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Remarks on Departure for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and an Exchange With Reporters

September 16, 1999

The President. Before I depart for the FEMA Operations Center, I'd like to say just a few words about East Timor and the terrible murders in Texas last night.

East Timor

First, I'm pleased that the U.N. Security Council has approved the creation of a multinational force to be led by Australia, to deploy as soon as possible to end violence, restore order, and support the results of the August 30 referendum, where the people of East Timor voted overwhelmingly for independence.

After consulting closely with Congress and with the Government of Australia on the best way for the United States to support this operation, and on the recommendation of Secretary Cohen and my national security team, I have decided to contribute to the force in a limited but essential way, including communications and logistical aid, intelligence, air lifts of personnel and material, and coordination of the humanitarian response to the tragedy.

We will deploy about 200 people, about half of whom will serve on the ground in East Timor. In addition, elements of the Pacific Fleet will provide support. I am especially encouraged that Asian nations will be taking the primary responsibility. The overall force will contain about 7,500 people, roughly half will be Australian, and I understand that Thailand and many other Asian nations will contribute, as well as governments from outside the region.

This mission is in America's interest for several reasons. Indonesia's future is important to us, not only because of its resources

and its sea lanes but for its potential as a leader in the region and the world. It is the fourth most populous nation in the world; the largest Muslim nation in the world. All Asians and Americans have an interest in a stable, democratic, prosperous Indonesia.

Our fundamental values are also at stake in East Timor. The election on August 30th was conducted fairly, under the leadership of the U.N., with the agreement of the Indonesian Government. It produced a clear mandate for independence. The violence since is abhorrent to all of us who care about human dignity and democracy.

Of course, on any mission like this, there are dangers and risks of casualties. There remains a great deal of work ahead, but this force is well equipped for the job, and it is a job that is in the interests of peace and stability.

Wedgewood Baptist Church Attack

Last night, in the Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, during a prayer service for teenagers, a gunman killed seven worshipers, wounded seven others and killed himself. Yet again, we have seen a sanctuary violated by gun violence, taking children brimming with faith and promise and hope before their time. Our Nation's support and prayers are with the families of the victims, those still suffering in the hospital, and the entire Fort Worth community.

Federal law enforcement officials are now working with State officials and local authorities to find all the answers. But we know we have to redouble our efforts to protect our children. We know we have to act as if it were our own children being targeted by gun violence.

We know that there is nothing we can do to assure that this will never happen, but there is a lot more we can do to assure that it will happen more rarely. And I can only hope that the shock of this event will spur that kind of action.

Thank you very much.

Consultation With Congressional Leaders on East Timor

Q. Mr. President, did you consult the leaders? You say you consulted the leaders on the force, this very small force?

The President. Yes. Yes.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:40 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Larry Gene Ashbrook, gunman who attacked a prayer group at Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, TX, on September 15.

Teleconference Remarks With Governors From States Struck by Hurricane Floyd and Remarks to Disaster Relief Workers and an Exchange With Reporters

September 16, 1999

The President. Thank you, Governor. Let me just say, there may be some people who question, when this is over, whether we did the right thing to recommend all the evacuations. But now that we have this technology at the National Weather Center, we have to act on it. And we can all be grateful to God that this storm turned away and didn't hurt us as bad as we feared. But I think that this is a terrific test, even though it was extremely burdensome, because some day our ability to do this evacuation will save hundreds of people's lives.

And I just want to thank you, Governor. I'm glad that all those people, in the end, didn't have to go. But I'm glad we did it because we've got the technology now, we knew what was likely to happen, and I just wanted to thank you. And I hope that all your people also believe that some day our ability to do this will save hundreds of lives. And I thank you very much.

[A this point, Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina discussed three topics: the extent of hurricane damage in his State, especially flooding; the need for the President to declare a major disaster for North Carolina; and Federal aid in improving and coordinating evacuation routes.]

The President. Thank you, Governor. Let me say that on the third point you made, we'll do everything we can to help you. On the second point, we'll give you the declaration you seek today. And it's unusual, but it's fairly unusual for your wife to be waste-deep in water in somebody's home, too. [Laugh-

ter] So we'll try to help as much as we can. And I regret that you have had to go through this after what you went through with Fran. And we'll do everything we can to help you.

[A this point, Gov. James Gilmore of Virginia described problems with flooding, especially concerning water treatment facilities. He also described evacuation efforts, high winds affecting electric power service, and ask the President to declare a major disaster for Virginia.]

The President. Thank you, Governor. We will do that, and in particular, we want to help you with these emergency protective services that you will need. I'm very concerned about the water filtration plants and the other problems you have. We'll do everything we can to help.

[A this point, Federal Emergency Management Agency Director James Lee Witt thanked the President and the Federal agencies for their response to Hurricane Floyd.]

The President. You know, everywhere I go in the country that's the one thing nobody criticizes the Federal Government about. [Laughter] And I thank you very much, all of you. I'm very, very—I'm proud of what we've been able to do over these last few years to try to make sure that when something like this happens, we're always ready, and we do the best we can. And we help people. And I'm very proud of you.

This is something that adds a lot to the confidence of people, when they go through what we've just heard about here. Thank you. Thank you, Governor Gilmore, Governor Hodges, Governor Hunt, thank you all very much. And thank you in the Hurricane Center.

[Following the teleconference, the President made the following remarks to disaster relief workers.]

The President. Thank you very much. You can all hear that I can't speak very well today. I just came back from New Zealand. It's about a 20-hour trip, and I lost my voice on the airplane, and I apologize.

But let me begin by thanking all of you and Secretary Daley, Secretary Slater, my long-time friend, James Lee Witt. You have