



**REMARKS FOR
ATTORNEY GENERAL ALBERTO R. GONZALES
AT THE
HURRICANE KATRINA FRAUD TASK FORCE CONFERENCE**

**New Orleans, Louisiana
October 20, 2005**

It is my pleasure to be in New Orleans to join you in this conference of the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force.

As we begin our discussions, I think it's important to remember the simplicity of our charge. We're here for one reason: to help the citizens and communities affected by Hurricane Katrina.

In the hours, days, and weeks since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ripped through this area, help has come from a number of sources. Americans from across the country offered relief, reached into their pockets, and opened their arms and homes to displaced families. Corporations gave generously of their expertise and resources...and federal, state, and local authorities have worked tirelessly to put the pieces back together for the people of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and other affected areas.

In the midst of all of this outpouring of support, however, there are some who have sought to take advantage of our collective generosity and our comprehensive response as a Nation.

As you all know, that is why we created this Task Force - to safeguard the integrity of the rebuilding and recovery process. We have a responsibility to ensure that relief aid and reconstruction dollars reach the shattered communities and victims of these powerful natural disasters.

We have been focusing on fraud schemes intended to divert relief funds from the people who need them. And, also on the integrity of public officials who are responsible for awarding government contracts. Every dollar that is directed for hurricane relief should be used in the affected communities - not to pad the bank accounts of fraudsters and criminals.

The Task Force is directing its work in a few important areas:

- Government Benefit Fraud
- Government Contract and Procurement Fraud
- Fraudulent Charities
- Insurance Fraud, and
- Identity Theft

When these crimes occur, the Task Force has acted quickly and aggressively to punish those who would prey on our fellow citizens in their hour of greatest need, and deter others with swift and certain prosecution.

I appointed Alice Fisher, the Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division, to chair this effort. She reports that there already have been unprecedented levels of cooperation and partnership among federal, state, and local law enforcement authorities, including the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, and the Postal Inspection Service. Together there are over 30 member agencies and organizations. You each bring an important and valuable expertise to the table. Combined with those of your colleagues in this effort, your skills and specialties make this Task Force effective in its mission. The President and I appreciate your dedication...and the American people do as well.

I'm also aware that only six weeks into this work, we already have had a number of great successes.

The Task Force has secured criminal charges against a total of 42 persons for hurricane-related fraud - many of them resulting from joint investigations that highlight the cooperation made possible by this Task Force.

In California, for instance, 15 residents - including subcontractors at the largest Red Cross Katrina call center in the country, located in Bakersfield - have been indicted for their role in an alleged scheme to defraud the American Red Cross of relief funds. The defendants allegedly obtained false claim information that allowed them to obtain direct payments from Western Union after claiming to be a victim from one of the affected areas.

In another case, the defendant was indicted for allegedly soliciting charitable contributions on the website AirKatrina.com. The defendant falsely claimed that he was piloting flights to Louisiana to provide medical supplies and evacuate children. In just two days, he had already received almost \$40,000 in donations, before his fraudulent operation was shut down.

These cases - and several others like them, including many instances of people falsely claiming the \$2,000 FEMA benefits - shed some light on the small group of criminals who look to profit from this tragedy.

The message of our collective effort is clear: We will not tolerate this kind of behavior in our compassionate society. Fraud will not go unpunished.

I know that this group understands what is necessary for us to collectively make good on this "zero tolerance" promise - made not only to those who've been affected by Katrina, but to every American.

When he spoke to the Nation from New Orleans, the President offered this pledge, "Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives."

This Task Force is a part of that pledge...a part of the rebuilding process. And we will do whatever it takes to get this job done.

Your work every day will dictate whether we are successful. So I urge you to rededicate yourselves - at every opportunity - to the coordination and cooperation that is necessary to effectively execute our responsibility to this region, to this country, and to our fellow citizens.

I am going to do everything I can to support you in this effort. That's why I am pleased to announce the creation of the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force's Joint Command Center on the campus of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

It's easier to work together when everyone is under one roof. With this Joint Command Center, Task Force representatives from federal law enforcement, the federal community of Inspectors General, and United States Attorneys Offices can better pool their resources to ensure a coordinated attack on procurement fraud and public corruption.

In the coming weeks and months, relief funds will continue to rush into the Gulf area. And with this influx will come further opportunities for fraud.

It is imperative that we continue to work together to do our part to secure the integrity of the rebuilding process here in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf region. I appreciate the dedication you've shown to this mission already - but there is more to come and more to do.

The road to full recovery is long and I expect that we will be there every step of the way to support the process that helps the displaced families and disaster-stricken communities rebuild, recover, and reclaim their lives.

Thank you for your work, for your compassion and dedication. God bless you and may God continue to bless the United States of America.

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