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End the Colonial Status of Puerto Rico!

Oscar López Rivera Testifies Before UN Committee on Decolonization



Oscar López Rivera is warmly applauded during testimony to the UN Special Committee on Decolonization, June 19, 2017.

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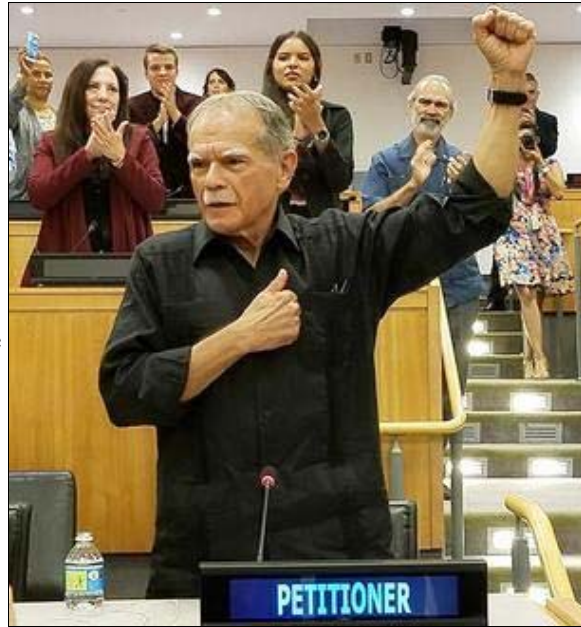
Oscar López Rivera Testifies Before UN Committee on Decolonization

Puerto Rican independence fighter Oscar López Rivera, finally released from his political imprisonment in U.S. jails after almost 36 years on May 17, continues to wage the battle for the Puerto Rican people's right to sovereignty and an end to U.S. colonial exploitation. Following a

hero's welcome in Chicago and New York, on June 19, Oscar addressed the UN Special Committee on Decolonization. Oscar, in his opening remarks, expressed his gratitude for all those who have stood by the cause of Puerto Rico's national liberation and conveyed the indomitable spirit and dignity of the Puerto Rican people which he embodies:

"I have spent five decades serving what I believe is the most just and noble cause any Puerto Rican citizen can serve. Doing it has been an act of love and fulfilling my duty as a citizen. And because I believe that when one serves a just and noble cause, it is never a sacrifice, even if it means giving one's life doing it. I say this to let people know that for me, serving a just and noble cause has been the most liberating experience I have had, and that in spite of all the horrible things done to me during the years I spent in prison, I have come home with my head high, and my honour, my dignity and my spirit stronger than the day I was sent to prison."

Oscar's presence at the committee would not have come without his perseverance and that of his comrades, compatriots and peoples around the world who fought for decades for the release of all the Puerto Rican political prisoners and for the just cause of Puerto Rico's independence. In this regard, Oscar's presentation is an important achievement for all concerned and a boost to this important cause.



TML salutes Oscar López Rivera and the heroic Puerto Rican people for their struggle for national liberation, and calls on Canadians to support this just fight. It is linked to the struggles in Canada, Quebec and the world over through the fundamental principle that the people must be the decision-makers in all matters that affect their lives. *TML* extends best wishes to Oscar during his tour of the U.S. and in this next phase of his life as he continues to defend the rights and dignity of the Puerto Rican people.

Oscar's Presentation to the UN Special Committee

Puerto Rico was occupied by the U.S. as spoil of war in 1898, after the U.S. prevailed in the Spanish-American War. The Puerto Rican people's struggle for national liberation, already well underway, was redirected from Spain to the U.S. The case for ending Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. colony has been made repeatedly at the UN Special Committee by Puerto Ricans and supported by Cuba, Venezuela and other countries, and affirmed in numerous resolutions by the Committee.

In his presentation to the Committee, Oscar pointed out that while there are no more Puerto Rican independence fighters held as political prisoners in U.S. prisons, there are still many political prisoners in the U.S., notably Ana Belen Montes, "who chose to serve a just cause and go to prison rather than to do the dirty work of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency." He noted the U.S. hypocrisy on this question, that it seeks the freedom of justly convicted counterrevolutionary criminals in Venezuela, for example, and refuses to bring to justice "the terrorists on its payroll who have killed independentistas in Puerto Rico or to stop practicing the crime of colonialism and allow the Puerto Rican people to exercise its inalienable right of self-determination and allow Puerto Rico to be an independent and sovereign nation."

Speaking to the ongoing crimes of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, Oscar pointed out:

"What has United States colonialism done to Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican people? Allow me to share with you some of the most deleterious problems caused by colonialism in Puerto Rico that I have observed since my arrival in my beloved homeland. Today there are over five million Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora, while there are less than three and a half million living in Puerto Rico. I found a Puerto Rico under the control of a Fiscal Control Board imposed by the U.S. government [in 2016] that has the power to dictate to the colonialists who help to administer the colony, what to do, especially when dealing with the payment of the \$72-billion debt Puerto Rico owes to the banks and hedge funds. And I have seen an accelerated gentrification process constructing condominiums costing one million dollars or more.



San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 1, 2016. Banner reads "Fiscal Control Board -- Colonial Slavery."

"Since I am familiar with what gentrification does to poor people, I know the luxury condominiums are not being built for them. The poor people are displaced; once the expensive housing is built, only the rich and super rich can live there. In Culebra, Vieques and around the coast of Puerto Rico, where the beaches are the most beautiful, the construction of luxury building is already overtaking the landscape. The colonialists who administer the colony give incentives to the builders and to buyers who are foreigners, and denies providing incentives to small businesses and small home owners. On the contrary, the small businesses and small home owners are taxed to the maximum. So what gentrification is doing is forcing poor people to move, and most likely to emigrate to the diaspora. This will cause more depopulation in Puerto Rico.

"It has been the goal of the U.S. government, since it invaded and occupied Puerto Rico, to depopulate it. By 1900 it was already forcing Puerto Ricans to emigrate to far away places like Hawaii and the southwestern states on the mainland. After World War II the United States government started another forced emigration wave. More of the land that the poor Puerto Ricans were forced to abandon was used for military bases and for the construction of luxury hotels to foment a tourist industry. And the last wave began 17 years ago. More than one million Puerto Ricans have moved to the diaspora, causing the biggest brain drain in Puerto Rico's history, because most of the emigrants are professionals, such as doctors, engineers, teachers, architects, nurses and other health workers. If the School of Medicine in Puerto Rico graduates 100 doctors, 85 per cent of them have to emigrate. There aren't jobs for most young professionals. Their only option is to emigrate.

"Imagine if such a loss of population were occurring in your countries. Any country that loses two-thirds of its population, including its best-developed human resource, cannot see itself having a strong economy and good quality of life for its citizens. And in Puerto Rico we are starting to see the negative effects of the last wave of emigrants. We are already seeing a larger aging population that is becoming poorer and poorer and with less medical and social services available to them. The future for them looks bleak. And at the same time young people of reproductive age are leaving Puerto Rico, and more foreigners are buying the expensive condominiums or living in gated upper class communities.

"If the displacement and depopulation of Puerto Ricans is an alarming problem, what the Fiscal Control Board is making the colonialist administrators of Puerto Rico do is more worrisome. For starters, by August 169 schools will be closed. Teachers will be losing jobs, and communities, especially the poorer ones, will be losing their schools. Behind the scenes the colonialists are pushing more and more their privatization plans. They aren't satisfied that privatization in Puerto Rico has played a major role in bringing the economy to its worse conditions in Puerto Rico's history.

"But beside closing 169 schools, it is threatening the future of the University of Puerto Rico. The goal of the Fiscal Control Board is to take away close to half a billion dollars from the University's budget. At the same time, it is looking for ways to raise the tuition and to force the University of Puerto Rico to close some of its eleven campuses and to sell much of its property, specially land that it has been using for experiments in the past. What the Fiscal Control Board seems to be doing is trying to privatize the University system. All the money that will be taken away from the public education system will be used as payment to fill the coffers of the Banks and hedge funds. While Puerto Ricans will be poorer and more destitute, the colonialists and the banking industry will become richer. Thus Puerto Rico is being made poorer and poorer and at the same time depopulated of its native population.

"In spite of the fact that the future of Puerto Rico looks very bleak, many Puerto Ricans believe this is the best moment to wage an effective decolonizing process. We know that the majority of Puerto Ricans love Puerto Rico, our national identity, our culture, our language, and our origins. We see the potential that Puerto Rico has to become a strong nation and an asset to the economy of Caribbean and Latin American countries. We have the human resources and the other basic resources to transform Puerto Rico into the [Garden of Eden] it has the potential of being.

"Because this is such a moment, we are asking this Committee to take the issue of the decolonization of Puerto Rico to the General Assembly and ask it to fulfill its responsibilities to bring to an end the colonization of Puerto Rico by the U.S. government.

"Colonialism is a crime against all of humanity. If the U.S. government is the nation of laws it claims to be, then it behooves it to decolonize Puerto Rico by adhering to the tenets of international law that prohibit the crime of colonialism.

"I hope you will do whatever you can to bring to an end the colonial status of Puerto Rico, to help us make Puerto Rico the nation it has the potential of being, and to be part of the community of nations."

Also on June 19, Cuba's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Ana Silvia Rodríguez, tabled a draft resolution at the Committee in support of Puerto Rico's right to self-determination. This resolution, co-sponsored by Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Russia and Syria, was passed by consensus and is the 36th such resolution adopted by that body.



Oscar López Rivera receives a warm welcome from students and teachers at the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School in Chicago, June 13, 2017.

(With files from Prensa Latina. Photos: R. Ramirez, Claridad, Global Voices, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School.)



Spurious Plebiscite on U.S. Statehood

On June 11, another so-called non-binding plebiscite was held in Puerto Rico on whether it should seek the status of a U.S. state, continue its current status as an unincorporated territory (commonwealth status), or seek independence. This is the fifth such plebiscite since 1967. When the results of this phony plebiscite are given, what is not mentioned is the high level of abstentionism and that the people of Puerto Rico are fed up with repeated attempts to give the decisions of the colonialists legitimacy. According to self-serving results, an estimated 97 per cent of votes cast were in favour of the statehood option; 1.3 per cent of votes were for the commonwealth option, while 1.2 per cent of votes cast were for independence.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The website Latino Rebels points out, "According to Puerto Rico's official electoral commission, just 23 per cent of Puerto Ricans voted. In a place known for high voter turnouts (50-80 per cent), the official 23 per cent number is low. Really low. [...] This was the smallest number of statehood votes since 1967. In 2012, around 834,000 Puerto Ricans voted for statehood. In 1998, the statehood number was around 728,000 votes. In 1993, around 788,000 voted for statehood. In 1967, the number was around 274,000. At the same time, this was the worst vote ever for the commonwealth choice. Boycott or no boycott, this is a fact: around 6,800 people voted for the current status. That is last place."

A report from TeleSUR points out that "Independence groups, along with three political parties, called for a boycott of the ballot as a protest against the government spending U.S.\$7.5 million on the election in the middle of a budget crisis that has forced the island to take on harsh austerity measures, making its colonial status more acute as the country can not solve the crisis without U.S. approval.

"Critics also pointed out that the U.S. Department of Justice has not supported the plebiscite."

What is clear from these results and the participation in prior plebiscites is that the call to boycott the plebiscite, from pro-independence forces and other parties that back the current commonwealth status, is what prevailed, and that the supposed result of 97 per cent of the people in favour of statehood has no legitimacy whatsoever.

A spokesperson for Governor Ricardo Rosselló said that he will now push Congress to recognize the result as support for statehood. Rosselló and others refer to this as pursuing the "Tennessee Plan," where a U.S. territory unilaterally declares itself a state and then sends a delegation to Washington, DC to win congressional approval, as Tennessee did in 1796. Despite the fact that Puerto Rico's economic crisis is fundamentally linked to its status as a U.S. colony, Rosselló and others believe that a change in status would help resolve Puerto Rico's U.S.\$123 billion debt (a figure that includes U.S.\$50 billion in pension debt) and allow it to become a "diplomatic centre and a business centre of the Americas."

In the face of the ongoing neo-liberal assault on Puerto Rico being directed from the U.S., to champion further annexation by the U.S. as a way to resolve Puerto Rico's debt or other problems is not a "solution" favoured by the Puerto Rican people. The results of the June 11 plebiscite and Puerto Ricans' abstention in fact demonstrate just this. It will not divert the people from fulfilling the historical necessity to win their independence from U.S. colonial rule.

(With files from Latino Rebels and TeleSUR.)



Crisis and Colonialism in Puerto Rico

- Olga Sanabria Dávila -



May Day 2017 march in San Juan, Puerto Rico, opposes U.S. Fiscal Control Board.

Throughout the 1960s, the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico was touted as the Showcase of Progress and Democracy in the Caribbean as a result of its accelerated industrialization, the development of its infrastructure, education and health systems and a constitutional system of government.

However, for a while now, many United States and international news outlets and economic

reviews are writing about Puerto Rico's astronomical public debt, its junk-bond status, the overall economic crisis and the United States' Fiscal Control Board that has been imposed on the elected government of Puerto Rico with the mandate of putting into order Puerto Rico's public finances. The U.S. Congress' PROMESA law legislated appointment of the Board.

At present, Puerto Rico's debt is estimated at U.S.\$69 billion -- up from U.S.\$32 billion in 2006, one year after the beginning of a recession in Puerto Rico that is expected to persist for years.

Beyond the junk bond status of Puerto Rico bonds, its unemployment is estimated at between 13 and 14 per cent, it suffers a 44.9 per cent poverty rate, and its economy has for decades depended on U.S. investment, low wages, tax exemption for foreign corporations, and dependence on U.S. federal funds.



Population and other demographic data are also indicators of a showcase gone sour. The new wave of Puerto Rican migration to the United States has been continuous and has overcome the massive 500,000 peak of the migration of the '40s and '50s. The present population of 5.1 million in the United States includes the present migration, 30 per cent professional -- especially medical doctors and specialists -- while an aging population of less than 3.5 million remains in Puerto Rico.

The constitutional system of government established in Puerto Rico in 1952 with the founding of the Free Associated State was a misrepresentation and also a failure as it left intact the backdrop for the present crisis which is the colonial status of Puerto Rico. In fact, recent statements by the U.S. executive, judicial and legislative branches have made clear that Puerto Rican sovereignty is under the plenary powers of the United States' Congress, while its autonomy in fiscal affairs, was quashed by the PROMESA law and appointment of the Fiscal Control Board.

United States' congressional laws govern over Puerto Rico in international relations and commerce, monetary issues, migration and immigration, maritime traffic (with U.S. Maritime Law applied to Puerto Rico), customs, labor relations and trade union organization, border patrol, airspace and transportation, communications, defense, and now the fiscal arena besides many other areas.

It should also be emphasized that the mission of the Fiscal Control Board is to ensure that Puerto Rico pay its public debt and balance its budget. Its plan is to oblige the government of Puerto Rico to:

- Cut back the budget of the 11-campus University of Puerto Rico by \$450 million;
- Cut back the health budget by \$2 billion 500 thousand;
- Cut back the general government budget by \$17 billion to \$20 billion;
- Cut back the workday of government workers by 20 per cent if the treasury does not have on hand \$500 million by June 30, 2017;
- Eliminate the Christmas bonus of government workers;
- Cut back their vacation benefits;
- Reduce the number of government agencies from 131 to 35;
- Privatize Workmen's Compensation, national parks and vacation centers, and several highways, ports and airports
- Increase the costs of some services and car registration, property taxes and other taxes, fines, tolls, permits, urban transportation, by \$1 billion;
- Cut back teachers' workday and that of school cafeteria workers if the treasury does not have on

hand \$200 million by April 30, 2017;
- Privatize public entities.



Recently, Nobel laureate Steven Steiglitz stated that measures to be taken are more severe than those imposed on Greece during its debt crisis, and that these will only make the situation worse. Several Puerto Rican economists have predicted that these measures will cause the economy to shrink by 8-10 per cent, thus the sacrifices the program entails will not improve the economy or the lives of the Puerto Rican people, but rather worsen conditions. Calls for an independent audit of Puerto Rico's public debt have gone unheeded.

In terms of its environmental protection and policy, ecological balance, climate change and global warming, Puerto Rico is also subordinate to outside United States' agencies, interests, policies, and power. This is very dangerous for the Puerto Rican population as Puerto Rico is a small island country in the Caribbean. Furthermore, part of the measures for stimulating economic development in Puerto Rico includes a fast-track for permits for infrastructure and other construction projects. This will include fast-track environmental impact studies thus undermining environmental protection.

In the present situation of fiscal and economic crisis, the Puerto Rican legislature adopted a bankruptcy law which would have made it possible for public corporations on the island to declare bankruptcy and thus be enabled to restructure their debt. (The debt of just one Puerto Rican public corporation -- the Electric Power Authority -- is estimated at U.S.\$9 billion.) In a lawsuit by a creditors, this legislation was overruled by the United States' extra-territorial Federal Court which operates in Puerto Rico. This was followed by a call from former Puerto Rico Resident Commissioner in Washington, DC, Pedro Pierluisi, calling for U.S. federal bankruptcy law to be made applicable to Puerto Rico, that went unheeded. A broad movement in Puerto Rico attempting to have Puerto Rico exempted from the application of U.S. maritime law has also gone unheeded.

In this situation, the people of Puerto Rico have already begun to mobilize. University of Puerto Rico students in eight of the campuses have declared an indefinite strike and are expected to be joined by students in remaining campuses, while university non-teaching staff have also declared a strike. Trade unions recently came together for a massive march against the Fiscal Control Board's plans under a multisector coalition.



Student strikes take place at several University of Puerto Rico campuses from March 28 to June 7, 2017, to oppose a massive U.S.\$450-million neo-liberal funding cut to the university, to make the people pay for a debt they did not incur. Banner reads "Why don't the guilty pay?"

The United States' president and Congress have maintained a hands-off position regarding Puerto Rico's debt crisis. This has deprived Puerto Rico of a rescue package and the tools necessary for confronting this crisis. The answers include that the United States must be forced to assume its great responsibility for the crisis in Puerto Rico, and to put an end to its colonial relationship with the United States.

However, as noted in a number of the editorials appearing in Puerto Rico major daily newspapers, *El Nuevo Día* and *El Vocero*, responses by the three branches of the United States' government have been non-committal and even indifferent (except for appointment of the Fiscal Control Board with the purpose of forcing Puerto Rico to pay its debt).

Many spokespersons in Puerto Rico have stated that the Puerto Rican community in the United States has a determining role because more than half of the Puerto Rican population is presently living in the United States where they participate in politics and form public opinion regarding Puerto Rico and other issues. When Puerto Rico was not a problem it was "swept under the rug." However, now that Puerto Rico is an issue, the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States can and is already exerting pressure in favor of just solutions to the present crisis.

The power relationship and political subordination of Puerto Rico to the United States points to the need for solidarity including regarding the need to end the colonial status which the United States has maintained over Puerto Rico since its invasion of the Island in 1898, almost one hundred and nineteen years ago.

Colonialism is an historical anachronism that has long been declared contrary to international law and human rights. The United Nations has repeatedly stated the right of the people of Puerto Rico to self-determination and independence in conformity with international law, in particular Resolution 1514(XV) of the United Nations General Assembly (1960), which is considered the Magna Carta of Decolonization.

Commitment to grassroots democracy is totally consistent with support for the decolonization of Puerto Rico as colonialism is also totally contrary to democracy. For a country ruled by another, democracy is non-existent, even if there are elections every four years to elect local authorities as in Puerto Rico where at present elected local officials have lost their limited power to the U.S. appointed Fiscal Control Board.



United States' control over vital areas of Puerto Rican life and the presence of the Fiscal Control Board point to the need for support of its decolonization has to be supported. This is a matter of principle precisely because colonialism is contrary to human rights, contrary to self-determination and contrary to democracy.

Puerto Ricans are a separate people from the people of the United States. Before the United States' invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, the nationhood of the Puerto Rican people had been forged for more than 400 years during which our culture and national identity became clear and distinct from that of any other people in the world.

The plebiscites, referendums and the like carried out in Puerto Rico are not the solutions precisely because they have not been free exercises of the will of the Puerto Rican people. They have taken place in the context of colonial rule, military occupation, repression and persecution of the independence forces, economic dependence, and colonial legislation and U.S. Congressional legislation. Thus, their results cannot be said to reflect the true will of the Puerto Rican people. For these reasons, they have not been an exercise of self-determination.

While the United States has maintained that it will accept the will and decision of the Puerto Rican people regarding Puerto Rico's status, it has obstructed the process by maintaining that the issue is its internal matter and not recognizing the role of the United Nations.

But Puerto Rican pro-independence forces and even some supporting other options have recognized that the United Nations has a role to play, and have continually resorted to United Nations Resolution 1514(XV). They recognize that in order for an expression of the will of Puerto Rico's people regarding its future relation to the United States to be a free exercise, it must take place under international law because otherwise the determining factor in any exercise will be the power relationship of the United States' domination over Puerto Rico.



Demonstration in New York, September 30, 2016.

The present situation of fiscal and economic crisis is increasingly billed as a political crisis which will force attention towards Puerto Rico's colonial status and the need to resolve it if the fiscal and economic situation are to be addressed. Regardless of preferences for the options for Puerto Rico's status, at present there is in Puerto Rico an overall sentiment that the present situation and the colonial status must be resolved. Cleavages along which Puerto Rico's main political parties are divided delineate several options but according to the rhetoric of leaders of the pro-statehood party and most leaders of the Free Associated State party, the country must move away from colonial status.

The vibrant social movements active today in Puerto Rico regarding women's rights, civil rights, community empowerment, the environment, youth, sports, culture, labor, cooperative and local economic endeavors, and many other areas, constantly encounter colonial status as an impediment to their objectives.

These movements and the pro-independence movement overlap in many scenarios. Along with the efforts of Puerto Ricans in the United States and solidarity from the people of the United States and our Latin American and Caribbean region and other countries, these are the basis for the future possibility independence and democracy in Puerto Rico.

A true exercise of self-determination with a level playing field for all options, including independence, must abide by international decolonization law. Despite this reality, important pro-independence and pro-sovereignty sectors have joined forces and decided to participate in a plebiscite legislated by the present pro-annexationist government of Puerto Rico where, if the process overcomes a number of obstacles it faces, the two options to be presented are 1) statehood and 2) independence/free association. If this plebiscite, scheduled for June 11, 2017, takes place there may be surprises regarding the strength of the vote for the second option of independence/free association.



In any case the struggle against the U.S. Fiscal Control Board now governing Puerto Rico and the struggle against colonialism and independence must continue, and solidarity with Puerto Rico must be stepped up.

Olga Sanabria Dávila is President of the Committee for Puerto Rico at the United Nations (COPRONU).

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