

MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR INTERVIEW
Guest: Attorney General Janet Reno
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JIM LEHRER: We return now to the Waco story. The plan that the FBI launched this morning was approved by Attorney General Janet Reno. She joins us now from the Justice Department. Attorney General Reno, welcome.

JANET RENO (attorney general of the United States): Good evening.

LEHRER: Do we assume at this point that 88 people died in that fire, is that correct?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We do not have a final conclusion on that.

LEHRER: But the FBI seems to assume that that is the case, but you're not assuming that, is that right? It's possible that somebody could have gotten out?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're going to wait to see until we can carefully determine just what happened.

LEHRER: Did the FBI handle this thing correctly this morning?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the FBI exercised remarkable restraint and handled this in a very professional and very able manner. I don't think that there is any situation that is more difficult than this. These are the hardest decisions possible to make.

LEHRER: Now, when did they bring this idea to you--I'm talking about the gassing idea, the thing they did this morning before the fire. When was that brought to you?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: This was presented as part of a systematic attempt to increase pressure without firing or taking violent action against members of the cult in the compound, and it was presented to me last Monday.

LEHRER: It was brought to you by their initiative or was it the result of you or the president saying, hey, look, let's get this thing over with, FBI. Or was it they came to you and said, look, we believe it's time to do something. Here's what we'd like to do. They came to us describing, again so that everybody understood exactly what the circumstances were, though they had kept us advised each step of the way. They came to me and they said these are the circumstances. Our negotiators do not believe he is coming out. They have not been successful in negotiating anything really in terms of the release of the children. We're continuing to be concerned about the children, we have from the outset. We have had reports that they have been sexually abused, that babies had actually been beaten.

I asked when I first heard that for them to verify it, and again that was the report that was brought back. We had a situation where we were continuing to be increasingly concerned about the safety of the children, about the danger to everyone who was around the compound, and we made a judgment that this would be the best time to escalate the pressure. We looked to see what had been done when the FBI came in to clear away the cars from around the compound. There had been no threat of anything such as this.

It led up to today, there had been no threat as the FBI took to retaliate by something such as this. We made a judgment because we had heard consideration that mass suicide might be a possibility, that it was a possibility, and that we had to carefully consider it.

But it was also a fact, based on every piece of information we had, that they had supplies that would enable them to remain in the compound indefinitely. We checked the water supply because we thought that might be a way to control, and I asked specifically about that. But the water supply continued to apparently be adequate based on the surveillance that the FBI was able to do.

We then determined that they could do something like this at any time. We could not control it for the future, that there was no right time for any thing such as this but this would be the best time to do it.

LEHRER: But what caused them and you to agree that this was the best time--best time in what kind of context?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The hostage rescue team surrounded the premises of the compound. One of the points that must be remembered is that the people in the compound had ammunition that could hit an object 3,000 yards from the compound, so you in

effect had at least two or a significant square-mile area of property that had to be secured as a perimeter. The hostage rescue team was in place able to control that perimeter to the that it could really be absolutely controlled.

We felt, based on discussion with the experts, that the hostage team would have to be pulled back for retraining, and that this would be the best time when the Bureau had the best opportunity to control the situation for the event to happen.

LEHRER: The convention wisdom, of course, is that in these kinds of situations the longer you wait the more you increase the chances of a peaceful solution. Was the decision simply that 51 days was long enough, that there was no point in waiting any longer, that that conventional wisdom was not necessarily at work in this particular case?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: When I first took office, we had discussions with the Bureau and we concurred that we should try to negotiate, try to wait it out, try to do everything possible despite the fact that we had information that the children had been abused, were continuing to be abused in terms of the babies being slapped and beaten. So we tried our best in terms of negotiation to get them out.

We then became increasingly concerned with the safety of the children, the safety of those who were providing the perimeter around the compound and made the determination that in all , based on the efforts that we had made to date, without receiving a response or any threat of a response such as this, as the Bureau took each increasing step or pressure, that this would be the time to do it.

LEHRER: When you went over the possibilities, the eventualities, the expectations of what might happen, if this gassing operation was successful--I mean, if they did what they did this morning and they put the gas in there, et cetera--what was the expectation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The general expectation is that it might take some time, that there might be some residents who would be better able to withstand the gas and others, but that ultimately, if we waited, if we were patient, that they would ultimately come out because the gas would be so discomfiting.

LEHRER: Did anybody raise the possibility that it could trigger this terrible--could trigger some kind of mass suicide?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: This was a possibility that was

considered because any time you make a hard, hard decision such as this, you have to consider all of the eventualities, and what influenced us was the concern that it could happen at any time in an undefinable future that we could not even begin to control.

LEHRER: So it didn't matter--your conclusion was, the FBI's conclusion was that Koresh was in control of the situation not the FBI, is that essentially it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Koresh certainly controlled, if he wanted to do something like this--it would have been, so far as we could determine, impossible to prevent if that's what he wanted to do.

LEHRER: What was the preponderance of the evidence about the likelihood of a mass suicide that the FBI gathered from people what had come out of the compound, other people who had once been members of this section?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The FBI advised us that they had talked with as many sources as possible to determine what the eventuality might be, and concluded that it was not great.

LEHRER: That Koresh was just not suicide-bent or his followers wouldn't follow him, or what was the basis for that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I looked at it in terms of whether the followers would follow him and whether he would lead them to something like this. It was a possibility. Again the possibility of it happening in the future is something that I could not control, but it was a possibility, but considering all the sources that the FBI consulted, considering their responses to the increasing pressure brought by the FBI over the last several days, it did not seem to be a great probability at all.

LEHRER: What pressure are you referring to?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The increasing pressure by coming up to the compound, clearing the area away from the compound, coming up--at one point they even bumped the compound, coming up this morning at the time the first gas was put in-- they fired in response but there was no threat of anything such as this.

LEHRER: Mr. Ricks of the FBI said there was some fresh intelligence that made them alter their plan in the last couple

of days or so. Do you know what he was referring to there?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know specifically what he was referring to.

LEHRER: Was the intelligence pretty good from inside?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It would vary; we can't really tell what the intelligence--whether it was really good, considering the final outcome.

LEHRER: But David Koresh was clearly the man in charge, is that correct? Is there any doubt about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: From everything that I have been advised, from all the information that the Bureau received, that is clearly the case.

LEHRER: Also, Mr. Ricks made the point today that basically David Koresh was a liar, that most of what he said to them--and the FBI agents talked to him endlessly in these last 51 days--is the evidence or the summaries that you received also bear that

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes, it does.

LEHRER: There was never a real honest communication between the FBI and David Koresh?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Basically when he said he would do something, he didn't do it.

LEHRER: The children--should we assume that those-- what is it, 17 children were in there by last count, or 25? I've seen two different figures. Could you help me out on that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What I understood was that there were at least 17 children and then there were possibly other minors who were people Koresh considered to be his wives.

LEHRER: And we should assume at that point that they perished as well in this fire, is that right?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not heard the final conclusion

LEHRER: There are all kinds of rumors about underground tunnels and all of that sort of thing. Those turn out to be not true, is that correct?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will certainly explore those. I've consulted with the FBI trying to make sure that all possible underground bunkers or tunnels are identified and explored.

LEHRER: What does happen next? What should we expect over the next couple of days or so? What are you going to be in there--you and the FBI, your folks, going to be looking for and how is this information going to come out, et cetera?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We want to make sure that as fair and as objective a review is done of this matter as possible. As I've indicated, the buck stops with me. I make the best judgment I can. And one of the hardest decisions that anybody can make, based on all the information I can possibly bring together, taking to consider every eventuality. Then it's my responsibility to be accountable, to ask questions and to answer questions and to review and to see if there is anything that could have been done differently to prevent such a loss of human life. We constantly have to look at what we have done to see if we can do it better.

But at this point, based on everything I know, based on the most careful study possible and a very deliberate manner, this was the best judgment that could have been made under the circumstances. There is no right answer to something like this, there is no perfect time. You just have to do the best you can with the information that is available, considering the interests of the children and the agents.

LEHRER: Now, you talked to President Clinton about this. Did he sign off on it, or did he approve it? I mean, what was his position on this plan?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I basically told him that I had carefully reviewed the matter, spent a number of days carefully talking to experts such as medical doctors to make sure that the gas was not lethal, that there was no permanent injury related to the gas; I had talked to other experts. I had tried to make sure that all the questions that I had were answered. I tried to explore all the eventualities. I told him that I had done as careful a study as

possible, that this was the decision that I had made, that I thought it was the correct decision though it was an extremely difficult decision, and he said okay.

LEHRER: All right, Attorney General Reno, thank you very much for being with us.

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