

Clinton off to Central America;

Deportations again: U.S. ending grace period for storm-devastated region, effective today.

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Body

President **Clinton** embarks **today** on a four-day tour of **Central America**, the same day a **U.S.** promise --- made just after Hurricane Mitch's devastation --- not to **deport** illegal immigrants to El Salvador and Guatemala is set to lapse.

In Guatemala, Foreign Minister Eduardo Stein Barillas warned the forced return of a large number of immigrants severely would crimp recovery efforts. "Our battered economies are not going to be able to sustain this influx of people back to the **region**," he said.

At the White House, Deputy Chief of Staff Maria Echaveste said there is "no basis" for extending the **deportation** stay.

Clinton --- traveling without his wife, who is sidelined by a recurring back problem --- will visit reconstruction projects in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. He will stand with disaster victims in a schoolyard in Posoltega, Nicaragua, where mudslides wiped out entire villages, and lend support to **U.S.** troops pitching in on the reconstruction. On Wednesday, **Clinton** is to address the Salvadoran legislative assembly.

At Guatemala City's anthropology museum, **Clinton** plans a roundtable talk on peace with citizens still smarting from a Guatemala truth commission report last week that blames most of the deaths and disappearances during that nation's 36-year civil war on the **U.S.**-backed army and the CIA. On Thursday, **Clinton** is to convene a summit with **Central** American presidents to make sure the post-Mitch crisis does not derail free-market economics and democratic systems.

Mitch and its subsequent flooding and mudslides killed more than 9,000 people, left thousands more homeless and caused between \$ 7 billion and \$ 10 billion in damage to the **region's** infrastructure. The **United States** has spent \$ 305 million on relief, eclipsing the \$ 297 million devoted to various disasters in **Central America** from 1964 to 1998.

The president leaves at home nearly \$ 1 billion in **U.S.** aid trapped on Capitol Hill by unrelated disputes over spending. Most likely, he will encounter the disappointment of **Central** Americans who fault his trade policy as halfhearted.

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Last week, **Clinton** submitted legislation to Congress providing enhanced trade benefits to **Central** American and Caribbean nations under the so-called Caribbean Basin Initiative.

Those nations, long pressing for the same free-trade benefits that Mexico received under the North American Free Trade Agreement, said **Clinton's** latest CBI enhancement does not go far enough to build markets for **Central** American exports. "Although it's indispensable, it is not sufficient," Stein Barillas said. "If we do not find economic horizons that can be sustainable, provide for the multiplication of job opportunities in **Central America**," the last decade's progress in peace, human rights and development cannot proceed.

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