

N.O. may lose strike force against crime

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New Orleans may lose its U.S. Justice Department Organized Crime, Strike Force composed of six attorneys and three clerical assistants, formed seven years ago.

The department is considering restructuring "or possibly dissolving" the special forces organized in 18 cities, a department source said in Washington.

They said the department was evaluating the effectiveness of the strike forces at the request of Atty. Gen. Elliot L. Richardson.

The attorneys reportedly told Richardson that a number of the strike forces "had failed to make meaningful organized crime cases," and their offices could do the job better and at less cost.

The U.S. attorneys met with Richardson a week ago at his request, and formed a 16-member committee to advise him on Justice Department policies and programs.

The subcommittee chairman, U.S. Atty. Richard L. Thornburgh of Pittsburgh, said the panel plans to talk with a number of officials in the areas where strike forces are operating, such as New Orleans.

Basically, the subcommittee will examine the relationship between the strike forces and U.S. attorneys in those areas, Thornburgh told a reporter.

The strike force system was conceived and implemented by Henry E. Petersen, now the assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Criminal Division.

Petersen said his own division's evaluation of strike force effectiveness is a continuing process, rather than a new development.

John Wall, who was the first chief of the New Orleans strike force unit, resigned and since has criticized certain methods of the Justice Department. He was succeeded by K. Erick Giesleson as acting chief.

Giesleson had an active role in the unsuccessful prosecution of DA Jim Garrison and two others on pinball gambling charges after others in the case had pleaded guilty or received severances.