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FEBRUARY 16, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE

EXCHANGE OF REMARKS  
BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT  
AND

DANIEL PARKER  
ADMINISTRATOR OF THE  
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

THE OVAL OFFICE

11:43 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: First I want to thank you, Dan Parker, for going to Guatemala as rapidly and as quickly as I asked, and I want to thank you and all of your assistants for doing a good job.

I think we also owe a debt of gratitude to the private organizations in this country that have likewise responded.

If you would, I would appreciate your impressions and your recommendations at this time.

MR. PARKER: Thank you, Mr. President.

This map shows all of Guatemala and it shows within the blue line that area that was most devastated, and within the red lines that which was totally destroyed. It puts the disaster into overall perspective.

Out of 5.8 million there are over a million who are homeless and 76,000 who have been injured, and over 22,000 that the Government of Guatemala indicates are dead.

To focus in on a severely damaged area, a million people live within this blue area of which 925,000, 90 percent, are homeless. 69,700 of the injured are within this area -- 21,600 of the dead.

This area of virtually total destruction I toured and there is no way to describe it, Mr. President, other than the fact that it is just incredible.

The impact of the disaster is basically in two ways. It is a disaster upon the poor and it is a disaster basically on the rural people.

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The people in Guatemala City that were affected were the poor people who lived in shanties and shacks which just came tumbling down. By the nature of the rural construction of the adobe with the heavy tile roof, the walls came down which caved in these heavy tile roofs crushing the people who were sleeping.

THE PRESIDENT: Do I understand that this part here is roughly the size of the District of Columbia?

MR. PARKER: Yes. I would say it would be somewhat larger, and this is part of the problem we are getting in trying to reach it. The terrain is very rugged, very mountainous, and the communications under normal circumstances are not good. When I say communications, I mean roads, telephones, even radios. Under the major disaster conditions they were virtually wiped out. So we have had to use the helicopters.

I must say that the U.S. helicopters have been a godsend and I am sure that that is the way the people of Guatemala look at them, too.

There is another value to them besides the specific measureable value, and that is the psychological value. Their presence makes it known that somebody is there, the United States is there to help them.

THE PRESIDENT: Where is our emergency hospital located?

MR. PARKER: It is located in the area of Chimaltenango and it has done its job. It has done a heroic job and we are commencing its phase-down and withdrawal at this time.

We are also, Mr. President, beginning a phase-down of some of the helicopters, the heavy helicopters in particular. Trucks are now able to get through into these areas and with that we believe that is the proper way to service it.

THE PRESIDENT: What has the impact on the economy been?

MR. PARKER: Well, it is more a disaster of people than it is economics. Now this is not to say that there is not a real economic problem but it is more in the economies of the individual families than it is from the overall national economy. The industrial establishment was not much damaged and it is probably going to get back into production, but that is only 6 percent of the gross national product.

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The farms and, of course, the farm buildings were destroyed, but the fields were not and they have had a good harvest. Their export crops -- coffee, which mainly goes out to the Pacific ports; bananas; cotton and sugar, which comes out this way -- the economic effect will depend on how quickly this road is opened.

THE PRESIDENT: This is that highway where the principal in the population lives?

MR. PARKER: That is correct. It is also the geographic fault line. The principal damage is really in this area right along in here, and we are doing a quick and, I think, very thorough engineering assessment of this.

END (AT 11:48 A.M. EST)