



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
Federal Responsibility for the Cleanup of Vieques and Culebra
March 26, 2014

Mr. Speaker:

Vieques and Culebra are two island municipalities of Puerto Rico. Each is home to beautiful beaches, to rich animal and plant life, and to warm, welcoming people. For decades, the two islands were used as military training ranges. The U.S. citizens living in Vieques and Culebra were required to make tremendous sacrifices to ensure the readiness of our armed forces and to enhance our national defense.

Although Vieques and Culebra are no longer used for training purposes, both islands bear the scars of their past. Some of those scars are easy to see, like the impact of bombing on the once-pristine landscape. Or like the threat that unexploded bombs in the ground and surrounding waters currently pose to the safety of residents and visitors. Other scars might be more difficult to discern, like the effect that bombing-related contamination may have had on public health, particularly in Vieques.

The Department of Defense is currently conducting decontamination operations in both Vieques and Culebra. The cleanup of Vieques is being conducted by the Navy, while the cleanup of Culebra is being carried out by the Corps of Engineers.

Several days ago, I wrote a letter to the Secretary of Defense about DOD's responsibilities with respect to Vieques and Culebra. The letter, which was signed by 16 of my colleagues in the House and Senate, makes three specific requests.

First, although many years have passed since the military stopped conducting training exercises on Culebra and Vieques, there are still meaningful gaps in information about the types and amounts of munitions used on both islands. My constituents have a compelling interest in knowing which types of weapons were used, where they were used, and in what volume they were used.

Congress agrees. As a result of bicameral efforts, the report accompanying the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act encourages DOD to make public all of its historical documents related to its training activities on both islands. Our letter to the Secretary requests an update about how DOD intends to implement this congressional language, and strongly urges DOD to collect, organize and publish the relevant documents on the Internet in a single location.

Second, the report accompanying the 2014 Defense Appropriations Act encourages DOD to accelerate cleanup efforts on Vieques. Therefore, my colleagues and I also urged the Secretary of Defense to implement this congressional guidance by allocating the funding necessary to complete the cleanup of Vieques as rapidly as possible.

Finally, the letter reminds the Secretary that there is a serious public safety threat in Culebra that requires resolution. As a result of a rigid legal interpretation, DOD refuses to fund the cleanup of a 400-acre parcel that formerly served as the bombardment zone, and which now contains popular beaches, pedestrian walkways and campgrounds.

This is unacceptable. Since 1995, there have been over 70 incidents in which members of the public have encountered unexploded bombs in this part of Culebra that could have caused them grave harm. Last March, a young girl visiting a Culebra beach suffered burns after she picked up an artillery shell containing white phosphorous. And earlier this year, local authorities had to close the same Culebra beach when a 100-pound unexploded bomb was discovered underwater close to shore.

I have filed multiple bills to require DOD to fund the cleanup of this parcel and to remove this public safety threat, but DOD has opposed these efforts. The letter urges DOD to reconsider its position on this matter.

The use of Vieques and Culebra as training ranges may have ceased, but the legacy of such use must be addressed by DOD. Working with my colleagues, I will continue to do everything within my power to ensure that DOD fulfills its legal and moral responsibilities.

Thank you.