

Op-Ed: The people of Vieques, Puerto Rico deserve justice from the U.S. Government

The following op-ed appeared in The Hill and The Huffington Post on May 17, 2010.

By Rep. Steve Rothman (D-NJ)

The injustice toward the people of Vieques, Puerto Rico must end. Vieques is a small island off the south east coast of Puerto Rico that was used as a bombing range by the U.S. Navy from World War II until 2003. The munitions used in and around Vieques contained toxins that have affected the health of the residents. Yet in 2003, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) issued a report that said that the levels posed no health risk. The conclusions in this report strain credibility, are inconsistent, and demand a thorough reexamination.

The people of Vieques deserve answers for the undisputed high rates of disease that they have encountered over the years. Residents of Vieques have a 25% higher infant mortality rate, 30% higher rate of cancer, a 95% higher rate of cirrhosis of the liver, a 381% higher rate of hypertension, and a 41% higher rate of diabetes than those on the main island of Puerto Rico.

I have brought this issue to the attention of the highest levels of our government and all of the appropriate federal agencies. ATSDR was finally convinced to re-open this case and made this known in response to my demands during a hearing of the House Science and Technology Committee, of which I am a member, on March 12, 2009. They have now begun an independent reexamination of their 2003 conclusions and have stated that they will issue their initial findings by the end of the summer or early fall 2010.

In addition, I have been assured that this issue will be included in the White House Task Force's examinations and recommendations to President Barack Obama regarding Puerto Rico. I look forward to reading a new and improved report from ATSDR that will finally reveal the truth and open the door for justice to be realized by the people of Vieques. Finally, I intend to question ATSDR's Director Henry Falk later this week when he appears before our House Science and Technology Committee.

We must bring the issues surrounding the health of Vieques to light. I am confident we will finally be able to bring justice to Vieques. The time for the U.S. government to right this wrong is long overdue.

Link: <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/civil-rights/98121-the-people-of-vieques-puerto-rico-deserve-justice-from-the-us-government-rep-steve-rothman>