

[At this point, the portrait was unveiled.]

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I think it's high time we heard from the man we came to honor, Secretary Mike Espy.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:52 p.m. at the Department of Agriculture. In his remarks, he referred to Rhoda Glickman, wife of Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman; civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson; and attorneys Reid H. Weingarten and Ted Wells, Jr.

Statement on the National Education Goals Report December 10, 1998

Today's release of the annual National Education Goals Report shows that America has made some progress toward achieving the National Education Goals but still has a long way to go. If we are going to reach these goals, we must strengthen accountability and raise standards for students, teachers, and schools. I will continue to press Congress to help give our students smaller classes, well-prepared teachers, and modernized school buildings. I will continue my efforts to expand access to early childhood programs, increase public school choice, make our schools safe, disciplined, and drug-free, open the doors of college education, and help Americans engage in lifelong learning.

I am pleased at the progress that the report shows in helping our young children arrive at school ready to learn, improving student achievement in math, and increasing the participation of women and minorities in math and science in higher education. Those responsible for such gains—parents and teachers, local and State education officials, colleges and universities, the business community, and students themselves—should be proud of what they have accomplished.

But we must do more. Education is a local function, a State responsibility, and a national priority. The National Education Goals define excellence in education, and Americans at all levels must redouble our efforts to meet them.

Remarks Following Discussions With Central American Leaders December 11, 1998

President Clinton. Good morning. I have just concluded a very good meeting with the leaders of five Central American nations: President Rodriguez of Costa Rica, President Flores of Honduras, President Aleman of Nicaragua, President Calderon Sol of El Salvador, and Vice President Flores of Guatemala. We send our best wishes to President Arzu, who is in Guatemala recovering from a bout of pneumonia.

Over the past decade, Central Americans have transformed their countries. Nations where freedom once was denied, where there was once fear and violence, have now joined their neighbors as democracies in peace. Economic development has raised many from poverty. Now nature has put that progress at risk.

Central American nations face in varying degrees the formidable task of rebuilding from the region's deadliest storm in modern history: 9,000 confirmed dead, another 9,000 missing and feared dead, 3 million people homeless or displaced. The hurricane destroyed schools, hospitals, farms, utilities, roads, and bridges.

The governments and people of the region have made tremendous efforts to address this crisis, showing great courage and strength. But they are not, and they never will be, alone. I say to the leaders here and to the people of Central America, the United States will continue to do everything we can. *Ayudaremos a nuestros hermanos.* We will help our brothers and sisters. It is the right thing to do. And I say to my fellow Americans, it also serves

our long-term interests in a stable, free, and prosperous hemisphere.

I'm very pleased that we have achieved an era of growing cooperation, respect, and friendship among the nations of the Americas. We stand together for democracy, opportunity, and peace. We stand together in good times and bad. The United States already has committed \$283 million in assistance, and we will provide an additional \$17 million through AID for food assistance.

Thousands of our troops and civilian officials are now in the region supporting relief efforts. With our help and with the help of others, the people of Central America have reopened roads, contained disease, restored drinking water in many areas. Both the First Lady and Tipper Gore have visited the region, and last month they led a conference of charitable organizations to coordinate aid.

Now we are shifting our focus to reconstruction. And the United States will do our share there as well. Working with Congress on a bipartisan basis, our effort will include funds for rebuilding, debt relief and new financing, trade and investment initiatives, and immigration relief.

Already, the United States has identified \$125 million in additional funds for rebuilding. Right now, Senator Domenici, Housing Secretary Cuomo, and other American officials are in the region discussing reconstruction. With Congress and with other countries, we will provide funds to restore hope and growth.

Debt relief and new financing are essential to recovery. We and other creditor nations will relieve Honduras and Nicaragua, the hardest hit nations, from debt service obligations until 2001. We are working with international institutions for new financing, and we will work with Congress to help these countries meet their loan obligations. Together, these efforts could provide more than \$1.5 billion in relief and new resources. For the longer term, we will support, and I am pleased other creditor nations have said they will support, substantial forgiveness of bilateral debt. We call on other creditors to join us.

Next week, Brian Atwood and USAID will convene a conference to encourage private sector aid and investment. Our Overseas Private Investment Corporation, under the leadership of George Munoz, is working to spur U.S. business involvement, starting with an initiative to

accelerate over \$200 million in new projects for the region. We will continue to support Caribbean Basin enhancement legislation to make trade more free and more fair, and to help Central American nations restore their economies. I hope very much that it will pass in this coming Congress and quickly. We also plan to submit to the Senate our investment treaties with Nicaragua and Honduras.

Let me add that, after the hurricane struck, our immigration service stopped deportations to Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala through early next year. We are considering further immigration measures, temporary and long-term, which will be announced shortly.

Finally, I want to say that the leaders have kindly invited me to visit their region, and I intend to travel to Central America early next year to consider how the United States can best help them and strengthen our partnership over the long run. I thank them for the invitation. It will be a chance to discuss moving beyond disaster recovery, to advance our shared agenda for the Americas: deepening democracy and good governance; improving education, health and the environment; expanding opportunity and trade.

I want to thank people all across the United States who have responded to this tragedy with generosity and hard work. And I want to thank these Central American leaders for their leadership and their friendship.

Now, I'd like to turn the podium over to President Flores, who will speak on behalf of the Central American leaders. Mr. President, the podium is yours.

President Flores. Mr. President, on behalf of the Presidents of Central America, I wish to express how very pleased we are with today's most fruitful and productive dialog with the President of the United States of America. That reaffirms our confidence in his strong leadership and superb ability to understand our people, both simply as human beings and in terms of their needs for the enormous task of rebuilding our devastated lands.

We also want to convey to the First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, to Mrs. Tipper Gore, and the distinguished members of their delegations who made personal visits to our anguished communities following the tragic days of Hurricane Mitch, and to the very generous American people the deepest gratitude of Central America for the prompt and meaningful cooperation the

United States provided during our emergency, and in subsequent endeavors of relief and rehabilitation.

First, let us say that we come to Washington completely aware the potential and responsibility for rebuilding the Central American region lies in our own efforts. Inasmuch as we do appreciate and are grateful for the generous support that we have and are sure to receive from the United States and the international community, we also feel that it will not replace our own initiatives but will provide much-needed momentum.

The main concerns of our conversation with the President of the United States touched on the following issues: first, the leadership we expect and which we feel that the United States is exercising among the international community for the procurement of the financial resources that are needed in the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction of our devastated economies.

We have explained to President Clinton, and we surely think that he is convinced, that in order for Central America to rebuild, it is crucial that not only debt relief be granted but, more important, that new financial resources and concessionary credits are available in the magnitude that permits that we shall not reverse what we have so heartily fought for and accomplished in terms of economic growth, our political and institutional stability, peace, and a dignified life for our people.

Second, we touched on the negative effects that may result in the aftermath of this tragedy, where tens of thousands of people uprooted from their lands and their jobs, with no homes and no economic security for themselves and their families, if left with no hope or possibility of rapidly procuring their own means of a decent life in their own homeland. We do not wish to see repeated the unfortunate exodus that occurred in Central America in the past, when the cruel consequences of war and internal political problems robbed thousands of the security of their jobs and opportunities in their own countries.

For us, a rapid means of providing back to our people the possibilities which have been taken by the devastating effects of this hurri-

cane, which, by the way, are much more graver than those inferred in the worst times of the Central American War, is by strengthening trade, open markets, and commerce opportunities. The enhancement of the Caribbean Basin Initiative, which originated as a bipartisan endeavor some years ago, would greatly increase these possibilities.

Third, we spoke about our profound concern, specially at this point where thousands have been left homeless and without jobs, that there be not only temporary measures but a definite solution to the immigration status of the many Central Americans now living and working in the United States.

We Central Americans have paid a very high price for upholding the principles of democracy and for insisting that our people live in freedom. We have made a commitment to ourselves and to the world to continue strengthening peace at home and to continue playing an important role in the stability and the security of the hemisphere, with a strength that surely comes from the most admirable determination of our people not to let themselves be defeated. We are committed to hard work and superior attitudes, so that this blow which we have had to endure is not a terminal one but a starting point for a more promising future for Central America.

Your hospitality, Mr. President, honors us and engages our commitments. We will be eagerly awaiting your visit to our Central American countries. We pray that God will continue to bless us all. And for you, Mr. President, on behalf of our people and our governments, we wish you the greatest success and strength as you lead your great and admirable country.

Thank you so much.

The President. Thank you so much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:35 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Miguel Rodriguez of Costa Rica; President Carlos Roberto Flores of Honduras; President Arnoldo Aleman of Nicaragua; President Armando Calderon of El Salvador; and Vice President Luis Flores and President Alvaro Arzu of Guatemala.