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~~Opposition to the~~ U.S. Policy in Vieques

Amend resolution 294. Book of Resolutions

Financial Implications: None

MARCHA (Methodist Representing the Cause of Hispanic Americans)

The Exodus story of liberation speaks volumes about the experience of the people of Vieques, Puerto Rico. Exodus Chapter 3 describes very well the experience of this courageous people who have confronted the power of the U.S. military and have come out victorious. "And the LORD said: 'I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey . . .'" (3:7-8, NKJV). God has surely seen the oppression experienced by the people of Vieques, and today we can celebrate their journey of no more bombs in Vieques and no more military maneuvers.

Historical Background

Vieques is a small island about eight miles east of the island nation of Puerto Rico. In 1938 the U.S. Navy began using the island-municipality of Vieques for military practices. In 1941, during the height of WWII, the United States initiated a campaign of expropriation of territory (evicting over 3,000 people), which ended in the Navy's control of over two thirds of the island's most arable land. Thousands of families were displaced and those remaining were jeopardized in their basic means of subsistence. The net effect of these policies was the clustering of the entire civilian population into a small strip of land right in the middle of the island. Only 25 percent of the island remained under civilian control.

One of the effects of 60 years of bombing has been the degradation, and in some cases destruction, of Vieques' delicate ecosystems. Hundreds of species of plants and animals have been killed as a result of the direct impact of projectiles during military practices. These bombings and military maneuvers have led to serious contamination of the environment due to toxic residues and other contaminants.

In an article published in 1988, engineer and environmental consultant Rafael Cruz-Pérez identified three ways that the military bombs pollute the environment in Vieques: (1) chemicals in the missiles' explosive payloads, (2) dust and rock particles released into the air from the missile impact and/or detonation, and (3) metallic residues left by missiles after they detonate and the junk and scrap heap they use for target practice. "According to information provided by the Navy, this material has never been removed . . . Under the effects of additional explosions and sea breezes, metals are oxidized or decomposed, turning in accelerated fashion into leachates that pollute the environment," wrote Cruz-Pérez. He also cited a scientific study by the U.S. Navy that found the drinking water sources in Vieques' Isabel Segunda village and Barrio Esperanza are polluted with toxic chemicals, including TNT, tetryl and RDX. Cruz-Pérez wrote

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that "the study doesn't explain how these substances got to the water sources, located more than fourteen kilometers away from the shooting area."

In the 1970s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sampled Vieques' air and soil. After studying the samples, the EPA determined that the air has unhealthy levels of particulate matter and the ground has iron levels above normal.

The net result of this environmental pollution is high levels of cancer and other serious health problems that Vieques have been experiencing for years. Studies carried out by the Puerto Rico Department of Health have shown that from 1985 to 1989 the cancer rate in Vieques was 26 percent higher than the rest of Puerto Rico's already high levels of cancer.

Dr. Rafael Rivera-Castano, a retired professor from the University of Puerto Rico's Medical Sciences Campus, has documented the increase in extremely rare diseases, including scleroderma, lupus, thyroid deficiencies, as well as more common ailments like asthma, which are significantly affecting Vieques' children.

According to Dr. Rivera-Castano there is no reason for the children of a small island like Vieques to develop asthma. "The winds that blow in from the ocean are rich in iodine, which prevents asthma. The only possible cause for this high incidence of asthma is air pollution," he stated. Vieques does not have factories or any large industry that could cause the high incidence of asthma; the only source of air pollution on the island has been the Navy.

Economic development on the island has also been drastically affected by the Navy's presence. About 9,400 people live on Vieques and the unemployment rate is almost fifty percent by most conservative estimates.

General Electric, the only large company in Vieques, ended its operations in the summer of 2003. One of the few viable industries in Vieques today is commercial fishing. The bombing, however, has left this industry barely profitable.

Agriculture, the largest industry in Vieques before the Navy expropriated the most fertile land, is today almost non-existent. Now the economic inheritance of the people and the children of Vieques is economic stagnation.

Conclusion

The United Methodist Church has been a key supporter of the struggle in Vieques. The voice of our Church joined with the voices of many organizations in Puerto Rico and around the world to halt the Navy's maneuvers on the island. The Navy's military presence finally ended on May 1, 2003, **which the 2004 General Conference celebrated.** Justice, however, is not complete. **The majority of the people of Vieques rejoiced with the announcement that the bombing, mainly by the US Navy, against their island had ended. Regretfully even when now there is**

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no longer any bombing, bombs continue to explode in the former base that was called Camp Garcia. The removal of thousands of live bombs in the area is being done exploding them on site, in the open air. This produces an additional quantity of contaminants that enter different ecosystems and continue to have an adverse impact on the food chain and on the health of the people of Vieques. The US Navy has reported that the open air bomb explosions on site in Vieques may continue until the year 2010 or even 2012. According to information published by the US Navy, by March 16, 2007 as part of the “cleaning” of Vieques, some 5,754 explosive artifacts were detonated in the open air. It is not acceptable to continue to put at risk the peace, health and security of the people of Vieques.

Now the people of Vieques need the Church to call for restoration for their island, urging environmental clean-up of the damage left behind by the U.S. Navy and restoration of the economy through the creation of new jobs and new industry.

Reconstruction in Vieques is only just beginning. It is important that renewal principally benefit the resident people of the island and not the hotel interests, politicians or other powerful forces. Equally important is that restoring agriculture, fishing, eco-tourism, housing, archaeological-historic investigation and environmental study, will be the backbone of a new model of cooperative, community and sustainable development.

Community participation in all steps of reconstruction (the environmental cleanup, return of the lands, future development) is necessary to ensure a process of genuine healing and reconstruction.

The land cannot be developed if they are not returned—and demilitarized. The use proposed by the Navy for some of the land will determine the level of cleanup. The Navy looks to bypass the Viequesenses' demands by "passing" the lands to the U.S. Department of the Interior and Fish and Wildlife Service, so that cleanup is not an essential part of the end of military use process.

Be it resolved that, The United Methodist Church:

- ~~1. urge the U.S. Navy to clean up the contamination caused by its practices and maneuvers~~
Request of the appropriate agencies of the United States government that the cleaning of all the contaminants produced by the US Navy activities or activities allowed by the US Navy be done using methods that will keep to a minimum the release of toxic agents into the environment. The health of the residents of Vieques must be protected. Diverse sources have published information on the availability of equipment and methodology that make possible the removal of explosive artifacts without detonating them in open air spaces;
- ~~2. urge the U.S. Congress to appropriate sufficient funds to decontaminate Vieques such that the land is again suitable for agriculture, environmental tourism and other social uses, to address the health problems resulting from that contamination;~~

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3. We also request the United States government to provide the needed funds to increase health programs in Vieques, instead of wasting time continuing to debate whether or not the evidence that has been presented is sufficient to prove that many of the health problems in Vieques are the direct or indirect result of the 60 years of bombing and weapon related tests. We call upon the United States government to assign funds to enable the people of Vieques to have access to new health programs directed to reduce the high incidence of different types of cancer, to provide treatment to all the persons with toxic chemicals in their bodies and to treat and reduce the high incidence of respiratory diseases;

3 4. urge Congress and the government of Puerto Rico to establish mechanisms to promote the reconstruction and sustainable economic development of Vieques;

4 5. We call upon the Environmental Protection Agency and all other government agencies responsible for the cleaning to also expedite the cleaning of the island of Culebra, Puerto Rico that was also contaminated as result of military maneuvers.

5 6. urge that civil and religious leaders in Vieques be involved in every decision regarding the future of the island;

7. develop educational resources through the General Boards of Church and Society, Global Ministries and Discipleship, to help United Methodists and others understand the issues affecting the people of Vieques;

8. send a copy of this resolution to the U. S. House and Senate Armed Services Committees, the governor of Puerto Rico and the secretary general of the United Nations; and

9. send a copy of this resolution to the bishop of the Puerto Rico Methodist Autonomous Affiliated Church.

ADOPTED 2004

See Social Principles, ¶ 165B.

Submitted by MARCHA

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