

Maria Martin: This is "Latino USA," the radio journal of news and culture. I'm Maria Martin. This time on "Latino USA," the Clinton administration says military training will continue on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, and tensions rise in the wake of that announcement.

Juan Manuel Gar...: The people of Vieques are telling the president of the United States, "No, go somewhere else."

Maria Martin: Also, 10 years after the U.S. invasion of Panama, a visit to the center of that deadly confrontation and to one of Panama's poorest neighborhoods, El Chorrillo.

Elena Thompson: Standing here, you naturally see the fire come out of the plane, whoosh, badam badam! All we could do was pray and hope that we didn't die.

Maria Martin: This and more on this edition of "Latino USA."

David Alvarez: For this week, this is news from "Latino USA." I'm David Alvarez. President Clinton has left open the possibility that the six-year-old Cuban refugee rescued at sea will be returned to Havana. From Miami, Derek Reveron reports.

Derek Reveron: The president said that he sympathizes with the father of little Elián González, who is demanding that his son be returned to Cuba. And Mr. Clinton said that federal officials should act in the boy's best interests, but he also said that federal regulations recognize the rights of parents outside the U.S. in immigration proceedings. The Immigration and Naturalization Service plans to interview the father to prove his paternity. In Miami, Cuban exiles accused Mr. Clinton of caving into Castro, who is demanding the boy's return. If the INS decides to send him back, his relatives will go to federal court to seek a restraining order. For "Latino USA," this is Derek Reveron in Miami.

David Alvarez: In Cuba, Fidel Castro has turned the case of six-year-old Elián González into a nationalist crusade. There have been daily rallies outside the U.S. interest section in Havana to demand his return. Tom Gibb reports.

Tom Gibb: Fidel Castro seized on the case as a way of showing up the contradictions of U.S. immigration policy towards Cuba. He's been holding out for Elián to be sent home unconditionally to set a precedent. Elián's father initially said he'd go to Miami if necessary to reclaim his son, but instead, the state is handling the whole case. While most Cubans say the boy should be returned, they also believe both sides are playing politics. Fidel Castro has, however, succeeded in applying pressure on Washington to start to comply with migration agreements signed between the two countries in 1994. These say any Cuban picked up at sea should be sent back. For "Latino USA," I'm Tom Gibb, in Havana.

David Alvarez: In Puerto Rico, a federal jury has acquitted five Cuban exiles of charges they conspired to assassinate Fidel Castro in 1997. It was the first U.S. trial in which

anyone had been charged with trying to kill the Cuban leader. Daniel Garza reports from San Juan.

- Daniel Garza: The jury's verdict came on the second day of deliberations, dealing a blow to U.S. prosecutors who claimed the defendants had conspired to kill Castro during a 1997 summit in Venezuela. Three of the accused were on a yacht stopped by the U.S. Coast Guard off Puerto Rico two years ago. Sniper rifles, ammunition, and night-vision goggles were found on the vessel. Among those cleared of conspiracy charges was a board member of the influential Miami-based Cuban-American National Foundation. Defense lawyers insisted the men wanted to help members of Castro's entourage defect from the summit on Venezuela's Margarita Island. They argued the weapons were needed to defend themselves against Cuban security forces. If convicted, the men could have faced up until life in prison. For "Latino USA," I'm Daniel Garza, in San Juan, Puerto Rico.
- David Alvarez: This is news from "Latino USA." Near the Mexican border city of Juárez, the FBI and Mexican federal police continue to excavate on four ranches, whereas many as 100 victims of the drug war may be buried. The search has helped focus attention on border disappearances, which have increased in recent years. From El Paso, Brenda de Anda has more.
- Brenda de Anda: Almost 200 people have vanished from the El Paso-Juárez area in the last six years, according to an association of relatives and friends of missing persons. Jaime Hervella has the El Paso-based group. He says they will not be satisfied until their loved ones are found.
- Jaime Hervella: In our heart, we hope, we pray they be not found in these graves that are being dug at the present time, but our minds tell us that we better prepare those things that can identify human remains.
- Brenda de Anda: Families of the disappeared are giving photographs and medical records to the FBI. The agency says they don't know when the excavations might end. For "Latino USA," this is Brenda de Anda in El Paso.
- David Alvarez: The Mexican government has put a hold on a refundable but unpopular tourist fee that went into effect early this month. From Texas Public Radio, Eric Roy reports.
- Eric Roy: While the 400 to \$800 vehicle deposit also kept non-Latinos away from Mexico, it was a personal matter for Mexican-Americans and Mexican citizens in the U.S. Many decided against the traditional Christmas pilgrimage or started boycotting beer and food from Mexico. Trinity University, San Antonio Professor Jorge Gonzalez researches the economic impact of immigration and the Monterrey natives sent angry emails to the Mexican Treasury.

Jorge Gonzalez: Mexicans and Mexican-Americans contribute a lot to the Mexican economy. However, they have never flexed the muscle. I believe this is the first time that they really push, and I'm very glad.

Eric Roy: Officially, the car deposit is only on hold, but Gonzalez doubts it'll be back. Mexico-bound tourist traffic had dried up along the Texas border but recovered immediately. For "Latino USA," I'm Eric Roy in San Antonio.

David Alvarez: In Austin, Texas, I'm David Alvarez. You're listening to "Latino USA."

Maria Martin: For nearly 60 years, about two-thirds of the small Puerto Rican Island of Vieques has been used by the U.S. Navy for combat training with live bombs. That was until last April when a security guard on the base, David Sanes Rodríguez was killed when a bomb accidentally fell on his checking post. That tragedy sparked protests and tensions between the U.S. government and Puerto Ricans who have united to demand a halt to all military training on their island.

Speaker 12: Enough is enough, and nobody will believe the Navy for anything except leaving Vieques and stop the shooting. And I don't think anybody is willing to budge an inch neither in Vieques nor in Puerto Rico anymore. This is like the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States.

Maria Martin: But on December 3rd in a long-awaited decision, officials of the Pentagon and the U.S. Navy announced they would continue limited training operations on the island of Vieques.

Admiral Jay Joh...: We do not want to leave Vieques. It is important to us.

Maria Martin: Admiral Jay Johnson is chief of naval operations.

Admiral Jay Joh...: I don't think any of us disagree that Vieques is an irreplaceable asset. In my words, it's the crown jewel of live-fire combined-arms training. It's the world's standard.

Maria Martin: In its announcement, the Navy made some concessions to the people of Vieques. The use of live munitions is being discontinued unless and until the people of Vieques agree to its resumption. And in five years the Navy may completely halt their exercises. The Navy also offered \$40 million for economic development on the island.

Kenneth Bacon: The Navy, the Marines and the Defense Department have put forth a package, that's I think a good package that balances readiness with the concerns of the people of Vieques and Puerto Rico.

Maria Martin: Kenneth Bacon is the press secretary for the Department of Defense.

Kenneth Bacon: We do have to pay the price for maintaining a ready military, and this is an important contribution for Americans in various areas of the United States to make. And I think that the Puerto Ricans have to look at that just as the Navy and the Marines have looked at it.

Maria Martin: But for many Puerto Ricans, the Navy's presence on Vieques has come at too high a cost. They blame a high rate of unemployment, the lack of economic development and environmental damage on Vieques on the Navy's presence. Even the mayor of Vieques, Manuela Santiago who describes herself as a pro-military Republican, soundly rejected the Navy's offer.

Manuela Santiag...: I want to tell the Navy that we are not selling Vieques. Vieques is for the Viequense and we are not selling Vieques. There is no price. I was offered about \$80 million when I went to Washington about eight months ago and they lowered it to 40. But no matter if it's 80 million or 40 million, we are not selling Vieques.

Maria Martin: That sentiment was echoed by Vieques community activist and journalist Myrna Connolly of the Vieques Times.

Myrna Connolly: The \$40 million is on a scale depending on how much training and live fire you allow, we will let loose the money. Can you understand? Que el pueblo está indignado con esto. It's such a blackmail or it's such a corrupt way of trying to deal with the people.

Carlos Romero B...: We think that the President's statement is unacceptable. First of all, it has no finality.

Maria Martin: Carlos Romero Barceló is the resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth's lone voice in Congress. A member of the pro-statehood party, Romero Barceló not only questions the intent but also the wording of the administration's announcement regarding the future of Vieques.

Carlos Romero B...: It includes a statement regarding the fact that the--One says up till five years, but unless the people of Vieques say otherwise further--using the live ordinance, unless the people of Vieques say otherwise. All it does is opening the doors, and it's probably under the Navy's insistence. They still have not accepted that they must go. Instead of looking for and establishing a definite alternative, they're still trying to.--They keep hanging on to Vieques.

Maria Martin: And the way the announcement was worded, says Myrna Connolly, shows the military doesn't completely understand the political reality in Vieques and in Puerto Rico.

Myrna Connolly: Who in Vieques are they're going to negotiate with? There is not like a Senate and a House of Representatives here on the island of Vieques. We're not independent. Who are they going to negotiate with when they say the people of

Vieques? Everything is up in the air. Do you understand? There's nothing definite about that except that they will re-initiate bombings in the spring.

Admiral Jay Joh...: We are committed to rolling up our sleeves and working with the good people of Vieques to ensure that we can continue to use that range. That is the most important part of this.

Maria Martin: Admiral Jay Johnson of the U.S. Navy.

Admiral Jay Joh...: Vieques is important to the United States Navy and the United States Marine Corps. We don't want to lose it, and we're willing to work to keep it.

Maria Martin: But in Vieques, Mayor Santiago says it's probably too late for the Pentagon to be a good neighbor. She says neither she nor the people of Vieques would tolerate any more bombings, even if this time the ammunition isn't live.

Manuela Santiag...: Sixty years of bombing was live bombing, live ordinances. It's too much for us. And I think that other people in the United States should have the same responsibility that we are having with the national security. We love the Navy, but we love also our people that are suffering because we do not have any jobs because we do not have any future for our future generations. And I have to tell you that the level of cancer in Vieques is 26.9% higher than in Puerto Rico. And we have to think that something in our environment is affecting our people.

Maria Martin: Vieques Mayor Manuela Santiago.

And joining us now from the studios of radio station Noti Uno in San Juan, Puerto Rico is political analyst Juan Manuel García Passalacqua. Bienvenido, Juan Manuel.

Juan Manuel Gar...: It's a pleasure as always to be with you.

Maria Martin: Juan Manuel, regarding the decision that was announced on December 3rd, that in five years, the Navy will completely halt their combat training exercises and that the use of live munitions is being discontinued, why is there such a strong reaction against this?

Juan Manuel Gar...: Well, the decision is totally unacceptable to all sectors in Puerto Rico, the government, the political parties, the churches, and the civil society, including of course the Vieques fishermen themselves. So the problem with the decision is that it's worthless.

Maria Martin: This seems to be the first issue on which so many segments of the Puerto Rican society have been in agreement and united in a very long time. It doesn't matter if you are for independence or if you support statehood from, as you said, Governor Rosselló to the Vieques fishermen. Why is there such a consensus on this issue?

Juan Manuel Gar...: It is, Maria, the result of 10 years of congressional debate and indecision on what to offer the Puerto Rican people. The Congress of the United States has been deliberating for 10 years and has failed twice in the U.S. Senate in offering anything but colonialism to Puerto Rico. And that failure, of course, has created such a resentment in all sectors of Puerto Rican society that it exploded with the Vieques issue. Vieques is merely a symptom of an emerging Puerto Rican nationalism against American indecision on the future of Puerto Rico.

Maria Martin: What about what the military says, that Vieques is important, that the kind of training that can happen on Vieques can only happen on Vieques and that it's important for the military readiness of this country?

Juan Manuel Gar...: Well, the military may be absolutely right as far as American national security is concerned. That doesn't have anything to do with the people of Vieques. The people of Vieques are telling the president of the United States, "No, go somewhere else." And as a matter of fact, they are bombing Scotland these days and Sardinia, so they can do it somewhere else. It's just a ploy from the Navy to keep Puerto Rico as a colony of the United States.

Maria Martin: But one could say that the administration made extra efforts to try to alleviate tensions with the Puerto Rican people and to recognize that fences need to be mended. For instance, the Eisenhower battle group is not training in December, as it was scheduled, and \$40 million is being offered for economic development in Vieques.

Juan Manuel Gar...: The Eisenhower group is not training in Vieques because they were 60 people in six different camps on the beaches and they would have had to blown them to pieces. And 3,000 people in lists officially signed waiting to take their place in the beaches if they were arrested. That's why the Eisenhower group is not training in Puerto Rico.

Maria Martin: So you're saying that the administration actually was buying time to prevent an even more explosive situation in Vieques?

Juan Manuel Gar...: I have no doubt whatsoever. After numerous contacts with the White House during all these months as a political analyst in Puerto Rico, that the White House was convinced we were heading towards America's Tiananmen and that they did not want to do that to please the Pentagon.

Maria Martin: So if Vieques is just a symbol of resistance to the United States refusing to deal with Puerto Rico's colonial status, what do you see happening on other fronts in relation to the US-Puerto Rico connection?

Juan Manuel Gar...: Well, Vieques being a symptom of frustration and a symbol of resistance, the whole Vieques issue will become and is becoming now a confrontation, a direct confrontation between the United States of America and Puerto Rico. And that confrontation that is happening right now in front of those gates, and

unfortunately it's not being covered by anybody in the United States and it's now in its second day, signifies a message, that the Congress of the United States must get off its butt and face the issue of what to do with Puerto Rico. That's what this message is all about.

Maria Martin: Well, thank you very much. Juan Manuel García Passalacqua is a political analyst based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican communities on the mainland are also unhappy regarding the administration's decision to continue military training on the island of Vieques. This report from Mario Murillo in New York.

Protesters: U.S. Navy, out of Vieques. U.S. Navy, out of Vieques.

Mario Murillo: About 200 members of various Puerto Rican community organizations and Vieques support groups in New York gathered outside the federal building in Lower Manhattan on December 7th to decry the President's Vieques plan. Using the anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor as their rallying point, organizers described the Naval bombardments of Vieques as 60 years of infamy for the Puerto Rican people.

Protesters: U.S. Navy, out of Vieques.

Mario Murillo: New York City council member José Rivera is one of many Puerto Rican elected officials participating in the latest series of protests against the Navy.

José Rivera: Today is a day that we remember those who lost their life as a result of the second war, December 7th 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbor. And sadly to say, 58 years have gone by, there's another place that has been a victim of bombing, and that's a tiny island by the name of Vieques in Puerto Rico whose for over 58 years have been used as a Navy target practice.

Mario Murillo: This and other protests around the country were called in direct response to the President's plan announced on December 3rd. Under the plan, Navy and Marine personnel will train this month at locations along the East Coast and in Scotland instead of Vieques. However, Navy officials say they hope to return to the island next spring. Cruz Fontanez Garcia is vice president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party's New York office. He says they'll continue protesting despite what he calls a partial victory.

Cruz Fontanez G...: Our position is that we're going to keep our civil disobedience and also try to reinforce it because this is a victory for the people of Vieques and also Puerto Rico. Because it was the civil disobedience that halted the battleship Eisenhower from training in Vieques this past December. We are going to stay there until they leave or until they arrest us.

Mario Murillo: Activists in New York are supporting the civil disobedience protesters on Vieques with similar actions throughout the city. Ben Ramos of the New York

Vieques support campaign credits this for why the Navy at least temporarily changed its course on the island.

- Ben Ramos: I would like to think that it's a partial victory simply because it's the first time in history that a Navy battleship has had to turn away and that the people were there was stronger than 20,000 tons of steel and metal. It is a victory, but it's not the final victory.
- Mario Murillo: The Navy is committed to returning to Vieques in March, as they put it, once the timing is right, perhaps meaning once the protests die down. But with the civil disobedience encampment being fortified on Vieques with new protesters and New York activists planning to take the issue to the United Nations later this month, it doesn't seem like that will happen anytime soon. For "Latino USA," I'm Mario Murillo, in New York.
- Maria Martin: In Panama, as in the world over, the end of 1999 will be a time for celebration. But Panamanians will have many more reasons to celebrate, from year 2000 festivities to the excitement over the Panama Canal being turned over to Panamanian control. But on December 20th, these festivities will come to a halt as Panamanians remember the events of 10 years ago, the unexpected U.S. military invasion known as Operation Just Cause and its victims. From the El Chorrillo neighborhood of Panama City, Rolando Arrieta reports.
- Rolando Arrieta: Midnight December 20th, 1989, a U.S. military alert message flashed repeatedly across the television screens nationwide. It warned people to stay in their homes. Twenty-six thousand U.S. troops sent by President Bush landed on the isthmus, the mission, to capture Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega, to disable the Panamanian defense force and to restore democracy in Panama.
- U.S. Troop: Alexander three, Defender six, Roger. The PDF building is now on fire at this time, over.
- Rolando Arrieta: The PDF, Panamanian and Defense Force headquarters was located in the heart of El Chorrillo, one of Panama's poorest neighborhoods. Elena Thompson and her next-door neighbor Selena live in El Chorrillo. They remember waking up to the sudden sound of explosions and the echo of bullets ricocheting as their apartment building trembled in the middle of the night. They lived one block from where Noriega supposedly was hiding.
- Elena Thompson: I said, "Selena, we have to get out here because they're going to kill us inside here." I'm standing here. You naturally see the fire come out of the plane, whoosh badam, badam. All we could do was pray and hope that we didn't die. And every time you hear badam, the building shake. And then after a while, we tried to get out of here, and then we couldn't move. A tank was down that side, ready to blow away the building. The people inside here had to start bawling and say, "Please, please, people in here. Don't blow down the building."

Rolando Arrieta: The actual war in El Chorrillo between U.S. soldiers and members of the Panamanian Defense Force lasted no more than six hours. General Carl Stiner was one of the key military officers in charge of the mission.

General Carl St...: We took unusual measures in limiting the amount of force that we would apply in order to accomplish this mission, in order to minimize, absolutely minimize casualties and collateral damage.

Rolando Arrieta: There were extensive damages in El Chorrillo. Rows of houses near the PDF headquarters were caught in the crossfire. According to the Pentagon, 23 American soldiers and over 350 Panamanians died. Other official sources in Panama counted four times as many Panamanian fatalities. At the time, the U.S. attack on Noriega was the largest military operation since Vietnam. Anel Béliz was the press secretary for the political party opposing General Noriega. He was one of the many Panamanians who supported the U.S. intervention to oust the dictator but did not expect it to come in form of an invasion.

Anel Béliz: I believe that the U.S. had many options to kidnap Noriega, threaten him. And I don't know why there was an invasion; that was to us a surprise because Noriega wasn't that strong. For us, with the weapon he had, he was strong. For the U.S., he was not as strong.

Rolando Arrieta: On an issue like this, even the opposite end of the political spectrum find common ground. Mario Rognoni, Director of the PRD, the political party that supported Noriega also feels that the invasion was unjust.

Mario Rognoni: Operation Just Cause has to be the biggest failure that the American Armed Forces have had in their history because the objective of Just Cause was to seize Noriega. And I can't believe that they were so clumsy as not to be able to grab him, even before the first bomb was launched.

Rolando Arrieta: Noriega was finally found and arrested 10 days later. General Stiner admits the long delay was not in the original plan.

General Carl St...: Our intelligence was not that good to be able to track him to where we could grab him within the first two or three hours. But I think the mission was a great success. It was a just cause. Our in-state objective was to give the people back their freedom and install the government that they had elected back in May of '89.

Rolando Arrieta: Residents of El Chorrillo like Elena Thompson have a different point of view.

Elena Thompson: I can't say the just cause because I didn't ask nobody to come and bomb me up. I could have died. And then if I would have died, they would say, I died for a just cause. No way.

Rolando Arrieta: In Panama, there is now a democratic government and the economy is booming. But residents of El Chorrillo say they are left out of this new Panama. They feel that they are the forgotten victims of the invasion. The restored housing has disappointed many residents. The cramped cinder block apartments are windowless, making them unbearably hot under the sweltering tropical climate, and poor plumbing has caused health problems for the community. Elena Thompson lives in a building that survived the attack, but she worries that it is structurally unsafe.

Elena Thompson: When any heavy thing passes by you feel the vibration. The only thing I have left there is a bullet hole and a wall there. Outside of the big hole, they cover it up with cement. And a big hole was in a step. All outside here have cracks.

Rolando Arrieta: For the past 10 years, many Chorrillo residents like Elena have paused on December 20th to reflect. This year, the U.S. soldiers that attacked their neighborhood are leaving Panama for good. For "Latino USA," I'm Rolando Arrieta in Panama.

Maria Martin: And for this week, this has been "Latino USA," the radio journal of news and culture. Gracias, por su atención. Thanks for listening. Further information about "Latino USA" is available at www.latinoUSA.org. You can also call our listener comment line at 1-800-535-5533. Our email address is lusa@NPR.org. And this week's program is number 348.

"Latino USA" is produced by Angelica Luévano, Walter Morgan and Alex Avila. I'm the executive producer Maria Martin. Our contributing editor is Katie Davis. We had helped this week from WOSO in San Juan and Diana Velasquez. Support for "Latino USA" comes from the Ford Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Center for Mexican-American Studies and K.U.T Radio at the University of Texas at Austin. Additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts and National Public Radio whose contributors include the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Maria Hinojosa will be back next week. Join us then for another edition of "Latino USA."

Announcer: This is NPR, National Public Radio.