

Statement of the Attorney General  
Meeting to Sign Historic Memorandum of Understanding  
Afton, Oklahoma  
August 29, 1994

You are gathered today for an historic event, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between 22 Tribal Governments, the U.S. Attorneys in the Northern and Eastern Districts of Oklahoma, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Indian Health Service. The agreement will guide the investigation, reporting, and prosecution of child physical and sexual abuse cases involving Indian children and/or Indian perpetrators. This agreement is the first of its kind and is a direct outgrowth of the Listening Conference held in Albuquerque last May. I applaud your efforts, and I deeply regret that pressing issues prevent me from being here to congratulate all of you in person.

CRIME IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Wherever I travel, I find that crime is of great concern. The level of violent crime in Indian Country, particularly child abuse, is cause for utmost concern. Crimes involving child physical and sexual abuse are among the most tragic and their prevention and prosecution must be a priority. The ramifications of these crimes extend beyond those of other crimes against persons. Child abuse is a crime against an entire community -- a crime for which the community will long bear the scars and pay the social costs. These costs include substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, lower

educational attainment, teenage pregnancy, and increased health care burdens. These are human costs that no community can afford.

The Justice Department through the United States Attorneys' offices is responsible for the prosecution of major crimes and crimes between Indians and non-Indians in most of Indian Country. According to the FBI, nearly a thousand Indian Country child sexual abuse investigations were conducted last year. The Bureau of Indian Affairs Division of Social Services reported nearly 32,000 child abuse reports in 1993, over 4,000 of which constituted sexual abuse allegations. According to an Indian Health Service report, rape and child sexual abuse occur at rates 2 or 3 times higher than reported rate.

These are alarming figures. They underscore the vital importance of combining our efforts to address -- and perhaps one day to eliminate -- these crimes in Indian Country. The MOU that you have negotiated represents a vital step in this direction.

#### INTER-JURISDICTIONAL COOPERATION

In addition to addressing the crime of child abuse, this MOU is symbolically very important. It captures the spirit of aggressive inter-jurisdictional cooperation, which is necessary to fulfill the federal government's responsibility in Indian Country. Such coordination is particularly important for crimes involving child abuse -- an area in which investigation and prosecution require

careful coordination and sensitivity.

As you know, the barriers that make it difficult to uncover instances of child physical and sexual abuse are even more daunting in the cross-cultural context. The problems of overlapping jurisdiction add an additional layer of complexity, particularly in states such as Oklahoma where there are a patchwork of jurisdictions with which to contend. Through your efforts, an MOU has been negotiated that overcomes many of these problems by forging a working relationship between the tribes and federal agencies. This relationship will allow all of us to work together to ensure that child abuse is dealt with effectively, and in a way that respects tribal sovereignty and draws on tribal wisdom and understanding. If we can achieve this in Oklahoma -- where the problems are most complex -- we can begin the task throughout Indian Country.

#### CONCLUSION

Crime extracts a tremendous price from communities. Indian communities are paying particularly high costs both in terms of broken lives and in terms of dollars. The statistics and the complexity of the problems, paint a grim picture. Historic efforts such as yours provide a basis for my optimism that the future will be brighter for the first Americans. I think I can speak for all Americans in offering you my thanks.