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Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples

Summary record of the 5th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 18 June 2021, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. McGuire (Grenada)

Contents

Special Committee decision of 5 August 2020 concerning Puerto Rico

Hearing of petitioners

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Special Committee decision of 5 August 2020 concerning Puerto Rico (A/AC.109/2021/L.7 and A/AC.109/2021/L.13)

1. **The Chair** informed the Committee that the delegations of Azerbaijan and Mongolia had indicated their wish to participate in the Committee's consideration of the item as observers.

2. **Mr. Alizada** (Observer for Azerbaijan), speaking on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, said that the people of Puerto Rico had the right to self-determination and independence, on the basis of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), and the Movement called for the prompt implementation of the related resolutions, many of which had been adopted by consensus within the Committee. It hoped that, as in previous years, the Committee would adopt by consensus another resolution on the question of Puerto Rico that took into account the Movement's position.

3. The Movement remained concerned at the imposition of a financial oversight board on the Government of Puerto Rico, which would encroach on its already limited power over its budget. The political subordination of the Puerto Rican people impeded their sovereign capacity to take decisions to address their serious economic and social problems, including the current fiscal crisis, the insolvency of the Government of Puerto Rico and the need to restructure the public debt. It was also hampering their ability to respond to the humanitarian crisis triggered by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, which had exacerbated existing economic and social problems and caused poverty levels to rise from 45 to 60 per cent, leading to mass migration and undermining efforts to achieve sustainable development.

4. The United States must assume its responsibility for expediting the process that would allow the Puerto Rican people to fully exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence. It must also return to them the occupied land and facilities of Vieques Island and the Roosevelt Road Naval Station.

5. **Mr. Sandoval Mendiola** (Observer for Mexico), speaking on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), said that the importance of the Latin American and Caribbean character of Puerto Rico had been highlighted at the highest level at the CELAC Summit held in January 2017. The Community had, moreover, noted the Committee's decisions on the subject and had reiterated that it was a matter of great interest to it. CELAC member countries were committed to continuing to work in accordance with international law, particularly General Assembly resolution 1514

(XV), to make the Latin American and Caribbean region an area free of colonialism.

6. **Ms. Marin Sevilla** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said it was regrettable that, more than 100 years after the United States had colonized Puerto Rico, and with the Committee having considered the question every year since 1972, Puerto Rico was still unable to exercise its inalienable right to self-determination and independence. Her Government wished once more to defend the Puerto Rican people's legitimate aspiration to live in a free, independent and sovereign State and to exercise their right to determine freely the future of Puerto Rico and its political, economic, social and cultural model. The political subordination of Puerto Rico to the United States prevented it from taking decisions in various spheres, including development, since the United States Congress controlled, inter alia, monetary policy, international relations and defence. The situation was exacerbated by the current financial crisis, rising poverty rates, problems with public debt, migration and other issues, all of which had been made worse by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

7. The United States must expedite the process leading to the independence and sovereignty of Puerto Rico and must comply with all the relevant United Nations resolutions and with the Charter of the United Nations. The United States Government should also return the territory and facilities occupied by its military forces in Puerto Rico and pay for clean-up operations.

8. Her Government reaffirmed the Latin American and Caribbean character of Puerto Rico, which had maintained its national identity and its own language, culture and history despite over 100 years of political subordination. Her delegation expressed its full support for the work of the Committee on the question of Puerto Rico, exhorted it to expedite the decolonization process for the territory and urged the General Assembly to consider the question of Puerto Rico in all its aspects. She looked forward to the day when Puerto Rico would become a fully-fledged State Member of the United Nations.

9. **Mr. Jiménez** (Nicaragua) said that Puerto Rico was a Latin American and Caribbean country that required solidarity and support from the international community in its struggle for self-determination and independence. The many previous resolutions of the Committee on the colonial status of Puerto Rico had clearly set out the urgent need for the United States to start the decolonization process. The General Assembly should therefore fully consider all aspects of the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. That nation could no

longer be excluded from the process of freedom and independence in Latin America and the Caribbean. It had every right to pursue development and implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as an independent country. No one should be left behind in that process.

10. **Mr. Zambrana Torrelío** (Plurinational State of Bolivia) said that as a sponsor of the draft resolution, his delegation reaffirmed the inalienable right of the people of Puerto Rico to be a free State and reiterated its support for their self-determination. His Government would continue to demand that the administering Power initiate, without further delay, proceedings to enable Puerto Rico to exercise peacefully and freely its right to full independence in accordance with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) and the Committee's related resolutions and decisions. He appealed to the members of the Committee to continue their work to ensure respect for the will of the Puerto Rican people, as expressed in the 2012 referendum, and their ability to take sovereign decisions to address their urgent needs, including those relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

11. His delegation urged compliance with General Assembly resolution 75/123 on the Fourth International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism and called upon the administering Powers to cooperate fully with the Committee to develop a constructive programme of work on a case-by-case basis.

12. **Mr. Pedroso Cuesta** (Cuba) said that since the imposition of the misleading status of Free Associated State of Puerto Rico almost 70 years earlier, the United States Congress had exercised complete authority over matters of defence, international relations, foreign trade and monetary policy in Puerto Rico. In 2016, the United States Supreme Court, Congress and even the Administration itself had unmasked the falsehood when they had clearly confirmed that Puerto Rico did not enjoy sovereignty and was a colonial territory entirely subject to the rule of Washington.

13. Since the Committee's previous discussion, economic and social conditions in Puerto Rico had worsened considerably. The economic depression and public debt burden had been compounded by a series of natural disasters and further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The military presence of the United States had increased, forming part of the plan for military intervention in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Puerto Rico was being used as a base for aggression against other countries, in contravention of General Assembly resolution 57/140.

14. Cuba reaffirmed the inalienable right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination and independence, in

accordance with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), and the applicability to the question of Puerto Rico of the fundamental principles set out therein. Cuba was firmly committed to the self-determination and independence of Puerto Rico, based on unwavering friendship, deep historical roots and the common struggle they had shared for over 100 years. The final determination of the fate of Puerto Rico was not a domestic issue for the United States; it rested with the Committee and the entire international community.

Hearing of petitioners

15. **The Chair** said that, in accordance with the Committee's usual practice, petitioners would be invited to take a place at the petitioners' table and would withdraw after making their statements.

16. **Mr. Koppel** (Socialist Workers Party) said that the priority of the financial oversight board imposed on Puerto Rico by the colonial Government of the United States of America was to pay the wealthy investors holding \$74 billion in bond debt, at the expense of the vast majority of workers. The financial oversight board had slashed jobs, pensions and hard-won protections. In response, working people in Puerto Rico were striking for better wages and conditions; protests were also being held across the island against the privatization of the public electricity company.

17. His party urged working people in the United States and worldwide to support those struggles and demanded that the Government of the United States cancel the debt of Puerto Rico. The independence of Puerto Rico from colonial rule would also strengthen the position of working people in the United States, who faced a common enemy in the ruling capitalist class, the Government and both major parties. Working people in the United States could identify with Puerto Rican resistance to the brutal cutbacks imposed by the financial oversight board. They, themselves, would not be free as long as the United States maintained its colonial bondage over Puerto Rico but, by fighting together, they could win. The revolutionary example of Cuba showed the road to genuine freedom and independence for Puerto Rico. That freedom would never be granted, but must be taken. He urged the Committee to continue to condemn colonial rule by the United States over Puerto Rico.

18. **Mr. Ramos** (The ProLibertad Freedom Campaign) said that, in its 122-year relationship with the United States, the Puerto Rico nation had been subjected by the administering Power to numerous human rights violations, as well as to economic and political exploitation and campaigns designed to eliminate the

language, national identity and culture of Puerto Ricans. The oppression meted out to those who revolted was typical of a colonial relationship. The contract accorded to LUMA Energy, a United States-Canada joint venture, was the latest attempt by the United States Government to privatize basic services in Puerto Rico. It would lead to unemployment, the defunding of retirement pensions and millions of dollars in lost revenue for Puerto Rico. Moreover, it would increase dependency on fossil fuels and push up the price of other basic services. Puerto Ricans had migrated en masse to the United States in search of the employment, educational resources and basic services that, owing to mismanagement and corruption within the colonial Government, were unavailable in Puerto Rico; however, since their arrival, they had experienced unemployment, homelessness, exploitation, racism and criminalization. Forced relocation and economic refugeeism were thus among the human rights violations perpetrated against Puerto Rico for decades.

19. His organization did not support the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act, a bill currently before Congress that pretended to resolve colonialism but gave the United States Government the power to overrule the choices of Puerto Ricans, thereby proving their colonial domination. Rather, it supported the decolonization process established under international law. The idea that the colonizing Power should have the right to control self-determination mechanisms was dangerous.

20. **Ms. Negron** (Herminia Health) said that, although petitioners came before the Committee year after year to describe the problems that plagued Puerto Rico, nothing changed. Puerto Rico was a non-self-governing territory, despite assertions to the contrary. The very existence of the financial oversight board and its extensive powers over the Government of Puerto Rico were incompatible with the United Nations definition of self-governance. The Supreme Court of the United States had ruled in the Insular Cases that Puerto Rican citizens were not entitled to the full protections of the Constitution, but only to the most basic rights. Under the territorial clause, the United States Congress retained plenary powers over Puerto Rico and, according to the United States Constitution, sovereignty resided in the United States, which exercised jurisdiction over the most basic aspects of life in the territory as well as all matters relating to foreign affairs and military defence. Puerto Ricans did not participate directly in decisions taken on those matters, nor did they elect the decision makers.

21. Self-governance had long eluded Puerto Rico owing to its designation as a commonwealth of the United States. Economic dependency had been the

strategy adopted to keep people from opposing the status quo. Migration and welfare had served as palliative substitutions for self-governance. Shamefully, the United Nations had long turned a blind eye to a situation that was contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In order to stand by that Declaration, the United Nations should affirm the inalienable right of the people of Puerto Rico to self-determination.

22. **Mr. Ortiz** (Call to Action on Puerto Rico) said that his network of compatriots in the diaspora urged the Committee and the General Assembly to condemn the United States Government's colonial regime, which had always been in violation of international law. Hurricanes and a dictatorial financial oversight board had caused economic collapse and unprecedented human displacement. A majority of Puerto Ricans now resided away from the archipelago. The social infrastructure of Puerto Rico was being dismantled, schools and hospitals closed, labour and environmental laws weakened and its most important resources privatized. LUMA Energy, a recently formed private company lacking any real experience, had already been paid \$159 million to operate the electrical grid in Puerto Rico. United States investors were buying up land and property, intensifying gentrification. The decline of the social order in Puerto Rico had led to a serious increase in acts of violence – and even murder – against women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community. Puerto Ricans were slowly being replaced by North Americans, some of whom had no regard for the local community, history, values or requirements.

23. Two pieces of legislation that purported to address the colonial status of Puerto Rico were under discussion in the United States Congress. The statehood bill maintained the lie that the Puerto Rican people were overwhelmingly in favour of becoming the fifty-first State of the United States. The so-called self-determination bill pretended to create a mechanism that would change the colonial status. However, the United States Department of Justice had recently stated that any mechanism designed to end the existing colonial status must include that colonial status as an option. The voices of Puerto Ricans who wanted to manage their own natural resources and dismantle the capitalist infrastructure that exported their land's riches for the benefit of United States capital interests were ignored. However, Puerto Ricans were no longer afraid to demand justice, even though many had suffered political persecution. The situation in Puerto Rico must be resolved, and he demanded the support of the Committee in that regard.

24. **Mr. Melendez Rivera** (Frente Independentista Boricua) said that Puerto Ricans had endured the effects

of colonialism for over a century, with their economy, media and educational systems completely in the hands of the colonizer. Essential services such as health care, transport, energy and education were neglected, as a means of forcing Puerto Ricans to leave and justifying the privatization and foreign takeover of public services. That practice was a gross violation of international law and constituted ethnic cleansing or genocide. Moreover, pension funds had been gutted and wages had been reduced across all economic sectors, while the cost of goods remained high owing to the continued implementation of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, which protected United States maritime interests. The Puerto Rican people identified as a Latin American nation, their national consciousness, culture and language remained intact and they continued their struggle to achieve justice and national liberation.

25. The United States must cease violating international law, remove all obstacles to the self-determination of Puerto Rico, including but not limited to its military and police presence and repressive agencies, immediately engage in a process of decolonization in Puerto Rico and transfer all sovereign powers to the Puerto Rican people. The United Nations should re-establish an observer seat for Puerto Rico in the Committee and give it observer status in the General Assembly. The international community should monitor the decolonization process. The Puerto Rican people demanded their inalienable right to self-determination, independence and freedom. They aspired to a fair, just and equitable society, free from discrimination and gender-based violence, with Puerto Rico assuming its rightful place in the community of peaceful nations.

26. **Mr. Rivera** (Puertorriqueños Unidos En Acción) said that neither of the two bills on Puerto Rico before the Committee on Natural Resources of the United States Congress met the requirements of international law and General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV). In drafting the bills, it had been taken for granted that the political problem of Puerto Rico was a domestic matter. Only a select group of people who supported the bills or were in favour of the process conceived by members of Congress of Puerto Rican descent had been allowed to attend the hearings, while those holding dissenting views or proposing a third way for the decolonization of Puerto Rico had been excluded. The election of a Democrat as President of the United States would not advance the decolonization of Puerto Rico, which both Democrats and Republicans had treated like a private estate. Moreover, it would be wrong to believe that the mere mention, in a bill before Congress, of a constitutional assembly on status as an ideal process for decolonization would actually advance decolonization.

The two bills had afforded the main parties a platform that would enable them to vie for the right to manage the colony in the next four-year electoral term. Minority parties had thus been forced to participate, thereby dividing the forces demanding sovereignty. The legal analysis on the two bills submitted by the Department of Justice at the request of the Committee on Natural Resources stated plainly that the fundamental source of Puerto Rico law was United States Congressional law. It also required the current status of Free Associated State to be included as an option, even though that had been rejected by the Puerto Rican people, by more than 54 per cent, in a referendum held in 2012. The serious discussion would begin when the United States Government, through its diplomatic delegation, joined the work of the Special Committee and when colonialism was eradicated.

27. **Mr. Natal Albelo** (Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana) said that after the imposition on Puerto Rico of a financial oversight board that decided how the budget of the Puerto Rican people was to be used and which laws should be passed, not even those in favour of the status quo dared to speak of self-government. In a recent opinion, the United States Department of Justice had insisted on retaining the colonial relationship with Puerto Rico as an option for the future, while opposing the inherent right of the Puerto Rican people to decide democratically the relationship they wished to have with the United States. Puerto Rico was going through the worst economic, fiscal, social and political crisis in its history. Budgets had been slashed, pensions cut and goods and services privatized, while poverty and inequality were on the rise. The Committee must intensify its efforts to compel the United States Government to recognize the right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination. It was up to Puerto Ricans residing within and outside of Puerto Rico to exercise their right to come together and discuss the future of the nation. A constitutional assembly on status would be the appropriate mechanism for presenting all decolonization alternatives and bringing the colonial situation to an end. A just, participatory and democratic process was needed, in which proponents of independence, statehood and free association could advocate for their preferred status and leave it to the people to decide. His party would continue to fight for greater equality and solidarity.

28. **Ms. Ramos** (American Association of Jurists) said that her organization supported the draft resolution before the Committee. The colonialism imposed by the United States on Puerto Rico had intensified with the establishment of the financial oversight board, which had been designed to ensure the collection of an

unaudited and illegal debt that benefited only the vulture funds at the expense of an impoverished people. Puerto Ricans' lack of political power had also been exacerbated by the recent decision to privatize basic services, including electricity. Attempts were being made to violate the human right to public education, as the academic standing of the University of Puerto Rico was gradually undermined by temporary contracts, low salaries, increased tuition costs and course cancellations, among other factors. The health and food insecurity of Puerto Ricans, especially those in Vieques and Culebra, was alarming. The existing economic model of imperialism by invitation allowed government bodies in Puerto Rico to continue granting subsidies and handing over the people's resources to transnational corporations.

29. Her organization reiterated its support for the independence of Puerto Rico and its solidarity with the countries of the Caribbean and Latin America that had been victims of interventionist policies by the United States. It condemned the use of Puerto Rico as a base for launching imperial attacks in the region. The United States must, as a matter of urgency, create conditions conducive to the full implementation of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) and the Committee's resolutions on Puerto Rico. International efforts should be redoubled so that the case of Puerto Rico could be referred to the General Assembly without further delay.

30. **Mr. Torres-Rivera** (Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano) said that the adoption of the Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) and the creation of the financial oversight board were proof that Puerto Rico had been and remained a colony, in violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. The claim made by the United States Government in 1953 that Puerto Rico had reached a measure of self-government compatible with self-determination had clearly been false. In the bill relating to self-determination currently before the United States Congress, it was proposed that a constitutional assembly be convened to hold deliberations for the definition of formulas for a future political relationship, outside of the territorial clause, and that it should have the capacity to negotiate and come to an agreement with the United States Government on options for self-determination to be submitted for consideration by the Puerto Rican people. The initiative before Congress proposed that the United States recognize the right of the Puerto Rican people to convene a constitutional assembly and incorporate in its domestic law the obligations it had assumed by ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1992. However, in a letter

addressed to the Chair of the Committee on Natural Resources of the House of Representatives, the Department of Justice had stated that the bill should include the current territorial status as an option and had rejected the inclusion of free association as a separate option, in clear violation of General Assembly resolutions 1514 (XV) and 1541 (XV). The executive branch was thereby setting up yet another roadblock to self-determination.

31. The Committee should fulfil its responsibilities by supporting the initiative, with a view to achieving an inclusive, democratic, just and informed decolonization process, and by ensuring access by the people of Puerto Rico to balanced and comprehensive information on the resources available in the international community, including economic and social assistance, to support the transition to sovereignty. Given the colonial Power's military might and influence over the economy and information, the Committee should ensure that the population was not pressurized, manipulated or deceived by fearmongering in relation to its exercise of sovereignty. The Committee should also urge the United States to start a dialogue on decolonization with Puerto Rico in accordance with international law. Lastly, the question of Puerto Rico should be referred as a matter of urgency to the General Assembly.

32. **Mr. Dalmau** (Puerto Rican Independence Party) said that the colonial experiment of the United States in Puerto Rico had failed. After more than 15 years of economic depression and with an unpayable public debt of over \$70 billion, impoverished Puerto Ricans faced the structural limitations of a collapsed colonial regime and lacked the competitive tools that independence would offer. The policies of the financial oversight board had further impoverished the island and led to the dismantling of essential services. Gentrification was resulting in the displacement of Puerto Ricans by foreigners. Multimillionaires from the United States took advantage of the poverty of the population, together with tax breaks provided by the United States Government, to buy up properties and then segregate and exclude whole communities. Recent elections, however, had signalled a change of climate in Puerto Rico, with pro-independence parties obtaining 14 per cent of the vote. Moreover, a new bill submitted to Congress proposed the establishment of a status assembly in which delegates would discuss and draft definitions on self-determination options outside the territorial clause of the United States Constitution, with the subsequent holding of a referendum in which Puerto Ricans could choose between the options decided upon in negotiations with the United States Congress. In a recent statement, however, the Federal Department of

Justice had declared that the bill for self-determination should include the current territorial status as an option, thereby making the absurd proposal that colonialism be included as an option for resolving the problem of colonialism. Such a claim was unacceptable and must be denounced. The support of the international community was crucial in that regard: it had the tools and the responsibility to create favourable conditions that would encourage the United States to fulfil its obligations under General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV). The persistence of colonialism in Puerto Rico was an affront to the dignity of the Puerto Rican people and violated their fundamental rights. The case of Puerto Rico must be brought before the General Assembly, since that would place strong political pressure on the United States to act. His party hoped that the draft resolution would be adopted by consensus and would be the prelude to a strong final push towards the independence of Puerto Rico.

33. **Mr. Alomar** (Organization for Culture of Hispanic Origins) said that he would continue to petition before the Committee on behalf of his people until Puerto Rico was free. Puerto Rico was always looked upon as a burden. In reality, it was the United States that placed financial, social, environmental and psychological burdens on the people of Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans should not only gain their freedom but should be collecting reparations from the United States for the land, goods and resources that had been robbed from them. Laws such as Acts Nos. 20 and 22 produced tax breaks for wealthy United States elites. United States-based businesses were operating on the island, generating millions of dollars in revenue and not paying any taxes. The year-long power outages experienced in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria demonstrated that the island and its people were considered by the United States merely as property. It was a case of modern-day slavery and anyone who remained complicit in it was guilty. The relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico was not complicated: it was abusive and catastrophic but, in fact, quite simple. The solution to the problem was also simple: the colonial status of Puerto Rico must be removed. The Committee existed for the sole reason that colonial rule had been deemed unconstitutional and a violation of human rights. The idea that it would be too difficult for the island of Puerto Rico to operate independently was a convenient lie made up by the corporate elite. The truth was that the United States did not want to give up its stolen property. His was a nation of free people and should be recognized as such.

34. **Ms. Capote** (Frente Socialista) said that the United States Government used sophisticated methods

to bring about the economic strangulation of the nation, encouraging the exodus of Puerto Ricans while promoting foreign invasion and usurpation of their assets and national resources. The recent privatization of the electricity supply had given the company LUMA Energy 100 per cent direct control of the Puerto Rican energy distribution grid, 68 per cent control of drinking water reservoirs and the widest fibre optic network in the Caribbean. Elimination of subsidies meant that 65 per cent of the population faced an increase in the cost of services. United States investors, on the other hand, were benefiting from the adoption of Acts Nos. 20, 22 and 60, at the expense of local businesses. The financial oversight board was devoted almost exclusively to cutbacks in health care, pensions and education. Neither of the two bills before Congress was a genuine instrument of decolonization. Contrary to the claims made by the United States, the decolonization of Puerto Rico was an international matter, not a domestic one. Any action intended to end its colonization must comply with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), with the transfer of plenary powers to the citizens of Puerto Rico as the first step. Any decolonization effort should also involve the active participation of the United Nations. The Committee should condemn the violation of international law committed by the United States in ceasing to report on the administration of the territory 66 years earlier and should require it to provide reparation to the Puerto Rican people for 123 years of colonial exploitation. Any bill relating to the colonial situation of Puerto Rico should be declared null and void; and only citizens of Puerto Rico, not merely residents, should be designated as eligible voters. The mechanisms for integration defined in General Assembly resolution 1541 (XV) should be declared inapplicable to Puerto Rico, since the latter had never been able to exercise full sovereignty. In view of the constant threat posed by the acceleration of acts of appropriation by the United States, the case of Puerto Rico should be brought before the General Assembly.

35. **Mr. Vieira** (El Grito) said that deception, lies, exploitation and subjugation had been the cornerstone of the United States-Puerto Rican relationship for over 120 years. Puerto Ricans had been promised democracy but, in reality, were under colonial rule. It was time for truth and accountability. Profitable deals were being made through the privatization of schools, hospitals, the water supply and, recently, the electric grid. Land grabs were occurring while Puerto Ricans were facing forced evacuation.

36. The colonizer was also controlling the fate of the Puerto Rican people through the recent discussion of

two bills in the United States Congress. The first bill, the Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act, would be ruinous, leading to a violation of human rights and international law. The second, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021 (HR 2070), sought to permit a status assembly but the Federal Department of Justice had declared that the current territorial status must be included as an option. Neither bill was in line with international will or the provisions of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV). The truth that Puerto Ricans had an inalienable right to independence must be made self-evident. Independence was the right of all peoples.

37. **Mr. Lugo Segarra** (Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico, Movimiento Libertador) said that all the laws enacted by Congress in relation to Puerto Rico had been designed solely to maintain the interests of the United States in that territory. The sole purpose of the referendums and so-called elections held every four years had been to perpetuate the colonial situation. Since the inception of the Committee, the United States had tried to obstruct decision-making in favour of free peoples and, even more so, those yet to attain freedom. Its own interests took precedence over all else and everything hinged on its prime objective: world domination. At intervals, the United States would trump up some scheme to deceive Puerto Ricans and the international community into believing that it was promoting democracy in the colony to encourage self-government or allow it to exercise its right to self-determination, as if either of those steps could be possible without freedom and sovereignty and under military occupation. The bill recently presented by Puerto Ricans in Congress was again not a true exercise in self-determination. The current situation in Puerto Rico, arising from the policies imposed by the financial oversight board, was dire. The only purpose of the board was to pay back the creditors of an illegal debt foisted upon Puerto Rico. Inequality had increased, with both children and adults sinking into poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic, together with the earthquakes and hurricanes that had preceded it, had been devastating both economically and socially for Puerto Ricans. Thousands had emigrated and thousands of foreigners were arriving in Puerto Rico, buying up lands and properties and setting up businesses that did not generate jobs for locals. The international community should address the situation in Puerto Rico as a matter of urgency and resolve the problem of its colonial situation.

38. **Ms. Torres López** (Gran Oriente Nacional de Puerto Rico) said that her organization urged the Committee to treat the issue of Puerto Rico as a social emergency and humanitarian crisis and act with the sense of urgency felt by a people under colonialism,

rather than merely going through the motions by adopting essentially the same resolution year after year. Her demands were prompted by the grave political, economic and social crises experienced by the Puerto Rican people and the escalation in the dictatorship imposed by the United States Congress under PROMESA. The legislature and the governor were prevented from exercising their functions as elected entities. The financial oversight board, supposedly appointed to pay off public debt to creditors, had taken control of all the basic institutions in Puerto Rico, had refused to submit to an independent audit of the debt and had favoured the vulture creditors over the best interests of Puerto Rico. Austerity measures had placed a stranglehold on the budget of working people, undermined the delivery of essential services and led to the divestment of national assets through unfair private capital transactions. The financial oversight board also intended to liberalize environmental protection legislation in order to allow the indiscriminate use of the limited natural resources of Puerto Rico. It had ordered cuts in government budgets, increases in the cost of utilities and a 10 per cent reduction in pensions. For a decade, Puerto Rico had suffered a severe recession and the minimum wage was well below the poverty line. As the next step towards the implementation of resolution 1514 (XV), the Committee should urge the General Assembly to declare the United States in violation of international law.

39. **Ms. Malespin** (New York Boricua Resistance) said that Puerto Rico had been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic; widespread power outages persisted following recent island-wide blackouts; access to health care remained dire; and many schools had been shuttered owing to austerity measures. Decolonization was therefore not a theoretical debate but an urgent necessity. For over a century, the United States had treated Puerto Rico as an incubator for neo-liberal policies, with disastrous results. The financial oversight board had used the debt crisis to enrich Wall Street investors and vulture funds, while slashing funding to public schools and pensions. Fiscal tax incentives such as those introduced by Act No. 60 – designed to stimulate the economy of Puerto Rico – had instead attracted wealthy investors intent on buying up land and displacing residents. Pharmaceutical companies received billions of dollars in tax benefits yet had failed to provide COVID-19 tests at the height of the pandemic. Puerto Rico had recently been forced to privatize its electric grid to a company that, instead of addressing the root issues of the island's electrical supply, had threatened to lay off workers, raised utility rates for working class consumers and failed to address power outages.

40. Decolonization was not annexation. Statehood would not eliminate the financial oversight board nor acknowledge the violent and racist history of the United States against the people of Puerto Rico. Neither would it eliminate systemic poverty on the island. All statehood offered was integration with a violent empire that historically had shown little regard for the Puerto Rican people. Status referendums and constitutional assemblies were not meaningful to decolonization efforts.

41. True decolonization could only occur through the independence of the island. It required the abolition of the financial oversight board and cancellation of the debt. Decolonization required financial reparations from the United States and full acknowledgement of the violence perpetrated against the Puerto Rican people. A transition towards a socialist government was needed in order to prioritize the needs of the working class and provide Puerto Ricans with the wherewithal to thrive in their homeland. Resources were necessary in order to address systemic issues such as gender violence, displacement, anti-blackness, ableism and other forms of systemic oppression.

42. **Ms. Pagán** (Vidas Viequenses Valen) said that the use of her island, Vieques, for bombing and experimentation with non-conventional weapons by the United States Navy and the Allied Forces for more than six decades had resulted in the displacement of the population, the loss of two thirds of the land and its contamination with toxic products including Agent Orange, napalm and depleted uranium. The Viequenses continued to suffer, as collateral damage, alarmingly high rates of cancer, cardiac dysfunction and cerebral vascular disease. The inhabitants were awaiting the construction of a detonation chamber, announced in 2019, to control toxic waste and gases generated in the clean-up process of the Superfund site. Meanwhile, deadly toxins would continue to pollute the environment and kill the people of Vieques, and the Navy still defended open burning and open detonation as *modus operandi*. In the absence of a hospital since the devastation of Hurricane Maria, meagre emergency medical services were available in improvised facilities. The islanders were treated as second-class citizens of the United States and their right to health, medical and other basic services was violated. Transport services were vital for access to medical services, educational opportunities, cultural development, economic growth and tourism. The lack of basic supplies for consumers and suppliers created unacceptable stress for the sick and the elderly. In order to live and prosper in their homeland, the people of Vieques required the establishment of a complete hospital with access to

medical helicopter service for emergencies, the installation of detonation chambers to deal with toxins, and adequate maritime transportation.

43. **Ms. Nogales-Molinelli** (Representative at Large, Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC)) said that while Puerto Rico had been undergoing dismantling for over a decade, that process had accelerated in 2016 with the enactment of PROMESA and the establishment of the financial oversight board, which had been granted the power of veto over laws in Puerto Rico. The Government's policies, actions and omissions had resulted in a steady expulsion of people, including professionals and families; deaths due to the lack of essential services, hospitals, electricity, doctors and specialists; and interminable delays in obtaining medical diagnoses. Hundreds of threatening letters from the financial oversight board had prevented Puerto Rican elected representatives from exercising their legislative functions. The board had thus usurped their already limited financial autonomy, destroying institutions and governance, privatizing essential services, liberalizing the granting of permits and weakening environmental protection, while promoting the privatization of beaches in Puerto Rico. The destruction of large conservation areas had left vital water resources unprotected. Furthermore, Puerto Rico had become a tax haven and had been deprived of \$21,194 million in income as a result of tax incentives. The ideology of privatization espoused by the financial oversight board promised to be as harmful as the former debt and austerity policies. The United States was killing the Puerto Rico people through its necropolicies, which were linked to the colonial relationship. The decolonization of Puerto Rico could therefore wait no longer.

44. **Ms. de Lourdes Guzman** (Movimiento Union Soberanista) said that the United States, invoking the territorial clause in its Constitution, continued to exercise its colonial powers over Puerto Rico with absolute impunity and to obstruct any efforts made by the Puerto Rican people to achieve self-determination. The Federal Department of Justice, in its legal opinion on the bills before Congress, not only dismissed the right of Puerto Rico to convene a status assembly but also insisted that colonialism should be included as one of the options. The seven persons appointed to head the financial oversight board had no connection whatsoever with Puerto Rico. Yet they had been appointed to the most senior positions and allowed to dispose of the island's budget as they saw fit without any reference to social realities. They took decisions that were contrary to the interests of Puerto Rico and were slashing the budget for essential services, leading to the

impoverishment of the people. Those decisions had generated many social ills and an escalation in migration. While the financial oversight board had used millions of dollars from the budget of Puerto Rico to pay financial advisers, lawyers, strategic consultants and other staff, it was promoting debt restructuring plans that gave priority to speculators and hedge fund investors over the pressing needs of Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, it had sought to implant its neoliberal agenda in Puerto Rico, destroying the island's educational, health-care and cultural institutions, dismantling its electricity service and stripping public employees of their pensions to cover an illegitimate, unaudited debt.

Draft resolution A/AC.109/2021/L.7: Decision of the Special Committee of 5 August 2020 concerning Puerto Rico

45. **Mr. Pedroso Cuesta** (Cuba), introducing draft resolution [A/AC.109/2021/L.7](#) on behalf of the sponsors, said that the text reiterated that Puerto Rico was a Latin American and Caribbean nation and recognized that its status prevented its people from making sovereign decisions to address the serious and worsening economic and social problems that affected them. The draft resolution also made mention of issues related to the financial oversight board, the United States Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Sánchez Valle* and action taken against Puerto Rican independence activists. Adoption by consensus of the text would, at the present juncture, be the most effective contribution that the Committee could make to the struggle of the people of Puerto Rico to exercise their right to self-determination.

46. *Draft resolution A/AC.109/2021/L.7 was adopted.*
The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.