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EL SALVADOR

## Battered nation needs relief, not charity

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SAN SALVADOR -- Still recovering from a bloody 12-year civil war that ended in 1992, the damage from Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and two deadly earthquakes in 2001, El Salvador was hit with great force by Hurricane Adrian on Thursday night. Strong winds and heavy rainfalls caused widespread flooding and massive landslides in the Pacific coast, bringing devastation to this battered nation.

While Guatemala and Honduras were also affected, El Salvador bore the brunt of the latest natural disaster to strike the region. Barely a few years into its reconstruction after the earthquakes of 2001, the tiny Central American nation now faces the grim challenge, once again, of picking up after the heavy blow dealt by Mother Nature.

Scientists have never recorded a hurricane forming in the Pacific Ocean so early in the rainy season. It is equally puzzling that what began as a tropical storm turned southeast and inland, instead of northwest and outward, as it normally happens. This "atypical" behavior presented Salvadorans with an unprecedented safety challenge.

Barely the size of the state of Massachusetts, El Salvador lies at the heart of the Central American isthmus. Its mountainous range and Pacific Oceanside provide for a beautiful backdrop at the cost of proclivity to natural disasters. As is the rest of Central America, El Salvador is prone to frequent seismic activity and damaging climatic phenomena.

Adrian struck just as an ambitious lobbying effort is underway in Washington, D.C. The leaders of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic seek to persuade the U.S. Congress to approve the Central American Free Trade Agreement. The accord was negotiated by the Bush administration in its first term and has already been ratified by the legislative bodies of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

Central American leaders argue that CAFTA is not just a trade deal but also a development strategy on which they have placed their hopes for boosting their economies. It is hoped that opening access to U.S. markets will increase foreign and national investment and create much-needed jobs. Only economic growth and job generation can guarantee poverty alleviation.

Even though Hurricane Adrian weakened as it raced across Central America, more than 30,000 Salvadorans had to be evacuated. Still, two deaths were reported in Guatemala and one in Nicaragua. It is still too early to know what the toll on infrastructure and agricultural output will be in all three countries. But it is fair to assume that it will add even greater pressure on the already strained social and economic fabric of the region. Poverty levels could increase and disease spread.

This situation may inspire thousands, if not tens of thousands of Salvadorans, in particular, to head north, as many of their compatriots did on the heels of the destruction brought on by war and previous natural disasters. The effects of Adrian could trigger a new diaspora, unless CAFTA and more benign U.S. immigration policy toward El Salvador bring quick relief.

To be able to rise again from extreme adversity, El Salvador needs the immediate approval of CAFTA. It also is working together with U.S. officials to find a formula that would normalize the immigration status of Salvadorans who have migrated to the United States.

## **Heavy blow**

There are already two million Salvadorans living in the United States, many of them are undocumented. About 260,000 of those have been granted Temporary Protected Status since the 2001 earthquakes. Salvadoran authorities nonetheless have argued repeatedly that what the country needs is some sort of amnesty for its illegal migrants, something similar to what Nicaraguans were granted more than a decade ago.

As if a ravaging 12-year civil war, Hurricane Mitch and two earthquakes weren't enough, Mother Nature has dealt this country of seven million a heavy blow once again. As in the past, we hope that the United States, our country's biggest ally and trading partner, will provide relief to Salvadorans. We are not asking for charity. CAFTA and a more-compassionate immigration policy can provide that relief.

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