

Protesters, Navy clash over Puerto Rican island war games

BY MANUEL ERNESTO RIVERA
ASSOCIATED PRESS

VIEQUES, Puerto Rico — Waving white flags and handing bags of soil to a Pentagon delegation, hundreds of protesters demanded Saturday that the U.S. Navy stop its war games on an inhabited Puerto Rican island.

Demonstrators chanted as the delegation — created on orders of President Clinton — visited Vieques, where a civilian security guard was killed in a Navy bombing accident April 19.

“Don’t lose hope!” Manuela Santiago, mayor of this 51-square-mile island off eastern Puerto Rico, urged the noisy crowd, which waved flags and banners as the commission held hearings.

David Sanes Rodriguez, a Navy employee, was killed when two bombs dropped by an F/A-18 fighter missed their target and struck an observation post inside a Navy bombing range on Vieques.

His death galvanized years of resentment over the Navy exercises in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory where residents have long complained they are often treated as second-class U.S. citizens.

The Navy insists its bombing range is the only place where its Atlantic fleet air, land and sea forces can train simultaneously with live munitions. The Pentagon panel is to determine whether alternatives exist.

On Saturday, panel members

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU	Adm. William J. Fallon, head of the Norfolk-based 2nd Fleet, has said that without renewed access to Vieques, he soon will have to deploy carrier battle groups that have serious combat-readiness deficiencies.
-----------------------------	--

visited the pockmarked range and heard testimony from Vieques residents at the island’s city hall. Santiago and activist Miriam Soba presented them with bags of soil, urging them to allow Vieques “to live in peace.”

Santiago testified that the Navy had failed to live up to a 1983 agreement in which it pledged to promote the island’s economic development. Vieques’ unemployment rate is close to 50 percent.

“We, the people of Vieques, firmly believe in the concept and idea of a common national defense — but never at the cost of our human and civil rights,” Santiago said, drawing cheers from the crowd listening outside.

Since Sanes’ death, protesters have occupied the bombing range, which is littered with unexploded ordnance. Political leaders of all stripes, including pro-U.S. statehood Gov. Pedro Rossello, have demanded that the Navy leave Vieques, which it has shared with civilians since 1941.