

How a People's Movement Stopped the Bombing in Vieques

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Vieques is a municipality with a long history of struggle against the U.S. Navy, which for more than 60 years used Vieques as a bombing range and munitions test site. It also was the practice center for the U.S. invasions of our neighbors Granada and Panama, as well as for the invasions of Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

We also went to Capitol Hill as "People's Lobbyists." We sent letters to the U.S. president from supportive church leaders and members of Congress. Remember the voting power of Latino communities! Our arguments were dramatic: in Vieques the cancer rate is 26% higher than on the main island of Puerto Rico, though there are no industrial activities on Vieques, and unemployment and poverty are also high.

We fasted, marched, held protest vigils and sit-ins in Puerto Rico, and coordinated actions in the U.S. and in other countries at U.S. embassies. We had hunger strikes, forums, press conferences, articles, videos, Web pages, and e-mails to inform people of the health situation and environmental destruction of Vieques. There also were many creative actions and concerts . . . it's a long list. The Puerto Rican and Vieques flags were placed on the crown of the Statue of Liberty!

FULL TEXT

It doesn't matter whether we look at the constitution of the United States or that of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, or Korea. All of them mention elements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - the rights to life, liberty, dignity, respect, equality, non-discrimination, participation, education, health, work, name, nationality, family - that let us live as human beings.

The case of Vieques, Puerto Rico, is an outstanding example of how we, the people, can make the difference.

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Can you imagine a colony demanding that the empire's navy stop bombing and get off our lands? We can say we're victorious, because in May 2003 they did stop bombing. But this was the first phase of a long, long fight that we are just beginning.

I sum up our struggle in Vieques in two words: pressure and persuasion. On April 19, 1999, a civilian Viequense guard was killed and three others were injured by a loose bomb. That was the last straw for the people of Vieques, who have many memories of violence, aggression, sexual violations, lack of access to the sea, land expropriation,

and the destruction of families. But from that moment everything changed in the century-old U.S. colony. David finally decided to stop Goliath. And you know something? The name of the dead guard was David - David Sanes.

From April 1999 to May 4, 2000 we established 14 civil disobedience camps in the restricted zone. The determination to stop the bombing on Vieques was so powerful that different Christian denominations created an ecumenical coalition. Catholics, Evangelicals, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, and others demanded a halt to the bombing as a human rights issue. Other organizations - the teachers' federation, university students, political parties - also established civil disobedience camps.

With the support of the American Friends Service Committee, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the War Resisters League, we conducted workshops on civil disobedience and nonviolent action to prepare people for federal arrest. Together with different Puerto Rican organizations, we also created a handbook on the philosophy of nonviolence.

It was powerful! More than 1,700 people were arrested and sentenced to prison sentences of up to six months, which were accepted with great dignity and a serious commitment to peace for Vieques.

The most important thing was the active participation of different sectors to pressure decision-makers through civil disobedience (CD). The Navy recognized CD as a key factor in its decision to cease its war games in Vieques. (It was very expensive to constantly repair the fence, and the Navy says CD cost it nearly \$11 million.)

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Despite the cessation of military practice, our challenge now is to maintain unity and the energy to continue the struggle for demilitarization, decontamination, the return of lands, and sustainable development.

This process has not been free from differences and problems, but the diversity has been powerful and dynamic. Vieques' victory is a big step toward our right to self-determination and freedom.

Sidebar

Struggles to close military bases draw solidarity from many communities, including others affected by military bases.

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Wanda Colón Cortés directs the Caribbean Project for justice and Peace (CPJP), which promotes active participation of people to understand the impact of militarism in Puerto Rico as an expression and synonym of colonialism. CPJP received the 2006 FOR Pfeffer International Peace Prize.

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