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Memorandum

**U.S. Department of Justice
Community Relations Service**

Subject Assessment: Little Rock, Arkansas	Date May 29, 1997
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To Sylvia Matthews
Deputy Chief of Staff, COS

From Rose M. Ochi
Director

For your information, I am providing you with an assessment of race relations in Little Rock, Arkansas. This information is derived from two cases the Community Relations Service (CRS) is working on in Little Rock. In August 1996, CRS was appointed by the Federal Court to mediate desegregation issues involving all Pulaski County schools. In addition, at the request of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), CRS is involved in easing community-wide racial tensions resulting from two separate police shooting incidents.

In 1957, pursuant to a Federal District Court's "Order to Desegregate," Central High School in Little Rock was ordered to allow black students to attend classes. Since that date, the Federal court has consolidated the desegregation order to include all schools in Pulaski County, as well as the schools in Little Rock. Although attorneys for the Plaintiffs and the school district are engaged in ongoing court-ordered mediation efforts with CRS, there are many issues that remain unresolved, including course programming, school athletics and educational opportunities.

The week of September 19-28, 1997, Little Rock is planning to commemorate the 40th anniversary of school desegregation. However, there are some community groups and individuals opposed to this celebration, because the school district is still under Federal court's jurisdiction and monitoring. Furthermore, the planning committee does not include representatives from the NAACP, plaintiffs in the original lawsuit.

Two other major issues have arisen which have increased racial tensions. In December, 1996, there was a fatal shooting of a black male holding a black female hostage. When the police shot the male, they also shot the female victim twice, in the face and arm. Critics allege that had the victim been a white female, the police would have exercised more restraint before shooting.

In January, 1997, two black males were fatally wounded by the police during a drug arrest. It is alleged by some that they were shot in the back, though they were unarmed and had no weapons. The police claim the suspects appeared to be reaching for weapons, though no weapons were found. The results of the police investigation have not been made public.

There is a perception among young African Americans that police have targeted all black youth as either drug users or dealers. There has been a call for a police citizen review board, which is opposed by the City government, the police department, and the Chamber of Commerce. The City Board of Managers has formed its own committee to investigate allegations of police misconduct. However, this action has not resolved the conflict. There were two peaceful demonstrations in January and February supporting the formation of a police citizen review board.

The second major issue concerns the use of minority contractors by the City of Little Rock. A study by an independent auditing firm released in 1996 indicated that white firms were awarded contracts over minority contractors, even when their bids were higher. Prior to the filing of a lawsuit against the City, the City had been willing to consider mediation with the minority contractors. However, further settlement discussions were stymied by the demands from white female contractors demanding to be included as a separate party in negotiations. The minority contractors were willing to include the white female contractors only if they were also required to be certified; this condition was rejected by the white female contractors. A class action lawsuit by the minority contractors was filed in federal court in May, 1997, when the stalemate was reached.

If national press attends the planned commemoration in Little Rock, there is a high probability that the NAACP and other community groups would use this opportunity to voice their concerns over these issues. In addition to the NAACP, there appears to be multi-racial community opposition to holding a desegregation commemoration event when the lawsuit has not been fully resolved, especially in the backdrop of current racial tensions.

For any additional information, please contact my Special Advisor, Byron Wong. His telephone number is 202/305-2935.

cc: Ann Lewis
Maria Echaveste
Ben Johnson