



## **SENATE SEEKS PRESIDENT'S VIEWS ON PUERTO RICO STATUS ALTERNATIVES**

The U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chair Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and Ranking Member Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) formally requested the White House to share President's position regarding The Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2010 (H.R. 2499) and constitutionally-viable status alternatives in a letter dated May 27 following a hearing on the legislation. The Senators requested the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status clarify the White House position on the issue. Puerto Rico has been a United States territory since taking possession of the island in 1898 following the Spanish American War.

Puerto Rico has had limited self-government since 1952 and Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917 but Puerto Ricans do not have voting representation that is proportionate to population in the U.S. House of Representatives and they do not have any representation in the U.S. Senate. As such, although Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, they do not enjoy sovereignty within the union of the United States. The U.S. Congress has plenary powers of responsibility and authority over Puerto Rico and its population of 4 million U.S. citizens. Puerto Rico currently elects a single non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives.

### **White House Yet to Weigh in on Status Debate**

Representatives of the President's Task Force did not attend the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing on H.R. 2499. In their letter to the Task Force, Senator's Bingaman and Murkowski expressed concern that representatives of the Executive branch did not participate in the committee discussion and that the Task Force has not expressed a position on the issue of constitutional options. Media coverage indicates that the President's Task Force has been reluctant to publicly address a positions on Puerto Rico's status because of the influence of Representatives Luis Gutiérrez (D-IL) and Nydia Velázquez (D-NY), both of whom are longtime supporters of the island's current unequal territorial status and oppose Puerto Rico's full integration to the union. However, the Puerto Rico Resident Commissioner is the elected representative of Puerto Rico residents. Puerto Rico residents elect neither Velasquez nor Gutierrez.

Puerto Rico Task Force members participated in previous status deliberations in Congress in 1998, 2000, 2005 and 2007 during the Clinton and Bush administrations. The last report issued by the Task Force was in 2007. The Task Force is expected to issue its report in October. Absent a White House response to the Senate's request, the Senate is unlikely to act on H.R. 2499. Mid-term elections will take place in November and a new Congress will convene in January.

President Obama issued an executive order in October 2009 continuing the Task Force adding social and economic reform to the Task Force's work plan. The taskforce held its first public

hearing in San Juan, Puerto Rico on March 3, 2010 and a second session in Washington on May 26, 2010. The taskforce is set to present its report to President Obama in October 2010. Commentators have questioned the expansion of the Task Force role to address broader socio-economic issues, which are viewed as an attempt to distract attention from the core issue of status that the Task Force was created to resolve. This criticism is compounded by the group's reluctance to date to publicly share its position on the unresolved status issue.

### **Pierluisi Feels Presidential Opinion Unnecessary**

Puerto Rico delegate, Democrat Pedro Pierluisi has stated that he believes additional guidance to Congress from the President's Task Force is unnecessary, as President Obama has stated that he will support the will of the people of Puerto Rico. In an interview with Caribbean Business, Pierluisi noted that that President Obama has stated that the "status issue should be resolved through a fair and neutral democratic process, allowing our people to choose from all valid options, including the island's current status, statehood and independence."