

Attorney General Holder pledges full support for civil rights

Written by James Wright, Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspapers
Thursday, 28 May 2009 14:23

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder has pledged to enforce the nation's civil rights laws, saying that while the country has made significant progress in race relations, a lot more needs to be done.

The first Black appointed to be the nation's top lawyer made his remarks at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's annual luncheon, which was held at the National Press Club in Washington early this month.

Holder, who answered questions from veteran journalist Gwen Ifill and note cards from the audience, said some people are still afraid to discuss race.

"When I made my statement that we were a 'nation of cowards' earlier this year, those three words got a lot of attention," he said. "If I could do it over I would have used different words, however, sadly the speech would not have gotten the attention that it deserves. I basically said that we as Americans need to put aside our feelings and talk about this openly and honestly...That way, we can grow together as one people."

Holder said Americans need to stop looking at affirmative action as a "zero-sum game."

"Studies have shown that where diversity is promoted, everyone wins," he said.

Holder said he will work to stop the "school-to-prison pipeline that is devastating Black males" and make fair housing a primary focus for the Civil Rights Division. He said the Justice Department will study the effects of the criminal justice system on the poor and people of color and work to eliminate the disparity in federal sentencing between crack and powder cocaine.

The Voting Rights Division will be strengthened to make sure that all citizens have the right to vote, he said. "Talk that we do not need the Voting Rights Act because President Obama was elected, is not true," he said. "We still have problems in regards to race and voting and a vital Justice Department, just like a vital [NAACP] Defense Fund is the key to eliminating those barriers."

He said he agreed with Obama that the next person to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court "should be a great, sharp lawyer who understands that jurisprudence deals with people's lives and not just abstract theories."

Holder said that no firm decision has been made regarding what to do with detainees at Guantanamo Bay, which is whether to put them in the states or to send them back to their home countries.

He said, "We've heard from lawmakers on the issue and we will see how this plays out."