THE NAVY AND VIEQUES

HON. TONY P. HALL
OF OHIO
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, July 27, 1999

Mr. HALL of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, in April, U.S. F-18 fighter jets accidentally dropped two 500-pound clusters of explosives on an observation post nearly a mile from their target on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, killing a civilian and wounding four others. Although Vieques has housed a naval live-fire training facility for over 50 years, there are 9,300 civilians who live on the island.

The following research memorandum was authored by Rebecca Brezenoff, a Research Fellow with the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA). This timely and pertinent article investigates the issues and delves into the history of naval operations on the island of Vieques:

Washington now finds itself embroiled in a sticky problem on the little-known Puerto Rican Island of Vieques, the site of one of its more perplexing public relations nightmares. Recent tragic events resulting from the military's continuing use of most of the heavily inhabited but relatively small island as a live-weapons storage and training facility present the Clinton Administration with a growing need to reevaluate its policies there. The increasingly militant demonstrations now being staged in Puerto Rico against the Vieques facility and the unity of the Puerto Rican population on the issue suggest that the problem will not go way, but requires some hard decisions now.

The island-municipality, located just off Puerto Rico's southeastern coast, once again emerged into the national news following its latest fatal incident on April 30, when two Marine fighter jets on a night training run over Vieques missed their mark by a mile and dropped bombs near an observation post, killing the 12-year-old boy, two younger family members, and a friend. The incident not the least serious incident to have afflicted the training facility, it is one that is likely to remain in the headlines as it prompts heated debate among citizen groups and government leaders, both here and in Puerto Rico. For decades, civilians on the island have suffered the effects of friendly fire. This time, a poisonous moment may be at hand for the Pentagon to review its options and have the wisdom to dismantle the base.

The Navy's primary argument in favor of Vieques' continued use has been the unparalleled importance of the live-ammunition training grounds for military readiness. The facility has been used by U.S. military personnel since 1941, when the Navy expropriated more than two-thirds of the 51-square-mile island for weapons storage and for ordnance disposal, involving bombings, shelling, and mock invasions.

Vieques' usefulness is indisputable. But the Navy is not the island's only tenant; a permanent community of 3,900 inhabitants occupies one-third of it. It would be disingenuous to argue that the naval presence is not detrimental to the lives and livelihoods of the local populace. Admittedly, the Navy admitted, after years of denials, to dropping 24 napalm bombs on Vieques in 1969. In February of this year, depleted uranium—believed to be linked to Gulf War Syndrome—was illegally discharged by Marine jets during a training exercise. On an island plagued by a cancer rate significantly higher than that of Puerto Rico, the firing of radioactive shells—five of which were actually recovered during “clean-up”—has not inspired confidence in the Navy's pledge of enhanced attention to safety. Nor is the local populace reassured by current plans to install a powerful anti-drug trafficking radar system, whose electromagnetic waves would be capable of reaching the mainland of South America.

Faced with encroaching environmental damage, stunted economic development due to declines in fishing and tourism industries, crew, unemployment, the constant pounding of heavy artillery and the drone of low-flying aircraft, damage to buildings caused by vibrations from war games, and the ongoing danger of bombing accidents from ships and planes, Vieques has been both figuratively and literally raked by all branches of the military. And not just the U.S. military. The participation of foreign and domestic law enforcement and local entities has been solicited—even via advertisements on the Navy's website—for a price. The fees collected in 1998 alone amounted to $80 million, but the increased bombing volume further strained the island's economy and worsened living conditions.

For all the Navy's purported efforts to be a good neighbor to the Viequeñas, its words and deeds are today viewed with mistrust. The Navy has disarmed depleted uranium and the electromagnetic frequencies of the powerful anti-drug trafficking radar poses no threat to human health are dismissed as inaccurate, if not deliberately misleading. Shortly after the mid-May announcement that the Navy would be returning a portion of its land on Vieques to civilian jurisdiction, a fisherman found a 12-foot torpedo near the island's main town. Even the U.S. panel recently established to conduct a thorough study of the Navy's presence and Vieques's skepticism is as weighted toward the armed forces—only one of its four members comes from a civilian background. The unfortunate combination of military mistrust and Vieques's skepticism as questioned and belated admissions, has created for the U.S. authorities a situation as ominous as the unexploded bombs and illnesses that often appear on the beaches of Vieques. With the integrity of the inquiry already challenged into question, Washington will face the difficult task of defending any decision that falls short of completely phasing out the facility.

Short of the forced relocation of over 9,000 people, no modification to the current program can adequately safeguard the residents of Vieques, whereas locating a viable substitute—an unoccupied island—and installing a new training facility, while difficult and costly, remains feasible. The Pentagon has had to reject plans for bases in other locations for such reasons as proximity to population centers and the periodic presence of federally protected migratory birds. Regardless of the recommendations due in August from a panel charged with examining the future military use of the island, the White House cannot allow itself to give any less consideration to Vieques' population. Continued live-fire training on a heavily inhabited island is indefensible, and it is time for the 60-year practice to end.