

US Navy resumes Vieques bombings

Our reporter
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The United States Navy resumed its bombardment of the small island of Vieques off the coast of Puerto Rico on April 1, following weekend protests by the island's residents and supporters. Solidarity protests were also held in New York and in Hartford, Connecticut.

In the pre-dawn hours of April 1, five women trying to enter the Navy grounds were arrested after being assaulted with pepper spray by a contingent of 200 Puerto Rican police. The police had been dispatched to prevent acts of civil disobedience from disrupting the bombing.

The confrontations marked nearly three years since, on April 19, 1999, an arrant bomb killed one civilian spotter working for the Navy and wounded several others. Demonstrations took place across Puerto Rico and hundreds of protesters camped out illegally on the bombing range, forcing the Navy to suspend target practice there. Over a year later, in May of 2000, some 140 protesters were forcibly removed and arrested by a large force of FBI agents and federal marshals brought in from the United States, and naval bombings resumed.

Ongoing protests led to hundreds of further arrests. Protesters suspended their civil disobedience campaign, however, during the exercises that took place shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, as they grappled with the increased security measures put in place at US military installations and a right-wing propaganda offensive denouncing them as "anti-American" and supporters of terrorism. Last week's exercises were the Navy's first in the intervening six months.

After the Navy announced its plans in mid-March, Puerto Rico's governor, Sila Maria Calderon, who had been elected on the promise of forcing an immediate end to the Navy bombing, ordered Police Superintendent Miguel Pereira to ensure that the current exercises could go forward unimpeded. In the

past, Puerto Rican officials had generally left arrests on Navy land to US federal authorities. However, Superintendent Pereira, who is married to the FBI's special agent in charge of the Caribbean and Puerto Rico, declared the prevention of civil disobedience his top priority. He had his forces assume control over both the ferry service and the airport serving Vieques, in an effort to block the arrival of demonstrators.

In the aftermath of September 11, Washington has exerted the unrestricted power of the US Navy over Vieques, insisting that the military exercises are indispensable preparation of US forces for the worldwide "war on terrorism." Using this pretext, it has ridden roughshod over the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the people there and throughout Puerto Rico, exposing Puerto Rico's formal status of "commonwealth" in free association with the US as a cover for its quasi-colonial condition.

A lawsuit brought against the Navy by Vieques Mayor Damaso Sarrano and others in the Superior Court in nearby Fajardo was recently transferred to US District Court, on the basis that the Puerto Rican judiciary has no authority over actions of the US military, even if they violate Puerto Rican and US law. For its part, the US District Court, which is expected ultimately to rule in favor of the Navy, refused even to hear the case before the current bombing exercises began. A US Navy spokesperson asserted the Navy's right to proceed with the bombardment, regardless of laws requiring permits for actions affecting coastal waters.

Vieques has been used for target practice ever since the US Navy took control of 75 percent of its area, including prime agricultural land, in 1941. Since then, the 20-mile long, 4-mile wide tropical island has been largely transformed into a military wasteland, while the over 9,000 inhabitants are forced to live on a small strip of land between the bombing grounds and an

ammunition depot.

The Navy's presence has been an economic and environmental disaster for the Viequenses, whose unemployment rate approaches 50 percent. The Navy's land seizure knocked out most of the island's agriculture and effectively blocked the development of tourism, leaving commercial fishing as the primary means of subsistence. Fishermen are impeded from making a living not only by the bombings, but also by the large ships' propellers cutting the buoy lines that mark the locations of traps, which are then lost on the sea floor.

A number of studies have shown significantly higher rates of cancer, heart disease, asthma and other serious illnesses among Vieques residents than in the rest of Puerto Rico. This has been attributed to the constant exposure to sonic booms, to metallic dust in the air and residues in the water supply, and, above all, to radiation exposure from depleted uranium shells used in past exercises. The Navy has denied any responsibility for these health problems.

Discontent over these conditions built up over decades and exploded in protest after the April 1999 killing of David Sanes. Subsequently, the Clinton administration brokered an agreement between the Navy and the colonial government in Puerto Rico designed to defuse the popular outrage. The agreement required the Navy to cease all training exercises by the year 2003, and to use only inert (i.e., non-explosive) ammunition in the exercises to be held until then. The Navy also agreed to reduce to 90 from 180 the number of days annually on which it would conduct bombing.

Although the Bush administration continues to maintain publicly that it is committed to this agreement, it is in fact leaving all options open as it prepares the US armed forces for military interventions around the world. In another demonstration of colonial arrogance, the US Congress quietly passed legislation last December requiring the Navy to override its agreement with the Puerto Rican government unless it could certify that it had other training facilities "equivalent or superior" to the ones on Vieques.

This latest congressional action follows passage of earlier legislation overturning another part of the agreement, canceling a binding referendum on the continuation of bombing which was to be held across Puerto Rico in November. In a non-binding referendum

held last July, 68 percent of the voters of Vieques opposed the Navy bombing.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service released a report last week indicating the Navy intended to continue to use Vieques at least until 2006, although the Navy denied asking "formal permission" for an extension. The Pentagon, meanwhile, is considering moves to give Puerto Rican bases a more prominent role in a reorganized "Northern Command for Homefront Security." There is no doubt that Puerto Rico is considered critical to plans for launching new attacks on impoverished countries, especially those in Latin America such as Colombia.



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