

Washington's colonial arrogance

Hundreds arrested as US Navy bombs Vieques, Puerto Rico

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US Marshals and Navy military police have arrested hundreds of protesters attempting to stop the resumed bombardment of Vieques, the small island off the coast of Puerto Rico, a US colonial possession. Security personnel used tear gas and pepper spray on others who have attempted to breach security fences surrounding the bombing range.

The Navy began the military exercises on April 26 after a federal judge rejected Puerto Rico's request for a temporary injunction to stop the shelling. Puerto Rico's government had urged the Navy to permanently halt the use of its bombing range on the island of more than 9,400 residents. Naval warships and fighter jets blasted the island for a fourth day May 1, completing the latest round of military exercises there. Navy spokesmen would not comment on whether more maneuvers are planned.

The protests forced the Navy to suspend shelling briefly on Saturday, April 28. The next day, the Navy announced that it was calling off exercises for the day, allegedly out of respect for the Vatican's naming of the first Puerto Rican saint. Protesters in Vieques dismissed the claim, saying that it was not religious sentiment, but the Navy's inability to clear civilians off the bombing range that prompted the cessation of the exercise.

Among those arrested by the Navy have been US Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), environmental lawyer Robert Kennedy Jr. and actor Edward James Olmos. They have been detained by US Marshals on trespassing charges.

The Puerto Rican Bar Association denounced what it said was brutal treatment of a number of demonstrators. In one case, military police sprayed pepper gas on a group of university students to stop them from singing

while waiting to be removed from the Navy base. Others were knocked to the ground with rifle butts, kicked and beaten with handcuffs. Special teams of US Marshals were brought in from the United States, protest leaders said, and treated demonstrators belligerently from the outset.

The exercises involved the USS *Enterprise* battle group, which includes 12 ships and 15,000 sailors and Marines. The warships are on their way to the Persian Gulf, and the military has maintained that the rehearsals of bombing, shelling and amphibious landings on the 52-square-mile Puerto Rican island are essential preparation for possible military action in the Middle East.

Protests over the military's bombardment of Vieques have escalated since October 1999, when a live bomb missed its target, killing a Puerto Rican civilian working as a security guard and wounding several others. After the killing, protesters occupied the bombing range for nearly a year.

When the Navy conducted exercises in June, August, October and December of last year, protests against those maneuvers led to more than 500 arrests.

During its eight years in office, the Clinton administration consistently deferred to the Pentagon, doing nothing to hinder the shelling of the island. Then, faced with mass protests that were interfering with naval operations, Clinton brokered a compromise between the Navy and Puerto Rico in January of last year. This allowed the resumption of the bombardment, using inert, or dummy, shells and bombs, while paying a \$40 million bribe to the Puerto Rican government in the form of development funds. It also called for a referendum this November on the future of the Navy's

presence in Vieques, with islanders voting whether the military should stay or go by 2003.

Sila M. Calderon, who was elected governor of Puerto Rico last year, was one of the few politicians to oppose the deal, and during her campaign pledged to permanently halt the military exercises. She said that the Bush administration had indicated it would not resume bombardment based on an agreement reached earlier with the Clinton White House and the Navy. Calderon sought the injunction against the latest exercise based on a recently enacted Puerto Rican law banning the exercises as a violation of local noise standards. While the injunction was denied, the federal court still must consider the underlying case.

Calderon has declined to criticize Bush, however, and has denounced protesters for breaking into the Navy base.

In resuming the exercises, the Bush administration and the Navy brushed aside studies indicating that Vieques residents, including children, are suffering from cancer rates twice those on the main island. Scientists have attributed the high incidence of cancer to the military's use of depleted uranium shells. Large numbers of Viequenses also suffer from heart disease resulting from exposure to chemicals and dangerous levels of noise connected with the shelling. Studies have shown a thickening of the heart walls in Vieques inhabitants that doctors have attributed to the effects of continuous sonic booms.

Even the federal judge who turned down the plea for an injunction against the bombing voiced concern over Washington's policy. She indicated that the Bush administration had broken "an implied promise" from Navy officials to postpone the drills until the Department of Health and Human Services completed a review of studies linking the noise to the Viequenses' heart problems.

While the US government has invoked "national security" and claimed Vieques offers unique training that saves American lives in combat, the show of force in Vieques is linked to a broader turn in US foreign policy toward military aggression. In deciding to ignore pledges made to Puerto Rico, Washington is sending a signal to Latin America and oppressed countries throughout the world that it will not allow issues of sovereignty—particularly in a US colony—or concern for human life to prevent it from asserting its interests

through naked armed force.

The island of Vieques, known as one of the "Spanish Virgins," is dominated by lush green hills and beautiful beaches. Its development has been stymied, however, by the continuous military exercises. It was first taken over by the Navy for practice shelling in 1941. While large landowners were paid for their property, thousands of agricultural laborers and sharecroppers who lived on the island were removed from their land, many of them forcibly exiled to neighboring St. Croix in the Virgin Islands.

For 60 years, the remaining inhabitants have lived with the continuous noise and terror of mock warfare. The inhabitants, mostly poor fishermen, are confined to barely a quarter of the land, with the rest given over to the Navy. The absence of employment forces most of the young people to leave once they graduate from school.



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