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At Justice Department, Perez vows action on hate crimes

By Carrie Johnson
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The leader of the Justice Department's civil rights unit has decried a recent spate of hate-crime cases across the United States and pledged to make prosecuting violent "equal-opportunity bigots" a top priority in the coming year.

The remarks of Thomas E. Perez, who took over the Civil Rights Division about two months ago, came on the same day as federal prosecutors in Roanoke won a criminal conviction against William A. White, a leader of the neo-Nazi group American National Socialist Workers Party, for making threats and intimidating a witness against him.

And last week, a federal grand jury in Pennsylvania charged two white men in connection with the fatal beating of a Latino man walking home from a community festival in July 2008, nearly six months after a local jury had acquitted the pair of the most serious charges against them.

The grand jury also charged the Shenandoah police chief, a lieutenant on the force, and another police officer with conspiracy to obstruct justice for allegedly trying to cover up the attack.

Perez said in a speech on Friday to the American Constitution Society, and in comments to reporters, that he was "shocked" by what he described as the feeble record of his predecessors under President George W. Bush in bringing hate-crimes cases.

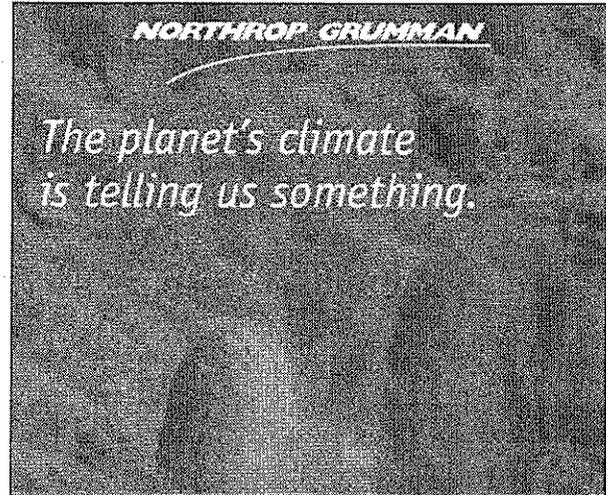
"I spent the better part of a decade prosecuting hate-crime cases, and I know what they can do to a community," he told reporters last week. "I got a tour of the route that James Byrd Jr. was taken as he was dragged toward his death. I saw the utter inhumanity of man toward man."

Perez served as a deputy assistant attorney general from 1988 to 1999, under Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. He was Maryland's labor secretary when President Obama tapped him for the civil rights post.

Last week, Obama signed a spending measure that will give the civil rights division funds to hire 102 staff members, many of whom will be lawyers assigned to hate-crimes investigations. In October, after more than a decade of consideration, Congress expanded hate-crime protection to cover sexual orientation.

But the Obama administration's ambitious agenda on hate crimes and other civil rights issues has been complicated by controversies, including a dust-up over why the Justice Department dropped a voter intimidation case in Philadelphia this year against members of the New Black Panther Party. The move rankled some career lawyers and Republican lawmakers, who successfully petitioned for an

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internal ethics investigation into why the case had been dismissed.

Perez's confirmation was held up for months in part because of the Black Panther case, which was brought at the end of the Bush years and abandoned before Perez got to the Justice Department under Obama.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.) inserted language into the omnibus budget bill late last week that requires Justice Department leaders to share the results of the ethics probe with lawmakers.

"There is something strange going on here," Wolf said in an interview. "We're just going to continue to push this thing until the full story comes out. . . . Voting intimidation is wrong whether it be in Philadelphia, Mississippi, or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

Perez told reporters that "we welcome the results" of the investigation and confirmed that subpoenas had been received "for a number of current and former employees," but he declined to comment in depth about the case.

The civil rights unit during George W. Bush's presidency was often controversial for its focus on religious discrimination and for hiring practices that the department's inspector general concluded were influenced by political motivations. But conservatives are watching the department's new leaders for signs that they might be falling into their own political traps.

Robert Driscoll, a Justice Department official in the civil rights division during the Bush years, said: "No matter what they do, no matter what their emphasis is, the things they do should be well-grounded in the law. They're running into trouble when they don't do that."

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