

US Navy to be sued for depleted uranium use on Caribbean island

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The inhabitants of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques are to take the United States Navy to court for compensation over a claim that its use of depleted uranium (DU) shells has caused a cancer epidemic.

DU is a highly toxic by-product of the enrichment of uranium for the production of nuclear weapons and reactor fuel.

Over a third of the island's population of 9,000 are now suffering from a range of cancers and other serious illnesses. By official figures, the cases of cancer of the breast, cervix and uterus have risen by 300 percent over the last 20 years. Many doctors have linked the alarming rise in cancers to the decades-long use of the island as a bombing range by the US Navy and to a lesser extent by Britain's Royal Navy.

Vieques, which is 20 miles long by four miles wide (32km by 6.4km), is situated off the East Coast of the US commonwealth island of Puerto Rico. Two thirds of the island is owned by the US Navy, which has used it for military practice for the past 60 years. The islands' 33,000 acres are divided into three; an eastern portion used for bombing practice and a western segment, which is used mainly as an ammunition depot. The islanders live in between these two strips.

Since 1940 when US troops occupied the island, in preparation for Washington's entry into World War II, there has been relentless opposition from the islanders. The Pentagon's original plan had been to clear the island of its inhabitants, but this was prevented due to protests. In 1975 protesters and activists forced the US Navy to pull out of Culebra, a sister island of Vieques.

Whenever opposition to its presence on Vieques has been raised, the US Navy has always maintained that a cessation of military practice would pose a threat to national security. The island is, the Navy claims, the only place where its Atlantic Fleet can use live ammunition for combined land, sea and air exercises.

Matters came to a head in April 1999 when a security guard, David Sanes, was killed and four other civilians were injured by stray bombs fired during the US Navy's training exercises for the Kosovo conflict. The incident sparked demonstrations across Puerto Rico, calling for the ending of the US military presence. Around 150 protesters occupied the bombing range and remained there for over a year. In May 2000, over a 1,000 US marines arrived on the island and forcibly evicted the protesters. On American Independence Day last year, 50,000 Puerto Ricans joined protests against the further use of Vieques for military purposes. The Pentagon had also admitted for the first time to having used napalm on the island.

Last October military forces from the US and other NATO countries staged a mock invasion on Vieques, despite repeated calls from campaigners for a delay to enable protesters who had broken into the bombing range a chance to get out. Several dozen warships and hundreds of military aircraft shelled the island before thousands of troops went ashore in a simulation of a United Nations mission.

Then US President Bill Clinton, seeking to repair strained relations between Washington and San Juan, ordered the phasing out of live ammunitions but ruled that 'inert shells' would continue to be fired until 2003 when a referendum organised by the military would be held amongst Puerto Ricans. In order to exert pressure for the resumption of live-fire exercises, Clinton held out the offer of a \$40 million development package (which originated in an un-honoured 1983 pledge between the US and Puerto Rican governments) to salvage the island's faltering economy. The bombing has largely destroyed the fishing industry upon which most islanders relied. The granting of clemency to 11 Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners, serving long jail terms, in September 1999 was also largely motivated by the US administration's efforts to diffuse opposition to its military operations in the

Caribbean. With the closure of its Panama headquarters, the US military's Southern Command transferred many of its functions to Puerto Rico.

The court case being brought by the inhabitants of Vieques will be closely watched by the various NATO countries that sent troops to Iraq in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999, due to public controversy over the possible link between the use of DU shells in those conflicts and a high number of sometimes fatal leukaemia cases amongst soldiers.

Campaigners across Vieques pursued an injunction through the Freedom of Information Act, which forced the US Navy to publicly admit to having fired DU shells on the island in 1999. The Navy maintained that this had been done by 'mistake' as the wrong ammunition had somehow been loaded onto fighter jets. It reported that efforts had been made to recover the radioactive shell casings, but only around 50 had been located.

The Navy insisted that several hundred DU shells would not be enough to constitute a health hazard. Scientists, however, say they have found signs of a far greater use of DU ammunitions. After conducting tests on soil samples from the Vieques bombing range, the scientists claim they have found evidence of systematic shelling with DU rounds that goes back at least a decade.

Jorge Fernandez, an environmental expert from Puerto Rico, flatly contradicted the Navy's claims: "They say the shells were used on target tanks on one particular spot, but when we made soil samples we found nine separate spots, all over the hundreds of acres of this bombing range, which showed significant levels of uranium."

Campaigners have also identified target tanks on the bombing range dating back to 1991, which are pierced with holes characteristic of DU shells—with their ability to burn smoothly through armour plating rather than blast it apart like conventional ordnance.

John Arthur Eaves, from a Mississippi based law firm that specialises in cases involving industrial pollution, has brought together 3,600 islanders who claim their illnesses are linked to the bombing of Vieques with DU shells. "I think \$100m may turn out to be at the lower end of the scale of what we might get from the Navy," said Eaves. "We have already spent \$7m on preparing this case which we wouldn't have done if we didn't think we had a very good chance of winning."

One of the cases, which is sadly all too typical, is that of Rolando Garcia. Garcia is a father of two young children. He is only 32 years of age, but looks much older. All his body hair has fallen out and he walks with the slow

shuffling movements of an old and infirm man. It is a tremendous effort just to cross his living room floor.

Garcia used to work on the bombing range, maintaining military buildings and believes this is when he was exposed to DU. His test results confirm that he is contaminated by a long list of toxic materials including titanium, but the most worrying is uranium. "I had never heard of uranium before this," he said "but now it looks like it might kill me."

Some families have more than one member affected. Ava Torres, who contracted cancer of the uterus in 1994, later watched her father die of a stroke. Both cases are believed to be linked to the bombings.

Many islanders who have never been on the bombing range itself are nonetheless showing high levels of uranium in medical tests. It is believed that they have picked up metals blown off the bombing range by the strong easterly winds that regularly blow across the island. On BBC Radio's "The 5 Live Report", broadcast on February 4, Matthew Chapman visited and interviewed protesters outside the US Navy base on Vieques. While conducting the report, the protesters and Chapman came under attack from US troops. Soldiers emerged from around the razor wired wall of the base and sprayed the protesters with pepper-gas.

Chapman went on to interview US Navy Commander John Carerra, who said, "Stories of cancers and illness are just part of a campaign of misinformation by those opposed to our presence on the island."

Chapman then asked Carerra why protestors had been sprayed with pepper-gas. Carerra replied that the US Navy had never done such a thing. When Chapman informed Carerra that he had just come from a protest where pepper gas had been used, a press officer interjected to assert that the troops used the gas because the protesters were repeatedly harassing them.

The US Navy has recently added the slogan "Doing everything to be a good neighbour" to its website and has donated six pianos to the island. When the Vieques bombing range closed last year due to protests, the British Royal Navy invited its US counterparts to practice on an undisclosed island off the Scottish mainland.



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