

PUERTO RICO - FBI Commits Domestic Terrorism on Independence Movement (by Jan Susler, ZNet)

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February 12, 2006 - [ZNet](#) - "The only domestic terrorist attack here is the U.S. government's attack on the people of Puerto Rico." - New York State Assemblyman José Rivera.

In a move reminiscent of a U.S. Marine invasion of a foreign country, the FBI descended in droves on Puerto Rico on February 10. Without breathing a word of the invasion to either the colonial governor or the chief of police, heavily armed, militarized units of the FBI, including the Special Weapons and Tactics Unit from Miami, hit six different spots throughout the island. Their purpose, they claimed, was to execute search warrants on six independence activists they identified as suspected leaders of the clandestine independence organization, Ejercito Popular Boricua/Macheteros, the same organization whose legendary leader, Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, who the FBI assassinated five months earlier. Their true purpose was widely understood as other: with their show of force, to continue their long campaign to intimidate and criminalize those who support independence for Puerto Rico, particularly in this moment of the resurgence of the left throughout Latin America; and, of course, to detract from their own criminal conduct in taking Ojeda's life. "This is yet another move on the part of the FBI to control and warn those who advocate for the independence of Puerto Rico, exercising their constitutional rights. It appears they are sending a message of intimidation," said independentist activist and attorney Roxana Badillo, who added that they are sorely mistaken if they believe the movement will be intimidated.

Landing in military-style helicopters, accompanied by caravans of vehicles, sometimes with the license plates obscured, FBI agents swarmed private residences and businesses in Trujillo Alto and Río Piedras (in the San Juan metropolitan area), and Mayagüez, San Germán, Aguadilla, and Isabela (in the west of the island), terrorizing entire neighborhoods. The search warrants bore the names and addresses of veteran labor leaders, community leaders, known independentists, and even a Protestant minister respected for his work promoting small projects of self-empowerment for poor people.

In Río Piedras, as Homeland Security helicopters hovered above and sharpshooters watched through their telescopes from neighboring buildings, FBI agents were ransacking the apartment of independentist Liliana Laboy. The Puerto Rican media arrived to cover the remarkable event. With the FBI's murder of Ojeda Ríos fresh on their minds, independence supporters quickly gathered at the closed gates of the condominium, shouting, "Asesinos!" Meanwhile, the FBI had banished Laboy from her apartment, and initially ignored requests from her attorneys to allow them access to their client, grabbing and threatening to arrest the attorneys if they didn't leave the premises.

In San Germán, agents assaulted the offices of the not-for-profit Ecumenical Committee for Community Economic Development [CEDECO, its Spanish acronym], where community activist and independentist William Mohler García was at work. They not only removed Mohler from his office, but they handcuffed him and left him to bake in the hot sun- this, after searching his home, pepper spraying his dog, and subjecting his wife to much humiliation. Supporters gathered at the scene, shouting at the agents: "Get out of here, damned FBI," and "FBI, cowards, assassins, terrorists!" In Aguadilla, the FBI searched the home of another CEDECO director, Presbyterian minister and independentist José Morales. Also in Aguadilla, the FBI spent four hours searching the home of independentist and elementary school teacher VilmaVélez Roldán, while she was at school. Agents threw her two sons out of their home, handcuffed them, and left them outside with no shade. In Isabela, the Cabán family home was searched. In Trujillo Alto, the home of Norberto Cintrón Fiallo was ransacked while he was away at his workplace.

Before leaving the scene in Río Piedras, the FBI, obviously unhappy with the presence of protesters and abundant numbers of media and the prospect of having to face further public exposure, aggressing against all those gathered, including attacking the media with pepper spray. Several journalists were treated by paramedics at the scene, and some went to nearby hospitals. As the caravan of some fourteen vehicles sped from the scene, the agents had their assault weapons pointed at the press and public. Adding insult to injury, the FBI emitted a press release stating, "It appears members of the media and the general public attempted to cross the established law enforcement perimeter, and the use of non-lethal force was utilized. This was done in order to protect members of the media, the public and the law enforcement officers executing this lawful search warrant."

Reaction from the Press

"It gives us pause that in a democratic society, security forces cut off the flow of information, and even worse, attack those who work in journalism, who seek to divulge precise and reliable information," said Annette Alvarez, a television reporter who was sprayed, who spoke in her capacity as president of the Overseas Press Club chapter. Oscar J. Serrano, president of the Journalists Association of Puerto Rico, declared, "The agents didn't use force and gas to defend themselves; they used them offensively to attack the press. The act of an agent emptying his spray can directly in the face of [journalist] Normando Valentín, who had his hands occupied with the instruments of his trade, cannot be excused as negligence. That, and the expression of disdain reflected on the agent's face, are indicative of a specific intent to cause harm, and represents nothing less than a criminal act." The Association of Photojournalists, the Center for the Freedom of the Press, the Organization of Independent Journalists, and the Union of Journalists, Graphic Arts and Ramas Anexas joined in condemning the FBI's use of force on their colleagues.

While the Puerto Rican print, electronic media and radio provided full coverage of this extraordinary militaristic operation, the U.S. press was virtually silent, with only a few newspapers reprinting slightly differing versions of an Associated Press wire story.

Reaction from the Puerto Rican Government

After the September assassination, the FBI lost all hope of credibility in the eyes of Puerto Rican society. Having been told on February 10 only after the FBI had begun its assault, and only that they were serving search warrants on suspected Macheteros, the chief of police, Pedro Toledo (himself a former FBI agent), as well as the head of the Department of Justice were quick to distance themselves from the operation, making public statements that they were not participants. When Toledo learned-after the operation was over- that the FBI asserted that this "ongoing domestic terrorism investigation" averted "a potential attack, where explosives devices were to be utilized," to be "directed at privately owned interests in Puerto Rico, as well as the general public," he insisted that, "[w]ithout a doubt, I should have been informed." Toledo rather resoundingly criticized the entire operation- not just the use of force against the journalists- as having used excessive force, listing the use of so many agents and the incorporation of helicopters. He recalled his own participation in the 1980's in executing search warrants against members of the same clandestine organization, when such incidents never took place. "It was an improper use, completely outside of the norm. This gas (pepper) is used when your life is in danger, against an attacker, not a journalist," he said. However, although he expressed that the Puerto Rican Department of Justice would have jurisdiction to prosecute federal agents for their excessive use of force, he did not express any intention to conduct such a prosecution, or even investigate these FBI crimes on Puerto Rican soil.

The governor was another recipient of such a "courtesy call," which also took place only after the FBI had begun its assault. He, too, expressed indignation at the assault on Puerto Rican journalists, calling it unjustified. However he offered absolutely no criticism of the FBI's invasion of his country, let alone of the agency's failure to even notify him in advance, and failed to insist that the U.S. government be accountable for the acts of its agents committed in Puerto Rico.

Reaction from the Public

The very same afternoon the FBI conducted its show of force, hundreds of people gathered at the federal courthouse, which houses the FBI offices, to express their indignation. Called by the Worker's Socialist Movement [MST by its Spanish acronym], people of all ages and walks of life marched and chanted, as elected officials, spokespeople from a variety of organizations, and those whose homes had been ransacked, spoke.

The following day, fifteen organizations convened a press conference to condemn the FBI's aggressive presence. A spokesperson for CEDECO's support network expressed concern that the highly publicized raid could cost the organization the financial support it receives from grants and foundations and thereby undermine its ability to offer services of education and of rehabilitating homes for people with few resources. Agency spokespeople questioned why the FBI would take important documents related to one of CEDECO's urban housing projects.

Julio Fontanet, president of the Puerto Rican Bar Association, expressed a common theme: "To complain to the federal government or the government of Puerto Rico is an exercise in futility, and the FBI acts with total impunity in Puerto Rico." Observing that this type of FBI operation in Puerto Rico has become a custom, Fontanet announced his intention to take the matter to international fora. The former dean of the Eugenio María de Hostos School of Law, law professor Carlos Rivera Lugo, echoed Fontanet, censuring the Puerto Rican government "for permitting the U.S. armed forces to act with total impunity in this country." The National Hostosiano Independence Movement coincided: "The governor of Puerto Rico has the obligation to stand up and defend Puerto Rico. We demand that governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá energetically condemn the FBI's abusive actions in Puerto Rico, and that as a representative of the people he express the general indignation we all feel, and that he demand respect for our people." The experience moved that organization to commit to redouble its efforts to "expel forever from our national territory the federal court and the FBI," because "the only thing the presence in Puerto Rico of these federal dependencies has caused is injury, damage, and impediments to our right as a people to self-determination."

Amnesty International of Puerto Rico expressed its concern for the FBI's conduct both in executing the search warrants and attacking the press, reminding the FBI that they are not above the law of civil and human rights, and that, like any other law enforcement agency, they must comply with basic human rights provided by international law.

Representatives of all the political parties have, however timidly, expressed preoccupation with the FBI's conduct toward the independence movement, but it was the independence party representative who expressed the sentiment strongly felt throughout the diverse independence movement: "This operation is the most crude proof that Puerto Rico is a colony," noted Juan Dalmau, secretary general of the Puerto Rican Independence Party. "If the FBI thinks that with these acts it is going to intimidate the independentists, it is mistaken. In the face of these abuses, the independence movement will respond just as it has historically, with more militancy, more patriotism and a greater commitment to struggle." That will be necessary, given the rumors that the FBI will return to conduct more search and destroy missions, and to increase the wave of repression.

All translations from Spanish to English are the author's.

Websites where photos and videos are available:

<http://pr.indymedia.org/news/2006/02/13197.php>

<http://www.primerahora.com/noticia.asp?guid=F9260F8D7C3A47B682B0BA4AAE99B5D2>

<http://www.primerahora.com/noticia.asp?guid=4822DBB409014D1C8C77C89458E01C5A&newscat=pano>

NOTES:

[there is no notes in the original article's text, just this list at the end - poster's note]

(1) Jesús Dávila, "Los allanamientos encienden la chispa en todo borinquen," El Diario/La Prensa, February 12, 2006.

(2) For most Puerto Ricans, it was also reminiscent of August 30, 1985, when, in another island wide invasion, the FBI arrested a multitude of independence activists and accused them of participating in a conspiracy involving \$7.6 taken from a Wells Fargo depot, an action for which the Ejercito Popular Boricua/Macheteros claimed responsibility.

(3) Boricua Popular Army/Sugarcane Cutters.

(4) Associated Press, "Abogada independentista acusa a federales de intimidación," El Nuevo Día, February 10, 2006.

(5) Jesús Dávila, "Ofensiva FBI contra independentistas," El Diario/La Prensa, February 11, 2006.

(6) Id.

(7) Jackeline Del Toro Cordero, "Operativo federal buscaba documentos," El Vocero, February 11, 2006.

(8) Comunicado de Prensa, Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano de Aguadilla, www.redbetances.com, February 12, 2006.

(9) Carmen Edith Torres, "Irrumpe el FBI en seis puntos del País," El Nuevo Día, February 11, 2006.

(10) Associated Press, "OPC censura agresión contra la prensa," El Nuevo Día, February 10, 2006.

(11) Mabel M. Figueroa, "Condena al vicioso ataque a reporteros: Una sola voz de repudio al FBI," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006.

(12) With the notable exception of El Diario/La Prensa.

(13) See, e.g., Maritza Díaz Alcaide, "Callaron lo del 'ataque terrorista'," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006; Yanira Hernández Cabiya, "Informada la Policía tras iniciar el operativo," El Nuevo Día, February 10, 2006; José R. Ortúzar, "El Súper se lava las manos," El Vocero, February 11, 2006. The chief of police of Mayagüez, whose police were roundly criticized by the public for having cooperated with the FBI during its assassination of Ojeda Ríos, and who was also not informed by the FBI about their operation, was also quick to distance himself from this assault. Associated Press, "Jefe de la Policía Mayagüez confirma operativo," El Nuevo Día, February 10, 2006.

(14) FBI Press Release, February 10, 2006.

(15) Maritza Díaz Alcaide, "Callaron lo del 'ataque terrorista'," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006.

(16) Daniel Rivera Vargas, "Con poder Justicia para acusar," El Nuevo Día, February 12, 2006.

(17) Yanira Hernández Cabiya, "Informada la Policía tras iniciar el operativo," El Nuevo Día, February 10, 2006.

- (18) Maritza Díaz Alcaide, "Callaron lo del 'ataque terrorista'," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006.
- (19) Id.
- (20) EFE, "Convocan a manifestación contra FBI," El Nuevo Día, February 10, 2006.
- (21) Melisa Ortega Marrero, EFE, "CEDECO niega vínculos con el independentismo puertorriqueño," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006.
- (22) Associated Press, "Varias voces expresan rechazo a operativo del FBI y su trato a periodistas," Primera Hora, February 12, 2006.
- (23) EFE, "Denunciarán ante organismos internacionales actos del FBI," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006.
- (24) Jackeline Del Toro Cordero, "Académico critica el operativo," El Vocero, February 11, 2006.
- (25) "MINH [Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano] condena atropello FBI," www.redbetances.com, February 12, 2006.
- (26) Id.
- (27) Melissa Correa Velázquez, "FBI choca con periodistas," El Vocero, February 11, 2006.
- (28) "Dalmau: tienen la Isla en estado de sitio," El Diario/La Prensa, February 12, 2006.
- (29) "Dalmau asegura FBI mantiene a la Isla en estado de sitio," Primera Hora, February 11, 2006.
- (30) Ricardo Cortés, "Anticipados más allanamientos," El Nuevo Día, February 12, 2006.

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=54&ItemID=9834>