



WEEKLY JUSTICE DEPARTMENT NEWS BRIEFING

WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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9:31 A.M. EDT

Q Good morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Welcome.

Q (Inaudible.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: It feels more like it should be with you sitting there. (Laughter.)

Just over four hours ago, federal agents began removing a group of trespassers who have been unlawfully camped out on the U.S. naval base on the island of Vieques, just off the island of Puerto Rico. The Navy and the Marines have used the base to conduct training and bombing exercises.

According to the Department of the Navy, the training exercises it conducts on the range are critical to ensuring the readiness of our armed services. But for the past year, the presence of the trespassers have prevented use of the range. That is why the president and the Navy asked that federal law enforcement take steps to remove the trespassers from the military installation.

Today's action was conducted to fulfill an agreement

reached last January between President Clinton and Puerto Rico's Governor Pedro Rossello. Under the agreement, the Navy can resume its training at Vieques Training Range as long as it only uses inert bombs. In turn, the residents of Puerto Rico will be able to decide through a referendum, whether all training must end in three years or whether it can continue indefinitely.

Throughout the morning, I have followed the developments on the island. I am pleased that so far the operation has gone very, very smoothly. Upon arriving on the island, federal agents advised trespassers that they must leave the naval installation.

Those individuals who were detained are being transported to a detention center on the main island. As of just a few moments ago, federal agents evicted approximately 140 trespassers, including more than 30 at the gate. All indications are that the protesters have handled themselves in a peaceful and dignified manner.

Once federal agents clear the trespassers at each of the sites, the Navy and the Marines will begin to secure the range and the adjoining coastline. Of the 12 campsites, federal agents have secured eight. We estimate that there are only about 20 trespassers in the other four sites.

Additionally, the U.S. Coast Guard has in place a security zone to prevent additional boats from reaching the coastline.

Today's action was taken with the full support of the government of Puerto Rico and the assistance of the police of Puerto Rico, is the result of joint efforts of the FBI, U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Coast Guard, and the U.S. Customs Service. I want to thank the federal agents who have participated in this operation. They have, so far as we have seen to date, handled themselves in the professional manner Americans have come to expect of our federal law enforcement.

Q Ms. Reno, you mentioned that they were -- the protesters

were there illegally. What law have they violated? And will they all be charged?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The trespassers are in violation of a federal trespass statute applicable to the military, Navy, and Coast Guard properties. It's 18 USC, Section 1382. And it provides, "Whoever goes upon any military, naval, or Coast Guard reservation, station, or installation for any purpose prohibited by law, or whoever reenters or is found within such installation after having been removed or ordered not to reenter by any officer, shall be fined or imprisoned not more than six months, or both."

In this instance, they will be taken to the -- to Puerto Rico, as I indicated. And unless they attempt to reenter or unless there is violence against a federal officer or some other charge, they will not be charged.

Q In other words, the 140 people taken into custody this morning or at least removed from the island will not be charged?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Unless they attempt to reenter or unless there are additional crimes involved in the trespass --

Q Why did you decide that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Because we're trying to make sure that people understand that we intend to enforce the laws, but that we want to do so in a fair and measured way.

Q The FBI has made it known that they weren't overly enthusiastic about this mission. Did the military not have the authority to take this action on its own?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The military has the authority, but in this instance, it was felt that law enforcement had more experience in a situation such as this, that it should be handled from a law enforcement perspective, as opposed to a military perspective, and that it is -- was part of the agreement that law enforcement handle it.

Q Ms. Reno, several months ago you argued pretty strenuously against having to deal with this, with the marshals, with the FBI.

What is it that persuaded you in the intervening months to go ahead?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think people have had an opportunity, and what we had encouraged then is that people sit down and talk, that we talk with the government of Puerto Rico, and I think we have seen the results in terms of a peaceful, orderly process.

Q Can you explain a little bit why -- because I think some people had the impression that the military couldn't have done this operation because of posse comitatus rules; but legally they could have? This was a matter of discretion?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I understand it, the Navy, the Marines -- and I will ask Myron to correct me later if I'm wrong -- but that they have the responsibility for securing a base. If you go onto Andrews Air Force Base or some other base, there will be a guard posted, and they have the responsibility. For violation of the law, they take custody of the person and detain the person and then turn them over to federal law enforcement authorities, either the marshal or some other federal agent. And in this instance -- so they have the authority to secure the base, and they will in this instance secure this installation. But the actual processing is done by federal law enforcement authorities.

Q Ms. Reno, everybody will be making the inevitable conclusions -- or the inevitable comparisons between this action and the enforcement action several weeks ago in Little Havana to remove Elian Gonzalez. What was the difference between the two? In one there was a considerable show of force; in this one there was a very minimal show of force. Were emotions just lower? Did you have any reports of weapons among the demonstrators?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Each case has to be taken on a case-by-case basis. Again, as was indicated previously, we had worked on

this. The Navy had been working with local authorities. We had been working with people, trying to understand the situation. And we were met with receptivity to the fact that, look, we want to express our feelings about this. From the information we had developed -- and again, I want to stress that it's not all done yet -- but the information we were able to develop indicated that people wanted to peacefully react, and yet they wanted to indicate their opposition by being taken into custody.

Q Ms. Reno, I understand that Director Freeh had argued that the U.S. Attorney's Office should obtain a court order; just to order the protestors to cease and desist. Why did you not go through that route?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: What Director Freeh indicated to me that he wanted was a court order, and as I pointed out to him and, I think, as he agreed, the law is very clear that you cannot trespass on federal military installations, and I think that the conclusion was that this -- a court order would not be necessary.

Q Ms. Reno, why not just wait -- was there any consideration given to waiting on law enforcement action until the voters on the island of Vieques had the chance to decide through referendum what the status would be? Why now?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That was an issue that I inquired about, and the response that I understand the Navy has made is that they need the facility during these next three years.

Q Ms. Reno, could you give us -- you said the president and the Navy had requested the action. Did you discuss this directly with the president, or senior White House officials? How did it work?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: The request really was made through the process of the agreement, where it was clear in the agreement and the directives by the president pursuant to the agreement with the governor of Puerto Rico.

Q And how many agents total were involved today? I mean, law enforcement officials?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Let me ask Myron to give you the exact number.

Q And from what agencies?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: This morning there were agents there from the United States Marshal Service, from the FBI, the Coast Guard was involved, the United States Customs Service was involved. I think that's -- people from -- I mean, officers from the Puerto Rican police.

Q Did they have to undergo any special training for this mission, or was it pretty straightforward?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think it was pretty straightforward. I think those of you who were watching it saw some agents who were skilled negotiators working with protestors and I think it was, again, another example of how you take the facts of the situation, you try to work through issues and try to resolve issues so that things can be done peacefully, and we see here such an indication.

Q Ms. Reno, you have mentioned that you take everything on a case-by-case basis. But going back to the issue of Elian Gonzalez and when federal agents went in to get him, was there any thought about how that operation had gone that influenced this specific operation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No.

Q Will the Defense Department reimburse the Justice Department for its expenses here?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we'll work it all out.

Q Well, does the law require it? I know the Economy Act, whenever one department uses the assets of another, it requires reimbursement. Is it clear yet whether -- (laughs) -- whether they have to reimburse you?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will work it all out with the Department of Defense. We always do. (Chuckles.)

Q Ms. Reno, can I ask another question about this mission?

There have been a series of deployments of FBI agents overseas, when they went over to react to the embassy bombings in Africa. Apparently, there were difficulties again on this one; when some of the initial deploying agents got on military aircraft and the aircraft broke down and weren't able to deliver them on time. Have you heard about this? Is this a continuing problem?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you'd have to check with the Department of Defense on that.

Q Ms. Reno, back to your decision not to charge these people, was that a decision that you made, or how was that decision reached?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we have all arrived at that decision together.

Q (Inaudible) -- why?

ATTY GEN. RENO: For the reasons I indicated.

Q Ms. Reno, would you tell us a little bit what issues would you discuss with the Mexican authorities next week at the binational meeting -- (inaudible)?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will continue our discussions about how we can work together effectively to deal with the issues of drug trafficking that plague both nations.

Q Ms. Reno, in your appearance, triumphal appearance, earlier this week on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," Ms. Winfrey asked you whether the Justice Department would try to work out some agreement with the Miami relatives in order to see Elian Gonzalez. What is the department's role there? Who is -- for want of a better term -- who is the gatekeeper

there?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The care of the child has been paroled to his father, and his father is responsible for making sure that in these days he grows up right. We have a responsibility to make sure that the terms of the law are complied with.

And what we have tried to do here, working with the father, is make a plan -- and we've submitted the plan to the court -- and it will provide that the psychiatrist, who is an expert, will see him every two weeks, and a social worker as well will see him every two weeks. And they will report to INS, who will report to the court.

As part of that, one of the issues raised is how can we provide for an appropriate transfer, how can we make sure that the contact -- what is in Elian's interest is properly considered. And clearly, contact with the family in Miami is an issue that should be considered.

INS and the Justice Department are not in the businesses of family reunification, but we are in the business of trying to figure out what is in the interest of the person who is in our custody. And so we have suggested to the Miami lawyers that we would be happy to pursue this. And Myron can give you more details.

Q As a practical matter, is it -- in other words, it's not going to happen, then, until the professionals who are visiting him say, "Now is the right time"?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think what they would like to do is figure out how to do it in an orderly way, consistent with his interest.

Q How much is the Elian Gonzalez operation costing now, to date? And how does that compare -- the sort per-week cost of protecting him compare with other people who have been in the custody of the U.S. Marshals Service, under protection?

And when was the last time there was such an expensive or elaborate custody going on, or protection?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll ask Myron to give you any details that he can.

Q Ms. Reno, Senator Hatch has complained that it's been difficult to get documents from the Justice Department. Can you update us on the status of providing information to the Senate Judiciary Committee?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We had very little notice, and we're doing our best to comply. We had, I think, complied with a significant portion that said, "Please give it to us within 24 hours." And we will continue to try to do everything we can to meet the senator's concerns.

Q Well, where does the issue of hearings stand? Do you know?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Have they -- have there been any further requests?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You'd have to check with him.

Q Ms. Reno, back to Vieques. In the days leading up to this action, a number of Hispanic American politicians were very critical of it.

Have you personally been contacted by Representative Velazquez or Gutierrez prior to this morning's action?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have received some letters. We have received some concerns. I will have Myron tell you exactly who has been in touch.

Q The FBI has made available the latest -- or the first crime figures for the full calendar year '99, which I guess will be officially released on Sunday, showing crime went down substantially again during the full calendar year.

What observations do you have about that and the reasons for it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think I should wait till they are made public. But I will say, no matter what they show, we can't become complacent. We really have a wonderful opportunity, if they are going down, we have a wonderful opportunity for Republicans and Democrats, for the rural areas and the urban areas, for all of us to work together. And you've heard this before, but it really -- it's real. It can happen. We can make a difference.

We can make a difference by developing appropriate prevention programs that give kids supervision in the afternoons and evenings and in the summertime. We can make a difference by getting guns out of the hands of people who don't belong to have them. We can make a difference by eliminating the gun show loophole and developing just common-sense provisions with respect to guns, like safety locks for kids and things like that. We can make a difference by working together to identify the dangerous criminals and go after them, prosecute them and get them sentenced to what they deserve.

I've got to tell you that, after 15 years as a local prosecutor, hoping that a system could come together so that you had prevention and intervention and punishment and after-care and follow-up, and then I'd see it kind of do its roller-coaster -- the crime rate do its roller-coaster ride, and I wondered, can we really make a difference, I believe with all my heart now we can if we don't become complacent. So, no matter what those figures show, my message is, let's try harder.

Q (Off mike) -- has seen quite a drop every year of your administration, do you think you'll regard that as the biggest achievement of your time in office?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As you know, I don't -- I've seen it go up before, and I don't think -- I think everybody will deserve some credit for it, except those people who stand in the way of common-sense approaches.

Q Ms. Reno, with the mass shooting last week near Pittsburgh, it seems like every other month, or every month, almost, we're having those kinds of incidents. What were your thoughts when you heard about that last incident? And how concerned are you about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Two families that I have met in this past year have had a profound impact on me: the family of James Byrd, who was dragged to his death in a hate crime in Jasper, Texas, and the family of Matthew Shepard.

These families are so strong. They have conveyed so much of their hurt, but of their resolve to make sure that we do something about hate in America.

One of the most profound moments that I have had in watching their influence was to listen to two police officers talk to the president of the United States about how their lives had been changed with respect to their attitudes about gay and lesbian individuals; how they had changed their manner of speaking and how, because of the family of Matthew Shepard, because of his friends, both straight and gay, they had a far better understanding of themselves and of others. Mr. and Mrs. Shepard do wonderful things all across this country, but all of us need to learn from them and to create a better understanding so that color, so that religion, so that where you're from, so that none of these things make any difference and that we judge people for who they are and what their heart and soul and mind and spirit say, not what a label says.

And yet, no matter how hard we try, there will always be people who hate and who commit terrible crimes because of hate and bias and prejudice and bigotry, and we should do everything we can to get the Hate Crimes Act passed, because it is clear to me that local authorities are doing so much, but we can do so much more if the federal government can be assured of being a strong partner, and that legislation is needed for that.

Q Ms. Reno, concerning Elian, a question I asked last week I'll put in a little different terms. Have you had any

firsthand contact with Elian or his attorney or Juan Gonzalez in the last week?

And do you know by other means, by other sources, how Elian is doing? Does he miss his Miami relatives, specifically?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not had contact with Elian. I saw his lawyer in the past week, just casually.

We are getting reports as I indicated, and these reports will -- I think both the psychiatrist and the social worker are seeing him today, and we will continue to get reports. I think that answered your question.

Q Well, I mean, are you confident the child is well and happy in his Maryland venue?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Based on Dr. Kernberg's reports and just casual comments, I think he is; I think he is glad to be with his daddy. I think we have got to explore how we can make sure that these five months that have passed are appropriately a part of his life, if it's the right thing to do.

Q Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, still on that topic, if Juan Miguel Gonzalez were to turn to an IS official this afternoon and say, "You know, I have changed my mind; I'd like to stay in the United States, and I'd like to ask for asylum for myself, my sons and my wife," would the INS be receptive to that request?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes.

Q Mm-hmm. (In acknowledgment.)

Q Ms. Reno, you mentioned on the Oprah Winfrey show --

Q Does it fix it, and -- (inaudible) -- that an invitation? (Laughter.)

Q You mentioned on the Oprah Winfrey show how painful it's been for you, to have the anger that many of your friends in Miami feel towards you. Do you think that those relationships would ever be repaired?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I hope with all my soul they will be because --

I want to say something. The Cuban American community in Miami has gotten a lot of slings and arrows, and harsh things have been said about them. But they are wonderful, caring, passionate, sometimes stubborn people. And they have contributed significantly to the art, the music, the culture of a city that has grown and has been a place to go for Americans and for people around the world.

I can get into some good arguments with them. I never dreamed we'd get into something like this. But they have contributed a great deal to this nation, and I would say what I said this past week: The time has come for everybody to sit down and let us all work together to maintain a democracy we love.

When I leave this job, one of the things that I've thought about doing is writing a book on how you build a democracy.

Where -- and Pierre is sitting right over there. Usually in Pete's place will be a minister of justice, sometimes a vice president; on two occasions, a prime minister. And an ambassador is in Pierre's place as I sit across the table from them. They come with such hopes and dreams, from emerging democracies that have come out from the shadow of tyranny. They come with renewed faith for democracies that have been submerged after a long history of democracy.

But one of the things that you realize is democracy is one of the most wonderful institutions that human beings have created, but it is also fragile. It is something that requires constant nurturing. And one of the things that is clear to me is that it requires a mutual respect for the people who are participating in this great undertaking.

I don't know whether it's going to be possible, but I'm going to try my best.

Q Ms. Reno, Judge Jackson has scheduled a remedies hearing on the Microsoft case for May 24th. Are you hopeful that that will be only hearing in the remedies phase, or do you anticipate that as a result of Microsoft's response to the Justice Department's proposal, that this may be dragged on well into the summer, if not the end of the summer or beyond?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things that I've learned is not to comment about court proceedings outside court, but do so in the court.

Q Ms. Reno, one last question on Elian. The police chief -- how do you feel that he acquitted himself in this process?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Chief O'Brien? Chief O'Brien has been a distinguished law enforcement officer from the time he joined the Miami Police Department, and he continued, till the time he resigned, to be distinguished.

Q And he's kind of the only casualty so far in the Elian case.

He's the one who lost his job because he didn't tell the mayor about the Justice Department's plans. How do you feel about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Just what I said. I think he has been absolutely distinguished.

Q When you talked of sitting down and talking with Miami officials, who are you thinking of at this point, and when?

Because obviously --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm -- just sitting down and talking to my friends.

Q Well, have you considered, like, a get-together with

Mayor Carollo? He's got his hands full right now, but is that the kind of person that you're talking about? Are you talking about on that level?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I want to talk to anybody that wants to talk about how we build a stronger America, a stronger community in south Florida, how we come together and work to build respect for each other. One of the things the Cuban community says is, "People don't understand us." One person said, "We've got talk it out and it's going to hurt like `blank.'" "

I don't care how much it hurts. What I do care about is that the rest of the nation have the opportunity that I've had over now 30 years or more to see the Cuban American community and south Florida at its best and to understand how much it has contribute and how much it has yet to contribute to this country.

Q Thank you.

STAFF: Thank you very much.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Thank you.

Q (Off mike.) Nice looking suit.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: This is -- Beverly would tell you this is old. (Laughter.)

Q Beverly, is that old?

(Laughter, off mike chatter.)

Q Is this the project --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: (Laughs.) She can even remember what I wore when I got nominated. (Laughter.)

Q Is this project going to delay the truck trip?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, I figure I'll just take my notes with me and -- (pause) -- I'm going to have such a good time!

(Laughter.)

And I've got to embarrass him. The other day when I came in here and Mike wasn't here, you all failed me. You didn't tell me he was indisposed, and so it was very uncomfortable, since he always sits on my right, not to have him there. And then I learned, and I'm just so glad that you're back.

Q Well, it's very good to be back --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: So nobody take his chair! (Laughter.)

END.

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