Statement on Signing the Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services Act of 1998

October 27, 1998

Today I am pleased to sign into law S. 2206, the ''Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services Act of 1998.'' This legislation reauthorizes and amends Head Start, Community Services Block Grants (CSBGs), and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). In addition, this bill effectively completes the community empowerment agenda I proposed in 1992 by establishing a new Individual Development Account (IDA) demonstration program to empower low-income individuals and families by helping them accumulate assets for their futures.

I particularly want to thank the chief sponsors of this legislation, Senators Coats, Jeffords, Kennedy, and Dodd and Representatives Goodling, Martinez, and Clay. Let me also thank Senator Harkin and Representative Tony Hall for their efforts to champion the IDA demonstration project.

More than 33 years have passed since President Johnson signed the legislation that began the historic experiment in child development called Head Start. I am proud that since I became President, we have raised Head Start funding by more than 50 percent; increased dramatically the number of children served; and improved the quality of the program significantly. I am particularly proud that we launched Early Head Start to bring Head Start services to children through age three.

As we approach the 21st century, S. 2206 strengthens and expands Head Start—renewing our commitment to prepare our neediest children for school and helping parents to teach and support them. The legislation continues to build on the themes first expressed in the 1994 Report of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion: improving program quality and accountability, responding to family needs, and strengthening partnerships with other community services. It raises qualifications for Head Start teachers; invests additional dollars in program quality improvement by increasing teacher salaries, benefits and training; and requires the Department of Health and Human Services to study the effects of these investments on children.

The bill also incorporates my recommendation to double the funding set-aside for the Early Head Start program. In light of new research on the significance of the earliest years, this expansion is an essential step to reach more of our most vulnerable infants and toddlers with critical services.

S. 2206 also includes a number of other important provisions to address the needs of low-income families. The IDA demonstration program provides incentives through Federal matching funds for low-income individuals and families to invest in their futures by saving for higher education, a first home, or to start a new small business. In addition, the bill's CSBG and LIHEAP provisions will help to address the need for critical urban and rural community development projects and heating and cooling assistance for vulnerable senior citizens, children, and persons with disabilities.

The Department of Justice advises, however, that the provision that allows religiously affiliated organizations to be providers under CSBG would be unconstitutional if and to the extent it were construed to permit governmental funding of ''pervasively sectarian'' organizations, as that term has been defined by the courts. Accordingly, I construe the Act as forbidding the funding of pervasively sectarian organizations and as permitting Federal, State, and local governments involved in disbursing CSBG funds to take into account the structure and operations of a religious organization in determining whether such an organization is pervasively sectarian.

Overall, the bill is a fine example of the good that can be achieved when the Congress and the Administration join together to support programs that can break the cycle of poverty and despair and create economic opportunities for our Nation's neediest families. It is with great pleasure that I sign this legislation.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
October 27, 1998.

NOTE: S. 2206, approved October 27, was assigned Public Law No. 105–285.

Statement on Signing the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998

October 27, 1998

Today I have signed into law H.R. 2431, the ''International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.'' My Administration is committed to promoting religious freedom worldwide, and I commend the Congress for passing legislation that will provide the executive branch with the flexibility needed to advance this effort.

The United States was founded on the right to worship freely and on respect for the right of others to worship as they believe. My Administration has made religious freedom a central element of U.S. foreign policy. When we promote religious freedom we also promote freedom of expression, conscience, and association, and other human rights. This Act is not directed against any one country or religious faith. Indeed, this Act will serve to promote the religious freedom of people of all backgrounds, whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, or any other faith.

I intend to nominate Dr. Robert Seiple, the Special Representative of the Secretary of State for International Religious Freedom, for the position of Ambassador at Large created under the Act. It is my understanding that he will act as an ex-officio officer of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an organization that is advisory in nature and does not have the authority to make specific findings concerning violations of religious freedom.

Section 401 of this Act calls for the President to take diplomatic and other appropriate action with respect to any country that engages in or tolerates violations of religious freedom. This is consistent with my Administration's policy of protecting and promoting religious freedom vigorously throughout the world. We frequently raise religious freedom issues with other governments at the highest levels. I understand that such actions taken as a matter of policy are among the types of actions envisioned by section 401.

I commend the Congress for incorporating flexibility in the several provisions concerning the imposition of economic measures. Although I am concerned that such measures could result in even greater pressures—and possibly reprisals—against minority religious communities that the bill is intended to help, I note that section 402 mandates these measures only in the most extreme and egregious cases of religious persecution. The imposition of economic measures or commensurate actions is required only when a country has engaged in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom accompanied by flagrant denials of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons—such as torture, enforced and arbitrary disappearances, or arbitrary prolonged detention. I also note that section 405 allows me to choose from a range of measures, including some actions of limited duration.

The Act provides additional flexibility by allowing the President to waive the imposition of economic measures if violations cease, if a waiver would further the purpose of the Act, or if required by important national interests. Section 402(c) allows me to take into account other substantial measures that we have taken against a country, and which are still in effect, in determining whether additional measures should be imposed. I note, however, that a technical correction to section 402(c)(4) should be made to clarify the conditions applicable to this determination. My Administration has provided this technical correction to the Congress.

I regret, however, that certain other provisions of the Act lack this flexibility and infringe on the authority vested by the Constitution solely with the President. For example, section 403(b) directs the President to undertake negotiations with foreign governments for specified foreign policy purposes. It also requires certain communications between the President and the Congress concerning these negotiations. I shall treat the language of this provision as precatory and construe the provision in light of my constitutional responsibilities to conduct foreign affairs, including, where appropriate, the protection of diplomatic communications.