



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, November 12, 1998

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

VOICE: Good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Since I've been back, I had the opportunity to meet this week in Columbia, South Carolina, with my counterpart, Attorney General Madrozo. U.S. and Mexican law enforcement officers are continuing in efforts to bring our nations closer together in a training program that is now taking place at the National Advocacy Center in Columbia.

Agents and prosecutors from both nations are taking part in a joint training seminar that will give officials from both countries a chance to learn and to understand and appreciate each other's laws. Attorney General Madrozo and I visited the training center where these courses are taking place. We had a chance to talk to the agents and prosecutors. And we emphasized the importance we place on the better understanding of the laws of each nation.

I was very impressed with the agents' approach. They found, just in the hour that we had been there, that they were beginning to learn so much. And this is part of an ongoing commitment to foster greater cooperation, a commitment that Attorney General Madrozo and I confirmed to President Zedillo and President Clinton earlier this

year.

Just last weekend, Mexican authorities extradited Mexican national Bernardo Vallardes Lopez on murder and drug trafficking charges. Last June, while allegedly smuggling marijuana across the border into Arizona, Vallardes allegedly killed a Border Patrol agent who got in his way. Afterwards, Vallardes fled back across the border.

Mexican authorities have been extremely cooperative. Just one week after the killing, the authorities in Mexico arrested Vallardes on the U.S. request for his provisional arrest. We formally asked Mexico to extradite him. Today I am pleased to report that Vallardes is back in the United States, in jail, and in record time. And Attorney General Madrozo and Secretary of Foreign Relations Rosario Greene were instrumental in making this happen.

We are building a very good partnership with our counterparts in Mexico. And our record demonstrates just that. We have mutual exchange of information that is helpful. Last year alone, a record 23 fugitives were returned from Mexico. And earlier this year, Mexico arrested two of the largest methamphetamine traffickers in the world.

We have much more to do. But with the very good working relationship we have with Attorney General Madrozo and Foreign Secretary Greene, I think we are making real progress.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what about the Casa Blanca matter, where the Mexicans were threatening to ask -- to charge U.S. agents that had been involved in that particular sting? What about the major trafficking families, especially the Tijuana Cartel kingpins? Can you tell us, if relations are so good now with Mexico, that we can expect to see some progress on these major fronts?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we are seeing major progress with respect to the cartels. And I will ask Bert to give you all information that can be made public.

QUESTION: Was this the first time the Mexicans have extradited a Mexican national?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. They've extradited a Mexican national before. But this was the first time where drug trafficking charges

were involved.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you say Mexico last year returned a record 23 fugitives. Out of how many? How many fugitives were we asking for?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'll ask Bert to give you the information. But this is not just returning, this is apprehending and taking into custody. And I think they are doing their share. I think both nations are trying to focus on this. And I will ask Bert, in his last week, to get you that information.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what about the fear, though, that -- as I understand it, at the agent level, sharing information, intelligence information, that oftentimes it gets out and it ruins --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What has encouraged me so much about my meeting in Columbia is to learn the same sense that I have always had when I have talked with prosecutors and agents. Even here in this country, agents are very leery about sharing their information with other agents, or State and locals sharing their information with Feds, or vice versa.

The way you get over that suspicion is to work with people on an ongoing basis, build an experience. And I think we are in the process of doing that. Sometimes it's a one-on-one with one agent on one side of the border that gets along real well with another on the other side of the border. But what impressed me about these agents as they talked with me, it's going to be that personal trust that's built based on pursuing investigations in a mutually satisfactory way. And I think we're on our way to doing that.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in 1976, Orlando Letelier and Ronnie Cochran Moffett, a 25-year-old American, were assassinated here on the streets of Washington. The lawyers for the families of those victims, a month ago, wrote a letter to you, and asked you to meet with them about an investigation of General Pinochet in connection with those assassinations. And two weeks ago you were asked about this. You said that you did find the letter.

Have you agreed to meet with them? And if not, why not?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We had just received the letter, I think, the

day before. So it had not reached my desk when it was inquired about. We are reviewing the matter now.

QUESTION: In the letter, they say that this case is similar to the bin Laden case, in that it was a terrorist matter. And yet the United States is not taking as seriously, that they have shelved their anti-terrorism policy when it comes to Pinochet. And there is clear evidence linking Pinochet to these murders.

And I was wondering if you could -- and the United States has said they could nab bin Laden anywhere in the world any time they want -- is it a comparable case?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Who said what?

QUESTION: I think that law enforcement officials said that they could grab bin Laden anywhere they want, anywhere in the world.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm not following your one --

QUESTION: Why couldn't you grab Pinochet for these murders?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I indicated to you that we were reviewing that matter and it would be premature to comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, two years ago, when Congress passed the Communications Decency Act as part of the Telecom bill, the Justice Department declined to prosecute under that version of the law. Now there is this new version, the COPA law. Have you given any thought to whether you are going to prosecute or pursue cases under that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are reviewing that, as well. And I will ask Bert to give you any information that we can on it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, a week from now, impeachment hearings are at least scheduled to begin in the House Judiciary Committee. Has anyone on the committee, either the majority or minority, asked the Justice Department for a definition of what an impeachable offense is?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm unaware of any such inquiry.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you are aware a couple of weeks ago in the

elections there were a number of states that brought the use of medical marijuana -- (off microphone) -- that your Department is reviewing those initiatives and in light of similar actions in those States that the government was taking in California?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are going to look at each case on a case-by-case basis, to determine what the best and most appropriate procedure would be. But, again, I want to emphasize that the judgment with respect to marijuana and whether it has medical uses should be made by medical experts. Studies are underway now. We have encouraged those. And clearly I think that that is the arena in which these judgments should be made.

QUESTION: Does that mean that in the interim time that all those sessions are going on that there will be no effort by the government to enforce those statutes against --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, the Federal statutes are on the books now and should be enforced.

QUESTION: Do you think that the move to legalize smoking of marijuana specifically is in fact a smoke screen for legalization, and is, as many physicians have concluded, is a very unhealthy way to take the active ingredients of marijuana?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I can't ascribe motives to the people who vote for something. I think people vote for issues for different reasons. But what I think is so important is that we make a sound medical judgment, based on sound medical evidence, about whether marijuana has medical properties and if it is the appropriate vehicle for delivering those properties, or is there another, more appropriate medical process for doing so.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as the three-day Conference on Community Policing ended two days ago, it was clear that that process is going to have major -- is having major implications on how policing is done, aside from just putting 100,000 more cops on the street. It is due to sunset in less than two years. Do you see the Department of Justice seeking expansion of that sunset or is it just going to die as scheduled?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, I think everybody wants to make sure --

and I can't comment about the future with respect to the specific office; I think that has to be a comment made by the administration -- but it is clear that community policing, the COPS office, and other initiatives have, as you say, had an impact on policing. We cannot let that drop. We have got to move forward in every way that we can, through our grant apparatus, through technical assistance, through work with State and local law enforcement to extent community policing, to extend technology that can free police officers to devote themselves to community policing.

And we have some exciting opportunities in law enforcement. I think you have heard me speak of them before, in terms of what it is going to mean when every police officer will have a computer in his squad car, or immediately available, in which he can do fingerprinting and immediately make matches, to make DNA matches, that can either preclude costly pursuits against somebody who is innocent or immediately identify the perpetrator.

There is so much to be done in policing. And we cannot let this great advance stop. We cannot become complacent.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what is the Department doing about the fact that some of these communities, despite the fact they have had the funds for some time, have not actually put new cops on the street? Some of them apparently are spending the funds on equipment. Is there any policing of the --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes, there is a monitoring process in place. And again, Bert can comment for you -- can give you the details.

QUESTION: Has there been any sanctions against any of these communities?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me ask Bert to give you the details.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Congressman George Miller and 35 members of Congress say that the Justice Department is not cooperating effectively with Spanish authorities in their investigation of General Pinochet, that the U.S. has classified documents that implicate General Pinochet and they're not being turned over. Why not?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are trying to give to the Spanish authorities everything that we have authority to provide under the mutual legal assistance treaty. And we will continue to do so.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, earlier you said that, to your knowledge, no one on the House Judiciary Committee has asked for any type of elaboration or definition of high crimes and misdemeanors. Is the Department prepared to give a definition or to somehow elaborate on what that means historically?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We want to make sure that we can, as necessary, provide what the institution of the Department of Justice has considered and determined with respect to this issue should it prove relevant.

QUESTION: So you are prepared? If they come to you with a series of questions, you are prepared now to --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are prepared to -- we want to make sure, since this is a body of information that has been assimilated over time by both Democratic and Republican administrations, that if that information is useful, that that information can be made available.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, there is a report that someone took a shot at an agent with the Southeast Bomb Task Force. What can you tell us about that? And is there any reason to believe that Eric Rudolph may have been involved in the shooting?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: A shot was fired at the command post in Andrews, North Carolina, last night, at about 8 o'clock. One agent was slightly injured, grazed by the shot through the -- literally -- the hair on his head. And he was very, very fortunate, thank goodness.

The Southeast Bomb Task Force, along with the Andrews City Police, are investigating. And other than that, we cannot comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as long as we are close to -- in close proximity to the subject area, do you have any update on --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You don't have to be in close proximity to the subject area to inquire.

QUESTION: I know. But I like to try anyhow.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You like to do things -- we will have an agenda from now on.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: A logical sort of flow.

Can you give us any sort of update on the efforts of the work of the task force against abortion clinic violence?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: They are proceeding, working with the Marshals Service, working with others to make sure that we have collected all the information that can be useful in investigations, and that we are proceeding.

QUESTION: There apparently are some reports that the gentleman who is being sought for questioning, I guess, in connection with the Slepian murder has been seen in New Jersey. Is that accurate? Do you have any updates?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Those are apparently not recent sightings. Those were sightings that allegedly occurred before this last shooting. But let me give you a number again. It's 1-800-281-1184. 1-800-281-1184. If you have information.

QUESTION: A week or so ago, your Campaign Task Force brought some charges against Franklin Haney, who is a Tennessee developer. And I was wondering if those are in any way connected to his involvement in the Portals project, and if there is any update on whether you all are still investigating this Portals matter.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I could not comment on the pending matter.

QUESTION: Ma'am, November 24 will mark the 90 days since the Department has looked at the Vice President's involvement in 1996 on raising an eye toward asking for an independent counsel. Do you expect to ask for an extension when that 90 days is up?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not made any determination with respect

to the matter.

QUESTION: So that you might or you might not?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That's right.

QUESTION: Does that hold for the other two deadlines that follow fairly closely on?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That would hold for any case or any matter that I was considering.

QUESTION: Is it possible you would ask for an extension?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And it's possible that I would not.

QUESTION: The FBI is going to celebrate its 90th anniversary of its predecessor organization next week. And they're having a President speak to them, former President George Bush. I wondered, was that decision run by you at all, run by the Department at all, to have Bush speaking --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, it was not. No, it was not.

QUESTION: It was not. Does that concern you at all?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I look forward to seeing President Bush there.

QUESTION: I see. Thank you.

QUESTION: Have you any comment on the church arson report? That appears to be -- and correct me if I'm wrong -- appears to be that church arson is quite a bit down, way down, maybe 50 percent, and that the arson is not predominantly racial or hate crime related. What is your impression of that report?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the report reflects the excellent work of the task force over these last two years. I am very proud of the agents, both from the Department of Justice and the Department of Treasury, the prosecutors, the lawyers from the Civil Rights Division and other parts of the Department who participated in this task force

and did such an excellent job.

I would also like to commend the State and local authorities who worked so hard on these issues. They were on the front line, and they did really important, important work, including the bulk of some investigations and prosecutions.

The one caution that I would provide, though, is that we cannot become complacent. We must constantly be vigilant against hate crime in any form. In addition, I think this has been helpful to us in terms of providing some prevention mechanisms to protect churches that oftentimes may go unattended for a week between services or have circumstances that might not be safe. It is important for us to learn from this experience and try to do everything we can to prevent it for the future.

But I think it reflects a larger issue. Crime is down six years now in a row. There is a tendency for America to become complacent about crime and to stop thinking about it. And then it shoots right back up. We have a really wonderful opportunity, if we continue the partnerships that we have forged and continue the dedicated interest in this effort, to bring crime down further and to continue to make a larger difference.

QUESTION: Can I press you a little more on --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You can press me on anything.

QUESTION: -- largely not -- church arson at present is largely not hate crime or racial motivation. Am I on the right track with that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would refer you to the exact language of the report. But I think it is important to note that from the beginning, some of the cases were people miffed at somebody else. I mean you always have different motivations. But any time you have something like that done based on prejudice, it affects everybody, and everybody is a victim.

QUESTION: Along those lines, outside Roanoke, there was a brutal murder of a black man by two white men. He was beheaded and burned. Last week, the second defendant in that case was given a life term. Neither one of the men accused any convicted were given the death

penalty. I know you were waiting to see the outcome of that trial before you decided whether to go ahead with Federal hate crime prosecutions. Have you made any decision on that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not received any recommendation yet.

QUESTION: Any feeling which way you may go on it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I would wait to --

QUESTION: Do you know about how long it will be before you --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It should be resolved shortly.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you use the Department Web site?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Me?

QUESTION: Yes.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: You don't. Well, I use it. And relative to other enforcement agencies, it is way out of date.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That's what people tell me. I've got to --

QUESTION: The Federal Trade Commission, every day, the day of press releases, they are on. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What is your name?

QUESTION: Russell Mokhiber.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good, Mr. Mokhiber, I will have Steve Colgate call you.

QUESTION: Who?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Steve Colgate.

QUESTION: Okay. It is two weeks out of date now. And if you go to the U.S. Attorney sites from around the country, sometimes there's nothing on them ever. It's just the U.S. Attorney's Web site for such an area, and there's nothing on them.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let us undertake a review of that.

QUESTION: Ma'am, in the current Congress, there was a long tug of war over Section 110 of the immigration law of 1996, about checking exits of Canadian and Mexican tourists. A large body of members of Congress want the -- there is an INS program -- a large number want it repealed. The legislation that finally passed delays the effective date of these new checkpoints for exiting tourists at the Canadian and Mexico borders for 30 months.

Does the administration want this program studied some more or do they want it repealed?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think what everybody wants to do is to make sure that if any process like that is in place, that the technology exists and that the processes are in place that will permit a free flow of commerce and a free flow of people who legitimately have the right to move from one country to another without large backups.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you now have a fairly large stack of pending matters in front of you that have to do with criticisms of Independent Counsel Starr, also including his request that you refer the Hubble tax matter to him as a related matter. And all of these things seem to keep pending and pending. Are you now putting off making any decision until after he testifies on the Hill?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: So it is possible you could make a decision before next week?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes. It is possible that I could not, too.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not ascribe any weight one way or the

other.

QUESTION: During the 1996 campaign, there were several reports that Senator Dole was intimately involved in the preparation of commercials and other materials that appeared by third parties on behalf of his campaign. Is that something that you all are looking into at all?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, any words in public about outstanding young American who is headed for Germany?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, you have just given me an opportunity to say Bert Brandenburg is going to join his wife, who is studying in Europe. As many of you know, though you sometimes doubt me when I "no comment" you and tell you that I can't answer this question, I believe very deeply in open government. I believe in trying to be as responsive to the media as I possibly can, consistent with responsibilities as a prosecutor and head of a law enforcement system.

Bert Brandenburg has done so much to help me do that. And I'm going to miss him very, very much. He is so sensitive and thoughtful. He is a kind person. He is an honest person. It's wonderful when Bert -- when I say something and Bert says, you know, you could add this and it would be a little bit more accurate, or, you said this 18 months ago. He has a marvelous memory, too. I think I am going to keep tracking him down, through Germany, Bert, what did I say, when?

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: But he came to this job under difficult circumstances. This Department of Justice has had so many difficult, difficult issues before it in this past year. He has done such a wonderful job. And I just want to say thank you, Bert. You are one great person.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, anything more you can tell us about how you are feeling and what you did?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I feel great. What I did was -- I have got woods that surround my house. And after Andrew, a lot of it was blown

down. But it also opened up the trees for vines. And the vines start to come back in, in this subtropical area. So I was pulling vines and sawing wood and clearing out.

And you don't have to think about it. You're not asking me any questions as I do it. I do not have to think what are going to be the consequences of this or that or the other. And at the end of the day, I sit and look up at these beautiful woods and say, oh, my goodness, look at the change. It was a great time.

Thank you.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Oh, it's never finished.

Thank you.

VOICES: Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 9:58 a.m., the press conference concluded.)