



WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2000

9:31 A.M. EST

ATTY GEN. RENO: Happy New Year.

Q Happy New Year to you.

Q Do you have a statement this week?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No.

Q Ms. Reno, lawyers for the Gonzalez family in Miami say they have sent a letter to you, asking you to review and reverse the INS decision to return Elian Gonzalez to his father.

It's our understanding that you reviewed this decision before it was made public. Is that the case? Have you already reviewed it? I mean, is this --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not had a chance to review the letter in detail. But Commissioner Meissner did consult with me prior to making her decision. And I fully agree with her determination that the father has the legal right and the legal authority to speak for his child in immigration matters.

Q Why doesn't the United States government, the INS specifically, offer a visa to John Gonzalez to come to be with his son in the

United States and to raise his son in a free land?

ATTY GEN. RENO: He has been extended the opportunity to come to the United States to assist in the return of his son to Cuba.

Q Is Castro afraid he won't go back if he comes here?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As far as I am concerned, I don't pay any attention to what Castro says. I am interested in trying to do what's right based on the law.

Q Ms. Reno, back to Mike's question; in a sense you have already -- you are aware of what Commissioner Meissner did, as you just said. So is it -- it's unlikely that you are going to reverse her, is it not? That's what the letter asks you to do.

ATTY GEN. RENO: If there is any information that we are not privy to -- I never say that I won't reverse myself. I try to be as open-minded as I can. But based on all the information that we have to date, I see no basis for reversing it.

Q The attorney for the family members in Miami was arguing that INS did not in fact conduct an extensive investigation, that they had made their decision based on, quote, "two secret interviews" with the boy's father. Is it possible that they did not consider all of the evidence? Is it possible, for example, that INS did not adequately take into consideration the obvious desire of the boy's mother that the boy grow up in the United States?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What they took into consideration is who, under the law, can speak for the six-year old boy who really can't speak for himself. He has a father. And there is a bond between father and son that the law recognizes and tries to honor. We had no information that would indicate that that legal connection, that bond, should not be honored.

Q Ms. Reno, the boy obviously can't speak for himself, but some of the critics of the decision are saying can you really be sure that the father is speaking his free will.

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have met with the father and are satisfied that he is speaking for himself.

Q Ms. Reno, members of the exile community in Miami say they have intelligence that the father was aware that the mother was taking the child to the United States, and that the father had applied for an exit visa to the United States. Have you seen anything that indicates that's the case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have no indication that he has applied for an exit visa.

Q Are you aware of the statement by Speaker Hastert deploring the INS decision? Have you spoken to Speaker Hastert about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I've not spoken to Speaker Hastert and I have not heard his statement.

Q Ms. Reno, turning to the arrest in Seattle of a man who was driving a car that had explosives in it, and the subsequent arrests of others that are suspected of being involved with him, does the Justice Department have any idea what these folks were up to, what their target was, what their motives were?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As you know, the case is now pending in the Western District of Washington in Seattle, and as you know, my policy is not to speak about pending cases but to let those cases be tried in the courtroom.

Q It was, however, a subject of nationwide concern. Is it safe to say that -- without saying what your conclusion is, do you have a conclusion about what they were up to?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think we should get into that. I think we should let the case be tried in the courtroom.

Q Do you believe -- is there any information that would indicate why Algerians or -- you know, these folks have been tied to the Algerian GIA -- why they would turn their attention from French or French Algerians to the United States?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It would be speculation, and I don't think we should speculate.

Q Well, with New Year's come and gone, do you think that the main threat has now passed, or do you think that there's just as much reason for concern now as there was a week ago?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we described the heightened risk that revolved around the time of the end of the millennium.

But I think it is clear and should be clear to all Americans that the risk of terrorism will continue, and that we must be prudent and vigilant and reasonable in our approach.

Q Ms. Reno, away from that case and on to the subject of domestic terrorism: The FBI put out a large report, Project Megiddo report, to law enforcement official around the country, warning them of all the groups that could potentially cause trouble at the turn of the year. So far, that hasn't happened. Why do you think it didn't?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that speculation as to why it didn't -- it -- the nice answer would be that there was no threat.

What we must all do, I think, is make sure that we pursue situations, consistent with the law, consistent with due process; that we take reasonable precautions; that we -- when we have specific information that can inform the American people, that we advise them; and that America proceed in the way it has always proceeded, that it won't back down, that it won't be intimidated, that it will take reasonable precautions, and that we will see our laws honored.

Q Because of the fact that there was no serious computer disruption, some have wondered whether there were -- whether the government similarly overestimated the potential threat of terrorism. Was there, in your opinion, a legitimate threat concerning the Seattle case and domestic terrorism as well? Were those real threats?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that with respect to the Seattle case, the facts speak for themselves in the indictment.

Q Do you think Seattle --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Wait. Wait.

Q Oh, I'm sorry.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: With respect to domestic terrorism, we have seen a terribly tragic example of it and other examples, and it's something that we should, again, exercise prudence and caution concerning.

Q Do you think the city of Seattle was correct in cancelling their plans?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think that's a decision that has to be made by the local authorities.

Q But based on the information that you have, that you saw?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Again, they have got to look at it from their perspective, from their law enforcement capabilities, from what they know, and I think it's a decision that must be made by them.

Q Ms. Reno, can you give us a sense of how concerned you were as the New Year approached and some of the activity that you were up to, I guess, as we approached midnight on the East Coast? I understand that you were closely monitoring things over at the Strategic Command Center?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: It is an interesting feeling, when you have both the issue of terrorism and the Y2K technology issues, to watch history roll towards you around the world. It's almost as if you are watching it unfold with an advance warning. And to me, it was, as the night unfolded, a wonderful evening -- an example of people who were not afraid, who went out to Times Square, who went out to the Mall, who celebrated life and celebrated history and celebrated the future.

Q Were you concerned about the people as the evening began?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I was proud.

Q Ms. Reno, was there any sense of who is in charge regarding the Seattle investigation? We've had arrests made, indictments in Vermont and New York and Seattle. We've got involved now the FBI and main Justice. I mean, who is in charge of the investigation? How is this being coordinated?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: The investigation and the prosecutions are in

different districts and the U.S. attorneys, the FBI, SACs, are coordinating through main Justice and through the FBI.

Q There was a report yesterday, Ms. Reno, that some of those folks came here to see you because they were concerned about which would be the lead office. Is there some concern about who is in charge?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we try to do in all these situations, whether it be situations like Oklahoma City where there are pieces of the investigation in different parts of the country, where there are situations where there are four or five districts involved; we try to bring people to Washington to make sure that the lines of communication are clear, that people are coordinating together. And that was the purpose of the meeting yesterday.

Q What is the current status with regard to alert -- being on watch for terrorism in the United States interior? And were there any of these cells or terrorist cells that were broken up? Was the main thrust perhaps broken up by some of these arrests on the border?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will not speculate about that. But what I think is clear, after we see the course of these last several years and see what the indictment refers to in the Seattle case, is that we must all exercise prudence and caution.

Q Which countries have you asked for assistance in this case; I mean, aside from France?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things that I don't do is to say who I have asked for assistance from because that tips off people as to what we are looking for.

Q Ms. Reno, now that the salvage operation is over for Egypt Air, can you give us an idea of what's happening with that investigation and if there is a timetable for a decision on whether that will be handed over to the FBI?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that's appropriate for the National Transportation Safety Board to comment on since it's the lead.

Q Ms. Reno, you said you are reluctant to speak about a criminal matter. But what can you tell the American people to reassure them so

that they don't live in fear, which obviously a lot of them do or they wouldn't have canceled the celebration in Seattle?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that what the American people have demonstrated over these last weeks is an example of prudence, thoughtfulness, care. And what I can tell them concerning the prosecutions is that we are doing everything we can to ensure a successful prosecution and we are pursuing every lead, to make sure that we first take steps to prevent any possible future act of terrorism. And we can't be successful in that effort, we will continue to take steps to see that these people are brought to justice.

Q How closely involved have you personally been in overseeing this investigation of these alleged Algerian terrorists?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Again, I would not comment with respect to who the terrorists are, since you make reference to a particular group. But I have been kept briefed and have been involved.

Q Have you been involved in terms of having to deal with FISA warrants?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We would not comment.

Q Were you troubled by the fact that had it not been for an alert Customs inspector, that several other kinds of explosives might have made their way into the country; there was no advance intelligence on this, apparently? Do you think that security measures need to be improved, given that situation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We continually look at the situation as occurred here or other situations to see what we can do with the resources we have to protect the borders.

Q Along those lines, Ms. Reno, as you probably know, a couple of members of Congress say they're concerned that the Border Patrol hasn't added new agents fast enough or as fast as it said it should to secure the borders. Has there been a problem there? And what's the answer, do you think?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The recruitment of Border Patrol agents is a high

priority for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and they are constantly reviewing the recruiting process to see what can be done to fully recruit Border Patrol agents and to fill in for attrition. That effort is continuing. And we are focused on the whole issue, not just with respect to the southwest border, but all our borders.

Q Isn't there a problem, too, if you go too -- I mean, on the one hand, if you don't go fast enough, people say you're not hiring enough Border Patrol agents and putting them on the job; on the other hand, if you go too fast, you end up getting people who aren't fully trained and fully screened. Are you convinced that everything's going about as fast as it can?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We would like to be able to recruit more, and we are continuing efforts to improve the recruiting process in every way possible. At the same time, as you mentioned, any police department that hires rapidly and has a ratio of experienced officers to inexperienced officers that's quite low, you're going to face situations of not having enough experience in the field to properly provide field training for the new officers joining the force. So it's a balance that always has to be measured by anyone in law enforcement.

Q Ms. Reno, the senior Canadian officials came to Washington last week to coordinate the terrorism investigation. Can you give us a sense of the level of cooperation now? And is there some concern that the United States might not have been as abreast of activity in Canada in terms of terrorist groups?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think there is a very good working relationship, and Director Freeh and his Canadian counterparts are working together to ensure that it continues to be effective.

Q Ms. Reno, for the last two weeks of 1999, the FBI engaged a considerable amount of its resources to head off possible terrorist attacks. I think at one point they had every available man and woman engaged. If something had happened, if that had been a failure, everybody around this table would be asking some rather close questions today. But it didn't. Did the FBI do a good job, or were their efforts successful in averting possible efforts of terrorism?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think, from the Customs officers who stopped Ressam

on the border to the FBI here and around the world, to lawyers in the Department of Justice, I'm very, very proud of their efforts.

I think we never know just what we have done, and we cannot -- and I reiterate, cannot -- be satisfied with what has occurred. We've got to continue to be vigilant and pursue, as we will, every lead that may occur or arise in the future.

Q Going back to Project Megiddo, there was a report this morning that a number of Christian groups apparently are very upset with the FBI over that report. They feel their membership was unfairly fingered as a potential terrorist threat because of whatever significance they attached to the millennium. Do you think that their feelings are justified? What would you say to them?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not seen the letter or the report or whatever form it's in, and I would have to see it to be able to comment.

Q Ms. Reno, are you concerned that, from some groups that -- in the FBI's zeal to ensure that there was no terrorist activity, blanketed the country, as was suggested, with questions, and a number of people were detained -- some have since been released, some not, some held on immigration violations and loosely in connection, perhaps, too with the bombing plot in Seattle -- are you concerned about civil liberties issues and whether an overly aggressive effort may have trampled the rights of certain groups who feel they've been targeted?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the issues that is paramount, in my mind, in situations like this, as I mentioned to you earlier, was what we do when there is a heightened risk. And what we did, in terms of addressing the issues, of pursuing the leads, of taking appropriate action, I wanted to do everything possible to make sure that it was consistent with due process and with constitutional protections.

Great thought, great consideration, was given to this, and I feel comfortable so far as I know with the process that resulted.

Q Ms. Reno, several of the suspects in Boston were initially picked up in loose connection with this case. The FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office there have now said that in fact they have no connection to Ressay, Algeria, Seattle, anything involved in this case and they're just pending immigration charges. I mean, was that

an example of perhaps you, in the interest of security, had to be too aggressive?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I won't comment on specific cases and reasons, but I think, again, we tried to make sure that there was a basis, an appropriate basis, for all the actions taken.

Q Ms. Reno, on another matter, the Allen Blackthorne murder- for-hire case in Texas. Federal charges have been filed against Mr. Blackthorne for the murder of his wife. Can you give us a sense of how the Violence Against Women Act was applied in this case, and also, why did it take women two years since the murder to actually bring these charges?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think it would not be appropriate for me to comment, because I don't have the details of the case.

What I will do is ask Myron to give you all the information that would be appropriate considering that it's pending, after we finish here.

Thank you.

Q (Inaudible.)

ATTY. GEN. RENO: (Laughs.)

Q I just want to go back to Elian Gonzalez for a minute and whether or not the Department is at all concerned that in the time between his transfer to Cuba, what are your concerns for his whereabouts, whether he might be moved, if you can give us any insight into what's going on down there in Miami?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I just hope that everybody concerned deals openly, candidly and thoughtfully about this complex matter, and that we pursue the law and the facts and do what's right. From my point of view, it's a community I know well, it's a community I love, and I think it will, in the end, work together to see that justice is done.

Q Can this tear apart this community that you love? I mean, what impact does it have to --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That community is far stronger than some people who would try to tear it apart. It is a community that reflects America, reflects the hopes and dreams of so many different people who have come from so many different places, from tyranny and from other places.

My father came in 1923 as a boy who had been born in Denmark. It has provided hope, it has provided opportunity, it has provided argument and discussion and sometimes disruption, but it is a community that I think reflects the best of America in terms of people coming together in this new century. And we will work through this.

Q Two different issues on Cuba. Mr. Macetti (sp), a former Cuban intelligence officer, testified to, one, drugs being smuggled through Cuba, using Cuban air space and et cetera. These drugs -- the cooperation was with the FARC, I believe, primarily in Colombia. But also Mr. Macetti (sp) talked about how the Cuban government financed a Wells Fargo robbery in 1983 that was done by the FALN, that Cuba put up the seed money for that and then received a benefit from it. They were receiving cash, actually, in Cuba from this robbery. Can you say anything at all about Mr. Macetti's (sp) allegations?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I can't comment.

Q Ms. Reno, one last question back to the Cuban situation. How do you balance the obvious passion of the Cuban-American community in Miami, which loves freedom, and the need of a father to be with a son? How do you balance that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the law has struck that balance. And there may be very special cases, but in this situation the father has evidenced a real relationship with the son. I don't think anybody really disputes that. And there is something about a six-year-old boy and his father. There is a relationship that the law recognizes, that morality and the sense of right of all people recognize. How would you feel if you were told you couldn't do what you wanted and that you couldn't live where you wanted if you had a six-year-old boy someplace else?

Just think about it in the human terms.

And we all think about the issue of freedom. And we all hope that the

day will come when this won't be an issue anymore between Cuba and the rest of the hemisphere.

But this is a little 6-year-old boy. He has got just his father left in terms of parents. Let us work together to get him the relationship that the law and the right suggests is proper.

Q Can I ask two questions of Wen Ho Lee?

The Senate Judiciary released, two weeks ago, the redacted version of your testimony before the committee in June.

Now, the Republicans indicated that you had resisted the release of that testimony. If that's so, can you explain why?

And second of all, you had made reference, several points in that testimony, to connections to the Taiwanese nuclear community. Do you think that Taiwan should be a focus of the broader investigation into possible espionage and leaks from the U.S. nuclear community?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't have any comment on the testimony.

And the reason we asked for the testimony to be done in camera was because it was relating to classified information.

And we have tried to do our best to provide what can be said consistent with the law.

Q Thank you, Ms. Reno.

(Chorus of thank-yous.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you.

Q How soon will you be responding to Mr. Eig's letter about Elian?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As soon as possible.

Q Did you have a good holiday?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I had a wonderful time --

Q Do you know what they were building?

Q (Inaudible.)

Q How soon the response to Spencer Eig.

Q Oh -- (inaudible).

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