

JUSTICE NEWS

Attorney General Sessions Delivers Remarks to the Executive Office for Immigration Review Legal Training Program

Washington, DC ~ Monday, June 11, 2018

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, James, for that introduction, and thank you for your years of superb service to the Department as an SAUSA, at Main Justice, and now here at EOIR. James has been doing a fabulous job. He understands these issues, knows exactly what our challenges are, and is working steadfastly every day to meet them.

Thank you also to Katherine Reilly, Kate Sheehy, Chris Santoro, Edward So, David Neal, Chief Judge Keller, Lisa Ward, Jean King, Robin Sutman, and all of the leadership team.

It is good to be with you today.

Each one of you plays an important role in the administration of our immigration laws. Immigration judges are critical to ensuring that the Department of Justice carries out its responsibilities under the INA. You have an obligation to decide cases efficiently and to keep our federal laws functioning effectively, fairly, and consistently. As the statute states, Immigration Judges conduct designated proceedings “subject to such supervision and shall perform such duties as the Attorney General shall prescribe”.

This responsibility seeks to ensure that our immigration system operates in a manner that is consistent with the laws enacted by Congress. As you know, the INA was established to ensure a rational system of immigration in the national interest.

Of course there are provisions in the INA, consent decrees, regulations, and court decisions where the commonsense enforceability of the plain intent of the INA has been made more difficult. That's what you wrestle with frequently.

President Trump is correct: Congress needs to clarify a number of these matters. Without Congressional action, clarity and consistency for us is much more difficult.

Let's be clear: we have a firm goal, and that is to end the lawlessness that now exists in our immigration system. This Department of Justice is committed to using every available resource to meet that goal. We will act strategically with our colleagues at DHS and across the government, and we will not hesitate to redeploy resources and alter policies to meet new challenges as they arise.

Last month, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it will begin to refer as close to 100 percent of illegal Southwest Border crossers as possible to the Department of Justice for prosecution. The Department of Justice will take up those cases.

I have put in place a “zero tolerance” policy for illegal entry on our Southwest border. If you cross the Southwest border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you. It's that simple.

If someone is smuggling illegal aliens across our Southwest border, then we will prosecute them. Period.

I have sent 35 prosecutors to the Southwest and moved 18 immigration judges to detention centers near the border.

That is about a 50 percent increase in the number of immigration judges who will be handling cases at the border.”

All of us should agree that, by definition, we ought to have zero illegal immigration in this country.

Each of us is a part of the Executive Branch, and it is our duty to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed.”

Ours is a public trust.

And the United States of America is not a vague idea. It is not just a landmass or an economy. Ours is a sovereign nation state with a constitution, laws, elections, and borders.

As you all well know, one of our major difficulties today is the asylum process.

The asylum system is being abused to the detriment of the rule of law, sound public policy, and public safety— and to the detriment of people with just claims. Saying a few simple words—claiming a fear of return—is now transforming a straightforward arrest for illegal entry and immediate return into a prolonged legal process, where an alien may be released from custody into the United States and possibly never show up for an immigration hearing. This is a large part of what has been accurately called, “catch and release”.

Beginning in 2009, more and more aliens who passed an initial USCIS credible fear review were released from custody into the United States pending a full hearing. Powerful incentives were created for aliens to come here illegally and claim a fear of return. In effect, word spread that by asserting this fear, they could remain in the United States one way or the other. Far too often, that rumor proved to be true.

The results are just what one would expect. The number of illegal entrants has surged. Credible fear claims have skyrocketed, and the percentage of asylum claims found meritorious by our judges declined.

That’s because the vast majority of the current asylum claims are not valid. For the last five years, only 20 percent of claims have been found to be meritorious after a hearing before an Immigration Judge. In addition, some fifteen percent are found invalid by USCIS as a part of their initial screening.

Further illustrating this point, in 2009, DHS conducted more than 5,000 credible fear reviews. By 2016, only seven years later, that number had increased to 94,000. The number of these aliens placed in immigration court proceedings went from fewer than 4,000 to more than 73,000 by 2016—nearly a 19-fold increase—overwhelming the system and leaving legitimate claims buried.

Now we all know that many of those crossing our border illegally are leaving difficult and dangerous situations. And we understand all are due proper respect and the proper legal process. But we cannot abandon legal discipline and sound legal concepts.

Under the INA, asylum is available for those who leave their home country because of persecution or fear on account of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group or political opinion. Asylum was never meant to alleviate all problems— even all serious problems— that people face every day all over the world.

Today, exercising the responsibility given to me under the INA, I will be issuing a decision that restores sound principles of asylum and long standing principles of immigration law.

We have not acted hastily, but carefully. In my judgment, this is a correct interpretation of the law. It advances the original intent and purpose of the INA, and it will be your duty to carry out this ruling.

This decision will provide more clarity for you. It will help you to rule consistently and fairly.

The fact is we have a backlog of about 700,000 immigration cases, and it’s still growing. That’s more than triple what it was in 2009. This is not acceptable. We cannot allow it to continue.

At this time, when our immigration system and our immigration judges are under great stress, I am calling on you to use your best efforts and proper policies to enhance our effectiveness. To end the lawlessness and move to the virtuous cycle, we have to be very productive. Volume is critical. It just is. We ask you to evaluate your processes and disposition rates.

We ask each one of you to complete at least 700 cases a year. It's about the average. We are all accountable. Setting this expectation is a rational management policy to ensure consistency, accountability, and efficiency in our immigration court system. Thank you for working every day to meet and exceed this goal. You can be sure that this administration and this Department of Justice supports you in this critically important and historic effort.

That's why we are hiring more than 100 new immigration judges this calendar year. And we are actively working with our partners at DHS to ensure that we can deploy judges electronically and by video-teleconference where needed and to obtain appropriate courtroom facilities.

Let's be clear. These actions will not end or reduce legal immigration. These actions will be directed at reducing illegal immigration. Only Congress can change legal immigration.

This is a great nation—the greatest in the history of the world. It is no surprise that people want to come here. But they must do so according to law.

When we lose clarity or have decisions that hold out hope where a fair reading of the law gives none, we have cruelly hurt many people. As we resolutely strive to consistently and fairly enforce the law, we will be doing the right thing.

The world will know what our rules are, and great numbers will no longer undertake this dangerous journey. The number of illegal aliens and the number of baseless claims will fall. A virtuous cycle will be created, rather than a vicious cycle of expanding illegality.

The American people have spoken. They have spoken in our laws and they have spoken in our elections. They want a safe, secure border and a lawful system of immigration that actually works. Let's deliver it for them.

Speaker:

Attorney General Jeff Sessions

Topic(s):

Immigration

Component(s):

Office of the Attorney General

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