

Arrival in Managua, Nicaragua
11/16/98

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

**STATEMENT OF THE FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES
HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
NOVEMBER 16, 1998**

To the First Lady and to the Foreign Minister, to Mr. Harding, to our Ambassador and to all of you. I bring greetings from the President and the people of the United States. I also want to thank the entire Embassy staff and the USAID staff who I know have been working around the clock since the disaster struck. I also want to thank all of the United States military troops who are here and your commander Major Lawrence Zaben with whom I have had the privilege of flying on a trip to Panama a few years ago. I know how hard the troops from the United States as well as troops from Nicaragua and Mexico have worked in delivering necessary food stuffs, water and medical supplies to often very isolated villages here in Nicaragua. I also want to thank all of you who work with the non-governmental organizations and the religious organizations who have played such an important role in delivering food to victims and providing other necessary relief.

I earlier received a briefing from Mr. Harding and the staff of the Vice-President and have the opportunity to speak to the President about the impact that Mitch has had on this country. They explained to me the loss of life, the injury, the hundreds of thousands of people who are without homes or shelter. Yet at the same time, they described very well their plans for rehabilitation, reconstruction and even transformation. The President and the United States Government have been very grateful to be able to be of assistance in these last weeks, and we will continue to provide assistance not only in these immediate days but for a considerable period in order to aid Nicaragua in its reconstruction.

In addition to the aid and resources that the United States has already deployed, I am pleased to announce today some additional contributions that the United States will be making in order to assist all of you in the work that you are doing. The assistance previously provided, plus new assistance will bring the United States's commitment to a total of more than 250 million dollars. As we speak, the Department of Defense is deploying more helicopters, more construction and engineering battalions, more medical supplies, a field hospital and eleven water purification systems to help ease the suffering in this region. The United States will also quadruple the number of United States troops from 1300 to 5600 in the next few weeks. In addition, the United States will provide an additional 57 million dollars in rice, beans, vegetable oil, dry milk, wheat and other basic commodities. That will bring the United States food aid to this region to over 81 million dollars, which is still coming in primarily by air. As of today 25 flights have brought 2.6 million pounds of food to this region.

We are also concerned about the heavy debt burden that Nicaragua carries. The United States forgave the bulk of Nicaragua's debt with ourselves, some 284 million dollars, several years ago. And I am pleased to announce today that United States is prepared to provide additional debt relief of up to 54 million dollars for Honduras and Nicaragua, the two countries hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch.

This would relieve Nicaragua of any obligation to service the remaining bilateral debt to the United States through the year 2000. And in addition, we will be working with partners throughout the world to ease the burden of multilateral debt that Nicaragua faces.

The United States Agency for International Development and the Interamerican Development Bank will also be giving 17 million dollars to micro-financing organizations, so that women like the ones that I met with earlier on today from FINCA, will be able to generate economic activity which will assist people in getting their lives back to normal. Several dozen members of the Peace Corps Crisis Corps, a group of returned volunteers, will also be coming to Nicaragua to assist with their expertise in both immediate relief and long term recovery.

As the President of the United States said in his radio address on Saturday, with Tipper Gore who had just returned from Nicaragua and Honduras, it is important that the United States stands with Nicaragua in this time of emergency and need. Nicaragua has been through so many troubles in the last several decades, and now that peace has come to Nicaragua, and the work of reconciliation has been underway, it is more important than ever to stand with the people and Government of Nicaragua as they rebuild lives, rebuild communities and rebuild this country.

The First Lady told me that this tragedy is worse than the war, worse than the earthquake, because it affects the entire country. I want to be sure that everyone in the United States understands the extent of the damage and destruction that was done by this hurricane, and I want them to understand that although Mitch could destroy bridges and homes and take lives, it could not and did not destroy the spirit and the strength of the Nicaraguan people. So I bring not only a message of additional relief and solidarity from the President, but also a message of hope that you will continue to do all that is necessary to give Nicaragua the future that this country deserves to have.

Thank you very much.