



Treasury News

FROM THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 10, 2000

LS-389

NATIONAL CHURCH ARSON TASK FORCE ISSUES THIRD REPORT

Arsons at Houses of Worship Continues to Decline

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The National Church Arson Task Force issued its third report to the President today, highlighting statistics that indicate the number of arsons at houses of worship continues to decline. Task Force officials contribute their success, in part, to continued vigilance, well-publicized arrests and ongoing prevention efforts.

The Task Force's arrest rate of 35 percent continues to be more than twice the national average for arson cases and 287 defendants have been convicted in connection with 206 arsons or bombings.

"I applaud the Task Force's diligent efforts of the past three years, which have resulted in the continued decline of arsons at our nation's houses of worship," said Treasury Deputy Secretary Stuart Eizenstat. "The hard work of ATF, the FBI, federal prosecutors and state and local law enforcement authorities, in conjunction with HUD and FEMA, have led to the NCATF's success in arresting and prosecuting the arsonists, rebuilding burned houses of worship and preventing additional fires."

"Vigorous law enforcement efforts, increased coordination among federal, state and local agencies and the vigilance of the faith community have laid the groundwork for tremendous progress," said James E. Johnson, Undersecretary of the Treasury for Enforcement and co-chair of the Task Force. "This coordinated approach has been vital to our success and to the continued decline of church arsons. We remain committed and will continue to aggressively investigate and prosecute those responsible for these horrific crimes."

"While these types of cases are often times difficult to investigate and prosecute, our cooperative efforts have brought tremendous success," said Bill Lann Lee, Acting Assistant Attorney General and co-chair of the Task Force. "The number of fires at houses of worship continues to decline, but even one burned church is too many -- we will not let up our efforts."

The Task Force's accomplishments include:

- opening 827 investigations into arsons, bombings, or attempted bombings that have occurred at houses of worship between January 1995 and October 1999, resulting in the arrest of 364 suspects in connection with 294 of these investigations;
- a 35 percent arrest rate in Task Force arson cases -- more than double the 16 percent rate of arsons in general;
- convictions by federal, state and local prosecutors of 287 defendants in connection with 206 arsons or bombings at houses of worship between January 1995 and October 1999.

The Task Force also reported on recent indictments against Jay Scott Ballinger, who is suspected of starting fires at 29 churches in eight states. The indictments against Ballinger represent the largest number of fires linked to a single defendant since the Task Force was created.

The Task Force continues to work with U.S. Attorney's offices, ATF, the FBI and state and local authorities to

investigate and prosecute arsons at houses of worship. The Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Federal Emergency Management Agency also continue to assist communities affected by these fires by providing rebuilding assistance and fire prevention information.

The Third Year Report is available on the internet at <http://www.atf.treas.gov/pub/arsonrpt3.htm>.