

**Statement of the honorable Rafael Hernández Colón to members of the
house Armed Services Committee --November 6, 1973--**

Mr. Chairman and Congressmen, I appreciate the invitation Chairman Hebert graciously extended to me to present position of the Commonwealth Government regarding the transfer of Navy training operations from Culebra to Desecheo and Monito. I understand that you will consider this matter in your Conference on the Military Construction Authorization Bill because the Senate passed & provision-- Section 204 of the Bill-- authorizing funds for the transfer.

As I explain to Chairman Hebert when we met to discuss this matter last week, the Commonwealth Government is deeply committed to a strong rational defense as well as to transfer of Navy operations away from the inhabited island of Culebra, The Secretary of the Navy, who is here this morning, agrees with our view that these two goals are entirely consistent.

Transfer of Navy operations from the tiny, inhabited island of Culebra, Puerto Rico-- constrained as the target is by safety considerations-- to an uninhabited site -- where safety does not present such a serious problem -- should enhance the quality of training that can be provided for our Navy. More modern weapons can be employed; a greater variety of target approaches will be possible; weapons can be delivered under more realistic conditions and operations can be maintained around the clock, if necessary.

The transfer of Navy operations from Culebra will also resolve a political problem that has long plagued the people of Puerto Rico. Political parties and positions in Puerto Rico are as diverse as here on the mainland but regarding the issue of Culebra there is complete unity and agreement. Four men have been elected Governor in Puerto Rico's history. All four of us, representing three different political parties, have joined in letters and telegrams to Congress, seeking an end to Navy training activities on the inhabited island of Culebra and its immediately adjacent keys. This joint action is without precedent and evidences the enormous importance of this issue in Puerto Rico.

The people of Puerto Rico are convinced that the U.S. Government has firmly and officially committed itself to this transfer. Three successive Secretaries of Defense --

Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson and James Schlesinger -- repeated and refined the pledge initially made by Secretary Laird in late March of 1971 that all Navy operations at Culebra would be terminated by no later than July 1, 1975. Secretary Laird reiterated this pledge in November of 1972 on the eve of the Puerto Rican election. Without explanation, Secretary Laird reversed himself in December of 1972 to the shock and dismay of the Puerto Rican people.

During the course of his confirmation hearing, the Honorable Elliot Richardson promised to review the Department's Culebra policy. He gave careful consideration to studies of the problem completed in the Department's Culebra policy. He gave careful consideration to studies of the problem completed in the Department of Defense at the direction of Congress and he conducted extensive discussions with Navy officials. Based on this review and on my personal assurance that a transfer of Navy operations to the uninhabited islands of Desecheo and Monito would be acceptable to the Government of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Secretary Richardson announced on May 24th of this year that he decided "it would be in the long range interest of the various parties to move Navy activities by July 1, 1975 from the Culebra complex east of Puerto Rico to the uninhabited islands of Desecheo and Monito, off the Western coast of Puerto Rico provided ... Congress authorizes and appropriates the funds required and ... a satisfactory overall arrangement be worked out with the Government of Puerto Rico for carrying out the proposed move and for insuring the long-term continuation of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range and Fleet Marine Force Training Area."

Secretary Schlesinger adopted Secretary Richardson's May 24 decision as his own during course of his confirmation hearing.

As Senator Henry Jackson stated on September 13, 1973, when, through his efforts the Senate passed Section 204 of the Military Construction Authorization bill authorizing in construction funds to effectuate the Transfer of Navy operations from Culebra to Desecheo and Monito by July 1, 1975: "If the honor of United States was not in issue as a result of Secretary Laird's commitment -- and I think it was -- there can be no question, but that the honor of the United States is at issue now in light of Secretary Richardson's announced decision and Secretary Schlesinger's public affirmation of that decision."

I know you have struggled with this issue for number of years. I am especially mindful of the personal sacrifices Congressman Bennett has made to support the Navy's request when the Navy thought is needed to expand its operations at Culebra. During the past three years, however, the position of the Navy has changed and evolved. Today, the Navy sincerely supports the transfer of its operations away from Culebra. I am delighted that Secretary Warner is here this morning at the invitation of your Committee to join with Puerto Rico in seeking your approval of legislation that will resolve this long-festering problem in a way that will best meet our Nation's long- range defense needs.

I affirm to you today in the presence of the Secretary of the Navy the personal pledge I made to Secretary Richardson prior to his May 24 decision.

My Government is committed, without qualification to support the transfer of Navy operations from Culebra to the uninhabited islands of Desecheo and Monito. I wish to leave no doubt in your mind that if the Navy's training needs at Desecheo and Monito preclude construction of a superport, which is under consideration, at Mona, Puerto Rico will honor its pledge to the Navy by constructing the superport elsewhere.

Secretary Warner and I have already begun to work out the overall arrangement for carrying out the proposed move and for assuring the longterm continuation of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range and Fleet Marine Force Training Area. I am pleased to inform this Committee that the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico already has made the decision to provide the Department of the Navy with an easement in which the Navy has a strong interest for its training needs on the south coast of the island of Vieques. The Department of the Navy sought this easement is entirely consistent with the policy of the Commonwealth to accommodate all legitimate needs of the Armed Forces.

Finally, I know questions have been raised about the Commonwealth's plans for Culebra after the departure of the Navy. We are committed to preserve the natural beauties of Culebra and will not permit despoliation by large scale development to replace the dangers of Navy training.

I would be delighted to answer your questions.