

12 June 2001

AI Index AMR 51/082/2001 - News Service Nr. 102

US Navy must use restraint against protesters in Vieques, Puerto Rico

As the US Navy prepares to resume bombing exercises in the Puerto Rican island of Vieques tomorrow, Amnesty International is urgently calling for restraint in dealing with protesters.

"During the last US Navy exercises in late April, dozens of people reported being subjected to unnecessary force and ill-treatment by Navy personnel," the organization added, urging the US Navy to abide by international standards on the use of force.

Amnesty International does not dispute the right of governments to secure their military training areas from trespassers. "However, there is substantial evidence that the US Navy went beyond the boundaries of legitimate force in dealing with demonstrators in this instance," the organization said.

"Some of their actions amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, in violation of the Convention against Torture and other treaties to which the US is a party."

A preliminary report by an Amnesty International delegate to Puerto Rico -- based on interviews with victims, eye-witnesses, government officials, lawyers, civil rights and other community groups, as well as on video footage of incidents -- includes allegations of:

! hundreds of peaceful demonstrators outside the training camp, including elderly people and children, being sprayed indiscriminately with large quantities of tear-gas and pepper spray and having rubber bullets fired at them. Those sprayed included a group of children playing outside the gate, and another group holding a religious service;

! many of the activists arrested after entering the camp being physically ill-treated while in military custody. Allegations include people being sprayed in the face with pepper spray or kicked or kneed while handcuffed; made to kneel for hours on rocky terrain, and to spend long periods in the sun without water;

! women and men complaining of humiliating procedures during clothed body searches, such as having their breasts or testicles squeezed. Video footage showed several girls being subjected to intimate touching during body searches by female soldiers, while male soldiers watched.

! people in detention being denied food, water, medications and phone calls for long periods. Most only had access to a lawyer after they were brought before a judge after two or three days in detention;

! the Navy continuing to fire its inert bombs after activists penetrated the bombing range, ignoring the protesters' white flags and flares. Some bombs allegedly fell within 50 to 100 feet of the protesters.

"Spraying large quantities of chemical substances into non-violent crowds is clearly incompatible with international standards requiring that law enforcement officials should use force only as a last resort, in proportion to the threat posed, and in a way to minimize damage or injury," Amnesty International said.

"These reports are particularly disturbing, given the potentially harmful effects of such agents in the case of small children or the elderly, or people suffering from asthma or other conditions."

Background

More than 140 protesters were arrested during the exercises from 27 April to 1 May 2001 and more than 40 have recently received prison terms of up to four months for acts of civil disobedience after trespassing into the area. Amnesty International is looking at claims that some protesters were denied due process by being denied timely access to attorneys or having excessive bail set.

Military manoeuvres at the base are due to resume for 18 days from 13 June and large numbers of protesters are expected to gather at the base. The USA has used Vieques -- a small island off the East coast of Puerto Rico with a population of 9,400 -- as a military training ground for the past 60 years. Public outrage against the base has mounted since a civilian guard was killed by two stray live bombs in 1999. The Navy currently uses only inert bombs, but protests by the local populace, civil rights activists and environmentalists continue. There are claims that the bombings have produced toxic levels of lead and cadmium contamination and have led to excessive cancer rates and other diseases.

A referendum due to take place next November will allow voters the option of ending the military manoeuvres, but in any case this would not happen until 2003.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>