



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, April 2, 1998

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

QUESTION: Good morning.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, both you and Mr. Holder have indicated that the OPR review of complaints against Judge Starr's investigation will have to wait until we get some rulings from Judge Johnson. Is that still the case? Are we still waiting on rulings from Judge Johnson?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the words I used was we have got to

pay some deference to the Judge. We are not foreclosing action, but we would like to make sure that we let the Judge have an opportunity to consider the matter. And so this is a matter that we will work out between the Judge, the parties and --

QUESTION: Are you talking with the Judge at the moment, to coordinate the --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not talked to the Judge.

QUESTION: How many rulings are we talking about?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know what rulings she would make, so I cannot say how many.

QUESTION: But, Ms. Reno, a U.S. Attorney in Arkansas has started his own investigation in a matter that touches on whether a witness, an important witness in Starr's investigation may have been passing information to a conservative magazine. Is that U.S. Attorney off the reservation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we are trying to do is, again, look at all the matters and take appropriate action. And I am reviewing that at this point.

QUESTION: Did he do that without consulting you or anyone in Washington?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, what we are doing is looking at the whole matter. And at this point, I am reviewing it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, have you -- (off microphone) -- inquiries into the conduct of Ken Starr's prosecutors questioning Monica Lewinski in those early hours -- (off microphone) -- OPR?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have heard from the media that that might be the case, but we have not seen anything, so I could not comment.

QUESTION: Would that automatically -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What I would prefer to do is to see the ruling, if there is such a ruling, and make an appropriate comment after I have had a chance to review it.

(Pause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Since you have some involvement in approving the broadened mandate for the Independent Counsel, in your view, does the Judge's dismissal of the Jones v. Clinton lawsuit in any way affect the mandate that you gave to the Independent Counsel?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno -- (off microphone) -- Justice bill has been stalled in the Senate because of objections from both the left and the right. Do you think the shooting in Arkansas is going to improve the chances for some kind of bill coming out of Congress this year?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is terrible that a tragedy like that should have to precipitate consideration of what I think is one of the most important issues in this country: how we give our children a chance to grow in a strong and positive way. That piece of legislation, I think, can be very important if it is balanced, if it provides for appropriate punishment that fits the crime, if it provides for intervention programs that aim at the first offenders and give them new opportunities, and if it looks at prevention and determines that it will provide of an authorized flow of funding to sound prevention programs.

But I just want to stress, too, that there is no one simple answer to the problem of youth violence. It requires that communities come together to really reweave the fabric of community around children. It requires parents' attention. It requires schools working with police. It requires the private sector to be involved, in terms of job opportunities, job training.

But what is really rewarding to me is that in an area like Boston, or in other areas where youth violence has been so high for some time, it has come down. Because communities have come together to address the issue of guns in the hands of kids, to address the issue of schools and afternoon programs that can make a difference. And I think we are making a difference where communities are affected.

QUESTION: How can Federal legislation help that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think Federal legislation can be vitally important in terms of providing a designated -- we have provided monies for prisons, we have provided monies for police -- it is the police, it is the sheriffs who are telling me how important it is that we provide monies for prevention, as well.

QUESTION: What is the prognosis in Congress as you see it right now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am very hopeful that we can work together to come up with a sound piece of legislation. I think it is too critical for this Nation, for us to walk away from it and say that we cannot work something out that can be effective.

QUESTION: Hopeful and optimistic?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am always optimistic that right will prevail.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if you can go -- you said that your lawyers were looking at whether there were any Federal statutes that could be invoked to prosecute the two suspects in Jonesboro. Is it clear from that review now that this will be a local matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are continuing discussions, and will continue to look at all the facts, to see and to -- before we did anything, we would certainly work closely with the local prosecutor and work in conjunction with the local prosecutor to see what was appropriate.

QUESTION: So Federal prosecution is still a possibility?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are still considering what would be appropriate under Federal law and under principles of Federalism and under the concept of what is best for justice in this case.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, about your trip to Jonesboro. You went, in part, to see if you could learn what was behind this behavior on the part of these young kids that did the shooting. I believe you met an awful lot of people who were -- well, the program was just wonderful. So could you recount a little bit your personal impressions?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I went at the invitation of those that arranged the convocation, to participate in whatever small way we could in an effort to heal. We did not -- we were not really looking at the issues that the Commission

will address. We were looking at how we could reach out and let the people of Jonesboro know how touched this Nation was, to let them know that, at least from my point of view, these children and that teacher who died had had a profound affect on the Nation.

While we grieved for them, we also took great joy in their life. And that the people of Jonesboro had evidenced a quiet strength in the way they had responded to the whole terrible, terrible tragedy. And that strength gave us an example to follow.

I think it is important, in those situations, to let people know that a nation is caring. And that is what we tried to do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I understand this morning the family of Dr. King plans to call for a special commission to get to what they feel is the truth concerning their father's death. Is there anything that the Justice Department is doing now in relation to that? Will the Justice Department participate? Or --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not heard of such a proposal. We would certainly look at it immediately.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- the former agent's statement or his claims about finding the material in James Earl Ray's car, in --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have reviewed the background of that, and we will certainly consider whatever he might want to present.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, earlier on the Starr question, you said: We're looking at the whole matter at this point.

That was after Ms. Lincoln asked you about the U.S. Attorney in Arkansas. When you say, "the whole matter," did you mean all the complaints against --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I was referring specifically to the matters that I understood she asked about. Which were the questions of monies paid to a witness, the specific matters that have arisen recently.

QUESTION: So there is an investigation underway at this point?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. Right now, it is on my desk, to be specific. I am looking at it, trying to consider what is the appropriate step to take.

QUESTION: On the -- (off microphone) -- Oregon assisted suicide law still pending? Could you just -- (off microphone) -- what the process is, where things stand -- (off microphone) -- time frame and what you are looking -- (off microphone)?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we have tried to do is to make sure that everybody has an opportunity to be heard. I am now anticipating some decision memos, giving the different perspectives of the Department, so that I can take final action. I have reviewed the memos. I have considered the arguments. And now I am waiting for a specific recommendation.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the fact that the judiciary administrative law subcommittee is taking up bankruptcy reform legislation today, and the House is going to do the same thing next month, has the Department taken any position or are they formulating a position on these proposals to put means testing for bankruptcy into the Federal legislation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me ask Myron to give you the specifics of just what we have done with respect to that legislation.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, has the Department reached any conclusions yet as to whether there is specific and credible information that requires further review or investigation under the Independent Counsel Act arising from the Yolanda Hill's testimony some days ago regarding trade missions and campaign contributions?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not gotten a report on that. That matter is still being reviewed by the Criminal Division.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if we can go back to one of Ron's question. One of the reports we are looking at, as far as with Judge Hale, while he was a witness in Judge Starr's investigation, availed himself of a vacation home, or some type of facility supplied by a Republican contributor, a large Republican contributor, who also supplied money to some Arkansas State troopers. One detail of that report said that the FBI detail assigned to Judge Hale -- (off microphone) -- Federal witness, also availed themselves of this facility. Is that part of what you are looking at?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot go into detail as to what I am looking at except to say what I have said previously: the matter is on my desk and I am reviewing all the aspects.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, your no comment with respect to the -- (off microphone) -- independent counsel matter, that "no comment" is a little bit more intriguing --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You all are amazing. I thought I was getting repetitious and that it was that you were bored with me for explaining why I could not comment. But I have no comments, because I have tried my very best not to comment on any matter with respect to the Independent Counsel. So you should not read anything into my attempt to be brief, so that you would have more time to ask questions.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on this thing that you have on your desk that you are reviewing -- (off microphone) -- copy this big?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Could you characterize -- I mean, is this an OPR report? Is it from the U.S. Attorney's office in Arkansas? Is it from the FBI?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot comment. I think rather than saying -- the issues involved, I am reviewing the issues involved to determine what would be appropriate in terms of how the matter should be pursued.

QUESTION: Can you even say whether it is a serious matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not finished my review, so I cannot conclude the seriousness of it.

QUESTION: Can you suggest -- (off microphone) -- preliminary statement in terms of determining whether it merits investigation or merits review by OPR or some other --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it must be pursued, and I want to make a determination as to how it should be pursued.

QUESTION: A man thought by many in the fight against drugs to be a hero, General Serrano, of Colombia, testified 2 days ago to, one, the Russian mafia supplying arms of just about any type of arms to the Communist guerrillas who are protecting the coca and poppy fields, very rich guerrilla groups. He says that that is the main threat insofar as arms supply, and their arms are more sophisticated than they have themselves.

The second point was they are not getting the helicopters they need to get their police into the field and out. They need -- they asked for Blackhawks because they will go high enough and far enough, and they can navigate in bad weather. And they are acutely in need of transportation. And they say, of course, that DEA is trying to help them.

Is the Justice Department aware of these particular factors?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We try to work with the State Department in trying to address the issues, such as the helicopters, trying to take into consideration what stalwart people like the General feel are necessary and, wherever possible, consistent with appropriate procedures, trying to provide those.

I will ask Myron to follow up with the State Department and what specifically we can respond to.

QUESTION: Did you get to speak with General Serrano in his visit this week?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I did not.

QUESTION: And I have one more drug-related question. Mr. Carrera-Fuentes, the former head of the Mexican Federal Judicial Police, was arrested in Mexico City. Do you have any comment with regard to that apprehension?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I do not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I hate to come back to the subject again, but here goes. Can you give us any sense of how this matter that you are considering concerning the witness came to your attention, without getting into, you know, what you plan to do about it. How did it come to the Justice Department's attention?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not sure how specifically it came to the Justice Department's attention.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno -- (off microphone) -- I was wondering if you were for it and what you -- (off microphone) -- comment -- (off microphone) -- Constitution -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot hear your last --

QUESTION: Oh, I just wondered if you were for the amendment, and I would like your comments on -- (off microphone) -- yesterday said that the -- (off microphone) -- statute -- (off microphone) -- change the Constitution.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not had a chance to review the language, so I cannot comment on their new specific proposal. But we have said all along that we want to work with them to draft language that is fitting for the Constitution, that really makes clear that the victims should not be the forgotten person in the system, and that we can protect the rights of defendants while at the same time focusing on the rights of victims.

I do not think that is frivolous at all. Anybody who has ever been a victim, particularly the victim of a serious crime, in the criminal justice system, knows that you go through the crime and then you go through the process of the system that can be, under the best of circumstances, a very, very difficult proceeding. And I think it is incumbent upon all of us to try to do everything we can, both in statute and in the Constitution, to make sure that, consistent with existing defendants' rights, we protect the rights of victims, as well.

Yes?

QUESTION: Earlier this week there was some backing and forthing over the Khobar Towers investigation and some comments that Prince Naif made in Saudi Arabia as to the state of their efforts. Can you just sort out for us where things stand in terms of the U.S. investigation, whether they are actively being pursued or not, and the state of cooperation with the Saudi authorities on that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I really cannot comment on the pending matter.

QUESTION: The Saudis say they are through, they are finished their investigation and they want Mr. Hani Said, the gentleman who was detained here in the United States, to be extradited back to Saudi Arabia. Is there some stipulation, perhaps, that they want to get this man back before they will release the results of the investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I will not comment, because our investigation continues.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, earlier you said you are not --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You just thanked me a moment ago, like I could leave.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: I thought of one more question, at least.

Earlier, you said that you are not in communication with Judge Johnson. Is anyone in the Justice Department in communication with Judge Johnson or her office to try to coordinate an OPR review so that you do not step on Judge Johnson's toes as she --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You have referred to an OPR review. And as I have heard this morning, there was an indication in the press that there was a referral for an OPR review. I have not seen -- if there is a ruling from the Judge, I have not seen that ruling. I should not comment until I see it.

QUESTION: Is it here in the Justice Department? Do you know if it is here?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: When I walked into this room, we had not heard that we were in receipt of such a ruling.

QUESTION: Let's go back to Colombia. General Serrano also said that every one of the anti-drug fight, everyone that is fighting the cocaine cartels, et cetera, are fighting for their lives every day. They fight to survive. And he said that the guerrillas were doing better and better, as we have heard, having victory after victory over the Army.

And I would ask once again if indeed the Russian mafia is responsible, as has been said by the Colombians several times now? Don't you think that for the security of the Americas, especially Colombia, that the matter of arms supply by the Russian mob into South America must have a priority?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: With respect to Russian organized crime, as with any organized crime, we try to pursue all leads. And as you know, I do not comment on what we do in pursuit of those leads.

QUESTION: Is this, to you, a very serious matter -- drugs and guns, drugs and weapons -- coming out of Russia?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Drugs and weapons coming from anywhere are a serious matter to me.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the Independent Counsel Act provides that -- as I understand it -- the only oversight that the Attorney General has over the Independent Counsel is to terminate or dismiss the Independent Counsel for cause. Have you -- can you explain exactly what "for cause" might be, what the threshold for that might be?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is going to have to be judged on the case and on the language of the statute. And I think for me to comment would be inappropriate.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, just one final comment so I can get straight in my mind -- and I admit I am a little confused.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not want to confuse you.

QUESTION: Well, it is easily done. There are two things we are talking about here. Number one is the OPR review. Number two is the report out of Arkansas. Is the material relating to both of these --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know which OPR review you are referring to.

QUESTION: Well, the OPR review request that has been held up by -- in deference to Judge Johnson. It has been requested by Representative Conyers and Senator Torricelli and the attorneys for Monica Lewinski.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There is no OPR review that is underway. As I indicated previously, what we are trying to do is to see if Judge Johnson is going to rule, and give her a chance to consider it, since the matter is pending before her. And then, just considering the timing, making an appropriate determination ourselves.

What I am hearing today and what I have heard from the media is that she may have ruled. We have not seen the ruling, and will check -- continue to check to see if she has.

QUESTION: But this matter on your desk -- and presumably it is some type of folder -- does it include that material?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think there is even a folder on my desk. The issue before me is what appropriate disposition is made of the

allegations that you referred to concerning benefits to witnesses.

QUESTION: That is the report from the U.S. Attorney in Arkansas?

(Pause.)

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 9:53 a.m., the press conference concluded.)