

CRS Report for Congress

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Vieques, Puerto Rico Naval Training Range: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

On June 14, 2001, the Bush Administration announced that it had decided to end military training operations at the U.S. naval training range on the small Puerto Rican island of Vieques by May 2003. The Bush Administration's new plan superseded a January 2000 agreement between President Clinton and the previous Governor of Puerto Rico, Pedro Rossello, that called for holding a referendum on Vieques (first scheduled for November 2001, then rescheduled for January 2002) in which voters could choose to either end the military's use of the range by May 2003 or allow it to continue indefinitely beyond that point. To implement the Clinton-Rossello plan, Congress last year approved \$40 million in assistance funding for Vieques and other legislation as part of P.L. 106-246 (H.R. 4425) and P.L. 106-398 (H.R. 4205). The Bush Administration had previously supported the Clinton-Rossello plan as implemented by Congress, but the new Governor of Puerto Rico, Sila Maria Calderon, who took office in January 2001, did not and has instead worked toward an immediate end to the military training operations on the island.

The conference report (H.Rept. 107-333 of December 12, 2001) on the FY2002 defense authorization bill (S. 1438) contains a provision (Section 1049) that (1) cancels the requirement for holding the January 2002 referendum; (2) authorizes the Secretary of the Navy to close the Vieques range if the Secretary certifies that equivalent or superior training facilities exist and are immediately available; (3) requires the Secretary, in making this determination, to take into account the views of Navy and Marine Corps leaders; and (4) transfers the lands to the Department of the Interior if the range is closed. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background information

The Vieques Training Range. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory in the Caribbean whose people are U.S. citizens. Vieques (pronounced vee-EH-kus) is a small Puerto Rican island a few miles east of mainland Puerto Rico. The Department of the Navy (DoN), which includes the Navy and Marine Corps, purchased

the western and eastern ends of the island between 1941 and 1950; the two DoN-owned parcels totaled about 22,000 acres, or about two-thirds of the island. Almost all of the 8,000-acre western parcel, which was used primarily as a naval ammunition depot, was returned by DoN to the Municipality of Vieques on May 1, 2001.

The remaining DoN-owned 14,000-acre eastern parcel has been used by U.S. naval and other military forces since the early 1940s for training exercises involving ship-to-shore gunfire, air-to-ground bombing by naval aircraft, Marine amphibious landings, or some combination. The parcel includes a roughly 11,000-acre Eastern Maneuver Area for Marine Corps ground exercises and a roughly 900-acre Live Impact Area (LIA) designed for targeting by live ordnance. The LIA is at the eastern tip of the island, several miles from the civilian-populated center section of the island, which has about 9,300 residents.

Until April 1999, the Navy used the Vieques training range about 180 days per year. Of these, about 120 days were for integrated (i.e., combined land-sea-air) live-fire exercises (i.e., exercises with explosive ammunition) by U.S. Atlantic Fleet aircraft carrier battle groups and amphibious ready groups preparing to deploy overseas on regular six-month-long deployments to the Mediterranean Sea or Persian Gulf.

Puerto Rican Discontent and Opposition. U.S. military activities in Puerto Rico have been a source of discontent among Puerto Ricans for several decades. Puerto Rican opposition to DoN activities on Vieques increased after 1975, when DoN withdrew from Culebra, another small Puerto Rican island near Vieques where DoN had conducted some of its live-fire training operations. After withdrawing from Culebra as a consequence of strong Puerto Rican opposition to DoN's use of that island, DoN consolidated its live-fire training operations at Vieques.

Puerto Rican dissatisfaction regarding military training activities on Vieques is driven by several issues: (1) lost economic development potential due to lack of access to most of the island's land, interruptions to local fishing operations, and the effect of DoN's activities on reducing the potential for developing the island as a tourist destination; (2) the inadequacy of past DoN economic development efforts intended to compensate the Vieques community for this economic loss; (3) damage to the island's environment, ecology, natural resources, historic resources, and archaeological sites caused by DoN training activities; (4) concern that the incidence of cancer or other diseases might be increased by pollutants released into the local environment by DoN training operations; (5) noise, especially from nearby ship-to-shore gunfire; (6) safety (the risk of an off-range accident), and (7) perceived DoN insensitivity in conducting its relations with the Vieques community.

The April 19, 1999 Bombing Accident and Subsequent Impasse. On April 19, 1999, the pilot of a Marine Corps F-18 on a training mission mistakenly identified an observation post located just to the west of the LIA (but still well within the overall range perimeter) as its intended target. The two 500-pound bombs dropped by the plane struck the post, killing David Sanes Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican civilian employed as a security guard, and injuring four others. Following the accident, DoN temporarily suspended its use of the range.

The April 19 accident galvanized Puerto Rican opposition to DoN's activities on the island. Puerto Rican political leaders and overwhelming segments of Puerto Rican public

opinion soon declared their firm opposition to any further military training operations on the island and called for DoN to withdraw from the island immediately and return the land to Puerto Rico. At the same time, dozens of demonstrators entered the range (most of which is off-limits to the civilian population) and established several protest camps, preventing DoN from easily resuming training activities there.

Rush Panel. On June 9, 1999, President Clinton asked Secretary of Defense William Cohen to establish a special panel to study the situation. The 4-member panel was chaired by Frank Rush, the then-acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for force management policy, and is consequently sometimes called the Rush panel. The panel released its report on October 19, 1999. The report recommended, among other things, that DoN

should immediately conduct a priority assessment of the training requirements at Vieques with the objective of ceasing all training activities at Vieques within five years. The Navy should take necessary programming actions to ensure that adequate resources are available to facilitate the identification and preparation of alternative locations, to institute necessary changes in training methods, and to provide for restoration and transfer to Puerto Rico of the Eastern Maneuver Area.

Clinton-Rossello Plan. On January 31, 2000, President Clinton announced an agreement with then-Governor of Puerto Rico Pedro Rossello on a plan for resolving the dispute over Vieques. The plan called for holding a referendum of the registered voters of Vieques to determine the future of DoN activities on the island. The referendum, which was later scheduled for November 6, 2001, and subsequently rescheduled for January 2002, would present two choices. One would be for DoN to cease training activities no later than May 1, 2003; the other would be for DoN to continue training, including live-fire training, beyond that date. If voters choose the second option, OMB would submit a \$50-million funding request to Congress to finance further infrastructure-improvement and housing projects on the western end of Vieques. Under the plan, DoN would be permitted prior to the referendum to conduct exercises on the range for no more than 90 days a year using only non-explosive ordnance, and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) would submit a \$40-million funding request to Congress to finance a series of community assistance projects on Vieques. The plan also called for transferring DoN lands back to civilian use.

Removal of Protestors and Resumption of Training. On May 4, 2000, more than 300 federal agents moved onto the training range and peacefully removed 216 demonstrators. On May 8, 2000, DoN resumed training operations on the range using non-explosive ordnance. As of September 2001, more than 1,500 demonstrators attempting to reenter the range on various dates after May 4, 2000 had been detained and removed by U.S. forces.

Congressional Activity and Legislation in 1999 and 2000. Hearings devoted to the situation on Vieques were held by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees on September 22, 1999, and by the Senate Armed Services Committee on October 19, 1999 (at which the Rush panel report was released). Several bills were introduced in September and October 1999 that proposed various measures for addressing the situation. Following the announcement of the Clinton-Rossello plan, Congress in 2000

debated the merits of the plan and acted on the administration's request for \$40 million in community assistance funding and its proposed land-transfer legislation.

Congress appropriated the \$40 million in community assistance funding as part of H.R. 4425, the FY2001 military construction appropriation and FY2000 supplemental appropriations bill. The bill was signed into law as P.L. 106-246 on July 13, 2000. The FY2000 supplemental appropriations portion of the bill (Division B) contains a provision under the Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide section that provides \$40 million to Vieques for conducting a referendum and for various community and economic assistance projects. With some exceptions, funds provided under this section of the bill "shall not become available until 30 days after the Secretary of the Navy has certified to the congressional defense committees that the integrity and accessibility of the training range is uninterrupted, and trespassing and other intrusions on the range have ceased." The Secretary is to recertify the status of the range 90 days after the initial certification, and each 90 days thereafter.

Congress authorized the \$40 million, provided land-transfer legislation (with terms modified from those proposed under the Clinton-Rossello plan), and approved other implementing legislation, as Title XV (Sections 1501-1508) of H.R. 4205, the FY2001 defense authorization bill. (See pages 365-373 and 879-881 of H.Rept. 106-945 of October 6, 2000, the conference report on H.R. 4205.) H.R. 4205 was signed into law as P.L. 106-398 on October 30, 2000. Section 1502 provided for the May 1, 2001 transfer of the ammunition depot on the western end of the island.

Position of Governor Calderon. On November 7, 2000, Puerto Rico elected a new Governor, Sila Maria Calderon, who took office on January 2, 2001. Calderon did not support the Clinton-Rossello plan and pledged to take steps that would appear to break the accord.

Final Clinton Administration Actions. The Clinton Administration warned Governor Calderon that if Puerto Rico did not fulfill its obligations under the plan, DoN would no longer be obliged to abide by the results of the November 6, 2001 referendum. On January 15 and 19, 2001, President Clinton issued two directives concerning Vieques. The first directed the Department of Health and Human Services to examine a new study showing that residents of Vieques suffer from a high incidence of vibroacoustic disease, an ailment affecting the heart and other internal organs. The second directed DoD to find a long-term alternative to live-fire training on Vieques, on the grounds that voters were likely to vote in the November 2001 referendum to permanently end training operations.

Initial Bush Administration Actions and Puerto Rican Response. The Bush Administration initially supported the Clinton-Rossello plan and held private discussions with Governor Calderon's office. On March 1, 2000, the Bush Administration canceled training operations for an aircraft carrier battle group that were scheduled to take place at Vieques later that month. On April 11, 2001, the Navy notified the Puerto Rican government of its intention to resume training operations at Vieques using inert ordnance (as required by the Clinton-Rossello agreement) starting April 27.

In response, Governor Calderon promised to introduce legislation to tighten noise restrictions in a way that would effectively prohibit the Navy from engaging in ship-to-shore gunfire. She also accused the Defense Department of violating an understanding to

suspend training operations on Vieques pending the outcome of independent reviews of studies on the health-effects of the training.

Calderon introduced the bill – The April 18 Noise Prohibition Act of 2001 – and the Puerto Rican Legislature passed it on April 23. Governor Calderon signed the bill into law, and on April 24, Puerto Rico filed a federal lawsuit to halt the Navy’s exercise, arguing that the Navy’s training activities would threaten public health and violate both the new noise-restriction law and the 1972 federal Noise Control Act. Arguments in the case were held in U.S. District Court on April 26; later that day, the court rejected the Puerto Rican request for a temporary restraining order to halt the exercises, but criticized the Navy, urged U.S. officials to defer holding exercises until reviews of the health-impact studies are completed, and stated that it would more fully explore the legal issues later and could ultimately bar future training.

As these developments unfolded, protest actions on Vieques continued and the dispute took on increased prominence, particularly following the arrest, along with other protestors, of several elected officials (including a Member of Congress) and other well-known persons. The issue was further inflamed by allegations that the Navy had mistreated protestors that it had taken into custody.

New Bush Administration Plan and Reaction. On June 14, 2001, the Bush Administration announced that it had decided to end military training operations at the U.S. naval training range on the small Puerto Rican island of Vieques by May 2003. Under the Administration’s plan, DoN will begin planning for withdrawal from the island by that date, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld will appoint a panel of retired military officers and other experts to seek effective training alternatives to Vieques, and the Defense Department will seek relief from the requirement to hold the November 2001 referendum by asking Congress to pass legislation cancelling sections 1503, 1504 and 1505(b) of P.L. 106-398. After May 2003, the DoN-owned land on the eastern end of the island would be turned over to the Department of the Interior, which would determine how to clean up and dispose of the land.

Supporters of the military immediately criticized the Bush Administration’s new plan on the grounds that it could lead to reduced readiness of U.S. naval forces and complicate the U.S. ability to maintain access to overseas training ranges in places such as Okinawa and South Korea. Some opponents of continued military training operations on the island welcomed the plan because it established with finality that training operations will end by May 2003, but other opponents of the training operations criticized the plan on the grounds that it didn’t go far enough – that training operations should end immediately rather than in May 2003.

Governor Calderon welcomed the plan as far as it went but stated that she still wants training operations to end immediately. She proceeded with her plan to hold a Puerto Rico-sponsored non-binding referendum on July 29 that gave voters on the island an opportunity to vote in favor of an immediate cessation of training operations – an option that would not be available at the November 2001 referendum scheduled under the Clinton-Rossello plan. In the referendum, which drew 80.6 percent of the island’s 5,893 registered voters, about 68 percent voted in favor of immediate cessation of training operations, about 30 percent voted to permit training operations to continue indefinitely, and about 2 percent voted for training operations to cease by May 2003.

Potential Issues for Congress

The Bush Administration's new plan for resolving the dispute over Vieques raises potential issues for Congress in the following areas:

- **Replacing Vieques.** DoN has argued adamantly that there is no site other than Vieques where Atlantic Fleet naval forces can conduct integrated live-fire training operations. What are the options for finding training sites to replace Vieques, and how will the loss of Vieques affect the readiness of Atlantic Fleet naval forces?
- **Roosevelt Roads and Fort Buchanan.** Much of the DoN presence at the Roosevelt Roads naval base on mainland Puerto Rico opposite Vieques relates to managing operations on Vieques. What effect would the end of operations on Vieques have on the Navy presence at Roosevelt Roads and on its economic impact in the surrounding community?
- **Access to other ranges.** How might the Bush Administration's new plan affect the U.S. ability to maintain access to overseas training ranges where there is local opposition to U.S. operations, such as Okinawa or South Korea? Does the plan set a bad precedent for managing disputes over ranges, and will it encourage other local populations to step up their opposition to U.S. training activities?

Legislative Activity

The House Armed Services Committee, in its report (H.Rept.107-194 of September 4, 2001) on the FY2002 defense authorization bill (H.R. 2586), included a provision (Section 1402) that would (1) cancel the November 2001 referendum, (2) require naval training to continue at Vieques until Navy and Marine Corps leaders certify that an equal or superior training location exists and is available for use; and (3) if an alternative site is found and the Vieques range is closed, retain all Navy land on Vieques for Defense Department use in case of national emergency, to be managed in cooperation with the Department of the Interior. (See pages 355 and 640-644 of H.Rept. 107-194.) The Senate Armed Services Committee, in its report (S.Rept. 107-62 of September 12, 2001) on the FY2002 defense authorization bill (S. 1416 [later replaced by S. 1438]), did not comment on Vieques.

The conference report (H.Rept. 107-333 of December 12, 2001) on the FY2002 defense authorization bill (S. 1438) contains a provision (Section 1049) that (1) cancels the requirement for holding the January 2002 referendum; (2) authorizes the Secretary of the Navy to close the Vieques range, and terminate all Navy and Marine Corps operations at the Roosevelt Roads naval station that are related exclusively to use of the range, if the Secretary certifies that "one or more alternative training facilities exist that, individually or collectively, provide an equivalent or superior level of training" and are immediately available upon cessation of training on Vieques; (3) requires the Secretary, in making this determination, to take into account the written views and recommendations of the Chief of Naval Operations and the Commandant of the Marine Corps; and (4) transfers the range lands to the Department of the Interior if the range is closed.