



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Puerto Ricans force United States Navy out of Vieques Island, 1999-2003

April

1999

to: May

2003

Country: Puerto Rico

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Vieques and San Juan, Puerto Rico; Washington, D.C.*

Goals:

To demilitarize Vieques; to remove U.S. Navy presence from Vieques; to return control of land to residents of island

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations › To speak with politicians in Washington, D.C.
- 019. Wearing of symbols › white ribbons and crosses
- 034. Vigils
- 042. Motorcades › 100 car caravan; 172: nonviolent obstruction - blocked traffic with cars
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 168. Nonviolent raids › protest camps erected at site gates and on beaches; 172: nonviolent obstruction
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Using boats and human bodies to prevent ship-to-shore bombing

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations › To speak with politicians in Washington, D.C.
- 019. Wearing of symbols › white ribbons and crosses
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

- 050. Teach-ins
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 168. Nonviolent raids › protest camps erected at site gates and on beaches
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations › To speak with politicians in Washington, D.C.
- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols › white ribbons and crosses
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › crosses delivered to offices of Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
- 034. Vigils
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies › Refusal to speak with officials from Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 162. Sit-in
- 168. Nonviolent raids › protest camps erected at site gates and on beaches
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 4th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 121. Refusal of public support › Residents of Vieques held an informal referendum with option to vote for immediate withdrawal of U.S. navy forces
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Celebratory rally when agreement was signed between U.S. and Puerto Rico

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Environment

Human Rights

Peace

Group characterization:

- Puerto Ricans
- environmental activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CPRDV)

Partners:

Vieques Women's Alliance, Vieques Fishing Association, Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP)

External allies:

Earth First!, Puerto Rican Federation of Teachers, Puerto Rican Bar Association, Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee, Catholic Church, Proyecto Caribeno de Justicia y Paz, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Operation PUSH, Vieques Support Network (VSN)

Involvement of social elites:

Ricky Martin, Rosie Perez, Felix Trinidad, Jose Torres, Denise Quinones, Dalai Lama, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Rigoberta Menchu

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Catholic Church
- Earth First!
- Fellowship of Reconciliation
- PIP
- PR Bar Association
- PR Federation of Teachers
- PR Solidarity Committee
- PSP
- Proyecto Caribeno de Justicia y Paz
- VSN
- Vieques Fishing Association
- Vieques Women's Alliance

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Dalai Lama
- Denise Quinones
- Felix Trinidad and Jose Torres
- Reverend Jesse Jackson
- Ricky Martin
- Rigoberta Menchu
- Rosie Perez

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 8 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

United States Navy

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Tear gas was used to suppress actionists at protest camps.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Since 1938, the United States Navy has occupied a significant portion of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, a fifty-two square-mile island eight miles east of the mainland of Puerto Rico. By the end of the twentieth century, the U.S. Navy controlled over 70% of the island. Thousands of the island's 10,000 inhabitants had been forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to the center portion of the island, surrounded by training grounds, weapons depots, and bomb sites on both sides. According to the U.S. Navy, the island was used for live-fire practice, air-to-ground bombing, ship-to-shore shelling and various other maneuvers. Other countries also used the island for training purposes. During World War Two and the Cold War, Vieques and other Caribbean islands served as important military locations for the U.S. armed forces. In 1998, 23,000 bombs were dropped on the island and live training took place 180 days out of the year. Additionally, the municipality faced an unemployment rate above 50% and more than 70% of the population lived below the poverty line. A campaign to remove the U.S. Navy two decades earlier had failed after violence broke out and the Puerto Rican governor was forced to sign a good-neighbor agreement with the United States to guarantee continued financial support (see "Puerto Ricans protest United States Navy presence on Vieques Island, 1977-1983").

After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the twentieth century, the U.S. began to reassess its presence at various bases around the world. The people of Vieques hoped that the two Navy sites on the island would be among those closed. When Vieques was not included on the list, the grassroots movement was revitalized in its fight to evict the U.S. Navy and return control of the island to Puerto Rican citizens. In the two decades that had passed since the fishermen's campaign against the U.S., awareness about the dangers of toxic contamination had grown extensively. Residents' concerns now revolved around chemical waste, environmental damage from bombings, polluted water, and increased rates of cancer.

Although the Comité pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques (Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, CPRDV) and others protested the U.S. Navy's presence on the island throughout the 1990s, it was not until a major accident in April 1999 that the campaign began to gain wider support. On April 19, 1999, David Sanes Rodríguez, a civilian security guard, was killed when two F-18 jets misfired two 500-pound bombs. Within a year of his death, fourteen protest camps had been established in Vieques and at other naval sites in Puerto Rico. Protesters acting as human shields were able to stop military maneuvers for a year by scaling fences and traveling by boat to occupy closed military sites. The Alianza de Mujeres Viequesenses (Vieques

Women's Alliance, AMV), which had formed in May 1999 in response to Rodriguez's death, organized demonstrations at the gates of the Navy bases on Vieques, banging pots and pans and distributing white ribbons to symbolize their desire for peace. In June, the AMV organized a procession of 100 cars that arrived at Camp Garcia's gates on the eastern coast of the island. The cars blocked traffic and members of the AMV tied hundreds of ribbons to the fence. Slogans, such as "ni una bomba mas" (not one more bomb), and speeches pleading for the immediate halt to bombing and training exercises continued throughout the summer and winter of 1999 and 2000. In July, protests also took place at Roosevelt Roads, a military base on the mainland of Puerto Rico. In December 1999, protesters built the Peace and Justice Camp at the Camp Garcia gates. Saturday night prayer vigils were held with the support of the Catholic Church until the protest camp was torn down and 224 actionists were arrested in May 2000. In February 2000, 150,000 people participated in the Peace for Vieques March in San Juan.

The population at the protest camps demonstrated the wide appeal of the struggle against the U.S. Navy's presence. Housewives, environmentalists, independence activists, church groups, fishermen, students and members of various political parties were united. Both the Puerto Rican Independence Party and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party supported the removal of the U.S. Navy from Vieques and other sites in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican Federation of Teachers assisted by providing education and literature on civil disobedience and the Puerto Rican Bar Association offered free legal advice and assistance to arrested protesters. Celebrities, including musical artists Ricky Martin and Rosie Perez, world-boxing champions Felix Trinidad and Jose Torres and Miss Universe Denise Quinones, visited the camps in solidarity with the protesters. Supporters of civil disobedience such as the Dalai Lama, Reverend Jesse Jackson and Rigoberta Menchu, also visited protest camps in 1999 and 2000. Lastly, several American politicians backed the Vieques struggle, although this was most likely to gain support from Puerto Rican constituencies.

Members of the AMV and the CPRDV sent delegates to Washington, D.C. and other cities throughout the United States to gain further support in their struggle. The Puerto Rican diaspora rallied behind the protesters and demanded action from their representatives in Congress. An example of the diaspora's support was the 2000 Puerto Rican Day Parade, which was dedicated to the Vieques struggle and featured slogans, signs and chants against the U.S. Navy. Additionally, the DC-based Vieques Support Network and the Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee helped to create alliances between people in Vieques and supporters in the U.S.. International support came from connections that the CPRDV had established by attending international meetings, hosting delegations from communities fighting similar battles with the U.S. armed forces (Hawaii, Guam, Ecuador, Korea), and speaking in front of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization. The CPRDV acted with the support of the National Council of Churches and various peace and human rights organizations, such as the Proyecto Caribeno de Justicia y Paz, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Operation PUSH.

Even after security forces tore down the camps, picketing continued at the gates and Puerto Ricans wore white ribbons to demonstrate their support. In late 2000, protesters conducted a sit-in at the office of Puerto Rico's Secretary of Health, demanding information about cancer rates on Vieques. In March 2001, the people of Vieques refused to meet with officials from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry who were conducting research on the environmental impact of military activity on the island. Residents declined to speak with the officials because they believed the results would be biased against them. Instead, sixty crosses were carried into the room where the officials were located to mark the sixty-year-long presence of the U.S. Navy.

In response to widespread protest, President Clinton created two committees to report on the Navy's impact in Vieques. Based on the results of these studies, Clinton offered up to \$90 million as economic incentive to allow indefinite use of the island for military purposes. A referendum was to be held that would give residents the option between financial support and the removal of the U.S. Navy within three years. Actionists rejected this offer and continued to demand immediate withdrawal. An informal referendum in July 2001 showed that 70% of the population wanted the Navy to leave immediately. President Bush reversed Clinton's attempts to negotiate with Vieques and stated that the Navy would halt military exercises in February and leave the island by May 2003. The closure of both military bases on Vieques was met with an island-wide celebration and support rally. The land was given to the Department of the Interior for the purpose of building a wildlife refuge. Some debate has continued over the high cost of clean up as well as the issues of control and ownership of the former military sites.

Research Notes

Influences:

The campaign to remove the U.S. navy from Vieques was inspired and influenced by a similar campaign in Culebra, Puerto Rico (see "Puerto Ricans expel United States Navy from Culebra Island, 1970-1974"), as well as an unsuccessful campaign that took place two decades earlier in Vieques (see "Puerto Ricans protest United States Navy presence on Vieques Island, 1977-1983"). (1)

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Additional Notes:

In 2005, Vieques was added to the U.S. Superfund list, which allocates funds for clean up of toxic waste.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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Source URL (retrieved on 01/27/2020 - 14:06): <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/puerto-ricans-force-united-states-navy-out-vieques-island-1999-2003>

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