Cohen seeks more talks with Vieques panel

By ROBERT FRIEDMAN
STAR Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary William Cohen has asked the special presidential panel on Vieques to hold "additional conversations" with Puerto Rico officials, but such a meeting apparently will not hold up the panel's report, which the Pentagon said Friday could be released next week.

Cohen made known his intention for the meeting, presumably with the governor's working group on Vieques, in a letter to Resident Commissioner Carlos Romero Barcelo.

"Before the panel completes its work . . . I ask that they have additional conversations with the officials that represent Vieques and Puerto Rico," he said in an Oct. 13 letter. "I seek your assistance in facilitating these discussions at the earliest opportunity."

Pentagon spokeswoman Lt. Col. Catherine Abbott explained Friday that while the panel officially ends its tenure once it has issued its report, Cohen had asked its members at a Sept. 21 briefing to hold the meeting.

She said the secretary would be open to receiving further information on the issue up until a final decision is made on whether the Navy should leave Vieques.

The panel will report its findings to Cohen, who will then make his own recommendations to President Clinton. The president will then decide on the Navy's future in Vieques.

Although Cohen has given the media various target dates for the panel's report, Abbott said the Pentagon now hopes to release the findings next week.

"I have not received any letter from Secretary Cohen or any request from anyone for such a meeting," he said.

Appearing somewhat miffed that Cohen's request for the presidential panel-island working group meeting was made to Romero, Morey said: "The proper way to do it would be to send a letter to the working group."

Romero, who said Friday he intended to contact Morey about the letter, added: "I think [the White House and the Pentagon] still don't know what to do about Vieques and they want our approval before they put anything on the table."

"That," he said, "could be very difficult."

Both Morey and Romero seemed wary that Washington wanted to continue negotiations for a Vieques settlement. On Wednesday, Clinton suggested to members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus possible further talks to resolve the issue.

"Our position is that there is nothing further to negotiate," Morey said.

In his letter to Romero, Cohen said that "while the readiness of our troops is paramount, I am also concerned about the quality of life for the residents of Vieques."

He added: "I am ready to move the Navy in a new direction with the citizens of Vieques."

Cohen also noted that "the patriotism of Americans of Puerto Rican ancestry is unquestioned." He cited various Puerto Rican medal winners and the distinguished record of the 65th Infantry Regiment, made up mostly of Puerto Ricans.

His response was in answer to a letter from Romero expressing his concern that the patriotism of Puerto Rican men
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Sources say it could be as early as Monday.

On Tuesday, the Senate Armed Forces Committee will hold a hearing on Vieques. Panel members are expected to testify at the hearing, which are high Navy officials, including Navy Secretary Richard Danzig, and Gov. Rossello, Romero Barcelo and Puerto Rico House Minority Leader Anibal Acevedo Vila.

The committee is chaired by Sen. John Warner. Sen. James Inhofe R-Okl., and Sen. Carl Levin, the committee's ranking Democrat, are scheduled to testify at the hearing.

Serrano said not having any testimony from PIP would be "unfair, undemocratic and... unwise."

Also, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, front-runner for the Republican Party presidential nomination, was urged by island Rep. Jorge de Castro Font, a Popular Democratic Party supporter of Bush for president, to take a position on Vieques.

De Castro Font wrote that it was "of paramount importance that the Puerto Rican people here on the island and the Hispanic community in the states be made cognizant of your views on this matter as soon as possible."

Vieques named one of worst vacation spots in world

By ROBERT FRIEDMAN
STAR Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- The bombs that the Navy "regularly drops at it for target practice" has qualified Vieques as one of the five worst vacation spots in the world, according to the Wall Street Journal.

"That sound you hear isn't the gentle lapping of a warm Caribbean sea or the melodious chirping of tree frogs," the Journal noted in its assessment Friday of truly awful vacations. "It's the booming impact of a live bomb."

Vieques was rated right up there with a beach trip to Cartagena, Columbia, "kiddie capital of the world," a nudist colony in war-torn Croatia, the nine-stroom Falkland Islands and a tour of Asbestos, Quebec, a town whose main attractions are its asbestos mine and asbestos museum.

Runners-up beaten out by Vieques were Chernobyl, site of the world's worst nuclear accident, and Marloth Park, a South Africa tourist resort where wild lions already have attacked six visitors this year.

Commenting on Vieques, the article said: "What a perfect place for a terrible vacation."

It said that the Navy occupies two-thirds of the 21-mile-long island and uses it to perfect its aerial bombing.

"Last year," said the Journal, "3,000 official hits."

The article listed the principal activities on the offshore island as "beautiful beaches, a bay that literally glows in the dark and a U.S. naval base with bombing."

Writer Nancy Keates noted that when she arrived, she found military checkpoints in front of most beaches, "as well as some disturbing signs warning us not to light matches."

Still, she added, she also saw why tourists come to Vieques "with its palm trees sprouting from pearl-white sand, a bay world-famous for its phosphorescent microorganisms, and almost no major development."

The article pointed to the "raging dispute" over the recent Navy bombing accident that claimed the life of civilian guard David Sanes Rodriguez and said that protesters had blocked access to the best beaches.

In other major media news related to the offshore municipality, 60 Minutes II will offer its take on the Vieques issue Tuesday evening at 9 on the CBS network.