

Justice Dept. sets up civil rights unit in Ala., after state crackdown on illegal immigration

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — The Justice Department said Tuesday it was establishing its first civil rights unit in Alabama, a move that comes after the state's crackdown on illegal immigration raised broader concerns about compliance with federal laws.

While the unit wasn't formed as a direct result of Alabama's immigration law — parts of which have been blocked by federal courts — officials said it would examine issues related to immigrants and also matters involving fair housing laws, police brutality claims, compliance with federal disability laws and minority protection.

Attorneys from the unit based in Birmingham will be responsible for both criminal prosecutions and civil lawsuits to enforce civil rights laws.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Tom Perez said the unit will ensure that the federal government has a continuing eye on civil rights issues in Alabama, which was a hotbed of unrest during the civil rights movement half a century ago.

“This is about sustainability ... of civil rights enforcement,” Perez said during a news conference held at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

Birmingham is the eighth U.S. city out of 94 with U.S. attorney offices to have a civil rights unit. The nearest similar unit is in Memphis, Tenn.

U.S. Attorney Joyce Vance said the department's work investigating effects of the immigration law resulted in new relationships in Alabama between government attorneys and the public and the realization that more work was needed on civil rights oversight.

“We rounded out our affiliations with members of the civil rights community,” she said.

Doug Jones — a former U.S. attorney who prosecuted the final two Ku Klux Klan members convicted in a church bombing that killed four black girls in 1963 — said the Justice Department never before had a civil rights unit based in the state. During the civil rights era and afterward, he said, civil rights laws were narrower in scope and such cases were mainly overseen from Washington with assistance from local federal prosecutors and investigators.

“I think the immigration bill put us back in the national spotlight. I think that's why you're seeing this coming together now,” said Jones, now an attorney in private practice.

The unit will be headed by Robert Posey, a longtime federal prosecutor who worked with Jones on the church bombing cases. With a core group of five lawyers in Birmingham and Huntsville, it will handle cases from the northern half of the state.

The Obama administration sued the state to block the law clamping down on illegal immigration after Republican Gov. Robert Bentley signed it last year, and Posey said the unit already is involved in two cases involving allegations of excessive force by law enforcement officers.

The department's decision to place a civil rights unit in Alabama shows the state will have problems guaranteeing legal equality years after the civil rights era ended, said Shay Farley, legal director of Alabama Applesseed, a public interest legal office based in Montgomery.

"It highlights the fact that the war isn't over," she said.

Isabel Rubio, the head of an advocacy group for Hispanic immigrants, said the formation of a citizen's advisory board to work with the new unit would make it easier for members of the immigrant community to stay in contact with civil rights attorneys. "It will provide a clear avenue for communication to have a way to move forward," said Rubio, director of the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama.

The unit is being formed as Birmingham prepares to mark the 50th anniversary of the landmark civil rights protests of 1963, when authorities used police dogs and fire hoses on protesters marching in the streets against legalized racial segregation. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was among those arrested during those protests.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/justice-department-starting-civil-rights-unit-in-birmingham-after-illegal-immigration-law/2012/08/21/d2ac528c-ebb4-11e1-866f-60a00f604425_story.html