

Puerto Rico wants Navy to close bombing range

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Puerto Rico's governor said Wednesday he will ask President Clinton to close a controversial U.S. Navy bombing range and allow thousands of nearby residents to live "in peace."

"We have powerful reasons based on basic rights contained in the Constitution of Puerto Rico and the United States," Gov. Pedro Rossello said in urging the closure of the range on Vieques island. "I think that this position will triumph and that we will be able, at last, to see the departure of the Navy from Vieques and that the people will be able to live in peace."

Rossello — who supports statehood for this U.S. commonwealth

— joined local politicians of all stripes in endorsing a committee report that calls for the Navy to leave Vieques. He created the committee after an April bombing accident killed a civilian guard at the range.

Puerto Ricans were further outraged when the Navy admitted last month that it mistakenly fired hundreds of uranium-tipped shells, in violation of local and federal law, on Vieques in February.

Navy officials insist that Vieques, the service's only live-fire range in the Atlantic, is vital to national security. The Navy occupied two-thirds of the island, just off eastern Puerto Rico, in the 1940s; today about 9,300 civilians live there.

Acting on Clinton's orders, the U.S. Defense Department appoint-

ed its own four-man panel to recommend whether the military should continue live-fire exercises on Vieques. The panel's work should be concluded by August.

Puerto Ricans criticized that panel because it has only one civilian member.

The Puerto Rican committee found that Navy exercises on the island since 1940 had harmed the environment and possibly the health of Vieques residents. It also restricted economic development by hindering tourism and other industries, the report said.

Navy Capt. James K. Stark Jr., commander of Naval Station Roosevelt Roads, which administers the Vieques range, declined to comment on Wednesday's report because the federal investigation was continuing.