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Next Target Puerto Rico?

The Repressive Message of the Pentagon's "Operation Borinquen Response"

by CARLOS BORRERO

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The significance of a recently divulged plan of the Pentagon to carry out military exercises in Puerto Rico under the name "Operation Borinquen Response" between the 14th and 21st of this month must not be underestimated. On the pretext of the need to prepare for a natural disaster, US imperialism has cynically prepared a series of military maneuvers for Puerto Rico in which more than 1,000 troops from the island, National Guard troops from West Virginia, Washington, Tennessee, Vermont and Nebraska, as well as international observers from Honduras and the Dominican Republic are slated to participate.[1]

This military deployment does not represent an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is an extension of the policy of increased militarization of US society to its colony in anticipation of an intensification of mass discontent. In the past several years there have been a number of similar military simulations based on urban warfare scenarios carried out in US cities such as Houston, Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul. These exercises have included the deployment of military aircraft such as Blackhawk helicopters as well as heavily armed paratroopers into residential areas. Indeed, Obama added a key piece to the legal architecture for this militarization of US society with the signing of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012, which essentially repealed what remained of the Posse Comitatus statute that made the deployment of US armed

forces on US soil illegal during times of peace. In this way, this Nobel Peace laureate has expanded the militarist policies of the previous administration both domestically and abroad.

Another critical component of this militarization of US society in recent years has been the supply of military grade equipment and weapons to urban police forces through the Department of Homeland Security. The brutal repression unleashed upon protesters in Ferguson, Missouri last year, as well as the recent revelations by *The Guardian* of the existence of secret prisons or 'black sites', such as the now infamous Homan Square[2], maintained by the Chicago Police in which the torture of civilians has been carried out are just two patent examples of this tendency.

In an age of the historical decline of its system, the only solution proposed by the capitalist class is war, both against the working masses within national borders and foreign rivals abroad. In fact, the practice of domestic military exercises is consistent with the recommendations made in a recent Pentagon study[3] that warns of the need to revise military doctrine in preparation for the eventuality of future interventions by the US Army in large urban areas. According to military theorists, the social and economic crises within so-called *megacities*, which they describe as 'petri dishes' for radicalism, will be particularly acute. The incipient wave of working class resistance, which is evidenced by recent strikes by west coast longshoremen and US refinery workers, coupled with the massive protests within working class communities of color subjected to brutal police repression, appear to be just the beginning of a new phase of intense class struggles within the center of world imperialism. As such, despite their rhetoric to the contrary, the strategists of US capitalism know very well that they are not immune to the type of social convulsions that have recently rocked other countries.

The objective conditions for popular opposition to the system have become particularly acute in Puerto Rico. Massive structural unemployment as well as economic stagnation over the past 8 years has highlighted the complete bankruptcy of the economic solutions imposed by the capitalists and their acolytes in the colony. In a recent report by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics it was revealed that in 2014 Puerto Rico registered the lowest labor participation rate in last 22 years, seeing a reduction of 37,000 people employed. It is a well known fact that this prolonged unemployment crisis has provoked a massive exodus of Puerto Ricans from the island, many of which are highly skilled, in what can only be described as *brain drain*. All of this is taking place within the context of a \$70 Billion public debt, which represents almost 70% of GDP, and serves as a pretext for a campaign of austerity measures carried out against the mass of working class Puerto Ricans. And in an effort to guarantee the steady transfer of wealth to the financial parasites of Wall Street as well as their junior partners in the colony, the colonial administration has recently proposed an increase to the consumption tax as part of what it cynically calls 'tax reform'.

This panorama of social and economic crises increasingly provokes a popular questioning of all the political institutions within the colony. As such, the planned military exercises represent a policy of psychological intimidation being carried out in anticipation of a new wave of popular protests within a colonial society that is crumbling from within. From the perspective of US imperialism and its defenders within the colony, there is a concern that any political change that takes place within its colony be carried out under terms that are acceptable and consistent with its strategic interests.

Notwithstanding, the military exercises planned for Puerto Rico cannot only be understood within the context of a response to the deepening of the social crisis in the colony. It must also be understood as an imperative of US imperialism within the context of the sharpening of geopolitical conflicts. Undoubtedly, the recent rapprochement between Washington and Havana as well as the destabilizing campaign carried out against Venezuela form part of the same strategy of the US ruling class to reassert its hegemony in the hemisphere against the threat of emerging rivals like China.

There exists in recent Puerto Rican history a powerful precedent for popular opposition to US militarism in the struggle to remove the US Navy from the island of Vieques. The task of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of this experience now falls upon those popular forces most committed to the working masses. Their capacity to foster the reorganization of popular resistance and international solidarity against this most recent example of US militarism is more urgent than ever.