

US jets kill civilian during training mission in Puerto Rico

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One civilian was killed and four others injured Monday, when two US Marine F-18 jets on a nighttime training mission missed their targets and bombed a communications tower on Vieques Island off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico. David Sanes, a 35-year-old contractor at the military base, was killed.

The two fighter jets based on the aircraft carrier USS *John F. Kennedy* struck the tower where four civilian contractors and one military observer were helping direct the jets over the island, just eight miles from the US territory of Puerto Rico.

The US has conducted military maneuvers on Vieques for three decades despite widespread opposition from the local population of 9,400. Seventy-five percent of the island--which is only 21 miles long and 4 miles wide--is owned by the US, which uses it for weapons storage and military exercises. Residents have long complained that US bombing has disrupted fishing grounds, destroyed coral reefs and ruined tourism.

According to Robert Rabin of the Committee for Rescue and Development of Vieques, a civilian group which opposes the military exercises on the island, it was inevitable that there would be an accident. He said, "What happened is what for years they have been saying was going to happen.... Vieques lives under the continual danger that this type of situation will happen if the Navy makes a mistake in its bombardment from ships and airplanes."

Just last month the Puerto Rican Senate demanded that the US Marines cease using live munitions on the island. After Monday's incident Vieques Mayor Manuela Santiago said she was going to ask President Bill Clinton and the US Marines to end all activities on the island.

Roberto Nelson, spokesperson for the Roosevelt

Roads Naval Station, said the incident was an "unfortunate accident" and added that a full investigation would be conducted. He defended the importance of the training grounds, stressing that most of the navy and marine aircraft involved in the Kosovar war had been trained on this island. "All of those pilots who are in Kosovo have dropped live ordnance in Vieques ...that is the importance of Vieques in this [Kosovo] operation."

The tragedy in Puerto Rico is only the latest example of the US military's disregard for human life near its weapons testing grounds. Just last month a US military jury acquitted a US air force captain who had recklessly performed an illegal barrel roll, thus flying his plane too low and faster than was permitted, and cutting through a cable car line at an Italian ski resort, killing 20 people.

See Also:

US pilot who killed twenty on ski gondola acquitted
[6 March 1999]



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