

UN Special Committee Underscores Why Puerto Rico Self-Determination Process is Needed

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The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization met Monday June 9 to discuss a draft resolution urging the United States to expedite the process of self-determination for the people of Puerto Rico.

The Special Committee has already adopted 25 resolutions or decisions on the issue to date, each reiterating the right of Puerto Rico to self-determination or independence.

The Special Committee on Decolonization was established in 1962 to monitor the implementation of UN Resolution 1514, which states, "All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development." Current Special Committee membership includes many former Caribbean colonies, such as Cuba, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Dominica.

The Special Committee discussed the U.S. federal imposition of the death penalty for federal crimes, despite Puerto Rico's constitutional ban on capital punishment. The Committee also discussed military installations and the return of lands to the Puerto Rican government.

An 18-person panel was invited to help UN officials consider the draft resolution, composed largely of representatives from Puerto Rican political parties and organizations. Included on the panel were current Governor Anibal Acevedo-Vilá, Puerto Rico Senate President Kenneth D. McClintock, and House of Representatives Speaker José F. Aponte-Hernández. McClintock and Aponte-Hernández are members of the pro-Statehood majority in the island's legislature.

In his testimony, Puerto Rico House Speaker José Aponte-Hernández stressed that the U.S. Congress must be the body through which the Puerto Rico self-determination process is established. "Puerto Rico's status will not be resolved unless Congress recognizes the necessity of acting proactively on this issue," he said. He also cited the positive outcomes and benefits that have resulted from Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States. "Puerto Rico has been blessed by all that comes with being under the American flag, from Medicare...to Pell Grants."

The Special Committee on Decolonization traditionally supported independence as the primary method by which colonies can achieve self-governance. But in his testimony, McClintock discussed Statehood for Puerto Rico as the most practical and most popular solution for Puerto Rico. McClintock referred to a poll published by El Nuevo Día in which 57% of Puerto Ricans preferred statehood, while only 5% supported independence.

Speaking to the Special Committee's interest in finding a final status option, McClintock described as unconstitutional the "New Enhanced Commonwealth" option pushed by status-quo supporters. He described it as an option that will "inevitably lead to the end of any self-determination process and, therefore, the perpetuation of the current territorial status." Puerto Rico is currently a territory of the United States but Puerto Ricans have no sovereign voting representation in the U.S. Congress.

McClintock identified the current situation in Puerto Rico as one where “The U.S. federal government continues to enact laws and issue regulations that affect the lives of the American citizens of Puerto Rico who lack proportional and voting representation in Congress.”