

US forces expel protesters from Puerto Rican bombing range

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In a pre-dawn raid Thursday morning hundreds of US Federal Marshals, FBI agents and military forces forcefully expelled more than 140 protesters who were occupying a US Navy bombing range on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Protesters had been occupying Camp Garcia on the facility for 380 days, demanding that the Pentagon stop using the island as a bombing range and return the land to civilian use.

A raid to clear the base had been expected since May 1, when three US warships, reportedly carrying 1,000 Marines, arrived near the small island eight miles southeast of Puerto Rico.

On arrival, the marshals and FBI agents, wearing helmets and bullet-proof vests, demanded that the protesters leave or face arrest. When no one moved the agents began handcuffing the demonstrators, who were hauled into military trucks as they sang the Puerto Rican national anthem.

Among those removed were nationalist leaders Lolita Lebron and Isabel Rosado. Lebron, 80, spent 26 years in jail in the United States as a result of an armed assault on the US Congress in 1954. Rosado, 93, is a long-time Vieques activist who was first arrested in a 1979 protest against the Navy presence. Also detained were singers Danny Rivera and Tito Auger and other Puerto Rican artists and intellectuals. A New York Democratic congresswoman who had joined the protest was also taken away.

As news of the raid reached mainland Puerto Rico, students and workers began spontaneous protests. University of Puerto Rico students who went on strike surrounded Fort Buchanan near San Juan and protesters also gathered outside Roosevelt Roads base, where the protesters were taken. Several hours later the protesters were released. US Attorney General Janet Reno then announced that no charges would be filed unless the

protesters attempted to re-enter the installation.

Meanwhile, hundreds of US Marines established a perimeter around the bombing range with concertina wire to prevent demonstrators from returning. Coast Guard ships established a security zone in the waters around the base to prevent further protesters arriving by boat.

In Washington, Rear Adm. Robert Natter said the Navy aimed to return as soon as possible to "inert-only" training, which could include shells without explosive warheads fired from the aircraft carrier George Washington's battle group.

Many of the protesters and residents of Vieques vowed to continue their fight. The demonstrations began a year ago when protesters, including leaders of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), set up "Camp Garcia" on a Vieques beach. The demand that the US leave the island won popular support.

The protests were sparked by the April 19, 1999 death of security guard David Sanes and the wounding of four others after two 500-pound bombs, dropped from jets on training maneuvers for the Kosovo War, missed their target and exploded near the observation tower where Sanes worked. Two days later Vieques fishermen erected a white cross on the beach and renamed it Mount David, in honor of Sanes.

The incident unleashed pent-up anger over the disruptions to fishing and the island's ecology by war games, a series of near-misses of civilians by live ammunition, and the Navy's failure to implement a 1983 agreement to limit live-fire exercises and to fund anti-poverty programs for the island's residents.

The population of Vieques has been resisting the US presence since 1940, when American troops occupied the island, which is 40 kilometers long and 3 kilometers wide, and took over two-thirds of it for a bombing

range. Originally, the Pentagon intended to expel all the inhabitants. However, popular resistance in both Vieques and mainland Puerto Rico made that impossible. The present population of 9,300, consisting mostly of poor fishermen and their families, are crammed into just one quarter of the small island, between the bombing range and an ammunition depot.

The Pentagon insists that Vieques is the only facility available for joint exercises by the US armed forces. US military bases in Puerto Rico are an important component of Washington's control over the Caribbean Sea and have been used to support military operations in Central America.

In addition to regular war games that have involved up to 20,000 soldiers, the Navy has used live-fire war games on Vieques to certify the combat-readiness of aircraft-carrier battle groups and Marine Corps units bound for deployment overseas. The exercises include forced landings on hostile shores involving amphibious, airborne and air units, naval bombardments of land targets and coordinated amphibious, naval and air maneuvers.

The Navy, however, canceled certification exercises for two carrier battle groups after protesters set up encampments on the training ground and bombing range in April 1999 in a drive to close them down.

In response to mass sentiment in Puerto Rico against the Navy's presence, the US government has moved cautiously. President Bill Clinton ordered last year that live bombs not be used until the year 2003. He also drafted a bill, now stalled in Congress, to return some of the island to its inhabitants and to use federal funds to develop the area. Clinton has also proposed a referendum on the issue by the Vieques population. Protesters say the deal offers no guarantees and they want the range to remain closed.

Formally, Puerto Rico is a commonwealth in free association with the US. The use of its territory by the Pentagon is supposedly bound by joint agreement. In reality the US exercises semi-colonial control over the island, which Spain ceded to the US after its defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898.

The expulsion of the protesters from Vieques and the US government's announcement that it will resume military exercises on the island, notwithstanding Clinton's attempts to provide a diplomatic gloss, constitute an arrogant assault on the rights of the Puerto

Rican people and one more demonstration of US militarism.



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