to more than \$250 million. It is largely being channeled through USAID, the Department of Defense and USDA. Those are the three major governmental agencies that are on the ground, delivering not only supplies, but also services. USAID is providing \$70 million, primarily for food, medicine, shelter and relief supplies, as well as development assistance and microenterprise credits to try to get some economic activity back in the field, particularly in rural areas where the crops have been wiped out.

As we heard from General Maher, the Department of Defense is now up to a deployment of 5,600, and it's very good news that they have got some of the heavy-lift helicopters in, because there is still a lot of work to be done. And General, one thing that I learned when I was visiting with the troops with Secretary of the Army Caldera, is that in order to do spraying for malaria, there needs to be that heavy-lift capacity, because of the tanks that have to be transported, and that is becoming a critical need to be able to do that as soon as possible.

The U.S.....(end of tape side 1 -- lost some comments).

(Tape side 2 begins)....corn and other food grants. The Peace Corps Crisis Corps has been mobilized. The AID, working with the Inter-American Development Bank, has put together a package of \$17 million as a rescue fund for very small businesses and micro-entrepreneurs.

In response to the requests that have been received from these countries, the United States Government, along with the Paris Club, is working on what can be done about debt relief. Now in some cases, like Nicaragua, we had already condoned the debt of Nicaragua back in the early 1990's. But they have a lot of multilateral debt that they're gonna need some relief for. In the case of some of the other countries, they have bilateral as well as multilateral debt. So we're gonna have to look carefully about how we deal with that particular problem.

The deportations have been postponed -- delayed until into January -- but there's a double-edged problem here for those countries with the immigrants. One is that they can not accommodate people at this time. They've literally nowhere for people to live or to be put. They also would collapse completely in some cases without the funds coming in from the people who are working and sending, in some cases, in at least one of the countries, up to a billion dollars a year, which is a huge part of their gross domestic product.

The real tragedy of this is not just humanitarian, although that is the most immediate and terrible impact of what has happened. But this hurricane carries with it political, economic and social implications that are far-reaching, not only for the country at stake, but for the entire region, and I would argue, also for our country as well. If you look at where those countries have come from in the last ten years -- they all have democratically elected governments. I believe that each of the presidents and the governments that he represents are reform-minded, they've made progress against often great political odds. In the case of El Salvador and Guatemala, they've only been at peace six years and two years, respectively. So that the ideas and the aspirations that those countries and their new leaders held for themselves have suffered an enormous blow.

If you take Guatemala, for example, which ended that terrible 36 years of bloodshed just two years ago in the peace accords -- which was a brilliant act of peacemaking by the current president -- one of the very strongest parts of that peace accord was not only the demilitarization and demobilization, which were critical, but a commitment to increase social spending on education and health care. Because this current government understands very well that long-term peace is gonna require more education in a country that has a very high illiteracy rate; more access to health care in a country that has one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. They were on the road to making progress. They now have to worry that they've lost dozens if not hundreds of schools, wiped out their rudimentary health care clinics, and so are facing a deep hole as opposed to starting off from where they were to begin with.

Each of the countries, I think, is worried to some extent about political stability in the face of the challenges that are confronting them. Certainly their economic growth, which were showing rather significant signs in some of their cases, will now be lucky if it stays above zero and doesn't fall into a negative position.

So the hurricane reversed a lot of hard-won progress in the eyes of a lot of these leaders, and in the eyes of many of the people. I had a woman in Nicaragua tell me that the hurricane -- and I asked her to repeat this because I found it such a stunning statement -- "The hurricane was worse than the earthquake and the war combined." And I said, "Excuse me?" And she said, "Absolutely, because the earthquake was confined to a relatively small part of the country -- Managua -- and not out into the countryside. The hurricane went back and forth across the country, reaping damage in so many places." And that the war was also, in her view, isolated in certain areas that were terribly impacted, but that this affected the entire country.

I think that, to me, summed up the kind of feeling that the people in this region had for what has occurred to them.

Now as you've heard from other speakers, the president and our government are committed to providing short-term relief, but I also hope we are going to be committed to providing medium-term and long-term as well. It is critical that we work together -- public, private-sector, all agencies of the government, in every respect, including the Congress -- to think about what we can do that is productive and effective to provide such assistance.

Each of the presidents with whom I spoke asked that I raise with the president and with members of Congress to whom I will send a report of my trip, their hope that the Caribbean Basin Initiative can be revived, and perhaps put into some form of legislation that would find favor in the Congress this year, because they view that as an essential part of what they will need to recover fully and get back to where they thought they were going.

We also want to be sure that as you are talking with constituency groups whom you represent, that you understand some of the limitations that we face from the government's end. It is very difficult for the United States Government to pay to send a lot of the donations that are being collected. One of the reasons why we've asked for more cash is to try to create some opportunities for transportation. But the best thing to do is to try to create a fund that will provide for shipping costs. The quickest way for the public to provide help is to contact directly the private voluntary organizations who are currently working in Central American and Caribbean regions. A handout in the packet includes the number that Tipper and Dennis Martinez were saying -- the 1-800 number for private-sector donations and businesses, and a clearinghouse number for all organizations working in disaster areas. USAID does not have the capacity to pay to move donated goods or volunteers, but it can help identify transportation in partnership with non-governmental organizations and the Department of Defense.

We're trying to be cost-effective so that the money actually gets where it needs to be to help people. And at a certain point, they will have enough used clothes and they will have enough canned goods, and what they will need is money to buy building materials. And one of the problems we face is that there are many, many millions of Americans who want to contribute. If they would contribute money that could then be used to buy the building supplies, that would actually be a more helpful contribution than contributing canned goods or clothing at this point. Once we get a better assessment of needs at this time rather than a month ago, then we may need more clothing and canned goods.

But the biggest need that these countries have is cash, that they can then use to buy relief supplies, medical supplies, but particularly shelter. You heard one of the earlier speakers say that there are nearly two million people who have no shelter. We cannot keep them in crowded shelters without fear of disease. When I was in Guatemala, one of our officers in the military mission there told me they had just flown out four cholera cases to a military hospital. So we have to be very cautious about how we dump materials into places so that we don't keep people in small confined spaces, but we try to get them back into areas that have been cleared and are safe, and get them materials so that they can begin rebuilding for themselves.

The disease efforts are just beginning to be significant now. Obviously you have to do the emergency work first. But as many of you who have worked natural disasters know so well, there's often a fear that given even the extraordinary loss of life just from the impact of the hurricane, disease often takes two to three times that number of people -- if you're dealing with denghi fever, or you're dealing with malaria, and you're dealing with cholera. So we're in this for the long haul, we are grateful for everything all of you have done, and we look forward to a partnership that I predict is going to last for some time, because I think it is in our long-term

interest to do everything we can to help these countries get back on their feet.

Thank you very much.