



Prepared Remarks of Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales at the Hurricane Katrina One-Year Anniversary Symposium

**New Orleans, Louisiana
September 13, 2006**

Good afternoon. It's good to be back in New Orleans. I was here a few weeks ago to talk with many of you about a regional, multi-disciplinary approach to rebuilding the greater New Orleans criminal justice system, because this great city cannot return to its former glory if its neighborhoods are being held hostage by criminals.

So I want to begin today by commending law enforcement officials here in New Orleans and all across the gulf region for their tireless efforts to take back the region's cities. Much has been done but there is much more left to do.

I know it angers all of us that devastating natural disasters have been followed by hundreds of smaller, man-made ones. From violent crime to fraud, this region has been taken advantage of by criminal elements.

After Hurricanes left this region in ruins, with thousands of lives lost and dismantled, the vast majority of the nation responded with compassion. Government, private sector and individual efforts to help the people of the region were as unprecedented as Hurricane Katrina herself.

Yet while most Americans were sending donations and prayers, some chose to plot their own corrupt enrichment instead. And the problem became a national one – requiring a national response including this integrated task force.

The actions of those committing disaster-related fraud are shameful as well as illegal – and I know they aren't tolerated by anyone in this room today.

In the past year, the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force has proven that point, charging more than 400 defendants in 30 separate judicial districts around the country.

These cases have involved millions of dollars – and in fact, since the establishment of the Task Force, FEMA and the Red Cross report that more than \$18.2 million has been returned by recipients of individual-assistance benefits. I see this as a sign that your efforts are making a difference in terms of deterrence as well, and that's extremely important. People need to know that they won't get away with these crimes, and that message is getting out there.

The people in this room today have cracked down criminal on activity ranging from charity and assistance fraud to identity theft, Internet fraud and public corruption involving federal or state contracts.

You've caught scores of people who, unaffected by the storms, tried to claim FEMA funds. One woman was living in Belleville, Illinois at the time of Hurricane Katrina. She defrauded FEMA by claiming she was displaced by the storm and even went so far as to tell FEMA that her two

daughters had died during the flooding in New Orleans... and that she had watched their bodies float away.

This woman had no daughters. It was all an elaborate fabrication which resulted in her indictment by the Justice Department this summer.

Another defendant allegedly made and presented to FEMA a false claim for funds for individuals displaced by Hurricane Katrina, claiming home damage and essential need for food, clothing and shelter. With those funds, the defendant allegedly obtained rooms at seven different hotels in Las Vegas... and re-rented them to other individuals for the believed purposes of narcotics sales and prostitution.

Some fraudsters had the audacity to set up websites to collect charitable donations... but truly the money was for personal profit. Your investigations and indictments in those cases have put other would-be Internet thieves on notice.

The examples seem endless, and it is disturbing to see not only the volume of fraud but the lengths to which people would go to take advantage of others' suffering.

Through your work, you have protected private, taxpayer and charitable dollars and discouraged would-be criminals from taking advantage of the situation in the Gulf Coast.

In short: I applaud your outstanding efforts to stop hurricane-related fraud, an especially dishonorable form of theft.

Today we've gathered to look at the past year – and to share what we've learned with one another. Because the work of the Task Force is not yet done. Billions of dollars are headed to the Gulf Coast region for the rebuilding effort – and we know that fraud, sadly, follows dollars. The criminally-minded are watching that money with a scheming eye, so our continued vigilance is more important than ever.

We need to watch for those who may be creating fraudulent websites to solicit charitable donation or to phish for identity theft purposes.

We'll continue to crack down on "insiders" who are using their positions with disaster relief programs to commit fraud for themselves or others.

And our eyes will be sharp for future cases of bribery or extortion of public officials involved in the disaster relief or recovery efforts.

Because of the work we have done, we are smarter now and I predict that our efforts going forward will be even better than our success to date.

The report released today details the trends and patterns the Task Force has identified, and that is one of the things that will assist you in the considerable work that lies ahead.

Your report identifies the cycles of fraud after disasters – beginning with charity-fraud schemes, then moving into emergency-assistance schemes and later procurement and insurance fraud.

The Task Force has also identified, and detailed in its report, how systemic weaknesses are exploited by criminals. In short, when these criminals find a weak spot, an easy route to the money, they tend to return for more – giving law enforcement an opportunity to stop them.

I think that you will all find the “best practices” section of the report useful as well. It lays out steps like planning, training, outreach and coordination that have worked for you already, but I believe everyone will find good tips and ideas to keep in mind as this enormous job continues to unfold.

As you go forward with your work, remember that you play a key role in making the most of the money that is allocated to help this region. I know that you and I agree that every dollar that is directed for Hurricane relief and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast should be used in the affected communities - not to pad the bank accounts of criminals.

Together, we must ensure that the criminals who have exploited this time of human suffering are brought to justice, and that their crimes do not undermine the programs intended to rebuild the homes, businesses, and communities destroyed by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. The Department of Justice is absolutely dedicated to vigorously investigating and prosecuting fraud, in whatever form it may take, and we are proud to work with you – our partners – to prevent fraud in the future.

I am reassured to know that you are safeguarding the integrity of this rebuilding and recovery process.

Thank you again for your efforts and your service; may God bless you and the critical work ahead.

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