



WEEKLY NEWS BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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Q Attorney General Reno, can you offer us some thoughts and insights about the arrest that's been made in the hacker case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think there will be an important announcement at 10:30 this morning. I think there has been superb cooperation between Canadian authorities, our Computer Crimes Section and the FBI. And I think further comments will be made at 10:30.

Q Is it still an open investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think comments should be made at that time.

Q Elian Gonzalez. You're waiting like everybody else for the Appeals Court ruling. I guess the question that needs to be asked at this point is: Are you -- people have been describing the Justice Department as being in "enforcement mode." How soon after an Appeals Court ruling are you prepared to act?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, it depends on what the 11th Circuit says.

Q If you get the injunction that you seek though?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the time has come for us to await the decision of the 11th Circuit and then take whatever appropriate action is dictated at that time. We will utilize all law enforcement options, if appropriate under the 11th Circuit order. And it doesn't make much sense to tell you what our options are or the timing of them.

Q Ms. Reno, we were told by department lawyers that Lazaro Gonzalez is specifically in violation of Section 212(d)5 of the INA. And we had some questions about what sanctions or penalties attach, and we are not able to get an answer. Is there anything that you can tell us about sanctions or penalties, what might attach to his violations?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not explored the issue of sanction and penalties. I am interested only in reuniting Elian with his father.

Q Ms. Reno, one of the advisers to the government released a letter, on Monday evening, describing his concern about imminent danger to Elian and calling for the immediate removal of Elian from what he called a "psychologically abusive situation." Your thoughts on his letter; and how concerned are you that this may be dragging on a little bit too long?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the court made clear in the ruling in the Federal District Court. I think the State Court has made clear the concern that we all have that every day that goes by in which Elian is not reunited with his father and this matter brought to a conclusion -- can be disruptive. And no child should be in that kind of nether-nether land for that long.

Q Does that create pressure for you to take enforcement action?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we must take enforcement action based on the facts as they arise at the time, and it is important that this factor be one of those that is

considered. But pressure should not be the issue; what's right should be the issue.

Q Ms. Reno, if the goal here is to reunite the boy with his father, Cuban television has broadcast images of the school that's -- where Elian would go once he returns back to Cuba. It's been described variously as looking like -- something like a reeducation center. When you hear details of what might happen to Elian when he goes back, does that give you any pause or any reason to reconsider Elian's ultimate return to Cuba, or what he might face there?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we have focused on is the role of his father. His father had a role in raising Elian. I think everyone who has seen this little boy upon his first coming to this country, see how he withstood so valiantly the time in the sea, has got to conclude that both his parents did a very good job of raising him, and now it is time for his father to be on with that task.

Q Are you confident that he is going back to his father, not to Fidel Castro?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have no doubts about that if you talk to his father.

Q Do you have any concerns about the use of force at this stage triggering violence in Miami?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just want to make sure that the little boy is reunited with his father in the safest, least disruptive manner possible.

Q Ms. Reno, do you share the view of this psychologist who spoke recently that this boy is in a dangerous situation where he is?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am not the expert, and I would defer to the experts.

Q Do you have any view in terms of -- in the aftermath of this videotape, whether or not that has any -- or has that

spurred any concern of yours that this boy may not be treated as he should?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I have been concerned that the boy has been separated from his father in a most difficult situation where it appears that he is not able to lead a normal life, get sleep, go to school, and I think it is important that the time comes that he -- quickly -- that he is returned to his father in a safe way with as little disruption as possible.

Q Are you influenced in any way, Attorney General Reno, by your prior experience in Miami as a prosecutor where there were riots or outbreaks of violence that you, as I understand it from looking back at clips -- I wasn't there -- but where you took responsibility or felt some responsibility in certain instances?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I've never --

Q How has that experience informed your --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I've never felt responsible for riots.

Q Let me rephrase the question, then. Based on your understanding of Miami over the years as prosecutor, where there had been some violence in connection with the aftermath of cases that occurred there, how does that inform your understanding, or how does that influence your understanding of the city and the way you approach this matter?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I try to take all my experience throughout life into consideration and I try to address the issue at hand, which is how we get this boy reunited with his father in a safe way that causes as little disruption as possible. And that nobody wants violence, so how do we do that? Our major focus has got to be to see that the law is enforced and that he is returned and reunited and we're going to be doing that.

Q Just to follow up, how is the experience at Waco,

similarly, how might that have colored your experience, your decision-making process here?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Each case is different.

Q Do you see similarities there as to the decision to hold back versus move in, and the results in Waco when --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Each -- each case is different.

Q How is it different, though? I mean, how does it --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: If you don't understand the difference, I'm not going to be able to explain it this morning, but I will try. In Waco, you had people who had killed federal officers and --

Q Mm-hmm. (In agreement.)

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Thank you. And who had injured others.

You had people who had not only defied the law but killed people in the process. There's a lot of difference.

And each case has got to be judged on the facts of the case, as to how we can best achieve the goals set forth by the law, while at the same time minimizing the chances for violence. It is important for us to try to work through those issues, and there may come time when there is no other alternative. But we've got to do it in a thoughtful, careful way.

Q With regard, Ms. Reno, to minimizing the chances of violence, there have been a number of reports suggesting that there were missed opportunities throughout this process, points at which you would have been justified going in and taking the child prior to the temperature being so elevated and the emotions so high. What is your response to that? Do you, in hindsight, feel that perhaps it might have been more prudent to take steps earlier?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I noticed somebody said that we should have

done it when it wasn't an unusual case. I think anybody who has followed this case from the beginning understands that it has never been a usual case, and that in each instance, what we have tried to do is follow the rule of law. The rule of law provides different alternatives and different timings. And I think everybody is in agreement that it should be resolved in the way that is least disruptive to this little boy.

Q In the Montana Freeman case, you waited 81 days, and they finally surrendered. Does that inform your decision as well?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I indicated, I think in all these situations you try to draw from experience. But each case is different, and there are factors involved that differ, that cause you to say, "Well, you can't apply this thought or this process or this tactic, but you could do this." And you just have got to draw on that, the people around you, their experience, and make the best judgment you can.

Q Ms. Reno, your trip to Miami last week -- in hindsight, would you do it again? And do you think that in some ways you may have been too personally involved in the case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I've heard more comments about that. Somebody said I did the right thing. Somebody said I did the wrong thing. Somebody said I was too personally involved.

Somebody said I was too remote. (Laughter.)

I guess the best answer is that sign on my wall, which says: "If I were to read everything bad that people said about me, I might as well close this shop for business. I intend to keep on doing the best I can, the best I know how, and I intend to keep on doing it until the end. If the end brings me out right, what people said about me won't make any difference. And if the end brings me out wrong, 10 angels saying I was right won't make any difference." And that's Abraham Lincoln, and I think that's the best advice for us all in these circumstances.

Q (Inaudible) -- you aware that you lost some credibility with the family or that you may have been overly trusting in the way that you dealt with them last week?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think to treat people as reasonable people, focused on trying to do what's right, is not too trusting. I think perhaps the world can use more people that trust and expect people to be reasonable. And having given them the opportunity to do that, then you take other appropriate action.

Q Some people have suggested this has now, in effect, become a hostage situation more or less; that, as of the 2:00 p.m. deadline last week, when transfer was made of the parole and the boy was not turned over, that the family is now clearly in violation of the law, that they are hostage-takers in this view. Do you hold to that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think these are characterizations that people have made that put labels on a situation. I think you have got to look at all the facts and figure out how to unravel this in the way that's as safe as possible for the little boy and causes as little disruption.

Q Ms. Reno, after your experiences last week with the family, are you still open to dealing with them? Is the door still open to some sort of negotiated settlement to this deal?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have said from the very beginning that we would like to try to work this out so that -- not whether the boy be reunited, but that he be reunited promptly in an orderly way. And we will continue to be open to any suggestion as to how that can be done.

Q Ms. Reno, whatever action is taken in Miami, are you confident that the level of cooperation and coordination between federal officials and local authorities in Miami is good enough now that, whatever situation occurs, it will be handled peacefully?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have spent many years with the police

departments of Metro Dade and the City of Miami. They are professional officers. And I don't think anyone wants anybody to be hurt nor any property to be damaged. And I think that we can work together to achieve those goals.

Q Ms. Reno, have you spoken recently with Elian's father?

And if you have, can you characterize his mood right now, and how he's feeling?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I have not spoken to him recently.

Q What did you think of the video that was put out of the boy?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: It made me very sad.

Q Why?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: He is a wonderful little boy, by all accounts. His father had a role in raising him. His father cares a great deal about him. He has been under the most stressful of conditions, beginning with this most stressful of all, floating in the ocean. It is so important that all of us turn off the TV lights, stop writing on your papers, start thinking about a little boy and getting his life to some permanent resolution.

Q Did seeing that video and -- (inaudible) -- make you think that they need to go in sooner rather than later? Has that even increased the urgency of the situation to see him in that position?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: As I indicated, all factors go into this, and we will weigh them and make a determination as to how to do it based on all our law enforcement options and the 11th Circuit opinion.

Q After the 11th Circuit rules, do you then feel -- you say you cannot act before the 11th Circuit rules?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We will take whatever action is

appropriate.

Q Prior to that time as well?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We will continue to look at all the circumstances and do whatever is appropriate.

Q Are you surprised it's taking the 11th Circuit such a long time to issue their ruling?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: One of the things that has been clear in this case is you can't anticipate anything.

Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno? Just another question?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Yup.

Q A little bit of time? Some of your Justice Department colleagues who are working on the Elian Gonzalez matter with you have raised questions about whether you have the will to act to enforce the rule of law.

You've spoken often of the rule of law and its importance. And the appearance thus far has been that because of your understandable concern about triggering any violence in Miami, that you've been reluctant to use force to enforce the rule of law. And there's concern that in the aftermath of Waco and based on your own personal connections to Miami, that you may have somewhat lost your way on this case.

ATTY GEN. RENO: That was a good line this morning, I thought. Was that yours?

Q And I -- it was.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I thought it was a good line.

Q And I think it's a genuine concern that's held in this

building by some who are working closely with you. And I'm interested in your response to that.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I know where I'm going.

Q You know where you're going?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yup.

Q Do you have a plan?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I know where I'm going.

Q Ms. Reno, on -- (off mike) --

ATTY GEN. RENO: And I think this is one of the most interesting things, because when you make a decision, and you have a discussion with your editors about what you're going to write and how you're going to slant a story, people's lives may not be at stake, but you spend time, and there's disagreement. "And David's lost his way on that story. He's lost his objectivity." And David says, "I haven't lost my objectivity; I know exactly where I'm going."

When you have something that is of this magnitude, you're going to hear from people who have differing views. I think one of the things that I'm proudest of is that I let people express their views, and I expect them to express their views. In the discussions around the table and in the discussions with the -- our representatives over at INS and in Miami, it is amazing to see the good discussion that takes place and the thoughtfulness.

One of the problems that people have with Washington is that they sometimes think Washington is too remote, that Washington has forgotten the people that are at issue and the people who are involved.

If the criticism of me is that I'm trying to avoid violence, if the criticism of me is that I'm trying to avoid that little boy being hurt or being snatched in a way

that is -- can scar him further, I plead guilty. But at the same time, as I told Pierre last -- two weeks ago, I'm going to enforce the law.

Law enforcement has one of the most difficult roles: how you exercise the authority of government in a fair, firm way that people can accept, or, do you cross the line so that it is unnecessary, in terms of its authoritarianism? This case presents those issues, and I simply go back to Lincoln. I feel very comfortable in the discussions that have taken place. I want people to speak their mind. I want to make the most informed decision I can, and I don't want to be considered remote and removed from it.

Q And if you find that some of the people working closely with you don't feel that they understand where you're going or what your next move would be?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, if I knew what the 11th Circuit was going to do, it would be much more useful. One of the things that is important is that you don't get set and send the signals so that you discourage further thoughtful approaches to how you resolve the issue. If I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is what I am going to do. We don't have any further need for discussion," and we did it two days later and further discussion could have precipitated a more effective way to do it, I wouldn't like that.

I think people have got to understand that you've got to discuss these issues, you've got to be prepared to look at the facts as they exist at the particular time, and make the best judgment you can. One thing I'm trying to do -- I'm trying to do it the right way; I don't know whether I will be right, but I am dead set and determined to do it the right way, the safest way, the least violent way, and the soonest way I possibly can under the law.

Q How will President Clinton be consulted on your next step, whether that be to move in or not?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: He will be consulted, as he has, as I've kept him advised all along the way.

Q Has he offered you any counsel?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That's between me and the president.

Thank you.

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