



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HON. JANE RENO, UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL

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9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

VOICES: Good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Since I became Attorney General, I have received information of vulnerable people being forced into labor against their will. Slavery is one of history's worst moments, but it is not just history when you look at some of these cases.

Just last year, 60 deaf Mexicans were forced to peddle key chains on the streets of Manhattan.

In Georgia, South Carolina and Florida, migrant farm workers were forced to work for little pay, in cramped, unsanitary living conditions, and threatened with physical harm if they tried to escape.

In California, Thai garment workers were forced by armed guards to work 20-hour shifts in sweatshop conditions.

We have tracked down modern-day slave owners and others who exploit workers wherever and whenever we can. But I think we need to do more. That is why I am announcing a new Federal task force to investigate and prosecute these modern-day slavery cases. It will be co-chaired by Bill Lann Lee, the Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, and the Solicitor of the Department of Labor. I am joined today by Bill and Steve Mandel, of the Labor Department. And I thank you for being here.

The purpose of the task force will be to coordinate the investigation, prosecution and prevention of these cases. The task force has three jobs. First, it will improve coordination between Federal agents who investigate worker exploitation for the INS, the FBI and the Department of Labor. This enhanced coordination will enable prosecutors to be more proactive in enforcing the law.

Secondly, the task force will establish a central information bank, where investigators can compare leads and exchange tips on how to pursue these cases.

And, third, the task force will establish a blueprint for addressing the unique needs of victims of worker exploitation. We must create an environment where victims will be more willing to come forward and report these terrible crimes.

We are not interested in containing modern-day slavery, we want to eradicate it in America. We want to get it off the front pages and into history books. And this is another step. It is a very important step.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, are we basically talking about illegal immigrants smuggled into this country and forced into conditions of slavery? Or are there legal immigrants being subjected to this? U.S. citizens?

MR. LEE: Most of the cases seem to involve undocumented workers from Mexico and other countries. But there are also cases involving migrant workers, which do involve United States citizens. And the way we see the problem is that no matter what your legal status, it is emerging as a significant law enforcement problem.

QUESTION: Mr. Lee, what would be an example -- (off microphone) -- proactive?

MR. LEE: I think an example or perhaps a model of what we are thinking about is the Church Arson Task Force, which is a task force I chair with the high official from the Department of the Treasury, in which we look at that problem. And we have the Department

of Labor, which has significant investigative expertise and resources. We have the FBI. We have INS. And they have been investigating these things from separate points of view and separate agencies.

It is important to bring them together and bring the expertise together. It is important to have regular meetings, at which the investigators share information. As the Attorney General says, it is important to have a central information bank, so that leads and information can be shared.

It is also important to meet regularly, to meet face to face, to keep in touch, and develop the kinds of techniques -- and there are always special techniques in particular areas of law enforcement, where you need to work together.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What I would suggest -- there are two or three fronts where I think we can be more organized and more proactive, in addition to what Bill has described. State and local officials -- sometimes it will be a building official, sometimes it will be a fire official, inspecting for fire violations, or police may get a tip, or the neighborhood may have information concerning these circumstances -- and local officials will hear about it. I think we can do more outreach to local officials, to develop leads and to find out what is happening.

This is one example. I think we can alert INS officials along the border, and the Border Patrol, as they pursue smuggling cases, to be particularly observant of circumstances in which people are being exploited because of their vulnerability, such as the deaf individuals that were conscripted to the streets of New York. Those would be some of the examples I have in mind of how we can be more organized in our approach and identify early on these circumstances.

QUESTION: Mr. Mandel, may I ask you two questions on this? Is this problem getting worse as you see it? And, secondly, is there any particular center of the economy -- garment-making or something else -- that it seems to be more gross, more prevalent?

MR. MANDEL: It certainly is our impression that the problem is getting worse. And I think garment is the best example. We are trying to focus our efforts on low-wage workers, and particularly the population of garment workers, for example. We certainly see a higher degree of abusive practices in the garment industry.

Our investigators, of course, are focused on trying to get back wages for those garment workers who are underpaid. But I think what we would like to see this task force develop is to have some of those cases develop into criminal cases. There is a criminal provision in the Fair Labor Standards Act, as well as other criminal sanctions that could come to bear, in an attempt to deter employers from engaging in these abusive factors.

QUESTION: If I could just follow up. What effort do you see on the part of the -- to use an old civics textbook term -- the captains of the garment industry to make this go away?

MR. MANDEL: Well, we are trying to engage in an effort, in compliance partnerships, where we try to get all the major players in the garment industry to help monitor the conditions in the industry and to work together with us to try to demand that the contractors, the shops at the lower levels, have a higher degree of compliance. It is a very difficult industry to monitor for a variety of reasons, one of which is that the population tends to be very vulnerable, because they tend to be undocumented and they are often unwilling to come to us with complaints.

So, again, one of the objectives, I think, of the task force is to encourage those people to remove the disincentives for those undocumented workers to come to us and bring complaints to our attention.

QUESTION: How many cases are there currently? And are the cases on the rise? And what percentage per annum? Or what can you tell us?

MR. LEE: All I can tell you at this point is we have had, with the Civil Rights Division, about 10 cases in the last 3 years. And they have involved approximately 150 individuals. There are ongoing investigations. And it is extraordinary that we are talking about modern-day slavery at this time in our Republic's history. So I do not have the exact numbers, but any -- as the Attorney General pointed out, any case is really an abomination.

QUESTION: And increasing, or can you say?

MR. LEE: I certainly hope not.

QUESTION: What are some of the steps you are planning to make workers more willing to come forward? How can you handle that?

MR. LEE: Well, from the point of view of the Department of Justice, we want to make sure that workers understand that if they are abused in this horrible way, that there is going to be certain action taken. And that is very important. So we are trying to coordinate all the Federal resources. And we are working with State and local government in order to make sure that when there is a problem, that government be able to act and enforce the laws.

QUESTION: What kind of assurances that they will not be deported? Isn't that the most important?

MR. LEE: In some cases that has been very important. And we will decide that on a

case-by-case basis.

QUESTION: Only on a case-by-case basis?

MR. LEE: I'm sorry?

QUESTION: Only on a case-by-case basis? MR. LEE: That is how we make those decisions, yes.

QUESTION: Do you feel you have no flexibility under the law? Because if it is true that, as you say, one of the reasons workers are reluctant to come forward is that they fear they will be deported, why not say we won't deport you? Do you feel you cannot, you just do not have that authority?

MR. LEE: Well, we will look into that. And that is actually one of the issues that the task force will be addressing. At this point in time, we have addressed it on a case-by-case basis.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the points that you have is, whether it be with respect to just general enforcement of the law, you have concerns about victims of crime who are afraid to come forward. And in each situation, it is important that we look at it on a case-by-case basis, with an eye to making sure that justice can be achieved regardless of the person's status, and that they should not be subjected to crime or subjected to these circumstances.

At the same time, you do not want to create a blanket opportunity. So I think if we do it on a case-by-case basis, as we have, we can work to see that justice is achieved while at the same time maintaining appropriate enforcement of the immigration laws.

QUESTION: Was any thought given to reaching out to people in countries of origin, or even immigrant -- there are advocates of immigrant rights -- trying to warn them ahead of time that there are these scams going on, and what seems like a golden opportunity to get into the United States may not be and might be leading to a life of slavery?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think that is a wonderful suggestion. And I would like -- because I discover that, thanks to you all, my voice is heard oftentimes beyond our borders -- I would just like to urge officials in other countries and those that might be susceptible to the smugglers or others who take advantage of them to beware and to make sure that you do not do anything that puts yourself in this situation if you can possibly avoid it.

QUESTION: Any sense of what the size of the task force will be at this point?

MR. LEE: At this point we have decided that it should be a high-level task force. In the

past, we have had informal, ad hoc kind of arrangements. So I cannot give you the size, but I can assure you that we will have the actors for the particular agencies -- INS, FBI, Department of Labor -- who will be able to make decisions and to make sure that the prosecutions and investigations are done in a proper way and with adequate resources.

QUESTION: Mr. Mandel -- (off microphone) -- Mr. Lee -- (off microphone) -- said that the Justice Department has -- (off microphone). Do you know how many complaints or cases that your Department has?

MR. MANDEL: Are you talking about criminal complaints?

QUESTION: Well -- (off microphone) -- maybe you just get complaints as opposed to -- (off microphone) -- criminal cases, but can you give us some kind of a numerical estimate about how big of a problem this is?

MR. MANDEL: I cannot give you a numerical estimate. As I said, we investigate cases from the civil side. And then, when we think a case might deserve to be looked at from the criminal side, we refer it over to the Department of Justice. But I do not have the numbers for you. I'm sorry.

QUESTION: Mr. Lee, do you need new funding for this task force, or does this come out of existing resources?

MR. LEE: At this point it comes out of existing resources.

DD> QUESTION: Ms. Reno, when you talk about addressing the needs -- (off microphone) -- are there other social service needs that these people have?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: They are going to be -- I was talking in terms of needs of the victim. With respect to, for example, a vicious assault, we have got to obviously make sure that appropriate medical care is provided and that general victim services are provided. And I want to try to do everything I can to make sure that people are not afraid to come forward, so that they at least have the advantage of some protection, so that they are not left vulnerable to the crime.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno -- (off microphone). Specifically my interest would be progress in coordinating counter-narcotics terrorism efforts.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I had an excellent opportunity to discuss with my colleagues, including a number of ministers of justice, a number of initiatives: how we can work together to focus on institution-building, to share training opportunities, to enhance what the heads of state have talked about in terms of the development of a justice study center.



And I am very encouraged. Because the common theme was that without strong judiciaries, without the training, it is fine to pass a law, but then you need to train people how to use that law, whether it be a money-laundering law, a law aimed at organized crime.

So there was really common support for this initiative. And we will probably be having some meetings of small working groups leading up, I hope, to some meetings this winter with the ministers of justice.

We talked, again, as I have often talked about, my desire to see that there is no safe haven and that drug dealers have no place to hide, that this hemisphere is a hemisphere that should be based on trust. And if we trust each other, then we should trust each other to try the case in the place where the crime was committed and where we can get the most effective result that is consistent with the interest of justice.

There was conversation -- I had a good opportunity to talk with Attorney General Madrozo from Mexico, and I am encouraged. Again, you come away from these meetings encouraged, but with the recognition that there is a lot to do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, with regard to Mr. Madrozo, did you get to talk to him about the money-laundering legislation that has not yet been implemented in Mexico?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated, we had a good general discussion with the ministers of justice about how we could work together to provide training for those investigators that may not have had experience in the implementation of particular pieces of legislation. And this was one of the areas that was covered.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- Thomas Gonzalez Velasquez, the defense attorney, the long-time associate of Mr. General Guittierrez Ribollo, who has made a number of shocking allegations, was assassinated yesterday, I believe, in Guadalajara. Have you any reaction to that assassination or to any of those allegations, which allegedly you have read about?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not going to comment on any of the allegations. And I am not familiar with the details of the event to which you refer. And it would be more appropriate for me to wait until I have more details.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Chairman Dan Burton is apparently getting ready to release publicly the tapes that remain of Webb Hubble's phone conversations while he was incarcerated. Those were turned over to Burton by you last summer, with a request that they be kept private. Now, apparently, he is not going to keep them private. What are you going to do about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My hope is, and from what I read this morning, there will

be efforts made to distinguish between that which is personal and private and otherwise. And I very much hope that we will be able to continue to properly work with the committee in providing materials, and that privacy interests will be appropriately considered in these efforts.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, yesterday Chairman Hatch warned your nominee not to pursue a prosecution against Haley Barbour, implying that there would be consequences. Frankly, are you aware of this, and what is your take on the warning?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We look forward to pursuing every case based on the evidence and the law. And taking it, as I have told Chairman Hatch on a number of occasions, taking it wherever it leads us. We do not want to do it based on politics. We want to do it based on what is right. And I know that Chairman Hatch shares that feeling and that we will -- he would not want us to do anything else but that.

QUESTION: Well, I am trying to imagine Judge Starr's reaction if someone had told him -- if some Democrat had told him that if he pursued -- (off microphone) -- consequences -- (off microphone). I am sure this town would just explode. Is there -- do you have -- (off microphone) -- Chairman Hatch or have you talked to him?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think this town explodes and people get into trouble because they talk beyond the particular case. In every case that we handle -- and what I want to say to anybody who cares -- is this Department does not do anything based on politics. It does it based on the evidence and the law and what is right. We try with all our might and main to see that that happens.

And I think -- I would be surprised if Chairman Hatch did not share those views. And so I think he can have confidence that that is what we are going to do. And I do not think we should get into a fussing match, because I know the way I am going to try to handle it. And if there are consequences, I accept those consequences. But I think everybody shares my goal.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, also at that hearing yesterday there was pretty severe criticism, some of it coming from Democrats, of work that the Criminal Division has been doing, or not doing, in the last couple of years, when it has been lacking a confirmed head.

One criticism was that Federal prosecutors have taken on a win-at-any-cost attitude towards their jobs. Another criticism was that there is no national policy for narcotics prosecutions; that last year there were 65 cases filed in Chicago and 1,000 in San Diego. And also that prosecutions in gun cases are down substantially.

If you could respond to each of those, but also tell me, do you think the Criminal Division has been out of control or lacking -- while it was lacking leadership, that it was just not pursuing appropriate policies?



ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: First of all, with respect to win at any cost, I think all you have to do is look at the record and see that that is not the case. And neither has anybody suggested that. So, again, what we try to do is, based on fact and the evidence and the law, and not on comments that are not made in the context of a particular case.

Secondly, with respect to the lack of a comprehensive drug strategy, let me give you a description of how we are trying to approach and what we are trying to do in the approach on drugs.

First of all, we look at the Nation, and are trying to pull together all evidence to identify major organizations, and focus on them, believing very strongly that Federal resources should be focused on those drug organizations that cut across district and State lines and that State and local officials are often better equipped to handle those cases that are primarily local; but that it is important to develop a coordinated partnership, so that cases are handled in what is in the best interest of a community and of the Nation. And I think that policy has been very consistent from the beginning.

Where there are concerns raised, I speak, for example, to the International Association of Chiefs of Police and Sheriffs on a regular basis. And I urge them to let me know when there are problems and what we can do to improve. We always try to be responsive to those problems and try to work through those issues. And we will continue to do so.

The second approach that we are taking is to look at regional patterns. Because oftentimes a matter will not be national in scope but it will have a regional impact. And we need to make sure that we are coordinated with State and local officials in the different States involved and take appropriate action, through our OSADEF initiatives.

Then we have asked the U.S. Attorneys to reach out within their districts, to make sure that efforts are again coordinated. And police chiefs and sheriffs tell me that they have never seen such effective partnership and good coordination. But we do not rest just on our laurels; we continue to try to do everything we can to improve on it, and to share information that can be helpful.

Another initiative that we are undertaking and have been undertaking is to focus on various tools that prosecutors can use. We are working with the Treasury Department in an effective and organized enforcement of our money-laundering laws, trying to make sure that we keep up with what is happening.

Along the Southwest border, we are trying to focus, again, in a more coordinated way, on not just making small arrest, but following those arrests and taking them to larger organizations, so that we can have an impact -- not just a one-shot impact in a small case, but

that we can make the larger cases.

With respect to international issues, I am looking -- I have had the experience of being a prosecutor in Miami. The Federal Government would come to town and it would say, We are going to put our resources here in Miami. And things would get better. But then I would hear from my colleagues that they were pushing the trafficking up the Atlantic Coast or across to the Gulf Coast.

And so what I have tried to do is look at it from the point of view of our whole Southern frontier, beginning with the Southwest border, working with our colleagues in Mexico, to do everything we can to form a partnership with them, focusing on the Caribbean, particularly with respect to Puerto Rico. We have greatly enhanced our resources on the Island of Puerto Rico. We are working with the State Department to address the issues that arise in Haiti.

And so I think we are making some very substantial progress. And I have already indicated in my previous answer the issues that we are undertaking with respect to justice ministers and others for South America as a whole.

Thus, I think anybody that suggests that we do not have a drug strategy that we have been pursuing, again, has not -- they have not really had the opportunity to sit down with us and see exactly what is happening. And one of the things that I discovered is prosecutors who claim instant success with drugs make large mistakes. The whole effort has got to be an effective and organized effort. And I think we can see results when we do that. And I think we have.

With respect to guns, what we have tried to do is work with local officials. What we have learned is that local prosecutors are telling us that in many instances States have enhanced their penalties for the possession of guns, and that the resources of the Federal Government, rather than being focused on one small gun case in a community where the local prosecutor can handle it as effectively as a Federal prosecutor can, our resources should be focused on cases that cut across State and district lines, in instances in which the local prosecutor could not follow it.

Our efforts should be concentrated on identifying major organizations that traffic in guns. And our efforts should be focused, as well, through our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in identifying the best practices that keep guns out of the hands of youngsters.

So I am very proud of what the Department has been doing over these years. I take the best measure of success from the people who are on the front lines, the police chiefs and sheriffs. And we are going to continue to try to do our best. But if anybody has any particular commentary, I would urge those that spoke yesterday, if they have a specific incident or

example, to give me a call. And we are always happy to sit down and, to the extent that we can, consistent with my refusal to comment on pending cases, we will work with them.

Thank you for that opportunity.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, speaking of things you have trouble commenting on, are you still negotiating with Starr's office about Secret Service testimony, or is this an issue that is going to have to be litigated in court?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are always hopeful that we can address these issues by working together and talking it out. I do not know whether we will be able to successfully resolve the issues, but that is certainly my goal.

QUESTION: So you are pessimistic about a resolution; a judge is going to have to decide this?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, you said that.

QUESTION: Oh.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, have you received any data from Judge Holloway Johnson on how to handle the allegations concerning Starr's office?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on any matter relating to the pending investigation and whether or not I had received any guidance.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- sent you a letter last week, saying that the Justice Department would have a conflict of interest in investigating Mr. Hale, expressing a reluctance to ship it back to you if he felt he had a conflict. And he said, in the windup of the letter I believe, that he wanted to discuss appropriate mechanisms, without specifying them, that he had in mind to deal with such matters. Have you got any response to that? Or when are you going to respond?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, first of all, it is his -- he has the jurisdiction to pursue it and to determine what is best. And we would always be available to talk with him and work with him in any way that would be appropriate.

QUESTION: Did you respond to him shortly on that letter, or have you sent a response?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not going to pursue the issues. If there are conversations, I think they are going to have to be pursued appropriately, without comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, going back just for a second to Chairman Hatch yesterday. You know, that really was unusual. When you see, over the years, these things come and go, people make sharp comments. But on this one, it was not just consequences. He said all hell was going to break loose at one point. And then he described it as unholy hell if the Department did anything about Haley Barbour. I just wonder where is the Haley Barbour investigation?

(End of provided tape from the Department of Justice.)