

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON DECOLONIZATION ADOPTS TEXT CALLING ON UNITED STATES TO EXPEDITE SELF-DETERMINATION PROCESS FOR PUERTO RICAN PEOPLE

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The Special Committee on Decolonization today called upon the Government of the United States to expedite a process that would allow the Puerto Rican people fully to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence.

In a resolution adopted by consensus, the decolonization body -- known formally as the Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples -- requested the President of the United States to release all Puerto Rican political prisoners serving sentences for cases relating to the Territory's struggle for independence and to the Vieques Island "peace struggle".

The Special Committee, also known as the "Committee of 24", urged the Government of the United States to complete the return of occupied land and installations on Vieques Island and in Ceiba; respect the fundamental human rights to health and economic development of their inhabitants; and expedite and cover the costs of decontaminating the areas previously used in military exercises.

Introducing the text, Cuba's representative said that, while the Special Committee and the General Assembly had been adopting resolutions and decisions reaffirming the inalienable right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination and independence, the United States, as colonial Power, had tried by all means to consolidate its economic, political and social domination over the "brotherly Latin American and Caribbean country". Because of its culture, history, traditions and especially its people's unswerving will, Puerto Rico would continue to be a Latin American and Caribbean nation, with its own national identity. After the Special Committee's adoption of the text, he said: "The adoption of this resolution today is a tribute to the patriotic spirit of the Puerto Rican people and the tradition of struggle led by their heroes, who are also the heroes of Cuba and all the Americas."

This morning, the Special Committee heard 18 petitioners, who presented the views of various Puerto Rican groups, parties and organizations. Many requested the General Assembly to call on the United States to begin a just and equitable process to allow the people of Puerto Rico to exercise their right to self-determination, confirming to resolution 1514 (XV). Puerto Rican people could no longer tolerate that consideration of Puerto Rican self-determination be "parked in a corner of chimeras" by the Assembly, a representative of the Puerto Rico Bar Association said.

Among the issues that required attention, petitioners mentioned the imposition of the death penalty for federal crimes, despite its prohibition by the Constitution of Puerto Rico; extradition of those facing death penalty; occupation and environmental contamination of Vieques; political prisoners serving disproportionate sentences in United States jails; and rising federalization of

Puerto Rican life.

Anibal Acevedo-Vilá, Governor of Puerto Rico, said the process of self-determination for the Puerto Rican people had not been concluded in 1952, when the General Assembly, on the request of the United States, had concluded that a new constitutional status had been reached that had attributes of "sovereignty". The United States Government had not complied with its promises to the international community, and a recent White House report on the matter stated that Puerto Rico had only two options: integration as a federal state, or independence.

He recalled having written in a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the United States had perpetuated a "monumental fraud". The Department of State must officially notify the United Nations of its current position. While supporting neither statehood nor independence, but rather the autonomous status supported by the majority of Puerto Ricans, he was asking the Special Committee, as an elected official, to request the United States to explain inconsistencies between its position in the 1950s and its current position.

Accusing the Governor of supporting the status quo, State Senator José Carriga Pico said true self-determination would make Puerto Rico the fifty-first State of the United States, while Luis Vega Ramos, a Member of Puerto Rico's House of Representatives, called for independence in free association with the administering Power.

Kenneth D. McClintock, President of the Puerto Rico Senate, disagreeing with many other petitioners, said that the Territory's ultimate political status was essentially a domestic matter of the United States, to be decided by its citizens residing in Puerto Rico and the Congress. It was not incumbent upon the Special Committee or the General Assembly to take action on the status of Puerto Rico.

Speaking prior to the adoption of today's draft resolution were the representatives of Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Panama, Venezuela, Dominica (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Syria, Iran, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Cuba.

The Special Committee will meet again at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 June.

Background

The Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration of the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, also known as the "Committee of 24" is hearing petitioners today from Puerto Rico.

A report (document A/AC.109/2008/L.3) prepared by the Committee's Rapporteur highlights Puerto Rico's general constitutional and political status, noting that, under the current Commonwealth arrangements, authority over defence, international relations, external trade and monetary matters remains with the United States, while Puerto Rico has autonomy on tax matters, social policies and most local affairs.

There is a deadlock among Puerto Rico's political parties as to whether the island's territorial status should change, the report says. However, the United States Congress reopened debate over

the island's political status in early 2007. The Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2007 was introduced in the House of Representatives in February and urged a plebiscite no later than 31 December 2009. It called for the ballot to provide voters with two options: to continue the existing form of territorial status or pursue a path towards a constitutionally viable permanent non-territorial status. The Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2007, also introduced in the House in February, would recognize the right of the people of Puerto Rico to call a constitutional convention through which they would exercise their natural right to self-determination and to establish a mechanism for congressional consideration of such a decision. The amended Democracy Act was passed in subcommittee in October 2007. If, in the 2009 referendum, Puerto Ricans would choose to continue the existing status, a new referendum would be held every eight years. If the other option were to win, a separate referendum no later than 2011 would give Puerto Ricans the option of statehood or becoming a sovereign nation, independent from or in free association with the United States.

Regarding military developments, the report noted that three issues remained to be clarified following the official end on 1 May 2003 of the United States Navy's presence on the island of Vieques, located eight miles off the east coast of Puerto Rico: the future development and environmental clean-up of Vieques; definitive conclusions regarding the effects of military exercises on the health of residents; and the future of the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station on the island of Puerto Rico. The Navy later announced it had budgeted \$76 million for the clean-up of Vieques for the 2006-2009 period.

According to the report, the United States maintains that Puerto Rico has exercised its right to self-determination, attained a full measure of self-government, decided freely and democratically to enter into a free association with the United States and is, therefore, as stated explicitly in resolution 748 (III) of 1953, beyond the purview of United Nations consideration.

Approving a decision by consensus on 13 June 2005, the Special Committee reaffirmed the right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination and independence in conformity with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV). It reiterated that they constituted a Latin American and Caribbean nation with its own unequivocal national identity.

Before the Special Committee today was a draft resolution (document A/AC.109/2008/L.7) calling upon the Government of the United States to expedite a process that would allow the Puerto Rican people fully to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence. It would note in that regard the broad support of eminent persons, Governments and political forces in Latin America and the Caribbean for the independence of Puerto Rico. The Special Committee would express serious concern regarding actions carried out against Puerto Rican independence fighters, and encourage the investigation of those actions with "the necessary rigour". By other terms, the Special Committee would urge the Government of the United States to complete the return of occupied land and installations on Vieques Island and in Ceiba; respect the fundamental human rights to health and economic development; and expedite and cover the costs of decontaminating the areas previously used in military exercises. It would request the President of the United States to release all Puerto Rican political prisoners serving sentences for cases relating to the struggle for independence, as well as those serving sentences

for cases relating to the Vieques Island peace struggle.

Introduction of Draft Resolution

RODRIGO MALMIERCA DÍAZ (Cuba), introducing the text, of which his country and Venezuela are co-sponsors, said the number of petitioners demonstrated the great level of interest in the question of Puerto Rico, whose people continued to lack the possibility of exercising their right to self-determination. For 30 years, the Special Committee and the General Assembly had been adopting resolutions and decisions, but little progress had been made. Meanwhile, the United States, the colonial Power, tried by all means to consolidate its economic, political and social domination over the "brotherly Latin American and Caribbean country".

The Special Committee had already adopted 25 resolutions or decisions on the issue, reaffirming in each one the inalienable right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination and independence, he said. Puerto Rico would continue to be -- because of its culture, history, traditions and especially its people's unswerving will -- a Latin American and Caribbean nation, with its own national identity, which the Puerto Ricans had been able to keep alive despite the colonizing process.

He recalled that, in 2006, 118 member States of the Non-Aligned Movement had reiterated in Havana their strong support for the Puerto Rican people in their struggle for the right to self-determination and independence. The adoption of the text by consensus would be the most effective contribution that the Special Committee could make to that just cause.

Petitioners

Many petitioners urged the Special Committee to adopt the draft resolution before it, insisting that, despite assertions of autonomy, Puerto Rico was still one of the few remaining colonies in the world. Speakers described their people's fight for self-determination and independence, requesting the Special Committee to urge the General Assembly to reconsider the situation of Puerto Rico and call on the United States to begin a just and equitable process to allow the people of Puerto Rico to exercise their right to self-determination. The Special Committee was invited to visit Puerto Rico to investigate human rights violations as well as cases of racism, discrimination and exploitation.

Insisting that there was consensus today over the existence of a colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, a representative of the Puerto Rico Bar Association said it "requires a solution in tandem with this century". The Puerto Rican people could no longer tolerate that consideration of their self-determination be "parked in a corner of chimeras" by the General Assembly. Puerto Rico was a Caribbean and Latin American nation with its own distinct national identity.

ANIBAL ACEVEDO-VILA, Governor of Puerto Rico, said the Territory's self-determination process had not been concluded in 1953. The General Assembly, on the request of the United States, had concluded that the new constitutional status reached had attributes of sovereignty. The Government of the United States had not complied with its promises to the international community, and a recent White House report on the matter was full of inaccuracies and offensive

conclusions. It stated that Puerto Rico had only two options -- integration as a federal state, or independence. In a letter to Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, he had said that the United States had perpetuated a "monumental fraud", and called on the Department of State officially to notify the United Nations of its current position. Presidential candidate Barack Obama had expressed his disagreement with the White House report's conclusion in a letter.

Describing himself as neither pro-statehood nor pro-independence, he said he was an autonomist, a status supported by the majority of Puerto Ricans. The people must have the power to take the final decision on their future. As an elected official, the Governor asked the Special Committee to request the United States to explain inconsistencies between its position in the 1950s and its position today.

Stressing the responsibility of the United Nations to ensure Puerto Rico's right to self-determination, several petitioners called for sovereignty, expressing the hope that, one day, Puerto Rico would be represented at the United Nations as an independent State.

JOSÉ CARRIGA PICO, State Senator, however, defended the option of statehood, saying it enjoyed the widest support in Puerto Rico. As the Governor supported the status quo, any proposal made by him must be reviewed carefully. True self-determination would make Puerto Rico the fifty-first State of the United States.

LUIS VEGA RAMOS, a member of Puerto Rico's House of Representatives for the Popular Democratic Party, called for independence in free association with the United States, cautioning that the claim that the majority of Puerto Ricans favoured integration as a state had never been validated at the polls.

KENNETH D. MCCLINTOCK, President of the Puerto Rico Senate, disagreed with many other petitioners, saying it was not incumbent upon the Special Committee or the General Assembly to take action on the Territory's status. The Special Committee's scope was limited to promoting independence, which had been overwhelmingly and repeatedly rejected by the people of Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican population had consistently favoured options intended to maintain United States citizenship and a continuing relationship with that country. Last month's poll in a major daily newspaper, for example, had shown that 57 per cent would choose statehood, 34 per cent would continue with the current status and 5 per cent would vote for independence. In a plebiscite providing the choices of statehood and independence, 77 per cent had said they would choose statehood and 12 per cent that they would opt for independence.

Assembly resolution 1541 stated that two other methods of achieving self-government included unilaterally revocable free association and complete and permanent integration with an independent State on an equal footing, he continued. Not recognizing those options would severely compromise Puerto Rico's right to self-determination. The Territory's ultimate political status was essentially a domestic matter of the United States, which should be decided by its citizens residing in Puerto Rico and the United States Congress.

Among matters requiring attention, petitioners mentioned the imposition of the death penalty for

federal crimes, despite its prohibition by the Constitution of Puerto Rico; occupation and environmental contamination of Vieques; political prisoners serving disproportionate sentences in United States jails; rising federalization of Puerto Rican life; participation of Puerto Ricans in the United States armed forces; and the effect of surcharges on the shipping of goods on the population.

Everything from the cost of milk to the imposition of criminal punishment was determined by the administering Power, one speaker said. The whole colonial apparatus was responding to the interests of that country. The Special Committee should respect its mandate and urge the Government of the United States to end the persecution of Puerto Ricans who had fought for the independence of their country.

It was also pointed out that Puerto Rico was the only nation in its region remaining under colonial rule, and its independence was a priority for Latin America and the Caribbean. Some speakers underlined that it was unacceptable to refer to the people of Puerto Rico as United States citizens, as they made up a distinct nationality. Others called for an immediate and unconditional transfer of sovereign powers to the people of Puerto Rico.

"Colonialism is contrary to international law, because it robs peoples and nations of their identity, language, culture, land and natural resources," a representative of the National Lawyers Guild International Committee said, adding: "This crime continues in Puerto Rico today." The current United States administration, in its reports from the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status, had virtually acknowledged that Puerto Rico remained a juridical colony.

Regardless of what the United States had said in its 1953 report to the United Nations in order to have Puerto Rico removed from the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, it remained subject to the plenary authority of the United States Congress under the Territory Clause, under which power the Congress could even cede Puerto Rico to another nation.

Outlining the activities of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) in Puerto Rico, she said that, as the wave of repression gathered force, so did the strong sentiment that the Bureau must leave Puerto Rico. In a recent public relations campaign to try to alter its image, the FBI had sought to create an impression that its "benevolent" intervention would save Puerto Ricans from their own corrupt, violent society replete with "terrorists", but in reality, the Bureau's purpose was to continue its long trajectory of criminalizing the independence movement and assuring the continued colonial status of Puerto Rico.

Other speakers protested the use of grand juries as a means of intimidation and harassment of independence-struggle supporters, as were raids on union headquarters and independence movements. "As long as Puerto Rico is under the American colonial boot, Washington and Wall Street will be strengthened," the representative of the Socialist Workers Party said, drawing attention to the fact that the prosecution against the Governor on 19 charges relating to his 2000 election campaign was a selective process, aimed at harming his re-election prospects in 2008. Petitioners also pointed out that the colonial status weakened Puerto Rico, leaving it vulnerable to the dictates of industrial entities, which imposed their terms on people in need of jobs. One of

the aspects of that problem was that Puerto Ricans now consumed what they did not produce and produced what they did not consume. "For over 50 years, the United States has fooled us with promises and dazzled us with their wealth," one speaker said in that regard.

Several others referred to the United States monopoly on the transportation of goods to and from Puerto Rico and to the problem of rising prices as a result of Puerto Rico's economic dependence on the United States. One petitioner outlined the impact of United States policies on the Territory's sufficiency and that country's "clear attempts to destroy what remains of Puerto Rico's agriculture", which made the Territory more dependent on the United States.

A representative of the Vieques Support Campaign said that, just four days ago, the United States Navy had carried out open-air detonations on Vieques, releasing scores of toxins into the air. The Navy and the corporation contracted to carry out the clean-up continued to lie to the people, claiming, in particular, that thousands of bombs being detonated on Vieques could not be exploded in a controlled detonation chamber. The Navy was also seeking authorization to burn vegetation in order to find unexploded bombs, inflicting damage on the environment. Control over the situation was in the hands of the Navy and the clean-up company, with little community input.

Addressing the Special Committee during the morning session were: Celina Romany Siaca, Puerto Rico Bar Association; Hiram Lozada, American Association of Jurists; Ruben Berrios, Puerto Rican Independence Party; Jan Susler, National Lawyer's Guild International Committee; Emilio Soler, Puerto Rico Action Foundation; Róger Colero, Socialist Workers Party; Eduardo Villanueva Munoz, Puerto Rican Human Rights Committee; Pedro Colon Almenas, Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores; Onix Maldonado Lopez, Estudiantes de Estudios Pre-Juridicos; Carlos M. Hernandez Lopez, Frente Autonomista; Jose Castillo, Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico; Hector Ivan Santos, PROELA; Carmen Gonzalez, Coalicion Puertorriquena contra la Pena de Muerte; and Antonio Cafiero, COPPPAL.

Speaking in the afternoon were: Jorge L. Limeres, Comite Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico de Connecticut; Wilma Reveron-Collazo, COPRONU; Valentin Rosario, Colectivo Puertorriqueno Pro Independencia; Rogelio Girueroa Garcia, Puertorriquenos Por Puerto Rico; Hector Pesquera-Sevillano, Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano; Raquel Delgado, La Nueva Escuela; Fernando J. Martin, Socialist International; Rodrigo Borja, former President of Ecuador; Yamil Mislá, Young Professionals for Puerto Rican Democracy; Manuel Rivera, Puertorriquenos Unidos En Accion; Francisco Velgara, Vieques Support Campaign; Romenio Pereira, Partido dos Trabalhadores; Benjamin Ramos Rosado, ProLibertad Freedom Campaign; Normahiram Perez, FMPPR Support Committee; Elliot Monteverde Torres, Hostos Grand Jury Resistance Campaign; José F. Aponte Hernández, Speaker of the Puerto Rican House of Representatives; Nilda Luz Rexach, National Advancement for Puerto Rican Culture; José Adames, Cultural Center Anancaona; and Santiago Feliz, Ministerio Latino.

General Statements

MARIA FERNANDA ESPINOSA (Ecuador), aligning herself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said the case of Puerto Rico was important because of its special circumstances.

While the decolonization Declaration applied fully to the Territory, its case should be taken to the General Assembly for resolution as Puerto Rico was a Latin American and Caribbean nation with its own identity.

HUGO SILES ALVARADO (Bolivia), also aligning himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said the situation of the people of Puerto Rico was "totally incomprehensible". How was it possible that, in the twenty-first century, policies of colonial expansion were still being conducted, and a country that claimed to advance democracy throughout the world was still imposing such a situation on the brotherly people of Puerto Rico? There was no greater anachronism than "commonwealth status", a trick used to manipulate a colonialist policy against the people of Puerto Rico. Bolivia urged members of the Special Committee and all Member States to support the wishes expressed by the Puerto Rican people and, in that regard, supported the establishment of a sovereign constitutional assembly by which they could determine their own future.

JAIME HERMIDA CASTILLO (Nicaragua) said Puerto Rico was a Latin American and Caribbean nation that had shown perseverance in its struggle for self-determination and independence. The Special Committee had approved some 25 draft resolutions and decisions stating that Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) applied to the Territory and it was to be hoped that the General Assembly would examine the question of Puerto Rico, in all its ramifications, in the very near future. It had been difficult for Puerto Rico to retain its identity over the years and to ensure that the struggle for the right to independence could remain at the forefront. Puerto Rico had much to contribute to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. As the Second Decade for the Elimination for Colonization approached its end, the full sovereignty of the Puerto Rican people must be recognized. It could no longer be deferred.

RICARDO ALBERTO ARIAS (Panama) said Puerto Rico's inalienable right to self-determination required a revision of its existing status in order to guarantee full implementation of the decolonization Declaration. The draft resolution before the Special Committee reiterated that the Puerto Rican people belonged to the family of Latin American and Caribbean States, with their own national identity, and were entitled to self-determination and independence. The Territory's full incorporation into the family of Latin American and Caribbean States was an outstanding part of the regional integration movement. The cold war was over and the new situation must be assessed realistically.

As suggested by the report of the United States working group on Puerto Rico's status, the Territory was still subject to a colonial system, he continued, stressing that it was time to end that anomaly. Panama was an example of how such issues could be resolved in a friendly manner. Puerto Rico should be included on the agenda of the General Assembly, for a comprehensive examination. All sectors of Puerto Rican opinion should be considered, as it was for the people as a whole to decide their future.

AURA MAHUAMPI RODRIGUEZ DE ORTIZ (Venezuela), supporting the Non-Aligned Movement, said that, as a co-sponsor of the draft resolution before the Special Committee, her delegation supported fully the inalienable right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination

and independence, as well as the participation of petitioners in the Special Committee's work today. Venezuela's traditional position on Puerto Rico was that, despite the efforts of the Special Committee, a colonial situation remained in the Territory, contrary to the spirit of the age. The United States should give up its dominion over the Puerto Rican people so they could exercise their right to self-determination and decide their own future, in accordance with resolution 1514 and other decisions. Regional and international support for the decolonization of Puerto Rico had been demonstrated, in particular, by the Fourteenth Conference of Heads of States of Government of the Non-Aligned Movement in Havana in September 2006, and the Latin American and Caribbean Congress on the independence of Puerto Rico in Panama in 2006. The text before the Special Committee was the twenty-sixth on the matter and Venezuela hoped it would be adopted by consensus.

CRISPIN S. GREGOIRE (Dominica), speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said decolonization and the legitimate right to self-determination continued to be a top priority for the Movement, which renewed its call on Member States to speed up their work towards the complete elimination of colonialism. The colonial question of Puerto Rico had been under the Special Committee's consideration for more than 35 years, with a total of 25 resolutions or decisions adopted on that subject, the last eight by consensus. The Movement strongly supported those resolutions and called for their expeditious implementation. It reaffirmed the right of Puerto Rico to self-determination and independence under resolution 1514 (XV), and called on the Government of the United States to assume its responsibility to expedite a process that would allow the Puerto Rican people to exercise fully their inalienable right to self-determination and independence. The Movement also urged the United States to return the occupied land and installations on Vieques Island and the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station to the Puerto Rican people.

MANAR TALEB (Syria) said the people of Puerto Rico had struggled for years for their right to self-determination as provided for in resolution 1514. The Special Committee had been considering Puerto Rico for more than 30 years, adopting resolutions and decisions that reaffirmed the inalienable right of Puerto Ricans to self-determination and independence. Syria had supported the Declaration of the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Havana in 2006, which demanded the implementation of all relevant resolutions. Hopefully, consensus on the current resolution would reaffirm the principles on which the United Nations was established, the most important being self-determination.

AMIR HOSSEIN HOSSEINI (Iran), aligning himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, supported the right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination.

CAMILLO GONSALVES (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), aligning himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said his country's post-colonial life had begun only a few decades ago and it therefore had an abhorrence of a rule imposed on a people without their consent. The unique people of Puerto Rico must not be denied the right to self-determination, as described in paragraph 12 of resolution 1514 (XV). Whether Puerto Ricans favoured independence, statehood or the continuation of the status quo, the Special Committee should only consider their right to self-determination. While statements blaming the United States for the situation might or might

not be accurate, what was beyond debate was that country's responsibility to follow through on its decision to end the bombardments of Vieques Island with a clean-up. The United States also had a responsibility to expedite the process by which the Puerto Rican people could exercise their right to self-determination with full respect to their rights.

Action

The Special Committee, acting without a vote, then adopted the draft resolution contained in document A/AC.109/2008/L.7.

Mr. MALMIERCA DIAZ (Cuba) said the Special Committee's action was highly relevant as 2008 would mark 110 years since the United States had intervened in Puerto Rico. The adoption of the text also had special meaning for Cuba because of its historic commitment to the self-determination and independence of the fraternal people of Puerto Rico. Both countries had been subject to the Spanish colonial yoke, and both had suffered the same United States military intervention of 1898.

He said his country had counted on brave Puerto Rican soldiers, adding: "The Cuban people will never forget that more than 2,000 Puerto Ricans shed their blood on the Cuban battlefields during our independence wars. [...] The Cuban and Puerto Rican peoples are forever united by centuries of history; the present generations of Cubans and Puerto Ricans continue to build this history, which is rooted in the deepest of our identities." Despite the long colonial domination, the Puerto Rican people had managed to keep their culture, identity and national sentiments. "The adoption of this resolution today is a tribute to the patriotic spirit of the Puerto Rican people and the tradition of struggle led by their heroes, who are also the heroes of Cuba and all the Americas."