



ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

DECEMBER 16, 1999

9:29 A.M. EST THURSDAY

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Q Good morning.

(Pause.)

Q Good morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Hello. How is your baby?

Q Fine. Thank you very much.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Okay.

Q (Inaudible) --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Uh-huh.

Q -- we were kidding him about how sleepy he was. (Laughter.)

Q Can we begin by asking you about Y2K preparations and your general feeling about how ready you are and what your general thoughts are, both internally within the Justice Department, which I think I got a

"D" grade from Congressman Horn last month on status of preparations, and perhaps as far as the public's nervousnesses, concern externally, in terms of preparations for thwarting terrorists and violent acts?

ATTY GEN. RENO: With respect to the internal preparations, I feel very comfortable about them. The computers that have got to be addressed are all being addressed.

They relate to foreign operations. And I think we're going to be prepared and ready to go. An awful lot of work has gone into it. People have been very diligent, and I feel good about it.

With respect to external issues, as always, we're going to take every reasonable precaution, pursue any lead in terms of terrorist activities, and work with state and locals to make sure that they are properly advised.

Q There were a number of arrests in Jordan this week and apparently elsewhere relating to potential threats. Is it your feeling that there are a number of those types of operations that the U.S. has to be concerned about?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think in every instance, whether it's the millennium or any other time, we must be vigilant. And the FBI is working with colleagues around the world to make sure that we are vigilant and as prepared as we possibly could be for any eventuality.

Q Ms. Reno, can you give us an idea of what will the status of Justice Department agencies be around the turn of the year, the new year? Will there be lots of extra people staffing command centers, extra law enforcement agencies on the beat, so to speak? Will it be just like any other night? What will be the sort of staffing for New Year's?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, New Year's will have an appropriate staffing for the technical issues with respect to Y2K, and as circumstances require, there would be appropriate staffing for any other eventuality.

Q Ms. Reno, the State Department issued an advisory last week warning Americans about large gatherings overseas, for the most part because of the threat of terrorism. Is there any reason for Americans here in

the country to be wary of such large gathering, of big New Year's celebrations or those kind of things?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think everybody just takes reasonable precautions in any circumstance, and in this instance, as we have no specific information, if any developed, we would share it.

Q You said appropriate staff for technical issues and appropriate other staff. Are there going to be more people either present in DOJ buildings or on call than on a regular day?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Y2K technical issues; usually we don't have people here at midnight on New Year's Eve.

Q Right. But other people, are there going to be more people on staff than normal?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It will depend on all the circumstances. What we would do is, if we have specific information, we will take specific action.

Q Where are you going to be? Are you going to work?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll be here.

Q Are you going to go down to the Mall?

Q In the department? In the building?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know. (Laughter.)

Q Cabinet members are going to attend the -- I believe it's called the American Millennium Gala, down by the Lincoln Memorial. Are you concerned at all about the security for that event?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think in all these instances, any time you have large gatherings, appropriate steps are taken to ensure security.

Q Is international terrorism a bigger threat than domestic terrorism, or is there concern about both?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think one should always be concerned about both and take reasonable precautions.

Q Ms. Reno, a U.S. official has said that the arrests in Jordan of 13 alleged terrorists reflect only a small portion of terrorist groups that the U.S. believes may be targeting Americans here or abroad especially. Can you make any comment about that particular report -- that there is coming at -- against the United States a number of attacks, possibly?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have no specific information concerning specific attacks. I think we must always be concerned about the possibility of an attack and take every reasonable step that we can.

Q What are those reasonable steps?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Now would I say something like that? (Laughter.) I mean, common sense dictates that if steps are taken, you don't describe those steps.

Q You said specific information -- (off mike) -- information -- are you getting more general information about any possible attacks or threats coming at a faster pace in the days leading up to New Year's than in the past? Or can you make a judgment on it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Each -- in terms of New Year's or any other day, the circumstances are different. And in each instance, we look at it and see what we have and try to keep people appropriately advised.

Q Ms. Reno, one of the undercurrents throughout militia groups, according to the FBI's report on potential terrorism, sort of Armageddon/Y2K-related, is a fear that the federal government is going to launch martial law. And is -- given that rather widespread expression of concern -- you find it on the Internet; a lot of these groups are saying it -- is there anything the department is doing differently to try to reassure those folks that that's just not the case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we try to do in all instances is exercise the appropriate effort that is necessary to protect the security of this country, while at the same time making sure that the rights of all Americans are adhered to in every possible way. It is the great issue

of law enforcement -- how it does its job. It's the reason that it is one of the difficult jobs I know. It is the reason that if you err slightly either way, there are going to be people who are critical of you.

We are going to try to do our job the best way possible, which is recognizing and protecting people's rights, while at the same time protecting their security.

Q Ms. Reno, how would you characterize this year? Probably a number of us are doing year-enders, looking back at this year. From your point of view, how would you characterize this year?

ATTY GEN. RENO: From the Justice Department's perspective, I think it has been a good year because we have continued our efforts, in terms of trying to focus on communities across America, to build partnerships with state and local law enforcement, and to reach out to the community as a whole, to develop prevention programs that give children and others positive futures.

I think we have made progress. But I want to see more done with respect to developing the technical resources and the technical expertise necessary to prepare ourselves for a world where cybercrime is a reality day in and day out. We have made marvelous progress, I think, in terms of our contacts around the world, and making sure that we take steps to let criminals know that there is no safe place to hide.

Personally, it's been a good year for me. And again, one of the points that I take away from this; there is nothing that is quite so rewarding, or as challenging, as to try to use the law the right way, to help the American people.

Q Can I just follow up? Those people give you credit for doing those types of crime issues and, you know, increasing efforts on counterterrorism and things like that, but that's not exactly what hits the news. What hits the news is, you know, Waco and Chinese espionage and divisions with the FBI over campaign finance.

Does it bother you that those are the things? Or are you concerned that perhaps those are the things that this year will be remembered for?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't worry about what the year is remembered for; I worry about what we do and whether it's the right thing to do. And having been the daughter of journalists, I have seen you all get carried away with so many different things. (Laughter, cross talk.)

Q (Inaudible) -- probably in Florida. (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will tell you a secret that you all know.

There was a member of my family, a young copy boy, who when he didn't like somebody, used to go into the place where they kept the photographs and find the worst photograph he could find and then he would prompt the headline writer to do the headline the way he wanted it done.

So I just take it with a grain of salt. (Laughter.) Now, you all are laughing like you understand. (Laughter.)

Q We -- (inaudible). (Laughter, cross talk.)

Q Especially when it comes to year-end stories. (Laughter.)

What was your reaction to the release of the Columbine tapes?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I haven't seen then, and so I don't think I should comment till I have seen them.

Q Some people complained about the fact that law enforcement allowed some reporters to look at them in the first place.

ATTY GEN. RENO: It is the hardest issue to deal with in terms of how you handle something like that. I need to review it.

Q Ms. Reno, given your general reluctance to discuss timetables, I understand you may not want to be specific here, but can you give some idea of when the INS will make a decision on the six- year-old Cuban boy? For example, do you anticipate it being before the end of the year? Is there some need, do you think, to get this thing wrapped up quickly?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think everybody wants to see it resolved as quickly

as possible. Christmas is coming. Any child that has been through that -- I was in Miami at the time he was rescued, and to think of what that little boy did and how strong he must be; but when you think of all that he's been through, getting him situated where he should be situated so that he knows that he can pursue a future, I think, is very important, and I would hope it would be before the end of the year.

Q Does the final decision rest on that, as far as you're concerned, with Doris Meissner, or will you review her decision before it's announced, or what is the basic plan, or does the White House even have some role?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're going to make a decision based on what is right under the law.

Q Ms. Reno, since this is our, probably, last meeting here, can you cover just a few points of old business?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You can always try to cover anything that you want to, Mike. (Laughter.)

Q The campaign finance task force, are they inching towards a final report?

ATTY GEN. RENO: They are continuing to pursue all leads, so I would not suggest a final report yet.

Q Are they going to make a final report once their task is largely done?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that it will be important that they summarize what they have done.

Q Have you found anyone to replace Scott Frederickson (sp)?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I have not. We're looking.

Q Do you think it's possible -- it may be premature, but out of the review of that task force's work, that the department would have any recommendation to Congress on changing campaign law, the law governing campaign contributions, for example, or overseas

contributions or anything of that nature?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That might be a possibility. I mean, one of the things that a number of people have raised with me, both in the context of campaign financing and then with respect to the enforcement of laws generally, that there are sometimes glaring situations where the adjustment of language can facilitate an end result that everybody prefers. So we will look at it from that point of view as well.

Q When you say some people have raised this, do you mean some of the lawyers here in the department?

ATTY GEN. RENO: In the department and out in the U.S. Attorneys offices.

Q The investigation of Haley Barbour in regard to the money from Hong Kong for the '94 elections, is that investigation over?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That matter is still pending.

Q The investigation of Chairman Dan Burton, which has been going on for several years, also regarding a campaign finance allegation -- is that over with?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't comment.

Q The Cuban detainees in Louisiana apparently have set a deadline of tonight. If they don't get some of their demands met, they're threatening to kill law enforcement officials. How closely are you following that? And do you have any message for them or any comments to make to them at this time?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think appropriate comments should be made on the scene. I am following it very closely and get reports regularly during the day.

Q Ms. Reno, these types of detainees are in kind of a difficult position because they can't be sent back to Cuba, generally, under the law, and yet they're serving time behind bars for much longer than many that -- than they would if they were ordinary citizen criminals. Are you concerned about this situation? There have been

protests by some of the mothers of these people down in Florida over this issue. Do you recommend any changes in that system?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have tried to review the processes by which we release people, and we have tried to take steps to release everybody possible in the circumstances that you describe. Again, it is recognizing the need to protect public safety, but understanding that they are not the -- if a country would take them, if they were -- could be returned, they would be returned.

Q So you think Cubans are in a much worse position than other -- detainees from other nations?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There are a number of detainees in -- from other nations in the same category.

Q You said "tried to review." Is this an ongoing -- I mean, are you going to look at this again because of the situation in Louisiana -- what to do specifically about the Cubans?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, what we try to do is look at the circumstances on an ongoing basis to just -- to determine, based on a number of factors and whether they continue to be a danger.

Q When you look back over the past year, what would you identify as the high point of the year for the department, and what would you identify as the low point for the department?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't identify lows and highs. (Laughter.)

Q Well, you've never had to write a year-ender! (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank goodness! (Laughter.)

Q Have you given any more thought to when you'd be able to speak frankly about the whole Monica Lewinsky process, the decisions made both in regard to the president -- the positions that the department took in Judge Starr's investigation and your relations with Judge Starr himself?

ATTY GEN. RENO: After our conversation last time, I thought a lot about it -- (pause) -- (laughter) -- and I don't have any further

comment -- (laughter) -- (pause) -- other than to say everybody has been asking me: "Will you write a book? What will you do?"

I've got today to focus on and then tomorrow. And I'll think about whatever I do afterwards when I leave. There are so many things that need to be addressed that are issues of great importance to the American people. And I am not interested in what I say so much as what I can get done. Whatever comment I make when I leave here, whether by book or otherwise, I want to be as useful and as constructive as possible.

I used to take -- I loved the history of Western Civilization in terms of history courses. But it always troubled me that you started early on, with the Angles and the Saxons and the Holy Roman Empire, and then you got up through the 19th century. And suddenly you were at World War I, and the course was ended, the year was over. And you didn't have World War I and World War II and everything that led up to it. Sometimes I think we should reverse our studies and start with the most recent and go backwards.

Q Ms. Reno, speaking of -- (inaudible) -- important -- possibly important to the American people, this week a panel of federal judges rejected a request by APBNews.com to obtain the financial disclosure documents for all 1,600 federal judges. In announcing their decision or their vote, the panel said they were concerned that posting this information on the Internet, which we had planned to do, would somehow put the federal judges possibly at a greater risk for their own safety.

This is information that has been public record for 20 years; members of Congress, members of the Cabinet have to provide it. As the nation's top law enforcement officer, do you have any notion as to why the safety of a federal judge would be any more of concern than a member of Congress or a member of the Cabinet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will have to look at what the court has said and make a determination.

Q Ms. Reno, to return to the Elian Gonzalez case for a minute; on the process, some people involved in the case would like you to help ensure, at some point, a hearing in a U.S. court on the asylum claim and related issues. Is that something you can get involved in, or is

that important that those issues be aired in a U.S. court before a final resolution?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would make no comment on what is appropriate, because the Immigration and Naturalization Service is in the process of determining that. But all I want to make sure is that we follow the law, follow the facts and do what's right.

Q Well in fact, in a case like this, an affirmative request for asylum, there wouldn't ordinarily be a court hearing, would there; it would simply be an interview, if there were any interaction with INS?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Again, I don't want to comment. I just -- by silence, I don't say anything.

Q Christmas plans? Do you plan to go home, or --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I haven't decided what I'm going to do. I just wish it were warmer so I could go kayaking, because now the water's back up.

Q Is there any other possible explanation for the bugging in the State Department than to determine that it was an inside job, that he did -- this person did have help? And how close are you to determining that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think it's appropriate to comment. The FBI and the State Department's investigators are working together, and any comment should come directly from them.

Q Has there been a similar sweep for bugs here at Justice? Has there been a -- is it part of a government-wide effort to find this kind of thing since the discovery at the State Department?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think appropriate precautions have and will continue to be taken.

Q While we're on that topic, I think a lot of of people were a little bit confused by this. We all assume that there are regular sweeps made, sophisticated sweeps made in crucial government buildings for listening devices, but this listening device apparently was discovered because a team from the FBI field office noticed a Soviet

Embassy employee hanging around the State Department. Didn't we kind of back into this? Shouldn't there have been an electronic notice that there was some listening device and where it was found?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would think it would be more appropriate for the State Department to comment.

Q Ms. Reno, there's been some action in the FBI to get together with militia groups to talk to them face to face, and this has been ongoing for several years, and it seems that they've been stepped up somewhat recently. What is your feeling about that program by the FBI to try to reach out to militia groups and create greater understanding?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Whether militia groups or otherwise, in instances where it is important in terms of trust building, where militia groups are those groups that do not advocate violation of the law but have different ideas, it is important, I think, for people to talk and to build understanding and dialogue even though their ideas may differ from others'.

Q What goes on -- what's your feeling about what they talk about and what can be done?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't discuss what they talk about.

Q Rather than rush to send Elian Gonzalez back to Cuba, is there an alternative that INS might invite the father to come to the United States and be reunited in the States with his boy? Is that something that would be perceived as a success?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't perceive something as a success or a failure; I perceive whatever we do -- that it be done with sufficient deliberation, to make sure that it's right, and that it's based on the law, and it's based on the facts.

Q On that -- I asked you about this earlier; let me try again. The State Department says INS is going to make the decision -- I mean, the -- and I'm just trying to find out if you personally could intervene in this, or is this entirely in the hands of INS to make the decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The Immigration and Naturalization Service is a part of the Department of Justice.

Q Right. And so you are making your final decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know.

Q Well, why can't you say? Why can't you say?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know what the circumstances will be.

Q Can you at least say that you will review the final decision before it becomes final?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think I can say I will know what the final decision is. (Laughter.)

Q Before we do.

Q The Times says that -- (off mike) -- the decision before anything --

(Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: See? Don't ever believe everything you read in the newspaper. (Laughter.)

Q (Off mike.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you all very much.

(Chorus of "Thank you.")

Q Happy holidays!

ATTY GEN. RENO: Oh, that's right. We're --

Q We won't see you in --

Q We won't see --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I hope everybody has wonderful holidays, safe and happy, and that everything is good in your homes.

Q And the same to you.

Q Same to you.

Q And we won't see you next week?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Unless you want to. (Laughter.) But I don't think you want to. (Laughter.)

Q Yes, we do! (Laughter.)

Q Happy new year as well.

Q Thank you very much.

END.

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