

## Puerto Rico

How many things we all have in common? How many similarities? Everywhere I go, I hear the same talk about "How many people have come over with cancer?" Many do we know just how to handle the situations. Our soils are so contaminated that we have in our countries a lot of people suffering from one single guilty name, The U.S. Armed Forces.

Having agencies that are supposed to watch for our health, they just look the other way as if we were going to forget how they have damaged our health, our environment, our whole lives.

Vieques is an island where there is no industry to contaminate our air or our soil, our waters. The only foreign thing we have in our surroundings is the contamination left after more than sixty years of military practices in our land.

One of the most important things for all of us is the gathering of proof. Start a campaign like we did to have evidence of all the people who have cancer and other illnesses that can be related to the contamination. Push the Health Dept. so they start an actual register of cancer patients. Work towards a sample testing, house by house, even if you have to accompany the technicians. We did this in Vieques and took a sample of 500 people. We had private labs do tests also. WE had scientists come to Vieques, during the year that we stopped the military practices, they came in different dates like every three months to take samples. We had other come and take samples of soil, water, fish, vegetable that were grown in Vieques. There is a break by Dr. Arturo Marsal, from the University of Mayagües in PR about his studies of the food chain. We had small plants planted in many parts of Vieques, we were to watch them grow, the technicians would come from time to time to collect leaves and test them, then when they harvested they came to collect the beans to see how much contamination they had. This has

been done during many years. I also have began a campaign to have the relatives of patients that already died to let me be their voice, to bring me their evidence, when their relatives were diagnosed, when they died and even a photo, all of this so we can add to a law suit that we are having, individual law suits in which we have more than 8,000 people signing, some in their names, some in the mane of those who already died.

It is very important for you to know that we have never rested, we are always doing something for our people. In a way we are doing all this also for ourselves, because who knows, when we will be diagnosed with cancer also. We have been breathing all sorts of chemicals, those left from the military practices that were been done in Vieques for more than 60 years.

None of the agencies in charge of guarding our health have been fair with us or with you. They have been saying that there is no relation between the health issues of Vieques and the existing contamination. We have almost 30% more risk of getting cancer that the rest of the people of P.R.

The federal agencies who have been doing studies on Vieques, have been doing the same in the U.S., one example is where they reported that there was no relation between the cancer cases around a base called Camp Legune, in North Carolina and their base activities. This base had a laundry which was disposing it's used waters in the same place where the drinking water of the neighborhood and even the base was. Since there were so many cases an investigation was done and it was proved that there was a relation between the activities of the base's laundry and the break of cancer in the neighborhood. Now they are trying to find every soldier and their family members who lived in the base during this time and also the people from the

surrounding area. Another example of the great job this agency does is what they did during a hurricane emergency in New Orleans. Some trailers were brought to help housing some of the people of the affected area. The agency reported these trailers were safe for the people to be sheltered in them, but later it was found that the trailers had asbestos, a highly cancerous material. These findings made possible for our case to be brought to the attention to the new head of the agency of the Toxic Substances And Disease Registry (ATSDR) from Atlanta, Dr. Howard Frunkin who came to Vieques and met with us, the community leaders and some of our scientists to hear our claims. After listening to us, he agreed that new studies will be done, with the cooperation with our scientists from whom we already have many studies. We hope that now, there will be no way of denying the harm that the contamination has been doing to our people. Our hope is that now the US will not be able to look the other way.

Another struggle we have fighting is the cleaning of our land. After more than 60 years of war games, testing every ammunitions, every armorments, using every weapon that you can imagine, pretended just to clean on the surface, and also they want to do open burning of the grass that has grown out of the contaminated soil. This will put us in a worse situation than before, our population lived in the center of the island. One side of the island (east side) was the bombs range for the military, on the west they kept bunkers, or magazines where they keep their ammunitions. There are more than 400 of them. They have been piling up the bombs they find on the surface and exploding them. When they had their practices it was bad for our health, now piling every bomb they find and exploding them together is more dangerous for our health and our environment. The wind always blows from east to west in Vieques, so when they blow all these bombs together they are making all these contaminations cover our island

and also part of the main island. There have been videos taken from these explosions and they show how this cloud of "dust or smoke" covers all the east of Puerto Rico not just Vieques. There is also a lot of cancer cases in this part of this island. We had a public hearing in which more than 30 persons took part. Everyone was against the open burning they want to do and also everyone demanded from the US to get closed chambers to dispose of the bombs but what they say is that they do not have big chambers but we know it is because it is more expensive to do it this way.