

Vieques vs. the U.S. Navy: Island struggle rekindled

by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

Vieques Island, Puerto Rico

The shoes of the fisherman, in Carlos Ventura's case, bear an historic obligation. Carlos's father, Severo, wore them for years during protests against the U.S. Navy, which in 1941 took over two-thirds of the island of Vieques, located just off the east coast of Puerto Rico. Before Severo Ventura died, he passed on the shoes and the responsibility that accompanies them. "The old man made us promise him that when he was no longer here, his children and grandchildren would continue the struggle," says Carlos.

Since April, Carlos Ventura has been wearing his father's shoes often. The struggle to free Vieques from the navy heated up again following the April 19 death of David Sanes, a civilian security guard killed when a navy F-18 fighter dropped two 500-pound bombs more than a mile off target.

Led by fishermen like Ventura, the struggle of Vieque's 9,300 residents against the navy has ebbed and flowed over the decades. In the late 1970s, the conflict attracted the world's attention for several months when protesters occupied part of the navy's bombing range on the eastern end of the island. But the navy arrested 21 protesters in 1979, and 13 of them were jailed for several months in U.S. federal prisons. While they were away, the movement dissolved amidst partisan political squabbling.

Within two days of Sanes's death, protesters were once again camped out on the bombing range. A group of young people set up camp on a nearby hilltop, escaping the tropical sun by stretching a tarp out from a bullet-ridden tank. They dubbed their settlement "Mt. David" after the guard who was killed. Carlos Ventura pulled his father's shoes out of the closet and started ferrying food and water to the protesters on his fishing boat.

Although there are similarities to the protests of the '70s, many throughout this U.S. colony think the political tide has turned. Church leaders, labor activists and even politicians have come on board the movement to drive the navy off Vieques.

Among the church leaders is the new Catholic archbishop of San Juan, Roberto González, who came to Vieques and termed the navy's practices here "immoral." The Catholic bishop of Caguas, Alvaro Corrada del Rio, whose diocese includes Vieques, preached the homily at Sanes's funeral. "The diocese will not abandon its peaceful protest until the military activities cease and the land of Vieques is returned to its people," he declared in a May pastoral letter. While Corrada del Rio isn't recommending civil disobedience now, he has warned that if the navy resumes bombing, then church leaders "will have to reconsider our position." Both he and González are asking their colleagues in the U.S. to exercise the church's political clout on behalf of the islanders.

Protestants haven't been far behind. The United Methodist bishop of Puerto Rico, Juan Vera Méndez, in May convinced his colleagues in the United Methodist Council of Bishops to restate their demand calling for the navy to set sail for the last time from Vieques.

Such ecumenical support was fleshed out in a May 30 ecumenical worship service on Yayi beach in the navy-controlled restricted zone. Some 300 worshipers broke the law to dedicate a small chapel; built in 24 hours by a labor federation, it is nestled between a turquoise bay and a bombing range littered with bomb fragments and unexploded ordnance. "Tomorrow they may tear down this chapel, but our struggle for life will go on," declared Hilario Sánchez, a Catholic priest from Caguas sent by Bishop Corrada del Rio to give the homily. "We in the church are clear: the navy must leave Vieques!"

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For many here, the struggle on Vieques may be a sign of things to come. With the closing of the Southern Command's operations in Panama, the U.S. military presence in Puerto Rico is expanding. In his pastoral letter Corrada del Rio asked for prayers and action "to liberate Puerto Rico from its strategic-military status." Vieques may be the first skirmish in that campaign.

The people who live on Vieques seem thrilled by the widespread new support. "In the past we suffered a lack of support from several sectors, including the churches,"

said Ismael Guadalupe, president of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. Guadalupe spent six months in prison for his participation in protests in 1979. "Today it's different. Sectors such as the churches and the labor unions are not just present beside us as we struggle to defend Vieques, they are actively taking on our struggle as their own."

Puerto Rico's diehard independence activists are also camped out on the bombing range. They have always been stalwart supporters of the anti-navy struggle, but today they seem less important, almost anachronistic, in the political picture. At the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) campsite along a beach on the southeast of the island, its people refuse to let visitors come under their tarp for shade. "We have our own security regulations," a burly independentista told me when I tried to avail myself of their shade. I was walking along the beach toward a rendezvous with Carlos Ventura and his boat.

The PIP activists weren't just opposed to gringo journalists; in an hour, I watched some of them chase off four boats that tried to anchor in the shallow bay in front of their camp. Several fishermen told me that while they appreciated the PIP's support, the independentistas obviously came to Vieques with their own agenda. "They are elitists who think they own the political struggle," said Neftali García, an environmental scientist who was taking soil samples from the crater-marked lagoons in the bombing range.

If support from PIP activists is problematic, so is the rash of sudden solidarity from government leaders. Secretary of State Norma Burgos, for example, has become a strong supporter of the islanders' struggle. Two weeks after being appointed to head a special government commission studying the navy presence on Vieques, she complained about repeated military lies. "Daily I'm confronted with incorrect information" from navy officials, she complained. "I honestly can't trust any of the information they're giving me." Many Puerto Ricans were particularly incensed by revelations at the end of May that the navy had used illegal depleted uranium shells during February maneuvers on Vieques-something navy officials had earlier denied.

With elections next year both here and in the U.S., politicians wanting Puerto Rican votes seem to sense that coming out against the navy may win them votes. Governor Pedro Rossello is urging the Al Gore campaign to side with the people of Vieques as a way of winning Hispanic votes. And Republican hopeful George W. Bush is considering a position paper that reportedly calls for the navy to leave Vieques.

Some islanders worry that the sudden popularity of their cause among politicians, who have shown little interest in their problems in the past, will lead to a deal behind their backs that would allow the navy to remain if it stops using live ammunition. Such a negotiated solution won't convince Carlos Ventura to put away his father's shoes. He and other islanders are pushing for total withdrawal. With their newfound support among fellow Puerto Ricans, especially in the churches, their chances of success are much better than in the past.

"The people of Vieques want the navy to leave the island, and won't be satisfied until it's gone," said Corrada del Rio. "There's a long struggle ahead for them, but in the end they will prevail. And the diocese of Caguas will accompany them until the navy leaves Vieques once and for all."

In late July a four-member panel, acting on orders of President Clinton, visited Vieques and held hearings; it will soon make a recommendation to the president about the future of the island.