

The Colonial Case of Puerto Rico

Reprinted below are the first two parts of a document which outlines the story of Puerto Rico's 75-year struggle for liberation from U.S. colonial domination. The document was originally presented by the Permanent Representative to the United Nations of the Republic of Cuba, Ricardo Alarcon Quesada before the U.N. General Assembly in 1971.

Since 1965, when the Committee for Decolonization was first requested to discuss the colonial case of Puerto Rico, Cuba has taken on the task of diplomatic representation in the United Nations of the Puerto Rican independence movement and the popular interests it articulates. This expression of solidarity has grown from the common struggle which the Cuban and Puerto Rican people have shared against the colonial domination of first Spain and then the United States.

Puerto Rico is a Latin American country. It has a nationality of its own which was crystallized as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its history, culture, customs, traditions and interests are totally different from those of the United States, the metropolitan colonial Power.

The people of Puerto Rico has a long and heroic tradition of struggle for its national independence. The common task of helping that people to win full emancipation is part of the historical patrimony of all the Latin American peoples.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when the first stirrings of rebellion against the colonial power of Spain began to make themselves felt in the West Indies, the Liberator, Simón Bolívar, personally assumed responsibility for assisting and encouraging those in Cuba and Puerto Rico who were fighting for national independence. Ever since that very early time, it was the Government of the United States which represented the main obstacle to the fulfilment by the Latin American patriots of their duty of solidarity.

On 23 September 1868, in the town of Lares, the Puerto Rican people launched its war of independence against Spain. Side by side with the people of Cuba, the inhabitants of the small West Indian island defied colonial power and fought under the very difficult conditions resulting from their insularity until the year 1898.

As a result of that struggle, Spain was forced to grant Puerto Rico a relatively large degree of autonomy, which was enshrined in the Constitution of 25 November 1897. Under the terms of that Constitution, the people of Puerto Rico elected deputies to the Spanish Cortes, acquired the freedom to trade with all the countries of the world and exercised important powers and prerogatives of self-government representing a degree of autonomy incomparably greater than that which now exists in the island under United States colonial rule. The

Constitution of 1897 provided that Spain could not modify the status of Puerto Rico without the consent of the Puerto Rican Parliament.

However, on 25 July 1898, the island was invaded by the armed forces of the United States, which placed the territory under military occupation, dissolved the Parliament and established United States rule by force of arms.

History provides ample evidence of the expansionist aims of the United States with respect to the West Indies. Everybody knows the famous line written by President Monroe in a letter to Mr. Nelson, United States Ambassador in Madrid, in 1822: "Cuba and Puerto Rico are natural appendages of the United States".

In July 1898, Spain was preparing to surrender after the defeats suffered in the fighting in Cuban territory. On 16 July, the Spanish Army surrendered in the city of Santiago in Cuba. The following day, the 17th, the Spanish Government, through its Ambassador in Paris, made an offer to the United States to open peace talks. The very same day, the United States Government ordered its Navy to invade Puerto Rico. An American writer, who certainly could not be accused of hostility towards the imperialist designs of his Government, wrote quite properly: "It was not a battle against the Spaniards any longer — they were fleeing satisfactorily — but against time: to establish a fait accompli occupation of the island before an unfavourable turn in the peace negotiations now in progress could deprive Miles' armies of the territory they already controlled." (Jack Cameron Dierks, *A Leap to Arms, the Cuban Campaign of 1898*, Philadelphia and New York, 1970).

Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, signed between Spain and the United States, Spain "ceded" to the United States the territory of Puerto Rico (article 2 of the Treaty), thus consummating a typical act of colonial plunder in which the people of the territory concerned had absolutely no say. To that extent, the Treaty of Paris, in so far as it concerns Puerto Rico, is null and void because it was done in total disregard of the Puerto Rican Constitution and its autonomous institutions. That argument was invoked by the great Puerto Rican patriot of the time, Eugenio Maria de Hostos: "Puerto Rico is a legal entity and could not be stripped of any of its prerogatives as a nation by a war which was not of its making". In October 1935, in a plea before the United States Supreme Court, Pedro Albizu Campos, leader of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, asserted: "The Treaty [of Paris] is null and void in so far as it concerns Puerto Rico. Spain could not cede Puerto Rico because Puerto Rico was not a negotiable entity (*res in commercium*). Puerto Rico became a sovereign nation by virtue of the Charter of Self-Government (Carta Autonómica) which

Spain could not amend without the consent of Puerto Rico. And the United States could not agree to the cession of the territory because it was obligated to respect the independence of Puerto Rico. . . . The feudal concept of international law which permitted the conquest of one nation by another through war and retention of the victim as the property of the victor, as a possession, must have been dead in the United States too".

By virtue of an act of imperialist plunder the people of Puerto Rico lost the autonomy which it had wrested from Spain. The territory, which had won international recognition as a separate legal entity when it was admitted to the Universal Postal Union in 1897, openly and frankly became a conquest of the United States, a colonial possession of the United States.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Since 1898, the Government in Washington has done everything in its power to crush the aspirations of the Puerto Rican people for independence and to make the island a part of the United States. Its efforts have resulted in total failure and the struggle of the Puerto Rican people has become irrepressible, forcing the colonial Government to resort to all kinds of manoeuvres to silence internal opposition and international condemnation of the oppression of Puerto Rico. 14. Today, United States colonial rule over all aspects of Puerto Rican life is absolute. Puerto Rico is under the legislative, judicial and executive control of the United States. The United States Government has exclusive jurisdiction over all questions of citizenship, foreign affairs, defence, immigration and emigration, foreign trade, currency, postal service, radio and television, air and maritime transport. Decisions of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico can be overturned by the federal courts of the United States. All the laws adopted by the Congress of the United States automatically apply in Puerto Rico.

The United States exercises absolute control over the economy of Puerto Rico. American investments in Puerto Rico amount to \$1,000 million and, even according to colonial propaganda, yield profits each year amounting on the average to per cent of the capital invested. American investments are exempt from taxes, corporation or personal taxes, for a period ranging from 12 to 17 years. In that way, Puerto Rico has been converted into a privileged preserve for United States monopolies, which use it as a source of cheap labour and exploit the national economy without even being subject to the rules and restrictions in force in the metropolitan country. For example, the average wage of a Puerto Rican worker is equivalent to one-third of what an American worker earns and the average income of the inhabitants of the island is half of what is earned by the citizens of the State of Mississippi, the poorest State in the United States. On the other hand, the United States has a monopoly over Puerto Rican trade, forcing Puerto Rico to depend entirely on the United States market and to carry all goods imported from the United States in ships of the United States merchant fleet, which has a monopoly over the island's shipping. The result is that the average prices of goods and basic necessities are 25 per cent higher than in New York or other American cities.

The effects of this situation on the living conditions of the

people are easy to imagine. According to official statistics, Puerto Rico has 100,000 unemployed, that is, 14.3 per cent of the labour force. One-third of the population has been forced to emigrate to the metropolitan territory of the United States where they are subjected to harassment and discrimination, reduced to accepting the hardest and least well-paid jobs, crowded together in the ghettos of the big American cities.

The same statistics indicate that 81.8 per cent of the population of Puerto Rico earns less than \$3,000 a year. In an effort to mitigate the effects of the poverty conditions imposed on most of the population of Puerto Rico, the colonial regime has established the so-called system of "maintenance", which consists of the distribution of United States farm surpluses to needy families. On 9 September 1963, a pro-American newspaper published in San Juan, *El Mundo*, reported on the first page: "850,000 people are living on maintenance", that is, approximately 35 per cent of the population of Puerto Rico.

The super-exploitation of Puerto Rico by the United States may be summed up in the following statement by Josué de Castro: "Thus, United States policy was one of protectionism for the benefit of an insignificant minority at the expense of the majority of the indigenous population, who were forced to make the heaviest sacrifices."* (Josué de Castro, *The Geopolitics of Hunger*, Cuban edition, p. 139).

One of the most brutal aspects of United States colonial rule in Puerto Rico is the military aspect. Thirteen per cent of the best arable land on the island is occupied by a vast network of military bases, including bases with nuclear weapons, which have transformed Puerto Rico into an enormous military arsenal and constitute a permanent threat to the peace and security of its population while at the same time ensuring military occupation as a means of strengthening colonial control over the territory. United States military activity also encompasses the island group of Vieques and Culebra, which are integral parts of Puerto Rican territory. World opinion has been aware of the criminal conduct of the United States armed forces, which are using the territory of Culebra as a firing range for weapons testing, thus seriously jeopardizing the lives of the people of Culebra, who are engaged in a vigorous battle for the dismantling of the installations established on their island by the United States Navy.

Puerto Rico, as a colonial territory, has no armed forces of its own. Yet Puerto Ricans have been made liable for compulsory military service in the armed forces of the United States. Some 200,000 Puerto Ricans served in the United States Army in the First World War, 400,000 in the Second World War, and 40,000 in the aggression against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1950. The imposition of compulsory military service on Puerto Ricans is a crude display of colonialism and racism.

The number of Puerto Ricans who have thus been sacrificed to the aggressive interests of United States imperialism is proportionately greater than the figure for citizens of the metropolitan territory of the United States itself. Thus, the newspaper *El Mundo* reported on 22 May 1967 that Puerto Rican casualties in the war of aggression against Viet-Nam are higher than those for 18 states of the United States and the District of Columbia.