



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, October 16, 1998

9:45 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:45 a.m.)

VOICE: Good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

Today I would like to talk about another step forward in the Federal Government's efforts against terrorism. When a terrorist act strikes the streets or rural areas of America, the first few minutes are very critical. The first people on the scene are often local rescue squads, fire fighters and police. They are on the front lines. The situation is often chaotic and dangerous.

For many victims, what these first responders do in those first few minutes can mean the difference between life and death. These first responders do so much. And we have seen them in action. But they need to be supported by proper plans, training and equipment to do the job right. The Federal Government must be a full partner in this effort. And we need to make State and local governments a full partner in the planning effort, since they know what they need there at the front line.

For nearly a year, we have been working with other agencies to help State and local governments better respond to terrorist attack. Now, under a new agreement, the Justice Department will establish a new National Domestic Preparedness Office, staffed in part by officials from a variety of Federal agencies. This office will be housed within the FBI, and will assume overall responsibility for coordinating the government's efforts to prepare America's communities for terrorist incidents involving weapons of mass destruction.

I want this new office to be a center for assistance and solutions, not a new bureaucracy. It will be a focal point for helping communities prepare for attacks. And it will offer them a new, more streamlined process for getting Federal assistance, for learning about the newest methods. We want to work with them in every way we possibly can.

Our efforts will begin by drawing on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's, better known as FEMA, Federal Response Plan, which is supported by 27 agencies and the American Red Cross. FEMA has developed a successful approach for dealing with natural disasters and other emergencies. And we want to build on the excellent work that they have done.

We will draw upon State and local plans and expertise to assist us in establishing priorities for federally provided equipment, training, planning, and exercise support. We will begin with two important initiatives. First, we are going to coordinate the establishment of training standards to meet the needs of first responders. We will work with our State and local partners to ensure that they have the latest, best thinking on what to do when the actions they take in a few seconds can truly save lives.

We will also focus on the critical issue of equipment, to identify local needs and develop a standardized list for communities across the country. These two steps will help ensure that our assistance is better targeted and more effective than ever before.

We are not interested in a top-down, one-size-fits-all solution. We are going to work directly with an advisory group of local law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services, hospitals, public health organizations, and State and local officials. Today we are unveiling our plan for a full partnership in the fight against terrorism. Next week, we will begin contacting State and local leaders, to ask for their help and their input. If we can do this the right way, we will make a difference, and help save lives the next time a terrorist strikes.

Bob Blitzer, from the FBI, and I are both available to answer questions.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, how many communities are prepared for this type of thing now? It's something so outside the experience of local authorities. How prepared are they now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think about a month ago, the Office of Justice Programs, working with the FBI and other agencies, held a conference for first responders. And in many instances, there are communities and jurisdictions around the country that have done wonderfully progressive work in this area. And we want to draw on what they have.

But what we need to do is make sure that whatever the weapon, whether it be a chemical weapon, a biological weapon or an explosive, that we have a State-by-State plan, depending on the community in that State, for how people respond, who is the best to respond, what can

be done, and how we can help support them in training and equipment.

QUESTION: Does this involve any new funding or rearrangement, redeployment of resources already on board?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The Defense Department funding, under Nunn-Lugar, will be made available. And then there will be -- it will revert in the future to the funding, the appropriations process.

QUESTION: Do you have to put maybe some more resources on the border with Mexico, that maybe is very vulnerable to the introduction of these type of weapons?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: This really does not affect -- this announcement and this office really does not affect the situation of prevention. This goes to the area of how we can deal with a terrorist attack once it occurs, and how we can prevent terrible deaths and injury as a result.

QUESTION: How unprepared, in your opinion, are some American communities?

MR. BLITZER: Some American communities are very unprepared. They certainly don't have the equipment and resources necessary to handle a major attack. So if you ask me numbers, I do not think I can give you numbers. I think that's one of the things that we will discover as the process unfolds. But as the Attorney General indicated, there are a lot of cities in a lot of different areas of the Nation that have tremendous capabilities. And it's really a matter of discovering what is there, what is needed, in terms of training and equipment, and hopefully assisting them in coming up to a standard -- a standard that can be met, that will enable them to effectively respond as first responders and hold until additional resources can be deployed.

QUESTION: Do you think that it will be maybe producing some information to educate, to instruct the population about the response for these emergencies?

MR. BLITZER: Absolutely. That is one of the things that will come out of this process, is more education of the Nation and certainly a better organization of what we're trying to do to counter this kind of threat.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we hope to do quickly is to develop training plans that can be adapted to different communities. You can't have one training plan that will be appropriate for every community in the Nation. And then, as time goes by and new technology is developed that will address the issue of chemical weapons in a more effective manner, or biological weapons, or some other weapon of mass destruction, we will be in a constant process of providing that information to the field so that all first responders will be advised.

QUESTION: Sir, does your response indicate that the potential number of domestic terrorism incidents are on the rise?

MR. BLITZER: Well, I think we need to separate it in terms of domestic terrorism incidents and WMD cases. It's really actually a clear difference. We've seen an increase in the number of cases just in the weapons of mass destruction area, either a nuclear threat, chem threat or bio threat. And we've seen that rising for about the last three years.

And I would emphasize to you that the vast majority of these are hoaxes. But the reality also is we are having the real cases. We are making arrests. People are going to court and going to jail. And, again, as I think we continue on into the next century, this is something of interest out there. And we are just trying to get to the point where we can better address something if it happens -- low threat, high consequence -- if something were to happen.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me express, though, that the first and foremost responsibility of the Department of Justice and the FBI is to do everything we can to prevent it in the first place. We will not be able to prevent everything, but we want to make sure that we take every step appropriate to prevent.

QUESTION: First responder training and actually what first responder actions would be in the case of one of these situations does not involve either the prevention or investigation of crime. And since the agencies typical involve hospitals and fire departments -- already are trained and involved with FEMA in first response programs for other forms of disasters, why is this being headed up by the FBI as opposed to another agency?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We talked with the other agencies to find out who they felt was best suited. And the general consensus seemed to be that the FBI, along with the Justice Department's other mechanisms, was the best suited. We were not interested in this from a turf point of view.

And let me explain one of the reasons why it is so important. If you see one sign that there may be -- if the FBI has advance intelligence, and we can coordinate better, we can do a great deal, both from the enforcement point of view as well as the catching the bad guy point of view if we can coordinate it while at the same time working with FEMA to ensure that consequence management is first and foremost when it comes to the protection of human life.

QUESTION: And on that, Mr. Blitzer, about foreign threats, I presume that was the principle terrorist threat against the United States, and specifically about the bin Laden organization, which has threatened this country both beyond our borders and within our borders, Dr. Kerr, of the crime lab, told us that he was very concerned about tactical nuclear weapons being available for sale. The London Times has recently reported that bin Laden had purchased such. And the Defense Department has said just yesterday that that's very possible to the

question I raised with the Attorney General last week.

Could you speak to those issues?

MR. BLITZER: Well, I'll try to do the best I can with that particular question. I must tell you, everything that I've seen in the last two years has been domestic. And I can't remember just any particular case where we've handled the criminal investigation that's engaged a foreign threat.

However, the reality of life is that there are nations out there that have these types of capabilities, as I think we all are acutely aware of. And certainly there are individuals with capabilities. And so we really face a two-edged threat. We do face a threat on the international side. We do face a threat on the domestic side.

And in terms of bin Laden, I would not comment about him to you. But that's I think the playing field we're operating on today, and into the future.

QUESTION: And is the FBI involved in defending the United States, internal in the USA, against a terrorist like bin Laden, who might acquire a missile from North Korea, a tactical nuke, put it together, put it on a ship-launch platform, and be able to reach any place in the U. S.?

MR. BLITZER: Definitely. I mean if we certainly had that kind of information, we would certainly mount a major operation. But it would not just be the FBI. I mean that's a particularly significant threat if that were ever to occur. I mean we have Defense, CIA, the intelligence community. I mean that's our first line of defense.

QUESTION: Do you think that's feasible?

MR. BLITZER: It depends on how good the intelligence is.

QUESTION: Mr. Blitzer, do you have any figures on how many of these threats you have been able to head off in the last couple of years?

MR. BLITZER: A small number, probably four or five. I do not have the numbers right with me. I'd have to look to give you that figure.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will ask Bert to give you whatever can be publicly provided.

QUESTION: Will the first responder training involve any training in actual law enforcement issues, such as in terms of identifying threats, prevention work, being involved in evidence preservation, those sorts of things?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think that will be one of the keys to what we do, how we work with State and locals, to make sure that they get threat warning information. Some of it involves classified information. How do we get that out? What do we do to make sure that State and locals are appropriately advised to protect human life? And also to get the advantage of the State and local knowledge. They may see some things that, to a Federal agent, would not be particularly material. But they find it material because they know their community.

We've got to create the two-way street, so that the alert officer or fire rescue person, who may see the beginning of a terrorist event, for several days unfolding, takes action immediately and follows up on it. It is that alert officer who can oftentimes make the difference. Just in a very small situation, just to show you what the difference can be, the officer in Oklahoma City, who was so alert that he spotted that VIN number very, very early on, that gave us the lead that was so critically important.

So it is important that we work together from a law enforcement perspective, but the first concern at the scene is the protection of human life. There may be other scenes where the weapon has not been fully activated yet, and it will be important for all of us to work together to address the issue of what can be done to prevent it.

QUESTION: This program has been very highly criticized by local fire fighters. For example, the head of the International Association of Fire Fighters calls it surprisingly ineffective because there was no hands-on training.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: This program was not in effect then. So when you refer to this program, the program that we are discussing today is trying to address the issues that first responders have raised, and create a two-way street, so that we hear from them, that we provide one central place where they can go, knowing that they will get the best information both from the FBI, DOD, the Department of Energy, the Public Health Service, and that they will get the latest information with respect to equipment.

QUESTION: How much money are we talking here? And is that enough to really make it effective?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think what is going to be important as the States come forward with plans, plans that include how all the State gets trained -- because we do not want to leave any area out, and we want to develop comprehensive plans for training, for how they respond. Much of that can be done based on FEMA's plans. And we just believe, based on Congress' comments to date, that if we can show a centralized, effective program, that hears from everybody who is on the front line, builds according to what the experts think is needed, that we will get the funding necessary to ultimately implement the plan.

QUESTION: But the start-up costs, start-up costs are rather low, because basically you're just organizing and getting in contact with everybody. So you really don't have an idea of what kind of a budget you're eventually going to be dealing with?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we will have a fairly good idea as we go along. We have \$12 million this year that the Justice Department is administering. These grants have been awarded. When I say this year, the previous fiscal year. I think we will have something like \$49 million from the Defense Department in this coming fiscal year. And that will give us a good track record to determine appropriations requests for the future.

QUESTION: Can you put in perspective how vulnerable first responders are right now and, then, secondly, the notion of how real the threat actually is?

MR. BLITZER: It really depends on what they're facing. In terms of a chem threat, there is a lot of really good hazmat out there.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You might say what hazmat is.

MR. BLITZER: Hazardous materials organizations on the fire departments. They have a lot of capability. And as we've looked at this, we have recognized that. That does not mean that that capability should not be improved to deal with a large chem attack.

The real weakness that we have right now is the ability to detect and counter a bio, because it is much more insidious and much more difficult to detect. So that in terms of the bio, there is certainly less protection, less particularly on the medical side, because that's where the detection is. And so that needs to be much more robust.

On the nuclear side, there is a pretty robust capability to handle those kinds of issues, and it has been for many years. So that pretty much paints the picture for you, as to the strengths and weaknesses.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me point out, though, that with respect to the biological weapons, the medical community, the Public Health Service, and others are very anxious to be a part of this team and to obtain the resources necessary to properly respond. And we have had some very good conversations with them. And we need to reach out to local hospitals and public health organizations to make sure that they are part of the State planning effort.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, can I maybe ask you about something else in regards to Mexico?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Surely.

QUESTION: We do understand recently the Department of Justice has brought a reward of \$2.2 million on Augustine Vasquez Mendoza, who killed a DEA agent. Can you tell us if you have requested Mexican cooperation at all?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Mexico is -- Attorney General Madrozo and I are always in conversation. I will ask Bert to give you specifics with respect to the one case that you speak of. But I would say Attorney General Madrozo and I talk probably at least once a week, trying to discuss how we can be more effective in working with each other.

QUESTION: And also in regards to the massacre that took place recently in Baja California, in Ensenada and Tijuana, are you concerned about it, that maybe this violence can go up to San Diego or maybe some other Californian city?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, obviously I think both nations share a real concern with violence and want to do everything that we possibly can to eradicate and to keep it from either country.

QUESTION: Will the death of the juvenile violence legislation have any practical effect on how the Department of Justice will be operating until the next Congress might do something?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We think that we are going to be able to deal with many of these issues. And what I think would be more appropriate is to wait until Congress has formally acted, and perhaps next week discuss where we will be on juvenile justice.

QUESTION: Did you read any of the stories this week that Ken Starr had met a number of times with the Paula Jones lawyers at the time that the immunity case was before the Supreme Court. What is the Justice Department doing about these revelations from Jones' previous lawyers? Are you looking into it? Does it trouble you in any way?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I said last week, we are taking all the information, all the allegations that are made, we are in the process of reviewing them to determine whether an investigation is appropriate.

QUESTION: As a practical matter, though, all these allegations seem to just go some place and sit, that the Department is not actively doing anything because you can't --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, they are not just sitting, except to the extent that allegations do not get on their legs and walk off.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: It does seem that a lot of these are on the slow track, though. The OPR review

still has not begun. And these complaints were made in February, I believe, from Congress --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I believe we have tried to indicate we are reviewing them. And OPR is part of that review.

QUESTION: But are you reviewing as well, as Attorney General, whether there was due diligence on the part of the Justice Department when Starr made his request for expansion, whether the right questions were asked?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are reviewing all the information that we are receiving, to determine what action is appropriate.

QUESTION: Ma'am, could you help us understand what criteria you have for determining what you review, given that if you were to use -- your phrase -- all the information that comes in -- this came in by way of a radio report -- virtually everything the Office of Independent Counsel has done in the last 10 months has been questioned at one time or another in one media report or another. How do you decide what constitutes part of this review and what doesn't?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, we review everything in the sense of reading it and trying to understand what the nature of the allegation is. And in some instances, there appears to be no basis for even a review. In other instances, we say, let's look at that to determine what action we should take, if any.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, this question --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Which question?

QUESTION: I was just about to say -- Judge Starr's contacts with Gil Davis, one of the lawyers on the Jones team early on, has passed that initial threshold to merit review; is that correct?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're reviewing that allegation to determine what action, if any, the Department should take with respect to it.

QUESTION: Yesterday's White House conference on school violence seemed to have some terrific initiatives happening around the country. Is there anything that particularly heartened you about the response to the problem?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have had two instances lately -- three instances -- and I think I've shared them with you. But let me just -- because it kind of culminated in yesterday's conference. About three weeks ago, I was in Salt Lake City for a conference with the mayors. They were full of ideas. But it was more than ideas. There were programs that were working in their community, that had not been in place five years ago.

This past Monday, I went to a National Crime Prevention Council conference. There were about 2,000 people there at 8 o'clock on a Monday morning, which was a holiday. And the energy in that room was just remarkable.

Yesterday's conference was one of the best things that I have seen in Washington. Because it brought together State and local officials. There were mayors there. There was a governor there. There were prosecutors, chiefs of police and social workers and members of the faith community, and teachers.

And, again, whether it be Boston or San Diego or one program in New Orleans or a conflict resolution program in New York, programs were working to make a difference for children and families. And you had the sense that the vision that so many of these wonderful people who work in these communities had was becoming a reality.

And the message that I got out of it, and I continue to try to spread, is we have got to figure out how to harness all these wonderful ideas, to realize that some ideas will not work in one community, where they might work in another, and how we make all this information available about what works and what does not work, and then how communities develop comprehensive systems that provide protective prevention programs while at the same time holding our young people accountable for their criminal conduct when it occurs.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in regards to the bombings in Africa, we do understand Rashid Saleh was going to appear today in Federal court. Does that mean his trial is going to take place here in Washington?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Any comment with respect to that matter should come from the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Southern District of New York.

QUESTION: Can I ask you again about the question about bin Laden and his hosts, the Taliban in Afghanistan. They have offered again to possibly arrest and hold Mr. bin Laden if we can provide evidence that will support his guilt. And wouldn't it be better -- my question is -- wouldn't it be best if he were being held, if he were out of touch with his terrorist network? Wouldn't that be a good first step to separating him from -- the head of this network -- separating him from his underlings?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, can you tell us what your policies are towards the recusal of Federal prosecutors in cases in which they have had some representation in parties to a lawsuit that they have been or are involved in investigating, what is the standard practice --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Give me a specific case and I will talk about it. But as you know, to talk about a hypothetical situation creates a situation in which the next time I am asked about it with regards to a specific case, one of your colleagues will say, but you told Mr. Serro this, that and the other with respect to these facts. Yes, but this was slightly different.

QUESTION: Well, this is not a hypothetical question. I guess, let me put it this way. Does the Department of Justice have policies regarding conflict of interest involving prosecutors who have had involvement previously with individuals that they are then involved in investigating?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will ask Bert to furnish you with whatever the rules are.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, it has been explained to us earlier within the independent investigation, Judge Starr serves as his own attorney general. Therefore, he's not necessarily bound by Department guidelines. Is that how you understand it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me get you the exact language of the statute. But generally the independent counsel must follow certain policy of the Department.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the Microsoft trial starts on Monday. How strong do you think the government's case is against Bill Gates?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot comment on the case or the strength of the case. I will say that Joel Klein and the Antitrust Division and the San Francisco Field Office have done a wonderful job of preparing this case. And I just want to commend them.

QUESTION: How high are the stakes for the Department?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think you talk in a case like that about the stakes for the Department. I think you talk about what's right for the Nation. And we will attempt to see that justice is done and that the Nation's interest is protected according to law. But I do not think you talk about the stakes for the Department.

QUESTION: But this is one of the biggest antitrust cases in a very, very long time.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Those that talk about stakes for the Department seem to be more worried about their -- themselves. And I do not think the people involved in this effort are. I think they're interested in what's right for the country according to the law of the country. If you worried about stakes, then you'd pick and choose your prosecutions. And that is not the right thing to do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, with regard to Mr. Rudolph and the Atlanta bombing cases -- and also for you, Special Agent Blitzer -- is there any evidence that Mr. Rudolph received any support or continues to receive any support of any kind from those who we would term Pro-Life radicals? Is there any evidence that Mr. Rudolph was motivated primarily by Pro-Life belief in his bombing of the clinic?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment. I think it would be more appropriate for those on the scene to comment.

QUESTION: What about the spy who was just arrested out near Dulles Airport. Now, in 1988, this guy walked through the front door of the Soviet embassy wearing no disguise, and he's arrested in 1998. What took the FBI a decade?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think that I can comment, other than to say that the Bureau has pursued this, in the time that I have been involved with the case, in a way that I think has been very, very effective.

QUESTION: Does it astound you that people in the military have sold secrets for such paltry sums of money?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think I really should comment on a pending case.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, let me take one more crack at this. Do you have any personal regrets at all about Judge Starr and any decision that you have made in that case?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: One last question. You told us last month that the Department is reviewing to see if there is something -- as an institution -- if there are any steps you should take to protect the institution of the presidency as we move through this process. Any results from that review?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we are trying to do is to make sure that we have gathered the opinions and the work of OLC over the years, from administration to administration, to make sure that we have that available, understand what's there, and that as issues arise, if there is information that can eliminate the issues affecting the institution of the presidency, that that is provided.

QUESTION: Does that include the definition of an impeachable offense?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It will depend on all the circumstances as we deal with these issues.

Thank you very much.

VOICE: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Can we borrow Mr. Blitzer for a moment?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If Mr. Blitzer wants to be borrowed.

(Whereupon, at 10:17 a.m., the press conference concluded.)