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Sincerely,

William J. Clinton

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives; Richard A. Gephardt, House minority leader; and Jesse Helms, chairman, and Joseph R. Biden, Jr., ranking member, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Remarks to the Community at the Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras

March 9, 1999

President Flores, Colonel Ramirez, General Wilhelm, Colonel Rosner, members of the Honduran and American militaries, to the people of Honduras, the American delegation and Members of Congress who came here with me, ladies and gentleman. Yesterday in Nicaragua, today in Honduras, we see that this disaster has taught us that what happens to one in the Americas affects us all. It reminds us that in good times and bad, *todos somos Americanos.*

Mr. President, I thank you for your kind words about the First Lady. I spoke with Hillary last night, and she asked me to give you her best. She remembers so well her trip here, and she wishes you well.

Mr. President, as our military leaders know, at this Honduran air base, our Armed Forces trained together for this sort of disaster just a few months before the storm. When the real test came, they passed with flying colors.

This long runway, turned into a lifeline, connected the countries all over the world. Over 47 million pounds of supplies came through here. Helicopters performed daring rescues and delivered food; engineers repaired roads; medical teams gave treatment and comfort; relief workers provided clean water, built schools and shelters, and restored faith in the future that nearly washed away.

Operation Fuerte Apoyo turned into one of the largest humanitarian missions performed by the United States military since the Berlin airlift 50 years ago. To all who were a part of it, I thank you for your courage, your confidence, your compassion.

I believe the United States must do more. I have asked Congress for $956 million to support the reconstruction effort in Central America. We expect almost a third of that to come to Honduras to improve public health, to build homes and schools, to rebuild roads so farmers can move their produce to market, and to prepare for future hurricanes. It will also forgive and defer Honduran debt, and it will be targeted to local communities to make sure the people who need it get the assistance.

I would also like to announce $56 million to expand our New Horizons program which brings civilian guardsmen and reservists to the region for 2 weeks of training and relief work.

Mr. President, I know Hondurans are determined not just to rebuild but actually to create something better out of this tragedy: to build a reconstruction that protects the environment so that people are not exposed to unnecessary risks in the next storm; to build a reconstruction that ensures that those who suffered most participate fully and benefit equally; to build a reconstruction that consolidates democracy by engaging local government, NGO's, and the private sector.

I would like to especially thank the members of our Armed Forces for their hard work to advance these goals, for their enthusiasm and good cheer, even when you have to sleep in hootches in Tent City—[*laughter*]—for your cooperation between the services and between our U.S. personnel and our Honduran hosts. You have shown the people of Central America the true colors of our men and women in uniform.

Today I am proud to announce the award of Humanitarian Service Medals to all those members of the U.S. Armed Forces who served in support of the relief effort in Central America. And to announce that I have just presented to Colonel Rosner a Joint Meritorious Unit Award to JTF Bravo for its sustained commitment to our mission in this region. Congratulations on a job well done.

Later today I will see the Juan Molina Bridge in Tegucigalpa. It was built jointly with U.S. assistance and Honduran efforts.

I can't think of a better symbol of JTF Bravo's efforts or our cooperation, building bridges between people and nations in Central America, with Central America itself the bridge between North and South America.

In this tragedy's aftermath, Hondurans and Americans have given new meaning to the words written by Juan Molina in his poem "Eagles and Condors": *Pueblos Americanos en este contiente debemos ser hermanos*.

Not far from here is Comayagua, the old capital of Honduras, built because it was near the center of Central America and of the entire New World. That city boasts a clock said to be the oldest in the Americas, made by Spanish-Moors in the 12th century. When that clock began ticking, about 900 years ago, the world was a smaller place in every way. Now that clock is ticking away the final hours and days of the 20th century, headed toward a new millennium. But one thing remains as true today as the day the clock was built: We humans still have the urge to chart a new course for the future and the obligation to make it a better one for our children.

Thanks to your work here, a new and better world truly lies within our grasp. Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:45 a.m. in Hanger 1 at the Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras. In his remarks, he referred to President Carlos Roberto Flores of Honduras; Col. Alberto Ramirez-Mathia, Honduran Base Commander; Gen. Charles E. Wilhelm, USMC, Commander in Chief, U.S. Southern Command; and Col. Elliot J. Rosner, USA, Commander, Joint Task Force Bravo.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Hurricane Mitch Reconstruction Efforts in Tegucigalpa, Honduras

March 9, 1999

President Clinton. Thank you, Mr. President, for your remarks and for the extended visit we have already had today about these matters.

I wanted to have the opportunity today to hear from a broad cross-section of citizens of this country, and so I will be extremely brief. I agree with the President that this period of reconstruction should be seen as the opportunity to build something even better than what was here before. And furthermore, I believe that if all elements of a society are properly involved and feel fairly treated, that the country's social fabric, sense of community, will be stronger than it was before the disaster occurred.

Many of you have paid a very high price for what has occurred, and the losses have been staggering. But I think the—I have been quite impressed by what has already been done and by the attitude of the people. What the United States is interested in is how we can best be an effective partner with you from our end. And so I'm quite interested in your perspective on that, as well as anything you would like to tell me about your present activities.

I'd also like to introduce—this is Congressman Xavier Becerra, who came here before with the First Lady and has just finished a term as the head of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. He is from California. And I am delighted to have him back with me. And Congressman Reyes from Texas is also here with us.

Moderator. We have our Archbishop—perhaps he can kick off the discussion.

[*Archbishop Oscar Rodriguez began the discussion by thanking President Clinton, the people, and the churches in the U.S. for their assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. He asked that the President support efforts to expand trade by allowing NAFTA parity, cease deportation of Hondurans, and support Central American efforts within the G–7 for multilateral debt relief.*]

Moderator. And this is the mayor of Tegucigalpa. I think you know about the accident she had in the helicopter. And after that, she took his job, and here we have her now.

[*Mayor Vilma de Castellanos stated that 30 percent of the city was destroyed and briefly mentioned the impact of loss of life and damage to the economic and social infrastructure of the city. She closed by presenting the President with the key to the city.*]

Moderator. And now we have Mario Canawati, who is president of the Chamber