

STATEMENT by the HONORABLE RICHARD DANZIG  
SECRETARY OF THE NAVY  
CONCERNING THE REPORT OF  
THE SPECIAL PANEL FOR MILITARY OPERATIONS IN VIEQUES

If the United States is to maintain military forces, it owes its Sailors, Marines, Soldiers and Airmen the best possible training. Only by providing this preparation can we fairly ask our service members to put their lives at risk. And only by virtue of this training can the United States rely on our Armed Forces to protect America's citizens, territory, and interests.

As explained in the previously prepared Pace-Fallon report, the Vieques Training Range, centered on property purchased more than fifty years ago, is the best – and for several important activities the only suitable – training site for Naval forces deploying from the East Coast of the United States. After reviewing all the evidence, the Rush Panel reached the same conclusion.

There is no doubt that training on Vieques is, and has been, safe for the civilian population of Vieques. The very regrettable death of a Navy employee on the range six months ago does not demonstrate otherwise. This is the only civilian death on the range in more than 55 years of training. None has ever occurred off the range. Further, despite unsupported allegations by some, no study advances evidence that Navy activities pose a risk to human health on Vieques. The White Paper attached to this statement documents this point. The Rush Panel's report recommends additional safety measures that will further strengthen the safety of the range. It recommends that the Navy participate in further studies of health effects. The Navy takes these steps.

The Rush Panel's report emphasizes the deterioration of the relationship between the Navy and the residents of Vieques; the Navy's failure to achieve the economic growth on Vieques that it committed to help to achieve under a 1983 Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU); and the Navy's "insensitivity" to complaints and concerns from the residents of Vieques.

Many things can be said in defense of the Navy's performance. As the attached White Paper shows, our achievement is much greater than has been acknowledged. Our efforts have been greater still. Factors beyond our control (including the isolation of the island, the devastation of Hurricane Hugo and limited assistance from others whose help is needed) have hampered our efforts.

None of this, however, is tendered as an excuse. The Rush Panel's report must be taken as a good faith, third party evaluation. Even as we consider its conclusions, the Navy will begin developing new ways to move forward constructively and substantively with the residents of Vieques.

As a first step, we must determine whether the Nation deems it vital for the Navy and Marine Corps to continue training on Vieques. The Rush Panel says that, for the next five years, it is vital. I urge the Senate Armed Services Committee and the entire Congress to endorse this conclusion. I urge the people of Puerto Rico, some six thousand of whose residents serve in the Navy and Marine Corps, to accept this judgment.

The Rush Panel further says that, if the Navy is to operate during these years, it must itself embrace two priorities. The first is to improve the relationship with, and the well being of, the residents of Vieques. The second is vigorously, thoroughly and effectively to develop alternatives to remaining on the range.

I accept these challenges and will assure that the Department of the Navy puts concrete plans in place to accomplish them.

To begin to meet them, I have asked the Center for Naval Analyses to report to me what longer term alternatives to Vieques could be developed within the five year window established by the Rush Panel. To assure the prompt visibility of their approach to this problem, I am requesting a Phase One report to be received within six months.

I also propose to meet with Governor Rossello, Resident Commissioner Romero-Barcelo, and Mayor Santiago, the Mayor of Vieques, to establish a plan which addresses job creation, land return, and infrastructure development and that is backed up by earmarked funds during each of the next five years. Further, I will assure that in all environmental and health related matters the Navy will treat Puerto Rico generally, and Vieques particularly, as equal partners in every way.

I have also authorized the assignment of a two-star Flag Officer to Puerto Rico. This Admiral's charter will specifically be directed to improving the Navy's relationship with Puerto Rico and Vieques in particular.

I have believed from the beginning of the current situation that both the legitimate national security needs of the United States and the needs of the residents of Vieques can be accommodated. The Navy is committed over the coming years to demonstrating this simple proposition in a way that is acceptable to all involved parties.