

Puerto Rico Remarks  
September 29, 1998

PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Luquillo, Puerto Rico  
September 29, 1998**

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you Governor. I am personally very pleased to be here on my own behalf and to represent our President. He asked me to come to tell you directly how deeply concerned he is about the people of Puerto Rico.

The Governor and members of Congress have just toured with me by helicopter some of the devastation brought by the hurricane. I saw the destroyed houses. I saw the destroyed crops. I saw the effects of the mudslides and the rivers that went out of their banks. I could see personally how damaging this hurricane was because it went across the entire island.

I am pleased that because of the response of the President, you were able to receive aid as quickly as possible. But I will be able now to tell my husband how much more needs to be done. I was also pleased that members of our Congress whom, the Governor has introduced, could join your Congressman in coming with me from Washington.

I have visited many natural disasters with my husband and on my own and I know how devastating losses like these are to families. We just visited some of the families who have lost everything. We cannot turn the clock back, but we can do all that is possible to help you rebuild your lives.

I am pleased therefore to make a number of announcements on behalf of the President to help you rebuild your lives and your communities. First, as you know already, FEMA helped to develop an emergency plan before the hurricane struck. And I would like to thank the governor and government of Puerto Rico for executing that plan so well.

Starting today, at least 200,000 gallons of water and 100,000 pounds of ice will be arriving daily to help the victims of this disaster meet their most critical needs. So far, more than 23,000 people have registered for disaster housing assistance and we now have a process in place of getting those checks to the victims and a temporary housing plan is being developed to ensure the quickest possible return to normal life.

Today I am also pleased to announce that FEMA is providing full public assistance in all categories throughout Puerto Rico. That means that funds will be available to pay for storm damage to those buildings and surfaces that most affect your daily lives. It will help to rebuild roads, schools and municipal buildings, repair bridges and fix utilities. And having seen what I have just seen, I know how much this assistance will help to get everyone back on their feet.

Second, we recognize that there are thousands of people who cannot go to work to support their families. Therefore, the Department of Labor will provide up to \$30 million in emergency funding to create temporary jobs for dislocated workers in clean-up and restoration efforts.

Third, we know how important it is to get back into your own homes. The Department of Housing and Urban Development will help you do just that. Secretary Cuomo is with me today and HUD will be funding many of the temporary shelters and is also offering major new disaster recovery assistance including \$39 million to help repair the damage done to public housing units.

For home owners, HUD will provide a three month grace period to make mortgage payments. And if your house is damaged beyond repair, HUD will help you buy a new home with 100% financing and no down payments.

Fourth, repairing the roads in the mountains as the Governor and I saw, is also a critical need at this time. So the Department of Transportation is allocating \$5 million in emergency relief funds to begin repairs to roads and bridges damaged by the hurricane. Emergency transportation specialists are already here to help with the transportation of emergency relief supplies. So I am hoping that even the most remote areas around Puerto Rico will once again be linked by transportation to the rest of the island.

These new announcements go hand in hand with all the other efforts that are underway to help the people of Puerto Rico in partnership with your government. Staff of the Small Business Administration -- and you already gave a standing ovation to Director Alvarez and of course you know she is the first Puerto Rican to be in the presidential Cabinet -- but staff from the SBA are already in the shelters taking applications and processing checks for personal assistance. The Department of Human Services is focusing its immediate recovery efforts on assisting elderly citizens because they are often the hardest hit. So the elderly people, the parents, the grandparents, even the great grandparents are very disoriented by all this and they need very direct assistance.

I also met some farmers who had lost their crops and a chicken farmer who lost 80% of his chickens. I could see from the helicopter the damage to the coffee and the planting crops. So we know that the farmers have suffered very much. The US Department of Agriculture will send people to help calculate individual losses so that Puerto Rico's farmers can get the funds they need to get back into the fields and produce their crops.

We know that in this difficult time, it is very important that friends and neighbors support each other. And I know your Congressman and your Governor have told me with great pride that there has been no looting. There has been a very neighborly spirit. People have been helping each other and I think that is a wonderful sign for the future.

I hope that the assistance that is coming to you from the Federal government through the President's directives will make very clear that we will stand with you as you repair your lives and build your communities back again. Our prayers, our thoughts and our help will be there for you.

We are also concerned for the other people in the Caribbean who have suffered from the devastation of the hurricane, including our fellow citizens in the Virgin Islands to our east. We are very concerned for the people of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. They have been

particularly hard hit and the United States government stands ready to assist them also and has already provided emergency relief.

Secretary Cuomo and Brian Atwood, the head of USAID and our members of Congress will be traveling on to Haiti and the Dominican Republic to see first hand how we can help our other neighbors in the Caribbean.

Let me just end by telling you I am very grateful that the hurricane did not cause great loss of life among Puerto Ricans. I know that it was devastating because it covered the entire island but we should be grateful because we were blessed that it did not do even more damage than it did.

And with the spirit of the people I have seen for myself, I know that Puerto Rico will come back even stronger and we will be with you every step of the way.

Thank you all so much.