

ECAAR Mobilizes NGO Opposition to Military Exercises on Vieques

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[Back to Previous Page](#)

Economists Allied for Arms Reduction (ECAAR) has been gathering support from leading national peace and disarmament organizations opposed to the resumption of military maneuvers by US and NATO forces and for the return to the Viequenses of land occupied by the Navy base. This action was taken in accordance with the January 8 Board of Directors resolution to request President Bill Clinton to end target practice and close the U.S. naval facility on Vieques.

To resolve the dispute between the people of Vieques and the U.S. Navy, President Clinton in late December negotiated a deal with Puerto Rican Governor Pedro Rossello to resume military training exercises on the island, this time using inert bombs rather than live ammunition. This was done by the governor without consultation and in contradiction to his previous support for closing the base

The resolution passed by ECAAR's Board of Directors, and the boards of several other organizations, was in response to the Administration's decision to resume military exercises. Under the current agreement, the people of Vieques will participate in a referendum in 2001 that will give residents the option of allowing the Navy to continue on its own terms with the use of live bombs and payment of \$50 million for island rehabilitation or requiring the Navy to cease all training by May 1, 2003. There are strong, vociferous objections to the agreement

During one of the training exercises last year, David Sanes Rodriguez, a resident working at the base, was killed by fragments of an errant bomb. Pursuant to the accidental death, Rossello publicly declared he would do everything in his power to stop U.S. and NATO forces from resuming target practice on the island. "Not one more bomb" would fall on Vieques, he vowed. But, to the dismay of many who have closely monitored the situation, he broke his vow after an eight-month halt to training exercises on the island.

In the meantime, ECAAR, Peace Action, Americans for Democratic Action, the Council for a Livable World and numerous other peace, human rights and religious organizations will continue to demonstrate their opposition to the resumption of bombing on the island, which has been used by the military since World War II. Representatives from these organizations want to see the Navy leave Vieques. The island community and the island itself have been damaged environmentally and financially.

Many believe the agreement was the Administration's effort to force a compromise between the Navy, the Defense Department, the military-congressional complex and the people of Vieques who have firm support in Puerto Rico and are increasingly supported by democratic organizations, church groups, and political leaders in the United States and many countries.

Antonio Torres, ECAAR member, organizer and director of the Tufts University study entitled, Vieques: Land Trust & Community Extension (1998), took a large delegation from Massachusetts to participate in a demonstration on February 22. Several members of the delegation are legislators working to pass a resolution in support of closing the base.

The demonstration took place in San Juan. It was organized by church leaders including Juan Vera, Bishop of the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico, and Robert Gonzalez, archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church in San Juan. Between 85,000 and 150,000 people participated, according to police accounts and reports from one of the

island's major newspapers, La Voz de Vieques. "It was the largest [demonstration] ever in Puerto Rico," reporters at La Voz allege the police commissioner on the scene that day had said. They noted the commissioner had indicated to them that he was baffled by the size of the crowd.

According to several local accounts, people involved in the demonstration hoped the size of the crowd would disprove President Clinton's comment that the majority of inhabitants favored continued military presence. A poll conducted by the weekly newspaper, Vieques Times, shows that only four percent of the island's residents actually favor a continued naval presence. It is important to note that many church leaders have sponsored resistance camps in the bombing areas to prevent military exercises from resuming. Rabbi Balfour Brickner of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, who is recognized worldwide as a leading spokesman of Jewish views on major civil and social issues, has joined in support of the opposition to the base.

Testing exercises involving the battleship USS George Washington were to have taken place in March but were canceled because of continued opposition. To meet the Navy's time schedule, new exercises have been proposed with the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower at Cape Wrath in Scotland. Having led fishermen in Vieques in their protest against the U.S. Navy, Alberto De Jesus will now join Scottish environmental groups in their struggle to oppose the training maneuvers.

In addition, many reports about Vieques are circulated on the Internet everyday. This has generated among religious, peace and non-governmental organizations international support for the people of Vieques. "We wish you much success in your fight against immoral bombing of Vieques," wrote one supporter, "and we sent a protest note to the German government to stop bombing in Vieques by [the] German military." Another supporter reports a discussion of the issue has reached the Dutch parliament, sparked in part by the reporting of the Dutch journalist, Anton Foek.

At ECAAR's January 8 Board meeting in Boston, Segito Hayabusa (ECAAR-Japan) pointed to similarities between Vieques and Okinawa. Having served as a Marine Corps Captain on Okinawa and subsequently followed the Okinawans' views of the United States and Japan, I concur with his analysis of the similarities to Vieques. As written in a recent letter asking organizations to join our resolution, "At a difficult time in my life, I am pleased to focus on Vieques which fits so well my vision of what ECAAR can and should do. It is this combination of study, reporting, influencing and taking action that may make the difference."

The effort shows where we are and what we might do. Here is this little island, a part of the United States with 19,000 inhabitants, offering people the opportunity to change from the use of force, destruction and death to peace, growth and democracy. Vieques provides a unique focus for reasonable people interested in economic growth and sustainable development. It is relatively compact, yet symbolically it represents the crucial issues facing those who would replace the law of force with conflict resolution, peace and the force of law.

Who will be the representative of the Water Keeper Alliance in Vieques? Tune in to the next newsletter.

Economists for Peace and Security

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