

Media Advisory

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Puerto Rico: Amnesty International sends observer to Vieques

Amnesty International will be sending an observer to Puerto Rico to investigate allegations that the US military police used excessive force against people protesting US military bombing exercises in Vieques.

Yanette Bautista, a Colombian national and Officer of Amnesty International's Costa Rica office, will be in Puerto Rico between 10 and 14 May and will observe a hearing on 12 May. The hearing, organized by the Human Rights Commission of the Puerto Rico Bar Association, will look into ill-treatment of demonstrators by US marine officers. Yanette Bautista will also be interviewing victims, attorneys, local groups and others about the events in question.

A number of protestors were hospitalized after being doused with pepper spray. Security forces also used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse non-violent demonstrators. A three-month-old infant was treated in hospital after the Navy sprayed gas during a children's activity. Some of those arrested have also claimed that they were ill-treated while in detention.

More than 120 people were arrested on trespassing charges during the protests between 24 April and 2 May. Most of them have since been released on bail but there are apparently seven people still in detention.

Background

The United States has used Vieques, an island off eastern Puerto Rico, as a bombing range for more than 50 years. The death of a civilian security guard in a botched bombing in April 1999 sparked protests and led to a suspension of operations. However, bombing exercises using inert ammunition resumed after lengthy negotiations between the US Navy and the Puerto Rican authorities.

The latest protests began just hours after a federal judge in Washington turned down a last-minute appeal by the Puerto Rican Government to stop the Navy resuming its bombing exercises. The lawsuit contended the bombing could harm the health of Vieques residents and created too much noise.

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