

# NASA abandons Puerto Rico experiment amid protests

By Carmelo Ruiz

Special to Sentinel-Voice

VEJA BAJA, Puerto Rico (IPS) — The people have spoken loudly and U.S. space scientists from NASA have listened, thus the skies over this Caribbean island are again silent and no more experimental rockets will launch from its northern coast.

The experiments consisted of 11 rocket launches from a makeshift pad on a beach in the northern coast town of Vega Baja. These rockets released chemicals in various layers of the atmosphere to study their effects on telecommunications and radio.

## D.C. Council approves new center

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The District of Columbia Council voted Tuesday in favor of a new \$700 million convention center, and supporters say work could begin before the end of summer.

"We will start our utility work in August and the groundbreaking will take place in September," said Lewis Dawley, general manager of the Washington Convention Center Authority.

Dawley was among the convention and hospitality executives who spent Tuesday waiting for District council members to vote on the project.

After hours of debate, the council gave preliminary approval to the project by a vote of 8-5.

A final vote is expected in two weeks.

"Alexandria, Va. (a suburb of the District) is waiting for us to falter," said Councilman Harry Thomas in urging his colleagues to vote to move ahead with construction.

"This is money the city desperately needs to fund our twin priorities of better services and raising revenues," said Councilwoman Linda Cropp.

"They want us to come in and work in their convention centers, but they don't want us to live here," said Steve Donkin, one of a group of residents who oppose building on a site in a low-income residential neighborhood.

He and another protester were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct after an altercation with police inside council chambers.

Representatives of the hospitality industry say their members will not support building the convention center anywhere else in the District.

Three of the rockets were not launched.

The experiment, Coqui Two, was the object of persistent and heated protests, led by the Committee against Experiments on the Environment.

The Committee claimed that the chemicals released by the rockets were an environmental hazard and that the experiments were of a military, not civilian, nature. Members of Familia Taina — who describe themselves as "socially and environmentally conscious surfers" — say that bathers and surfers in the Puerto Rico north coast began suffering from unusual skin

sores when the Coqui Two experiments began in February.

Similar skin irritations were widespread in the wake of the United States National Aeronautic and Space Administration Coqui One experiments in 1992. The government attributed them to jellyfish stings.

Many disagree. "The rashes and sores of 1992 and today are totally different from jellyfish stings," says Familia Taina spokesman, Hector Javier Pesquera.

Coqui Two opponents are convinced that the experiments were part of a U.S. military program to develop new

"cyber-warfare" weapons.

Chemist and long-time environmentalist Neftali Garcia sees a relationship between the NASA rockets and the controversial High Frequency Advanced Auroral Research Project in Alaska, a U.S. military project to alter the ionosphere.

Although a NASA spokesperson told the local press that the cancellation of Coqui Two was motivated solely by adverse weather conditions, he admitted that the protests, which were carried on around the clock for 52 days, had a real effect on the scientists' morale.

NASA scientists had to go

through a gauntlet of hostile protesters every time they drove in and out of the launch pad area. The demonstrators also had powerful speakers through which they blared music and protest speeches.

Coqui Two opponents also turned to civil disobedience to thwart the rocket launches. Members of the environmentalist groups, Friends of the Ocean, as well as Familia Taina, swam every evening into the restricted waters in front of the launch pad, in kayaks and surfboards. NASA's own safety regulations prohibit rocket launches if there are unauthorized persons within

the safety perimeter.

Helicopters with searchlights, police boats and riot police on the shore tried to apprehend the protesters, but to no avail.

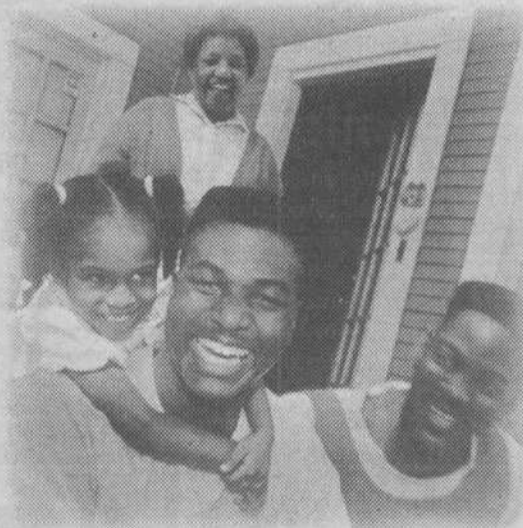
Every evening, kayakers and surfers managed to slip past the law enforcement authorities and enter the restricted waters. On some nights there were as many as 20 protesters, all of them waving flashlights to make their presence known.

Members of Friends of the Ocean and Familia Taina claim that some rockets were launched while they were within the security perimeter,

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