

Puerto Rico: Vieques bombing halted

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Navy has ended practice bombing on the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques after 56 years and three decades of protest. Operations conducted in the ocean near Vieques, however, will continue, and plans are underway to use various new locations--mostly in the southeastern United States--to make up for the loss of Vieques.

FULL TEXT

The U.S. Navy has ended practice bombing on the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques after 56 years and three decades of protest. Operations conducted in the ocean near Vieques, however, will continue, and plans are underway to use various new locations--mostly in the southeastern United States--to make up for the loss of Vieques. The Navy announced on February 9 that it had officially concluded its final round of exercises; on the final day of bombing 19 demonstrators were detained for trespassing and one person detained for destruction of federal property. Local residents say they will continue to demand a cleanup and further study of the health effects of toxic wastes left by the Navy.

Active resistance to the Navy presence in Vieques, a town with 10,000 residents, began in the 1970s, when a group of local fishermen said the bombing and other Navy activities were ruining their livelihood and stifling local development. Opposition to military use of the island has been fierce since 1999, when two misfired 500-pound bombs killed David Sanes Rodriguez, a civilian security guard. The Navy switched to inert shells after protestors engaged in civil disobedience and occupied the range for a year until U.S. Marshals forcibly removed them. The Navy should hand over the eastern third of Vieques to the Department of the Interior on May 1, 2003.

According to Navy spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Kim Dixon, "the Navy has certified that alternative training ranges have recently been made available," in other locales including Florida and North Carolina.

Ismael Guadalupe of the community based organization Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques says, "The end of bombing on the island is a huge step and a great triumph, but the most serious problems remain unresolved." Opposition groups continue to demand the complete demilitarization of the island: Radar and communication devices remain intact and, more seriously, land remains contaminated by toxic residues from the military operations. Some believe that the only reason the Navy left is so it would not have to foot the cleanup bill. Last year the Pentagon acknowledged the testing of chemical and biological agents during a training mission on Vieques in May 1969. Marine jets sprayed trioctyl phosphate, a chemical used to simulate nerve gas, on Marine units to test how the troops operated in protective gear and how effective actual chemical weapons might be. The Navy's Dixon says that, "The Navy has not found any impact to the health of the civilian population and we work to maintain the natural integrity of Vieques," though many local residents believe military wastes have contributed to unusually high cancer rates in the area. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry--a public health agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services--released a public health assessment on Vieques in November of last year. The assessment confirmed that "the residents of Vieques have been exposed to contaminants released during the Navy's military training exercises, but these exposures are much lower than levels known to be associated with adverse health effects." According to a similar document, concentrations of several metals were present in the fish and shellfish of the area. The government has yet to make good on a

promise to conduct a cancer study proposed by Puerto Rican Health Secretary Johnny Rullan.

Guadalupe thinks "no one really knows what effects the nearly 60 years of bombing will have on the health of the island and its population, and the Navy is dodging the issue by turning the lands over to the federal government."

-Teo Ballve

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