

US gov't denies illnesses tied to Navy bombing of Vieques

BY SETH GALINSKY

A recently released report by the U.S. Health Department admits that there is an abnormally high rate of cancer and other diseases on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, but denies this has anything to do with toxic substances left behind by the U.S. military's more than six-decade use of it as a bombing range.

"There is nothing positive in this report," Bob Rabin, a spokesperson for the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, told the *Militant* in a phone interview. "The U.S. government and the colonial government of Puerto Rico are not interested in solving this problem."

The U.S. Navy used a one square mile area on the edge of the 20-mile long island as a bombing range, dropping millions of pounds of bombs, rockets, and artillery shells, including some with napalm, depleted uranium, and Agent Orange. Many of the bombs fell into the ocean. Along with the bombing range the Navy set up an ammunition dump and other military facilities on 25,000 acres that had been forcibly confiscated from local farmers and fishermen. The base was also used as a training ground for Washington's 1983 invasion of Grenada, the 1989 invasion of Panama and the wars on Iraq.

The former bombing range is about 10 miles from where most of the island's nearly 10,000 people live. The Navy stopped using it in 2003, after decades of protests by local residents, fishermen and people across Puerto Rico who saw it as an affront to the right of the Puerto Rican people to control their own land

and resources.

Thousands of people poured into the streets of Vieques to celebrate on May 1, 2003, the day after the Navy officially ended its military operations there.

Puerto Rico's colonial status

Highlighting Puerto Rico's colonial status, the Navy turned over most of the land to the U.S. Department of Interior, and only a small amount to the municipality of Vieques.

In February 2005 the Environmental Protection Agency designated portions of the island as a "Superfund" site, due to contamination and hazardous waste from the Navy's operations. Bombs are still being detonated from time to time as part of the cleanup, Rabin said, releasing more contaminants into the air and water.

According to earlier studies by the Puerto Rico Department of Health, cancer rates in Vieques are 30 percent higher than the rest of Puerto Rico. *Viequenses*, as local residents are called, also have a 25 percent higher infant mortality rate, a 41 percent higher rate of diabetes, and a 381 percent higher rate of hypertension than other Puerto Ricans.

A 2003 report by the U.S. Health Department's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, saying contaminants released by the military posed no threat to Viequenses, was widely criticized. The new report notes it was conducted "to be responsive to those concerns."

"We acknowledge that research done by other experts indicate increased morbidity and mortality in the population of



Marc Becker

Celebrating end of decades-long U.S. Navy operations on Puerto Rico's Vieques island, May 1, 2003. Banner says, "We stopped the bombing, Vieques won, the struggle continues."

Vieques," agency officials told the *Militant* by email. "However, after assessing each specific report we have found no connection between bombing associated contaminants and population exposure or public health impacts."

Time magazine wrote in 2009 that the Navy admitted to using Agent Orange as well as depleted uranium in Vieques. In response to a question on the effects of Agent Orange, the agency responded, "None of the data ATSDR reviewed indicated the use of Agent Orange."

"At least they are admitting for the first time that there is a higher rate of cancer and a higher death rate here," Ismael Guadalupe said in a phone interview from Vieques, "even though they refuse to say it's connected to contamination from the bombing range." Guadalupe, now a member of the town council, has been a longtime leader in the fight to get Washington to end its military operations there.

"There's no other logical explanation for the high incidence of disease in Vieques than the contamination from the bombings," John Eaves Jr. told the *Militant*. Eaves represents more than 7,000 Vieques residents who filed a lawsuit against the U.S. government in 2007 charging it had negligently exposed them to toxins.

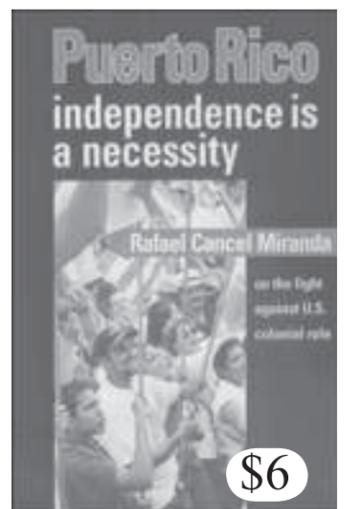
"We're finding concentrations of lead, mercury, cadmium, arsenic, aluminum and uranium in people's hair," Eaves said. "It just so happens those are the main components of these bombs."

In responding to the lawsuit, the U.S. Department of Justice did not answer the charges of health risks. In 2009 the

government argued that the Navy could not be sued because it had "Sovereign Immunity." The judge's 2010 decision on the side of the government is being appealed.

"The Navy spent hundreds of millions of dollars bombing and destroying Vieques," Rabin notes. "We want them to spend whatever is needed to provide a health care facility and medical care with dignity for all those people who are suffering the effects of that destruction. And we want the land returned to the people of Vieques."

"Our people are becoming aware of their own strength, which is what the colonial powers fear"— Puerto Rican independence leader Rafael Cancel Miranda



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Business manager: Lea Sherman

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The Militant (ISSN 0026-3885), 306 W. 37th Street, 10th floor, New York, NY 10018.

Telephone: (212) 244-4899

Fax: (212) 244-4947

E-mail: themilitant@mac.com

Website: www.themilitant.com

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