

US dragnet snares Vieques protesters

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Demonstrators gathered July 4 outside the Guaynabo Detention Center in Puerto Rico in protest over the mass roundup of opponents of the US Navy's continuing bombardment of the island of Vieques.

The protest was one of several held on US Independence Day throughout Puerto Rico—a de facto colony of Washington—against the Navy's resumption of military exercises following a year-long occupation of its firing range on Vieques, a small island off the Puerto Rican coast. The occupation began in April of last year after stray bombs killed a civilian security guard. It was broken up with the forced eviction of the protesters' encampment on May 4.

The shelling was resumed, based on a directive issued by President Bill Clinton. Washington rejected the demand for an immediate halt to the use of the island as a bombing range. Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans had taken to the streets to press for this objective. Vieques has served as a test target for US naval bombardment for 60 years.

With 10,000 inhabitants, Vieques has seen its economy stagnate, with the Navy controlling more than two-thirds of the land and the constant bombing disrupting fishing, agriculture and other economic activity. The use of munitions, including radioactive shells, has also caused extensive ecological damage and high cancer rates among the people of the island.

Instead of ending the bombardments, Clinton's directive allows the Navy use of the island for practice with inert shells and bombs until 2003. At that time, the exercises will supposedly end, though the cessation of the bombings is dependent upon a referendum that is to be organized by the Navy.

US Marshals raided the homes of scores of protesters beginning June 30, after they failed to pay bail of \$1,000 imposed by a federal court in Puerto Rico. They had been arrested the previous week for crawling under fences and scrambling onto remote beaches near the

firing range in an attempt to halt exercises by a naval battle group. The naval operation, which included the aircraft carrier *George Washington*, used 130,000 pounds of ammunition.

Among those jailed were at least a dozen candidates of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) in the upcoming elections. The party took the position that the US court has no legal authority over Vieques and refused to pay the bail on principle. Its members have for the same reason refused to offer any defense in federal court proceedings. In all, 122 arrest orders were issued for refusing to pay bail and at least 90 people had been detained by July 4.

“We do not recognize any moral authority nor the legitimacy of the US court in this matter,” Puerto Rican Senator Manuel Rodriguez Orellana of the PIP said July 3. The arrests, he added, “unmask the repressive and intimidating character of this process.”

The crackdown came only days after President Clinton hosted talks in Washington on Puerto Rico's status, to which PIP President Ruben Berrios was invited, together with the leaders of the Popular Democratic and New Progressive parties. The summit served merely as a public relations exercise aimed at deflecting attention from the controversy over Vieques.

Indicative of the growing tensions over the Pentagon's insistence on continuing its military exercises in Vieques is the friction between federal and local police agencies. The chief of the federal marshals, Herman Wirshing, threatened July 3 to bring obstruction of justice charges against the Puerto Rican superintendent of police. The US official charged that Puerto Rican police refused to assist the marshals in arresting the protesters, and then denied them the use of holding cells before the protesters were transferred to the federal jail.



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