

Puerto Rico at the United Nations

On December 14, 1973 the report of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization which contained the controversial resolution on the colonial status of Puerto Rico and the right to independence of the Puerto Rican people was overwhelmingly passed by the General Assembly.

The struggle to bring the Puerto Rican case to the United Nations dates back to the very inception of the U.N. in San Francisco in 1945, Puerto Rico being the first petitioner in that same year. In 1952 the U.N. voted to accept the U.S. colonial position that any discussion of Puerto Rico should be handled internally by the United States. Within a year the U.S. declared Puerto Rico a "Free Associated State" or "Commonwealth" and the U.S.-dominated General Assembly of the U.N. responded by deciding that Puerto Rico was self-governing and therefore no longer a colony.

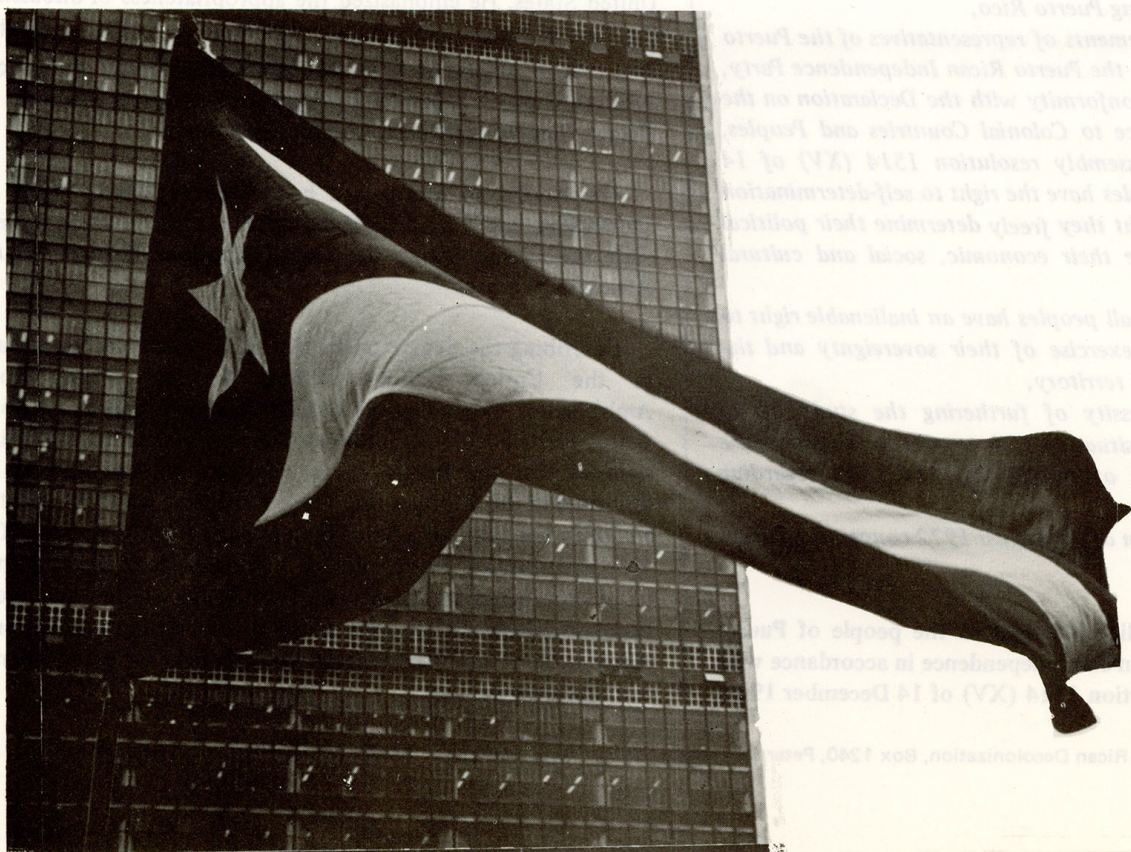
In 1960 it was the representatives of the Puerto Rican liberation movement who requested that the clause "other territories which have not yet attained independence" be added to the General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) which crystallized the international body's condemnation of colonialism. Puerto Rico was the first petitioner to the

Committee of 24 in 1962 but hasn't yet been put on the list of colonized territories illustrating again how influential the U.S. has been in blocking the cause of Puerto Rican independence in the U.N.

Finally, in August 1972, after years of continuous effort on the part of the Cuban delegation to the U.N., the Committee on Decolonization passed a resolution that a report should be made on the situation in Puerto Rico to be presented to the Committee the following year.

In August of 1973 the Decolonization Committee discussed the colonial case of Puerto Rico and invited two representatives of the national liberation movement, Juan Mari Bras, Secretary General of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and Ruben Berrios of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, to speak before the Committee.

Thursday, August 23, Juan Mari Bras, Secretary General of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party spoke before the Committee of 24. He described the history of the Puerto Rican Nationalists' attempts to be heard before the international body, and the history of U.S. colonialism in his country. He spoke of the U.S.



economic domination of the island, citing wages in Puerto Rico as one third lower than U.S. salaries, while the cost of living is 25 per cent higher. The rate of profit per annum on North American investment in Puerto Rico is 30 to 40 per cent, three times higher than the rate of profit realized by U.S. industry on the mainland.

On Friday, August 24, the President of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, Ruben Berrios Martinez, spoke before the Committee on the right of the Puerto Rican people to independence. Eighty per cent of the Puerto Rican economy, he explained, is now controlled by U.S. multinational corporations. Twenty-four U.S.-owned chain stores in Puerto Rico are responsible for ninety per cent of all sales. U.S. repression and psychological and physical persecution of the Puerto Rican people had "covered the country in mourning."

Both men brought before the Committee plans of U.S. multinational oil companies to establish a petroleum "superport" on the island, and emphasized the disastrous implications this would have for the national integrity of Puerto Rico and the survival of the Puerto Rican people.

The culmination of the August discussions was the resolution, reprinted below, which was included in the Committee on Decolonization's 1973 Report:

The Special Committee,

Having considered the question relating to its resolution of 28 August 1972 concerning Puerto Rico,

Having heard the statements of representatives of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and the Puerto Rican Independence Party,

Reaffirming that, in conformity with the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, contained in General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960, all peoples have the right to self-determination and by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development,

Reaffirming also that all peoples have an inalienable right to complete freedom, the exercise of their sovereignty and the integrity of their national territory,

Considering the necessity of furthering the study of all pertinent aspects of the situation with respect to the procedure for the implementation of resolution 1514 (XV) regarding Puerto Rico,

Recalling its resolution of 28 August 1972 concerning Puerto Rico,

1. Reaffirms the inalienable right of the people of Puerto Rico to self-determination and independence in accordance with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960;

2. Requests the Government of the United States of America to refrain from taking any measures which might obstruct the full and free exercise by the people of their inalienable right to self-determination and independence, as well as of their economic, social and other rights, and in particular to prevent any violation of these rights by bodies corporate under its jurisdiction;

3. Requests its Rapporteur, with the assistance of the Secretariat, to collect all pertinent information on the question, including the views of all the parties concerned, for the purpose of facilitating its consideration of the question in 1974;

4. Decides to keep the question under continuous review.

The report, which was discussed in the General Assembly during the month of November, was not voted on until December 14th, an unusually long interval. It provoked extensive debate among the U.N. delegates. Fifteen of the thirty-five countries which spoke in favor of the report addressed themselves specifically to the case of Puerto Rico. Algeria and Libya, two oil producing countries, put particular emphasis on their opposition to the construction of a superport and oil refining complex on the islands of Puerto Rico.

The United States stood alone in denouncing the report's reference to the colonial status of Puerto Rico. The President of the Decolonization Committee and Ambassador of Tanzania, Salim Ahmed Salim, described the United States intervention as an attack on the work of the Committee. He referred to Puerto Rico as a country which had suffered the colonial rule of Spain and which now remains under colonial domination by the United States. He emphasized the appropriateness of discussing the Puerto Rican question in the General Assembly, given the fact that in August of 1972 this international body approved a resolution which called for further investigation on the status of Puerto Rico by the Decolonization Committee.

The resolution was passed by a vote of 104 in favor, 10 abstentions and 5 against. Those countries which voted against were the United States, the United Kingdom, Portugal, South Africa and France.

Describing the debate on Puerto Rico which has taken place in the United Nations General Assembly, the Cuban Ambassador, explaining his delegation's vote, called it a total defeat for U.S. colonial interests. The approval of the resolution signifies that the Puerto Rican question will continue to be discussed in the international body, something which the United States in the past has been able to prevent from happening. The U.S. position that Puerto Rico is a self-governing territory, not to be considered among nations fighting for self-determination, becomes inoperative in light of the overwhelming international recognition of the Puerto Rican people's fight for independence as a just struggle.