



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, October 8, 1998

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

VOICES: Good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

QUESTION: How do you feel?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm fine. Thank you.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Four years ago, President Clinton signed the Crime Bill's Violence Against Women Act, landmark legislation that provided new laws, new money and a new awareness of a problem that has languished in the shadows for far too long.

I have often said that the cycle of violence begins at home. Domestic violence often begets more violence. And too often children who witness the crime go on to commit crimes of their own. It is handed down from one generation to another, because they come to accept violence as a way of life.

In the past four years, the Violence Against Women Act has helped us take several important steps forward. We have awarded more than half-a-billion dollars to support community efforts to fight domestic violence. \$412 million has been awarded under the STOP program to hire, train, equip, and help coordinate the efforts of police, prosecutors and victims advocates.

Almost \$106 million has been given to help jurisdictions that encourage arrest whenever the police find evidence of domestic violence. In rural America, where shelters and services are sometimes many, many miles away, we have provided \$32 million for joint law enforcement efforts, more treatment and counseling, and new education and prevention strategies. And we have given almost \$16 million to tribal governments to strengthen their enforcement, prosecution and victim services.

These grants are making a difference. But we have not stopped there. We are working to ensure that States give full faith and credit to each other's protection orders. We have sent out more than 90,000 copies of a booklet designed to help stop the cycle of domestic violence. We have helped police and prosecutors crack down on stalkers, established a Violence Against Women home page on the Internet, and distributed information to community-based organizations around the country.

And the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-SAFE -- 1-800-799-SAFE -- has received hundreds of thousands of calls since it was established in 1996. In addition, Federal prosecutors are working with their local counterparts to make sure that Federal laws are used whenever appropriate, and in an agreement with the local prosecutor.

Today we are taking another step by providing new assistance under the Act's last new funding program. As a result of Violence Against Women, several legal assistance grants -- \$11.5 million -- will be awarded to 57 legal advocacy programs, including one in every State, to help them provide more legal services to victims of domestic violence.

Too many victims cannot get the help they need to pursue civil remedies because they cannot afford a lawyer. Thanks to bipartisan support, led by Chairman Howell Rogers, of Kentucky, legal clinics will have more resources to help battered women obtain protection orders, divorces or separations, spousal and child support, and child custody or visitation. And victims will be able to get more access to public benefits such as housing and employment.

The Violence Against Women Act is four years old. In every area of the country, new programs and activities are underway because of this Act. These programs range from new specialized prosecution and law enforcement units to expanded services for victims and for expanded services for those who witness the crime. Prosecutors have new tools and victims have new protections. And, in part, because of the Violence Against Women Act, we are seeing fundamental change in how our Nation responds to these serious crimes.

In 1978, I developed a domestic intervention program at the State Attorney's Office in Miami. Few people thought it was a serious crime. In these 20 years, we have seen a very significant change. But we cannot stop here. We must continue our efforts, in partnership with State and local officials, both law enforcement and the medical community, to make sure that domestic violence never becomes acceptable again in this country.

I would like to thank two women who have helped make the success of the Act possible. Bonnie Campbell, the Director of the Justice Department's Violence Against Women Office, and Noel Brennan, Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Justice Programs, are here with me today to answer any questions.

QUESTION: Looking at how the grants are distributed, I noticed that American Samoa gets more than California. Is this reflective of the need or the problem or is it because California already has gotten its share in earlier grants?

VOICE: These are not formula grants. These are discretionary grants. And the decisions were made based on the applications. While I do not know the specifics of the American Samoa applications -- and by the way, Cathy Schwartz, who is the Administrator of our office is here -- the money is going to nonprofits in the jurisdictions. And I know from my own dealings with people in American Samoa that this is a huge issue for them. I would be happy to talk further after the availability.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the issues that we have faced is in certain areas of the country people simply have not had the resources to begin to address the issues. You will see the same situation arise in Indian country. And when I go out to Indian country, people are telling me that this is one of the great problems they face. So we will get you the information as to why and how what the considerations are.

QUESTION: What are the numbers saying in terms of the reporting of domestic violence -- are women less fearful about either coming forward or taking steps to get out of bad situations?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will try to get you as specific figures as we can. My understanding is that it is being reported more frequently. But I am still trying to grapple with the issue of how it is reported. I find aggravated battery or aggravated assault would oftentimes be a charge that would reflect domestic violence. And in some cases you have a very high aggravated assault rate and a very high murder rate. In others, you do not have a comparability. That makes you wonder just what the situation is.

So we are trying to refine how we report these crimes, to ensure accuracy and to ensure full reporting. I will give you the best information I can, but I am not satisfied with it yet.

QUESTION: Ms. Campbell, recognizing that today's announcement is about the civil side, may I take the opportunity to ask a question about the use of criminal sanctions that are in the Violence Against Women Act. We have seen quite a few stories about various States using the statute for the first time and that kind of thing, but how often have the Federal criminal sanctions been used as opposed to State sanctions in the past four years?

MS. CAMPBELL: Well, more and more, all the time. I think it is important to recognize that the

Federal criminal offenses are very narrowly tailored. They were meant to fill gaps in the law. And sometimes even if local prosecutors have conferred with Federal officials, a decision is made to go forward under State law, because the remedy is better.

QUESTION: Would you say a couple of dozen times -- do you have any idea how often it has been employed?

MS. CAMPBELL: Many more than that. I can get the numbers, but it is closer to 100.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not sure that it is too many more than that, because as Bonnie points out, it is a gap-filler for those cases where you simply do not have venue in one specific jurisdiction or there are question marks that are raised. But what we have asked the U. S. Attorneys to do is to meet with their colleagues, the State and local prosecutors, advise them of the Federal remedies, and make sure that they are aware that if they run into a case where they question their jurisdiction, and we might fill that gap, that we are there and available and ready to respond.

But what we have tried to do in all our efforts is to recognize principles of Federalism, that States are primarily responsible for -- and want to -- when you talk to the National District Attorneys Association and to local prosecutors, they say, This is our responsibility and we should enforce these laws. So it is, again, part of the partnership we are trying to develop, and to take the cases based on what is in the best interest of the community in the case and not who gets the credit or whose turf it is.

QUESTION: May I ask you one other question, Ms. Campbell. Does your office take a position on the practice of some States to have a two-tier welfare system, where people who come from other States receive welfare benefits at the level of the State where they came from for a year or so? Some women's groups have said this is difficult for women who are trying to flee an abusive situation.

MS. CAMPBELL: We weighed in very strongly on welfare reform, to encourage all the State governors to implement the family violence option. I think that is as far as we have gone on that topic, though certainly we recognize the interconnection of poverty and violence and all of the other issues the Attorney General referenced -- housing, child support, battles over custody issues. This interconnection really speaks to the importance of the grants that we are announcing today.

I have told anyone who will listen that because we are tightening up the criminal sanctions and making the batterer feel consequences there, the battleground now is becoming -- is shifting to the civil arena. But we are well aware of all these connections. And I would say that if you are hearing that about a two-tiered welfare system, there is no question that there is a connection between not having money and the ability to flee.

But we have not, for the reasons Ms. Reno suggested, gone in and told States how they ought to structure their welfare system. But we encourage, always, that they consider using the family violence option, which is available.

QUESTION: What is the family violence option?

MS. CAMPBELL: Well, I am a very long way from being an expert on welfare. But in the welfare reform law, there is a cap on the numbers of people and dollars -- I am not sure how it is structured -- before States begin to be punished, if you will. I think the family violence option excludes, in the counting toward meeting the cap, monies that go to help women who are fleeing family violence.

I can get for you a more sophisticated explanation when we are through. But Ms. Reno wrote a letter -- if I am remembering correctly -- to all the State governors when welfare reform was first being initiated, saying how important it is that they be aware of the family violence option as they put together their plans and its connection to domestic violence.

QUESTION: Hundreds of thousands of calls you've had since 1996, I take it in the wake of the O.J. trial. Can you give us some flavor of what people are saying when they call in? What are they looking for?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I can tell you, because sometimes I answer the phones here on weekends or late in the evening. And it is a touching litany of: I can't get a protective order. I have got to move. Why can't somebody help me? He is there, he is stalking me. I am going to lose custody of my children. Why do I have to put the children at risk? If I leave, I may lose the children. What do I do? I do not know where to go.

And that's the reason these grants can begin to fill the vacuum for that person who does not have enough yet to file a criminal charge, but wants some civil remedy and some civil protection. These is a great step forward, but not a complete step, in trying to make the law real for victims who are sometimes just in terror.

QUESTION: What does the national SAFE number, the 800 number, tell someone that they would not find by calling their local -- I am going to wait until they adjust the microphone there -- what do you get off the national number that you would not get off of calling a local hotline? Or is it just a national number if you do not know what your local number is?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There may not be a local number in some instances. There may be a local number in name only. This is to provide for people who do not know any other outlet or any other opportunity to get advice. And the more local communities can let people know what is available in their communities, the more legal services programs can respond,

the better. But it is trying to fill in all the gaps that victims face.

QUESTION: A different subject for a moment?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You can always change subjects. You never have to ask me.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: This week one of the President's lawyers, David Kendall, sent the Department a letter, asking for disclosure of the material that Ken Starr gave the Department when he asked for permission to change the direction, or to include the Lewinsky matter, in his investigation. Is that something the Department can release on its own? Do you have to seek permission? Would that be appropriate to release?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are looking at all of those issues now, to see just what we can and what we should do under the circumstances based on any court order that exists and what the law is with respect to the impeachment proceedings.

QUESTION: So if you can respond to this letter and can do so publicly, you will, is what you are saying?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If it is appropriate and does not constitute a comment on the investigation. We are trying to figure out what is the right thing to do.

QUESTION: What is the status then - does the Attorney General have a lid on OPR and its looking into the leak question?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we are doing is reviewing all the documentation that has been made available, looking at all the issues raised by Mr. Kendall's letter, and then we will make a determination as to how to proceed.

QUESTION: Does that mean that the lid is at least partially lifted on OPR?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, when you say the lid is lifted on OPR, that does not mean that there is an investigation. We are trying to determine what would be the appropriate route to take.

QUESTION: So you're not going to use your usual mantra of deferring judge?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That is right, I am not.

QUESTION: So has the review, the OPR review -- not the OPR investigation -- the OPR review of these complaints, has that started?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The Department, of which OPR is a part, is reviewing the documentation, Mr. Kendall's letter, and all the circumstances, to determine what would be appropriate.

QUESTION: Before we get off the subject, can I ask one other question. I do not know how much you can say here, but have you been contacted by a special master for the court? And is that why you are doing this now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot comment on anything a court would do. What I can say is that based on the public release of documentation, we are reviewing that documentation and we are reviewing Mr. Kendall's letter to make a determination as to what would be appropriate action on the part of the Justice Department.

QUESTION: I would just add: but is there something that has happened that has caused the Justice Department to do these things? In other words, how have we come to this new state?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The House of Representatives has released a significant amount of documentation. We are reviewing that documentation to see if there is anything there that should determine action by the Department of Justice and what that action should be, and taking into consideration Mr. Kendall's letter and the issues that he raises.

QUESTION: Is there any limitation on the tenure of the Special Counsel, Mr. Starr, and what he may in fact be able to pursue at this point?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That would be up to Mr. Starr.

QUESTION: I just want to make sure I understand. When you say Mr. Kendall's letter, obviously we are talking about two different Kendall letters. One is the one you received this week, and the other is the one that came earlier this year, asking for an investigation of Mr. Starr. Are you considering the Kendall letter this week to be a kind of follow-on, the same subject, as the earlier one?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are looking at Mr. Kendall's letter and the earlier letter, if it has any relevance to this new letter. And we are looking at the documentation that has now been made public.

QUESTION: So what has shifted here is the focus on how Mr. Starr came to you and how this expansion was sought?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not focused on any specific issue. What I am doing is asking that the documentation that has now been made available be reviewed to determine whether there is any action that would be appropriate for this Justice Department to take.

QUESTION: I guess we are a little confused about -- I mean there has been, what, about 8,000 pages of documentation released by the House. What is it that has triggered this sudden interest in the Department?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is just reasonable, when there is new information in regards to a matter, that you review it to determine whether it should dictate or direct or indicate that the Department should take action.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, can we just be --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether there is anything in the information or not.

QUESTION: Well, you are reviewing it under what rubric? I do not -- to see if there was something wrong in the way the investigation was expanded?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: To see whether there is any action that the Department should take.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I just want to make sure there is a clear demarcation here. Up until now, you told us that the review of any of these complaints against Judge Starr's investigation had not begun, in deference to Judge Johnson. Now there is a review of allegations or of complaints?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. What I had indicated to you -- we reviewed earlier complaints and determined to defer to Judge Johnson. We are reviewing the new material to see whether there is any action that the Department should take. And when we complete the review, we will make a determination as to how to proceed.

QUESTION: The new material that you are referring to is what?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The new material is material that has been released by the House of Representatives, to see if there is any information that indicates that action by the Department of Justice is appropriate.

QUESTION: Does that include allegations which were reported in the New York Times over the weekend, that some conservative lawyers may have tipped Ken Starr off to an affair involving an intern?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on the nature and what is being reviewed.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if I could go to terror for just a moment. The Taliban rebels in Afghanistan have stated that they would capture and try bin Laden, especially I think for the Khobar bombings, to that offense. Would that be satisfactory to the Justice Department or would the Justice Department insist that Mr. bin Laden be extradited to this country?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: You are not able to comment.

Also, there is an article, related, that Mr. bin Laden's gang -- this is from the London Times yesterday -- has acquired nuclear weapons by purchase from Russian -- former Soviet states, I should say -- and this man not only has nuclear weapons but of course could have missiles and could possibly use a ship-type platform for launching these missiles against the U.S. Is this being considered as a security risk?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment. I would let the National Security Council comment on any matters such as that.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as long as we are on the subject of terrorism, you are apparently due to unveil a new system of trying to deal with chemical and biological attacks this coming week. Without tipping your hand any more than you want to, what can you tell us by way of preview of that or rationale behind what you are going to be doing?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The Federal agencies are working together to develop a unified capacity in which we draw on the expertise of all the agencies involved to respond to State and locals in instances of attack by weapons of mass destruction. State and local fire, police, medical officials, and emergency officials are the first-responders. They are on the front line. They are frank to say, We need training, we need equipment; We are looking to you, but you have got to realize that we know our communities, our States, our areas better than you and we have got to build a partnership.

What this effort is about is developing a coordinated, a fully coordinated, Federal effort to train and to provide equipment in a cost-effective manner, based on sound standards. And it involves a two-way street with the State and local first-responders. Hearing from them, so that we get their input as to what their problems are, what they see to be the situation, and together, in a partnership, providing the training, providing the equipment, in a cost-effective way, meeting standards that everyone comes to accept, and also providing for the opportunity to have exercises in which State and local officials can work with Federal officials to be prepared in case the real thing, God forbid, should happen.

QUESTION: Just to follow up. How much -- I cannot think of the proper word -- but how urgent is the need for this type of process? It is obviously needed, but how urgently?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is important, on all of these efforts, to be as prepared as possible. When we see that anything like this might be possible, I think we have got to use all reasonable means and do it with deliberate speed to get it done the right way.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the Department has been looking into what its role might be as things move on on the Hill in any impeachment process. Have you reached any conclusions there? For example, would the Department's role be limited only if this goes beyond the House?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the Department, which is the repository of OLC opinions and thoughts and consideration, should be prepared to address issues that affect the institution of the presidency, and to advice on law when it is appropriate, when it affects the institution of the presidency.

QUESTION: What would trigger that? Someone would have to ask?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It will depend on a number of circumstances, and I could not suggest how it would be triggered.

QUESTION: Last Thursday, the (off microphone) -- of Columbia made a decision on extradition -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We regret that. Because we do not think that anybody should have a safe place to hide from crimes that they committed in this country. But we are gratified that the extradition process will apply to those who commit crimes after the date in December in 1997. And we will be working together to make sure that we do everything to see that those people are extradited to the United States, to be held responsible for the crime they commit.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- extradition treaty -- (off microphone) -- Mexican -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My hope is that, in a hemisphere that is basing so much of its actions on mutual trust and respect, that we come to conclude that people who commit crimes have no safe place to hide; that the crime should be tried where justice can best be done, where the crime was committed, and that only in rare circumstances will that process not be followed. We have a long way to go, but we are developing great trust across this hemisphere. And I think that trust can be a great foundation for the extradition of criminals to the place where the crime was committed, so that they know they will be held accountable.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, just one last one. On the Hill this morning, Congressman Burton is planning to release an interim report on his committee's investigation of campaign finance. In his run-up to it yesterday, he said that the reason it is an interim report and not a final one is because of problems getting information, and he spoke of what he referred to as an unprecedented lack of cooperation by the White House and by the Justice Department. How would you respond to that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have tried every way we know how to cooperate with Chairman Burton, to honor his oversight responsibility, and we will continue to do so.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I hate to seem dense on this, but --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You are not dense.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Thank you.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You may have just missed the point here.

QUESTION: Sometimes.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: As the Justice Department reviews these 8,000 condensed pages released by the House Judiciary Committee, you are not just looking to see if there is any appropriate action to take in regard to the OIC, but any appropriate action -- in other words, if you found some action should be taken against possibly people who are not included in the Independent Counsel's investigation, is that what you are looking for, as well?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not do "what ifs." We are just reviewing it to determine whether the Department should take action.

QUESTION: Well, within that universe, you are not just looking at the OIC, you are looking at the entire gamut; do I understand that correctly?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If there is some action indicated in those files that does not refer to the IC, and it is appropriate action, we would take it.

QUESTION: Is it standard for the Department to review Independent Counsel reports to see if there is action that should be taken?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think that there has ever been a situation like this before, so I can't suggest that it is standard or not standard.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in the way of clarification, is it fair for us to conclude at this point that you are concerned -- you and the Department are concerned -- over the information presented to you by Mr. Starr and his subordinates at the time the investigation was expanded?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: But the review does include David Kendall's letter of October 5th?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated to you, we are reviewing Mr. Kendall's letter to see what would be appropriate action, if any, to take. With respect to what I can comment on and not, I can tell you that I am conducting a review. I cannot comment on the nature of the review. For, as you well know, I try not to comment on anything that would relate to any pending matter. And I do not want to do anything that would affect the independence of the Independent Counsel, except as I am required to.

QUESTION: Can you give us a little more time?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes.

QUESTION: Okay. I wanted to ask if you were overworked, fatigued, what factor can you tell us that may have contributed to your fainting a couple days ago?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, the doctor just called me this morning with the last test, which he said came back perfectly normal. And he said he attributes it to the very, very brisk walk of the day before and the fact that I came back and sat down to dinner and did not have enough water and got dehydrated. So everybody is putting water in front of me now.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And I am drinking it.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And I am getting a good night's sleep. And I am going to take a vacation.

QUESTION: Mr. Holder suggested that -- (off microphone). Was he successful in that -- and

others?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes.

QUESTION: Because we all hope that you might do that.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Where are you going?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not going to tell anybody where I am going.

(Laughter.)

(Whereupon, at 10:03 a.m., the press conference concluded.)