NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

When a win for peace is not a victory

Mary Ann McGivern | Apr. 25, 2013 NCR Today

Vieques is a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico. For 60 years, the U.S. Navy used it for bombing practice. Ten years ago, President George W. Bush ordered the Navy to close its training base. But the island is still waiting for the cleanup. The west half of Vieques is beautiful: sandy beaches, coves, rock formations. The eastern half is beautiful, too, except for the unexploded ordinance, heavy metal residue, blown-apart tanks, and radioactive contamination from depleted uranium.

The Navy testified once to Congress, straight-faced, that the island was uninhabited, news to the 10,400 people who live there. They have high cancer rates, asthma, headaches, arthritis. Although the Navy left and the noise and injuries from bombing errors are gone, cancer rates are high and tourism is not a thriving industry.

This month, Vieques is holding a series of events to mark the withdrawal of the Navy and the continued need for environmental cleanup. They have hosted members of Congress and held memorials for residents killed by accident from those bombing errors. Next is a film festival, showing all the documentaries that have been made of the 60 years of Navy practice bombing runs, the military debris, the illness on the island and the community resistance and demands for change.

Medical histories of Vieques residents have been gathered [1] as part of the anniversary.

Sunday, there will be a daylong symposium on the archeology, literature, development and history of Vieques. There will also be a photo exhibit documenting the people's struggle for their home. The day will close with music. On May 5, a new art exhibit will open, displaying Puerto Rican masks and other popular art that has grown out of the resistance.

I was in Vieques for a demonstration back in 2002, while the Navy was still using the island for bombing runs. We marched and danced, visited homes of the sick, then marched and danced at the fence delineating unexploded ordinance, contamination and future bomb drops. Protesters were receiving six-month prison sentences for trespass, and I was ready to join the next trespass action when the Navy was ordered to cease its exercises there. But the eastside beaches remain closed and heavy metals contaminate the ground water. Residents continue to be diagnosed with cancer. They are poor and have no other place to go.

Vieques is not the only place contaminated by the U.S. military, but it is probably the most beautiful. However, cleanup is expensive. And it is easy to turn our backs.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/19/2014 - 11:01*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/when-win-peace-not-victory

Links:
[1] http://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/nota/cancerlagransecuelaenvieques-915193/