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The Ongoing After Effects of the U.S. Navy Occupation in Vieques, Puerto Rico

**Patricia I. Colón Rafols
Foundation Course
Seminar Facilitator Saumava Mitra
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Abstract

Vieques, a municipality island of Puerto Rico, has a dreadful history inflicted by conflicts that, to this day, torments the local community and their surroundings. Since the U.S. Navy occupation of the territory in the early 1940s, the *viequenses* have been involved in a series of abuses which include, but are not limited to: the use of two thirds of the island and its waters as a firing range, environmental damage, and alarming health issues. Even though the Navy abandoned the island in 2003 due to numerous acts of civil disobedience and negotiations with the government of the United States of America, the suffering of the local community continued thenceforth. Though health and environmental issues had seemed to be the main concern and despite the series of clean-up programs established by the U.S., the efforts were not enough. This paper seeks to understand the current situation of the islanders and analyze it from a Peace Studies perspective in order to propose a series of steps which may be useful in the recovery process of a conflict situation in the Island of Vieques.

Keywords: *Conflict Resolution, Puerto Rico, Vieques, USA, Militarization, Health, Environment*

The Ongoing After Effects of the U.S. Navy Occupation in Vieques, Puerto Rico

White sandy beaches, turquoise waters, colorful coral reefs and lush vegetation are what one sees when flying over Vieques, an island municipality located off the East Coast of Puerto Rico. However, in reality, what is seeing upon landing is quite different. Vieques, or *la Isla Nena* – as the locals have nicknamed it – has a dreadful history which dates back to colonial times. Toxic waste, and drastic health and environmental issues, among others, are some of the burdens that the *viequenses* have dealt with in the past seventy years as result of the U.S.’s colonial ambitions and military occupation. Even though this remains a daily fight by the viequenses for their land, their health, and their environment, they vividly exemplify resilience and the power of social perseverance over government interest.

In 1898, Puerto Rico, along with Cuba, Philippines and a few other nations, were absorbed into the orbit of the United States of America after defeating Spain in the Spanish-American War. For Puerto Ricans, who had just then started to acquire recognition and political rights under the Spanish Crown¹, this change in “administration” meant the total loss of political and economic autonomy. This rearrangement has reshaped the island’s history to this day.

Since Spanish colonial times, the Archipelago of Puerto Rico has been exploited for its significant strategic value and geographical position in Caribbean waters. Therefore, when the United States of America took possession of the islands, plans of utilizing them as military ports rapidly unfolded. Vieques, one of the seventy-eight municipalities of Puerto Rico, had the advantage (and disadvantage) of being a small island. It is located about 11 kilometers East of Puerto Rico, in which, at that time, there was a relatively small community of people making a living off of the production of sugarcane and other tropical fruits. The island also offered a great deal of isolated beaches, keys and fields, which were the main incentive for the U.S. Navy, as they decided to “buy” two-thirds of the island for less than two million U.S. dollars and use it as a military training site. As such, in the early 1940s, the expropriation of Vieques intensified under the auspices of the U.S. Navy, or *la Marina*, as the locals called it. “Thousands of viequenses were forced out of their homes with only a few hours’ notice and given twenty-five to a hundred dollars to leave. The Navy threatened to bulldoze 9,300 viequenses out of the island’s eastern area if they did not leave quickly” (Deane, 2008, in Mark, 2017). The island was then divided into three portions, leaving only one-third of it for civilian use and the other two thirds became restricted U.S. Federal territory. This basically marked the beginning of more than seventy years of suffering and fighting against the foreign occupation within the Vieques community.

The U.S. Navy Occupation on Vieques

From the 1940s to late 1990s, the fight to expel the U.S. Navy from Vieques was limited to small encounters between the local fishermen and the marines. Despite Governor Carlos Romero Barceló request in 1978 whereby he “asked the Federal District Court in San Juan, Puerto Rico for an injunction to stop the Navy and Marine Corps from further military activities on Vieques” (“Puerto Rico Asks Injunction to Halt Military Activities on Nearby Island, 1978), the only positive result of these efforts was a fishing agreement

¹ “Between 1869 and 1873, the establishment of a liberal government in Spain led to ample liberties in the Caribbean, including the rights of Cubans and Puerto Ricans to send representatives to the Spanish Cortes.”. (Brás, M., 2011)

between the Navy and the local fisherman, allowing them to fish several hours a day on restricted areas of the island.

The event that caused all the attention on the media and around the international community to shift towards Vieques occurred on April 19, 1999 when David Sanes, a civilian security guard who was standing outside an observation post, was instantly killed when “the two [U.S.] bombs struck on either side of him fifty feet away” (The Associated Press, 1999). The Navy, which never revealed the names of the pilots that mistakenly dropped the bombs, attributed the alleged accident to a miscalculation stemming from weather conditions. For the locals, who had already seen their family members die or disappear in areas of restricted access controlled by the Navy², and whom had tolerated more than sixty years of injustices, this was the trigger that fomented civil unrest among Puerto Ricans. In less than twenty-four hours, the local population had organized protests and swore not to tolerate any more of the Navy’s exploitations on their island.

Sadly, a death of a civilian was all it took to put the Navy in the spotlight and for the media to become interested in the conflict and abuses ongoing in Vieques for years. This sparked a series of manifestations as dissidents and other supportive members of the cause infiltrated restricted areas of the island to set up camps as an act of pacific civil disobedience and, in turn, hundreds of people were arrested. This fight for the emancipation of the island also aimed to denounce the abuses caused by the Navy, which had been ongoing and unabated for years, sometimes escalating into violent exchanges between the locals and *la Marina*. Such abuses included, but were not limited to, the detonation of bombs close to civilian areas, naval programs that put public health and local ecosystems in danger, among other unethical practices. Fortunately, the protest and claims for demilitarization of the island came to a positive ending when in 2000 the U.S. government announced that Puerto Ricans would be allowed to vote in a referendum. Essentially, the vote was to decide if the Navy would continue with its aforementioned practices or, in lieu of explosives, employ the use of non-explosive bombs until 2003, when they purportedly would commit to dismantling their facilities. Even though both options were dreadful, the second option (being the most reasonable) won, marking a deserved reduction of many decades of direct abuse and suffering.

The aftermath of the U.S. Navy on the island: an ongoing conflict

Even though the Navy vacated Vieques on May 2003, life on the island has never been the same as it was prior to the U.S.’ control. When *la Marina* abandoned the area, the local population was left with an environmentally torn island. They were overflowing with toxic wastes and critical health issues which continue to affect them fifteen years later. These factors have become obstacles in obtaining a viable and peaceful resolution to the conflict in Vieques island therefore making it an ongoing one.

In words of Ramsbotham, O.; Woodhouse, T. and Miall, H. (2016), “conflicts are embedded in a social, regional and even international context which is often critical to their continuation”. This means that in order to resolve a conflict, it is necessary to analyze the different contextual factors that influence it and try to understand the diverse postures of the parties involved, all in order to engage in a reasonable negotiation and resolution. In the case of Vieques, the Navy kept their promise and left in 2003, but never

² See more on Islas de Borinken TV. (2013, April 23). Vieques, Puerto Rico: Documental Histórico [Video File]

fully compensated for the severe damages caused and the lives taken in the hands of cancer and other conditions that ensued as a result of toxic waste the Navy failed to dispose of responsibly. A study³ performed by the Health Department of Puerto Rico in 2003 concluded that “Viequenses were 27% more likely to have cancer and higher instances of diabetes, asthma and hypertension than Puerto Rico as a whole” (Roman, 2003).

These facts are alarming and they are still affecting the civil society in Vieques which, compared to the rest of the Puerto Ricans, have less access to healthcare or health services in general because the island only has a small clinic with no specialists. The scarcity of jobs has caused many to flee the island in search of better livelihoods, thus, hindering valuable resources and potential opportunities from reaching the area.

Many of the health issues are interconnected with the environmental degradation from which the island hasn't been able to recover. There have been contradictions in the data that links the food consumption and the contaminated environment with the health problems of the Viequenses. Many locals and specialists firmly believe there's a relation between the consumption of fish and the health effects on some people, often claiming that significant amounts of lead, nickel, and other metals are constantly found in the ecosystem. Massol-Deyá, A., & Díaz, E. (2003) conducted a study dealing with “the presence of high concentration of lead in *S. filiforme* (manatee grass) from Carrucho Beach [Vieques], indicating the potential for dispersion and dangerous bioaccumulation along the marine food chain. Fishes, crustaceans, and manatees directly or indirectly consume this marine plant, which humans fish and eat after”. This being a possible link to the cancer-related health issues happening on the island.

The health issues and the torn environment are directly interconnected with the Navy's occupation of the Island of Vieques. The problem is that even though the U.S Navy abandoned their military and naval base, U.S. efforts to clean the island have been mediocre at best, slow at worst, and the locals continue to suffer from this troubling reality. Reports about the lack of transparency from Puerto Ricans on the mitigation efforts for the damages often leads to confusion and lack of trust in the system its inhabitants.

What is being done to mitigate the conflict?

In the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) must abide to a law called the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, approved by Congress in 1976, which basically calls for the provision of resources to clean up all hazardous and toxic sites along the U.S. Vieques, as a municipality of Puerto Rico, has clung to this Act in order to guarantee that the island's toxic wastes and residuals of the Navy are cleaned up. Essentially, the cleanup in Vieques has been divided in two processes: the time critical removal of wastes and the non-time critical removal. This has basically given the U.S. a loophole, if you will, to decide how long they should take on removing the toxic wastes from the island whilst prolonging for as long as possible.

³ Read study in “Incidencia y Mortalidad de Cáncer en Vieques: 1990-2004” by Figueroa, R., Suárez, E., De La Torre, T., Et Al. (2009)

The domestic actions being taken have been many, including the creation of the Vieques Wildlife Refuge in 2001, which was one of the most notable ones administered by the Municipality of Vieques and the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust. These protected lands that make up two-thirds of the island's territory are only used for conservation purposes, and the locals have no control over it; this often being a source of dispute and debate. However, from a conservationist and environmentalist perspective, "the creation of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge was beneficial for local flora and fauna on the island, since they were able to establish conservation programs to help endangered and threatened species, like sea turtles" (Mark, 2017).

For cleaning up the deteriorated and hazardous munitions, often hidden under the forest, the main strategy introduced has been open field burning. This cleanup process consists of controlled burning of vegetation in order to eliminate the munitions and contaminants. But, "ironically, many residents claim that this process is detrimental to human health" (Mark, 2017), constantly worsening asthma and other respiratory problems that are often present among the islanders. Also, in order to involve the community in the whole clean up process, the Navy, along with the EPA, created the "Community Involvement Plan", but many claim this was not efficient enough in boosting community participation in the recovery.

Apart from these efforts, the area is infested with undetonated bombs in uncertain locations (often in tourist zones) which led to several fatal accidents among locals and tourists. To mitigate the collateral damage - or unintended consequences - caused by the Navy, constant, controlled detonations of active bombs occur off the coast of Vieques and on the coastline. Even so, many locals argue that the cleanup efforts on the island have been slow and that they have been focused too much on the preservation and conservation of the environment and not much on addressing the health issues that have been reported on the island.

Obstacles to the conflict resolution

In the field of Peace Studies, due to its emphasis on human relations and social theories, we are trained to ascertain the root causes of conflict and find possible solutions, but of course geopolitical affairs are highly complicated matters. In the case of Viequenses, there are other obstacles that are still thwarting social progress. The Viequenses thought that by expelling *la Marina* from the island all their sorrows will come to an end. Needless to say, that's not how it has been. "Even though fishermen can now catch red snapper and yellowtail unfettered by the Navy's target practice, and visitors have discovered the rural charms of a place where horses roam freely on the roads, Vieques still has high rates of poverty and lacks a full-fledged hospital" (Navarro, 2009). In addition, Puerto Rico as a whole faces a great deal of corruption, lack of transparency, inadequate resources (both financial and technical) that impede much needed improvements from taking place on Vieques. Furthermore, disagreements among the local community on how the issue has been approached doesn't make the situation easier to address.

Even though the EPA is supposed to deal with the contaminated zones, and it has to some extent done so, the political situation in the United States at the moment does not make things easier for the islanders. The Republican government under Donald Trump has been slowly dismantling institutions like the EPA which would result in funds, designated for environmental preservation and recovery, being misused as a result of the government's greater preference to coal, oil and gas interests. The government of

Puerto Rico, corrupt as it is, has more important issues to consider such as paying an economical debt of more than 70 billion U.S. dollars and dealing with the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria which left the island wrecked in September 2017.

Putting corruption and money aside, activist and scholars agree that in terms of health issues “there is inadequate treatment to a long list of health conditions and diseases, many of which may be the result of chemical residue and hazardous waste contamination left by the Navy and the lack of adequate medical support on Vieques” (Mark, 2017). There’s a common consensus that the medical services provided on the island do not even begin to fully treat the conditions that have erupted since the Navy’s occupancy of the island. Additionally, Vieques, due to its isolated position from mainland Puerto Rico, does not have direct access to the good medical services provided on the big island meaning that some Viequenses can’t afford to travel by ferry or plane to obtain specialized treatment. And even though politicians, like former U.S. President Barack Obama, have pledged to work directly with the health issues of the Viequenses, they have “never really followed up on this statement” (Colón-Ramos, 2015).

In conclusion, the active factors like health and environmental concerns that make this conflict an ongoing one are slowly being assessed, however like every conflict, it has encountered obstacles to its resolution. Scarcity in money, myriad corruption, insufficient interest, lack of transparency and disagreements among the local community on how to handle the conflict continue to be essential elements that impede it from being resolved. As a peace-oriented individual, I firmly believe that through peacebuilding, empowering and other strategic tools, the island of Vieques has the possibility to overcome this by behaving as a united community in order to leave the cycle of poverty and misery. In the lines below, I will proceed to analyze and explain a possible and peaceful conflict resolution scenario for Vieques Island, all based on peacebuilding theories and a pro-human rights perspective.

How to address the conflict from a sustainable manner?

As stated throughout this essay, the resolutions so far proposed to mitigate the effects and aftereffects of the occupancy of the U.S. Navy in Vieques have been slow, mediocre and unsuccessful. However, from a peace perspective, there are many many options on how to approach the conflict guaranteed to achieve requital for the victims involved, as well as, sustainability and prosperity of the island as a whole. That is how, based on Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T. and Miall, H.’s framework for contemporary conflict resolution⁴ and with a series of other theories, I’ve compiled a string of affirmative actions that seek to serve as a plan of recovery and peacebuilding for the Viequenses.

Change the structure of the conflict: empower the disadvantaged

Constantly, in conflict resolution theories, there are diverse levels of relationships which greatly influence how the dispute should be converged. Often, parties are met with asymmetric power relationships which can lead to the creation of victims and victimizers. In order to reach a resolution, these asymmetric relationships must be taken into consideration and equity must be embraced as an option to empower the

⁴ Read more in Ramsbotham, O.; Woodhouse, T. and Miall, H. (2016). Contemporary Conflict Resolution

victim. This is a necessary change in the structure of how the conflict is seen, all in order to benefit the less advantaged and to engage in a just conversation between parties.

Among the diverse ethics of intervention processes, the Empowering Approach⁵, which essentially seeks to empower the party in a disadvantaged position, could be seen as a way of finding a voice for the Viequeses among the conflict. By empowering a victim, equity is introduced into the process giving the less advantaged party the tools to present their position and interest in the recovery process. By offering a voice and listening to the complaints and suggestions, one can begin to deal with the dispute from a healthy and inclusive approach. In Vieques, the Empowering Approach can be integrated as part of a renegotiation process between the local community and the U.S. Navy and Federal Government. A possible solution could be exposing the Viequeses to professionals in the field of law, environment and health, in order to help them understand the whole reconciliation and recovery process that has been already made, and help the locals organize and propose a series of community-based suggestions that could be presented into a conflict resolution scenario.

Transformation of the group relations

Empowering a victim simplifies the recovery process since victims are perceived as equals around the negotiation table. In this case, the next step to follow will be to introduce a collaborative and participative process among all parties which essentially requires the parties to have a positive attitude towards learning how to work together in order to reach a mutual agreement. In Vieques, locals have complained that there is not enough transparency in the recovery and cleaning up process happening on the island; they are led by confusion and misinformation of what's being done. Therefore, as a way of transforming the diverse party's dynamics and relationships, it is imperative that the U.S. Navy involves the community more into the whole recovery process. One example of how this could be done that has been suggested by many residents on the island⁶ is by hiring locals to do the clean ups around the fields. Currently, the Navy employs a foreign private company tasked with cleaning the toxic wastes. As a result, many local residents are unaware of the time, energy, and funds invested into the process. Additionally, there is little to no interaction happening among the local community and the company; all profits are returned to the U.S. By incorporating Viequeses in the clean ups, cooperative action occurs between the victim and the victimizer in which both parties work toward a common good and exchange a productive interaction. Jobs are created and profit goes directly to the islanders, hence, boosting the island's wrecked economy.

Reframing the issues

"Conflicts are defined by the conflicting positions parties take on issues. When they change their positions... the conflict is transformed" (Ramsbotham, O.; Woodhouse, T. and Miall, H., 2016). Once there is transformation, there is openness to approach the issues from a different, common ground. As it was mentioned before, in Vieques, there's an imperative need to approach the conflict from a common ground,

⁵ Read more in Abdalla, A. and Akay, L. (2016). Understanding C.R. SIPABIO: A Conflict Analysis Model

⁶ See Mark, K. (2017). Colonialism and Its Aftermaths in Vieques, Puerto Rico: How U.S. Hegemony Led to Contamination, a Superfund Site, and Local Mistrust, page 51

but most importantly, the interest of the locals must be met. For this to be accomplished, there needs to be a reframing on how the issue is perceived and on how it has been engaged for years.

When the U.S. Navy left, one of the solutions to mitigate their unethical actions on the island was to create the Wildlife Refuge on highly contaminated zones instead of cleaning them and distributing the land to the people. Since then, many locals have complained that the land should be granted to the community so it can be used as they please, yet there are debates on the current environmental value of this land. As a way of reframing the conflict, the community of Vieques can use their disadvantages as advantages meaning that the already protected land can be positively exploited as a sanctuary for environmentalist and tourist to come and gaze at its natural wonders. By doing this, Vieques could become a safe heaven for migratory species from the Caribbean and an example to the world in terms of ecology and sustainable development. Also, as a way of pleasing both parties' interest, the U.S. Federal government should grant the community more access to the administration of the land; this way they are giving it a cultural, environmental and economical value that could benefit all.

Furthermore, there is a shift needed on how the health issues on the island have been approached and treated. There have been many cleaning up efforts happening in the past, but not enough assistance to the people who suffer the side effects of living in a contaminated environment. Nowadays, there is enough evidence to guarantee that many of the health conditions, like asthma and cancer, are directly related to the Navy's deliberate practices on the island. Therefore, there should be a reframing on how the health issues should be treated, and the government, both local and federal, should combine efforts to reach a better resolution and a guarantee of just treatment for the victims. In conclusion, the U.S. Navy and its government must assure human and environmental security by shifting to new approaches of the conflict and reframing it.

Final recommendations and conclusions

Since I was a young girl, my parents thought me the value of social justice, setting the bar high for me, as they were always involved in finding justice for Vieques. My mother, as a lawyer, gave free legal advice to the activist involved in the protest and my step-father got arrested and thrown in jail for protesting against the Navy's occupancy on the island. And even though I was very young at the time, the social fight for the liberation of Vieques created an important impact in my personal view of the conflict. Nowadays, as an adult, I understand to some extension why the viequenses, my parents and other activist continue the fight to demilitarize, clean and preserve this small island. Vieques is a symbol of resilience against U.S. imperialism, but its a fight that we don't seem to win, nor to conclude. And, as it has been portrayed throughout this paper, the fight for a cleaner environment in Vieques seems to be the main factor that prolongs the conflict from reaching its positive outcome. Yet, the local community continues to plead for a sustainable resolution, one that includes them in the whole recovery process.

Vieques' history and how resilient the locals are, doesn't ceases to impress me. As most Puerto Ricans, one sympathizes with the fight to demilitarize, clean and support the island, but doesn't fully understand the context of living with environmental and health issues that are a treat to you and your family on a daily basis. Currently, the situation doesn't paint right for the Viequenses; Since the passing of hurricanes Irma and María in September 2017, most of the islanders, who were already struggling to stay

afloat, continue to live in impoverished conditions, with little to no access to basic health and services. The electrical grid on Vieques is still running entirely on generators⁷ and the government, both Puerto Rican and U.S., doesn't seem to be doing anything to address the needs of the locals. In the meantime, many people continue to suffer, since they don't have the resources to be treated in hospitals on the big island. In short words, the aid is not properly reaching the Island of Vieques and right now the list of burdens seems to be getting longer. Nerveless, I've seen how community led efforts are able to move mountains and defeat big Empires, and have high hopes for the Viequenses and their land. Of course, the reality to which the islanders are exposed to at the moments is tough, but yet again, once community led processes begin to unfold, their faith might change and they will be empowered enough to advocate for a serious compromise in working hand in hand with the government.

As a peace advocate, I trust that the solution to this conflict lies along the application of a peacebuilding program, in which there's a reframing of the issues and both the victims (community) and the victimizers (U.S. Navy/government), are seen as a whole, seeking to work hand in hand to reach a positive resolution. This recovery process must assure the security of the people, thus giving space for Human Rights and human development to flourish. Also, the viequenses need to be guaranteed that their health issues will be addressed from a responsible manner, breaking the pattern of malpractices happening in the past. In other words, a conciliation and recovery operation must be coordinated along with a community plan to make the efforts sustainable, guaranteeing the overall wellbeing of the Viequenses.

In a personal manner, I firmly believe in the power of community led processes, since the locals are the ones who have personally lived the conflict and who would know how to approach the recovery process on the island. This being said, and assuming that an empowerment approach has been offered to the locals, I consider imperative the use of the resources that are to hand to bring prosperity to the land. By perusing the conservationist seed that was planted with the creation of the Vieques Wildlife Refuge, the islanders could approach the preservation of the land from a sustainable way, utilizing farming techniques like agroforestry and permaculture, and promoting themselves as an eco-tourism mecca for people to visit. This new wave of recovery would not only protect the environment, but will hence bring economical and environmental sustainability to the island. Also, an approach to peace education should be integrated in the educational system, promoting dialog, mediation and other methods of conflict resolution that can lead to changing mentalities and addressing manners from a peaceful perspective. By doing this, we guarantee an integral recovery process that deals with the land, health and security problems.

⁷ See more at "Forgotten island: Vieques still running entirely on generators more than a year after Maria hit" (2018)

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