

Up From the Flood

On his Central American tour, Bill Clinton hails the efforts of a region ravaged by hurricane and war

By TIM MC GIRK/TEGUCIGALPA

VILMA REYES HAS BEEN PROMISED TWO minutes with U.S. President Bill Clinton this week when he stops briefly in Honduras during his four-day Central American tour. In two minutes she can't even begin to tell Clinton how the fury of Hurricane Mitch tore through her life last October. An elegant widow in her late 40s, Reyes inherited the job of mayor of the capital, Tegucigalpa, from her husband, who died in a helicopter crash during the disaster. Now Reyes must put aside her sorrow and convince the President of how badly she needs U.S. help in trying to resurrect a city pushed into an open grave.

Clinton will hear many variations on the widow Reyes' tale of need during his post-Mitch tour of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. But thanks to timely foreign aid—\$5 billion so far from the U.S., Canada, Europe and Japan—and Central Americans' sheer grit, the catastrophe predicted for the hurricane's aftermath never happened. Famine, pestilence and the pocketing of relief money by corrupt technocrats all failed to materialize. (Most of the money was doled out for specific projects; work was done by donors themselves.) Nor has Washington's great worry come to pass: the stream of Mitch refugees heading to the U.S. is so much smaller than the feared tidal wave.

That's not to shrug off the calamity. Mitch was one of the worst storms to hit this hemisphere. It killed more than 5,000 people and left 2 million homeless. Bridges, roads, entire shantytowns and

villages vanished under floodwaters. In Honduras 70% of the banana crop was wiped out. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimated that simply rebuilding the region's infrastructure will cost more than \$8.5 billion, and that's not counting the damage to business and crops, which could raise the total loss to more than \$10 billion.

The full extent of the challenge is nowhere more evident than in Tegucigalpa. Like every other settlement scythed down by Mitch, the city of 850,000 is broke. It has 24,000 homeless. Entire neighborhoods buckled, sank and tumbled downhill during the disaster. After the initial flood crest passed, waters settled into a stagnant lake choked with

corpses, dead horses, refrigerators and a swirl of papers, as all the city's education and tax records were swept away. Eventually, the waters receded and the bodies were retrieved, but as the city hall's spokeswoman, Adriana Callejas,

Though Hurricane Mitch was one of the worst storms to hit this hemisphere, the catastrophe predicted in its aftermath never happened.

says, "every so often, it still smells of death."

A onetime colonial silver mining town speckled with abandoned quarries, Tegucigalpa is trying to find its moorings. The mayor's office, working with federal authorities and foreign relief teams, repaired the main road leading to the coastal port within 24 hours, restored garbage collection within two days and turned electricity on within 10 days. Often people didn't wait for relief teams. In Valle de Angeles, a town of artisans near the capital, residents replaced electricity posts and rewired cables.

But some deep problems remain. At least 60% of the city's water and sewerage system was destroyed, and Mayor Reyes would like direct aid from Wash-

ington to restore these crucial services. (The American Red Cross has volunteered to help.) Reyes is a constant presence in the streets, sometimes donning a surgical mask and black trousers to direct the road crews that are shoveling up the mud that still encrusts homes and streets along the Choluteca River. Survivors living in mega-shelters erected by relief agencies have been receiving around 110 kg a month of rice, beans, milk and other staples. President Clinton's visit is partly in recognition of the damage caused by Mitch and partly to hail the efforts that have begun to restore one of the hemisphere's poorest and most battered regions. It is also intended to bring some belated recognition, as U.S. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger puts it, of "the extraordinary progress this region had been making before it was hit by this act of nature." By that, he means progress in restoring civilian institutions and tranquillity in an area bathed in civil-war fratricide during the 1980s and after.

The first stop on the President's trip is Nicaragua, where U.S. relief efforts have helped sweep away resentment still smoldering over Washington's support for the long-ago *contra* war. U.S. troops that arrived just before Christmas on a relief mission faced hostile rhetoric from former President and Sandinista Party leader Daniel Ortega, who called them potential spies who would spread AIDS. But Nicaraguans cast aside their skepticism as they watched the soldiers rebuild roads, bridges and clinics. Even the daughter of Augusto Sandino, Nicaragua's nationalist icon whose guerrillas fought occupying U.S. Marines in the late 1920s and early '30s, declared that times had definitely changed. "Before, the gringos came to kill us, but now they come to help us, so we have to thank them," says Blanca Sandino, 60. "Today they are friends."

Clinton's Nicaragua tour includes a stop at the single worst disaster site of Hurricane Mitch,

Posoltega, where an avalanche of mud and boulders from the collapsed Casita volcano buried at least 2,000 villagers. Then he travels to El Salvador, where he is scheduled to visit during March 7 national elections, in which Marxist guerrillas, once at war with the government, are fielding a presidential candidate. Clinton is to arrive in the region on election night and stay part of the next day in San Salvador.

Clinton's next stopover is Honduras, where he'll meet President Carlos Flores and Reyes will get her two minutes of face time. The widow claims that out of political revenge against her late husband, who belonged to the opposition National Party, Tegucigalpa was denied access to any of the international aid that flowed into the country after the disaster. She fumes, "Tegucigalpa has been used to sell the tragedy of Hurricane Mitch, but we've not received 1 cent from the Honduran government." Honduran authorities insist that once nationwide priorities such as bridge mending and medical care are attended to, they will direct aid to the capital.

Further delays in aid, especially in financing reforestation projects, could harm Central America even more. The ravages of Mitch have left the region vulnerable to smaller storms that buzz saw in from the Atlantic with murderous punctuality. Heedless development policies have created a

possibility for dangerous replays: Central America is chopping down 4% of its forest cover each year, and this environmental devastation was an important factor in making Mitch the killer of the century. ■

Questions

1. Why did Bill Clinton visit Central America?
2. In what ways did the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch defy expectations?

