

New Prospects for Vieques

Robert J. Schwartz

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Since 1999, when a civilian was killed in error during military practice bombing at the US Naval base on Vieques island, there has been strong support in the United States for the struggle of the Puerto Ricans to close the base that occupies most of Vieques on land appropriated in preparation for World War II.

ECAAR has worked with the Viequesenses for more than six years to close the base, and we are now beginning to see real prospects for success. Our participation has included sponsoring a major study with Professor Lionel McIntyre of Columbia University entitled Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, Looking Forward: A Development Strategy for the Naval Ammunition Facility, a report praised for its analysis by many experts and officials. This study was submitted to former Secretary of Defense William Cohen. There were two later by Professors Leticia Rivera Torres and Antonio Torres, Vieques, Puerto Rico: Economic Conversion and Sustainable Development, based at MIT and Vieques: Land Trust & Community Extension, based at Tufts. These complement the Columbia study.

In addition to seeking the closing of the US Naval base and rehabilitation using US Navy and federal funding, ECAAR proposes creating a land trust from which the benefits would go to the Viequesenses. The trust proposal stresses sustainable development to meet the needs of the present without compromising future opportunities through a community economic development program to include eco-tourism, agriculture, fishing, mariculture, arts and crafts, education and housing.

With the large additional military expenditures proposed by the G. W. Bush Administration and accepted by Congress, the struggle to end the Navy's military exercises and those of allied naval forces in Vieques more complicated. But nowhere else in the 50 States are American citizens subjected to bombing and ship to shore target practice as they are on Vieques.

The Navy's claim that Vieques is essential for target practice is refuted by highly respected retired Admirals Gene LaRocque and Jack Shanahan who have assisted ECAAR on the Vieques project. Ever since the Chinese invasion of Korea over 50 years ago, new weapons and tactics have made the US tactics used then increasingly obsolete—air bombardment, firing missiles from naval vessels, and landing men from ship to shore. Over the years that ECAAR has been a part of the movement to return Vieques to its people, our views and reports have been communicated to the White House, the Secretary of Defense, Puerto Rican officials and the press. What once seemed impossible, can now be seen as an impending reality.

Key people involved in ECAAR's efforts include Charlie Connely, editor and publisher of The Vieques Times, Robert Rabin, Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, Lourdes Miranda, President of the Miranda Foundation which gave initial funding and good advice, and Eng. Johnny Vaquez, Director of Planning and Community Development, Municipality of Guaynabo, who has been organizing with Migdalana Bernardo, a key person in the planning and development of the base transfers from Fort Buchanan to Guaynabo.

The referendum in Vieques sponsored by the Navy and former Puerto Rican officials was overwhelmingly in favor of having the Navy cease its activities in Vieques. In the last election of November 7, 2000, the three major officers, the Governor, the Resident Commissioner to the US Congress, and the Mayor of Vieques, were replaced by persons strongly favoring the departure of the Navy. The two US Senators from New York and many Representatives in the House have declared and demonstrated in Puerto Rico for the Navy to leave Vieques.

With the world turmoil since September 11 in which the US is heavily engaged, the problems of Vieques may seem small and unimportant. However, Vieques is a symbol of unacceptable treatment given by the US government to US citizens. The potential ending of this injustice aided by ECAAR's work is most satisfying and a move in the right direction. To me particularly, this is the idea upon which ECAAR was founded: to use our research and knowledge to reduce military expenditures and to apply funds to economic development at home and abroad.

Robert J. Schwartz is the Founding Trustee of ECAAR. Dr. Schwartz represented ECAAR at an April 12-13 conference hosted by Hostas Community College and the National Puerto Rican Coalition. One purpose of attending was to distribute brochures about the Peace in Peacetime International Encounter in San Juan this August.

The following Coalition objectives for Vieques were agreed:

- Demilitarization
- Decontamination
- Devolution of land
- Sustainable economic development

Dr. Robert J. Schwartz is the founder of ECAAR.

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