

**Attorney General Eric Holder Delivers Remarks at the Fourth Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Public Security in the Americas  
Medillin, Colombia ~ Thursday, November 21, 2013**

Thank you, Associate Deputy Minister [John] Ossowski. I appreciate your kind words – and I thank you for serving as moderator for today’s first session. I would also like to thank the Government of Colombia for hosting this important gathering of friends, colleagues, and leaders. And I applaud the Organization of American States for having the vision to focus on regional cooperation as an effective conduit for increasing public safety – and reinforcing our mutual security.

It’s an honor to bring greetings from President [Barack] Obama. And it’s a pleasure to be in this beautiful city today.

As Minister Pinzon suggested this morning, there could be no more powerful symbol than that we are holding our OAS meeting today in Medellin – a city that has been transformed. And I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the courage of the Colombian judges, prosecutors, police officers and citizens who made this transformation possible – sometimes at the cost of their lives. Their courage is an inspiration to us today.

Indeed, each of our nations has displayed a shared commitment – and dedication – to building on the progress that our respective countries have made possible in recent years, particularly when it comes to protecting our citizens from violence and harm and combating transnational organized crime. And I appreciate the chance to discuss this commitment with you today.

As the title of this session suggests, the cornerstone of any effective law enforcement strategy rests upon the notion that our actions must be undertaken in concert with others – whether within individual neighborhoods, states, countries, or continents. We must cooperate if we are to protect our respective citizens from the criminal enterprises that threaten our national and international interests. And we must acknowledge that none among us can fight this battle on our own, or by implementing a “one-size-fits all” approach. On the contrary: we must take advantage of opportunities like this one to review and analyze cutting-edge strategies that can work for all of us, while at the same time seeking ways to adapt, to fine-tune, and to closely tailor our individual crime-fighting modalities to the specific security threats our people face.

In the United States, shifting crime trends over the last four decades have made it abundantly clear that new strategies must be brought to bear. It’s become self-evident that 20th-century solutions are simply not adequate to address the 21st-century challenges we face. And that’s why my colleagues and I have undertaken a series of fundamental policy changes – within the American criminal justice system, at the federal level – to invest in innovative models for reform; to explore new ways to ensure public safety and bring about just outcomes; to target precious law enforcement resources to the areas where they’re most needed; and to become smarter as well as tougher on crime. I hope that what we’ve chosen to do at the Justice Department will prove of value to you. And I

look forward to your feedback, as well as the chance to learn how your countries have dealt with some of the same issues.

The approach we have undertaken in the United States requires policymakers and law enforcement leaders to be frank about which policies have proven effective – and which have not. It demands that we embrace data-driven solutions, reject the tired assumptions of the past, and consider crime in its appropriate context – not just by reacting to criminal acts themselves, but by improving the government’s ability to enhance public safety through proactive policing – and empowering those who are released from prison to rejoin their communities in a productive and meaningful way.

As President Obama and I have discussed many times over the years – and as I have repeatedly made clear – the path we are currently on is far from sustainable. As we speak, roughly one out of every 100 American adults is behind bars. Although the United States comprises just five percent of the world’s population, we incarcerate almost a quarter of the world’s prisoners. While few would dispute the fact that incarceration has a role to play in any comprehensive public safety strategy, it’s become evident that such widespread incarceration is both inadvisable and unsustainable. It requires that we routinely spend billions of dollars on prison construction – and tens of billions more, on an annual basis, to house those who are convicted of crimes. It carries both human and moral costs that are too much to bear. And it results in far too many Americans serving too much time in too many prisons – and beyond the point of serving any good law enforcement reason.

Clearly, it is time – in fact, it’s well past time – that federal leaders consider a fundamentally new approach. As a prosecutor, a former judge, an attorney in private practice – and now as my nation’s top law enforcement official – I’ve seen the federal criminal justice system firsthand, from nearly every angle. And although I have the utmost faith – and confidence – in America’s legal system, and especially in the dedicated men and women who serve it, I also recognize that we can and must do much better.

This is why, early this year – at my direction – the Department of Justice launched a targeted review of the federal criminal justice system in order to identify reforms that will enable us to better protect the American people from crime; to increase support for those who become crime victims; and to bolster public safety by improving the criminal justice system as a whole. In August, I announced the results of this review – which include a series of significant actions that the Department of Justice has undertaken to ensure just outcomes, to promote fair law enforcement, to improve diversion and reentry policies, and to strengthen protections for the most vulnerable members of our society.

These reforms – which are currently being implemented across the United States – will help to bring our criminal justice system in line with our most treasured values: of equality, opportunity, and justice under law. Particularly in this time of growing demands and limited budgets, they also will help our federal system operate more efficiently by improving coordination between agencies at every level.

These efforts must begin with law enforcement. That's why I issued guidance to ensure that every case brought by federal authorities serves a substantial federal interest – and complements the work of our law enforcement counterparts at the state, local, and tribal levels. I have also directed our United States Attorneys, who lead federal prosecutions across the country, to develop specific, locally-tailored guidelines for determining when charges should be filed, and when they should not. This will enable us to focus our efforts on the most serious cases – those that implicate clear and substantial public security threats, including national security, protecting Americans from violent crime and financial fraud, and safeguarding our most vulnerable citizens.

In addition, I took action this summer to bring about a significant change in the Justice Department's charging policies with regard to mandatory minimum sentences for drug related crimes – so that certain people who have committed low-level, nonviolent drug offenses, and who have no ties to large-scale organizations, gangs, or cartels – will no longer be charged with offenses that impose draconian mandatory minimum sentences. Instead, they will be charged with offenses for which the accompanying sentences are more appropriate for their specific conduct, reserving the most severe penalties for violent criminals or drug kingpins.

This shift will enable the Justice Department to better promote public safety, deterrence, and rehabilitation, while making our expenditures smarter and more productive. As it stands, roughly 219,000 federal inmates are currently behind bars in the United States. Almost half of them are serving time for drug-related crimes, and many have substance abuse problems. Statistics show that many are likely to reoffend after they are released from prison – cycling through our federal and state criminal justice systems at great cost to American taxpayers – and without real benefit to public safety.

This vicious cycle – of poverty, criminality, and incarceration – traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities. And many aspects of our criminal justice system may actually exacerbate these problems, rather than alleviate them. This is why the Justice Department is also placing a renewed emphasis on the use of what we refer to as diversion programs – such as drug courts, treatment programs for those who have committed low-level drug crimes, and dual-track programs that differentiate between those with a low risk of recidivism and those with more serious criminal histories. By examining cases individually, identifying effective alternatives to incarceration under certain circumstances, and providing the resources necessary for those currently in the criminal justice system – and those who are released from prison – to become productive, law-abiding members of society, we can break this cycle. And we can improve public safety, forge safer neighborhoods, begin to address the root causes of criminality – and make smarter decisions on how to prevent it.

With these goals in mind, I have directed federal prosecutors around the country to designate prevention and reentry coordinators within each U.S. Attorney's office – so we can ensure that these efforts are prioritized in every district. The Justice Department is taking steps to highlight promising initiatives – many pioneered by individual states – that can serve as models for success, allowing policymakers to direct funding away from

prison construction and toward strategies that are proven to reduce recidivism and improve public safety. And my colleagues and I are moving in a variety of ways to identify and share best practices on reentry programs focused on specific needs related to employment, housing, and family support, among other key priorities.

Ultimately, however, this comprehensive “Smart on Crime” approach is about far more than fairness for those who are released from prisons. It makes plain economic sense. And it is a matter of both public safety and public good. While my colleagues and I recognize that the aggressive enforcement of federal criminal statutes will always be necessary, the reality is that we will never prosecute or incarcerate our way to becoming a safer nation. No country can succeed with such an approach. Instead, we must focus on prevention and reentry. We must be smart as well as efficient when battling criminal acts – and the conditions, and individual choices, that breed them. Most importantly, we must embrace reforms and innovations that can bring our law enforcement policies and practices in line with the values we share with all of the nations represented here – and which all of you have been working hard to translate into principled action, especially in recent years.

Each of the leaders in this room has the privilege of serving his or her respective country – and its citizens – in a time of common challenges and uncommon threats, when our ability to ensure peace, security, and justice depends more than ever on our willingness to work together – meeting national challenges with regional, and even global, solutions. There’s no question – as we come together today – that we have an unprecedented opportunity to share critical information, instructive experiences, and best practices. And that’s why I firmly believe that each of us must resolve – here and now – to seize this chance to collaborate, and to work together, in order to make our communities and our nations not only safer, but stronger.

Together, we can grow smarter on crime by implementing reforms and enacting legislation that ensures fairness in sentencing; by focusing scarce resources on incarcerating only those who pose the greatest threats; and by providing safe and productive paths forward for those who have paid their debts to society. We can grow smarter on crime by directing assistance and resources to “hot spots” of criminality; by recognizing that vulnerable populations deserve extra care and protection; and by acting on the realization that we are uniquely positioned – and empowered – to make the positive difference that our citizens need and deserve.

On behalf of President Obama – and the Department of Justice I am privileged to lead – let me say, once again, how pleased and honored I am to stand with you, and to work with you, to improve the safety and security of our fellow citizens. Despite the obstacles that undoubtedly lie ahead, as I look around this room, I cannot help but feel confident in our collective ability to do just that. I look forward to all that we will accomplish in the months and years ahead. And I thank you, once again, for the opportunity to be here today.