

118TH CONGRESS  
1ST SESSION

# H. R. 379

To provide compensation to certain residents of the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, for the use of such island for military readiness, and for other purposes.

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## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JANUARY 17, 2023

Mrs. GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Natural Resources, and in addition to the Committee on the Judiciary, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned

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## A BILL

To provide compensation to certain residents of the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, for the use of such island for military readiness, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Vieques Recovery and  
5 Redevelopment Act of 2023”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 The Congress finds the following:

1           (1) Vieques is an island municipality of Puerto  
2 Rico, measuring approximately 21 miles long by 4  
3 miles wide, and located approximately 8 miles east  
4 of the main island of Puerto Rico.

5           (2) Prior to Hurricane Maria, residents of  
6 Vieques were served by an urgent medical care facil-  
7 ity, the Susana Centeno Family Health Center, and  
8 residents had to travel off-island to obtain medical  
9 services, including most types of emergency care be-  
10 cause the facility did not have the basic use of x-ray  
11 machines, CT machines, EKG machines,  
12 ultrasounds, or PET scans.

13           (3) The predominant means of transporting  
14 passengers and goods between Vieques and the main  
15 island of Puerto Rico is by ferry boat service, and  
16 over the years, the efficiency of this service has fre-  
17 quently been disrupted, unreliable, and difficult for  
18 cancer patients to endure to receive treatment. Each  
19 trip to Ceiba, Puerto Rico, for the cancer patient is  
20 an additional out-of-pocket expense ranging from  
21 \$120 to \$200.

22           (4) The United States Military maintained a  
23 presence on the eastern and western portions of  
24 Vieques for close to 60 years, and used parts of the  
25 island as a training range during those years, drop-

1       ping over 80 million tons of ordnance and other  
2       weaponry available to the United States military  
3       since World War II.

4               (5) The unintended, unknown, and unavoidable  
5       consequences of these exercises were to expose  
6       Americans living on the islands to the residue of  
7       that weaponry which includes heavy metals and  
8       many other chemicals now known to harm human  
9       health.

10              (6) According to Government and independent  
11       documentation, the island of Vieques has high levels  
12       of heavy metals and has been exposed to chemical  
13       weapons and toxic chemicals. Since the military ac-  
14       tivity in Vieques, island residents have suffered from  
15       the health impacts from long-term exposure to envi-  
16       ronmental contamination as a result of 62 years of  
17       military operations, and have experienced higher  
18       rates of certain diseases among residents, including  
19       cancer, cirrhosis, hypertension, diabetes, heavy metal  
20       diseases, along with many unnamed and  
21       uncategorized illnesses. These toxic residues have  
22       caused the American residents of Vieques to develop  
23       illnesses due to ongoing exposure.

24              (7) In 2017, Vieques was hit by Hurricane  
25       Maria, an unusually destructive storm that dev-

1 astated Puerto Rico and intensified the existing hu-  
2 manitarian crisis on the island by destroying existing  
3 medical facilities.

4 (8) The medical systems in place prior to Hur-  
5 ricane Maria were unable to properly handle the  
6 health crisis that existed due to the toxic residue left  
7 on the island by the military's activities.

8 (9) After Maria, the medical facility was closed  
9 due to damage and continues to be unable to per-  
10 form even the few basic services that it did provide.  
11 Vieques needs a medical facility that can treat and  
12 address the critical and urgent need to get life-sav-  
13 ing medical services to its residents. Due to legal re-  
14 strictions, the Federal Emergency Management  
15 Agency (in this Act referred to as "FEMA") is un-  
16 able to provide a hospital where its capabilities ex-  
17 ceed the abilities of the facility that existed prior to  
18 Maria; therefore Vieques needs assistance to build a  
19 facility to manage the vast health needs of its resi-  
20 dents.

21 (10) Every American has benefitted from the  
22 sacrifices of those Americans who have lived and are  
23 living on Vieques and it is our intent to acknowledge  
24 that sacrifice and to treat those Americans with the

1 same respect and appreciation that other Americans  
2 enjoy.

3 (11) In 2012, the residents of Vieques were de-  
4 nied the ability to address their needs in Court due  
5 to sovereign immunity, *Sánchez v. United States*,  
6 No. 3:09-cv-01260-DRD (D.P.R.). However, the  
7 United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit  
8 referred the issue to Congress and urged it to ad-  
9 dress the humanitarian crisis. This bill attempts to  
10 satisfy that request such that Americans living on  
11 Vieques have a remedy for the suffering they have  
12 endured.

13 **SEC. 3. SETTLEMENT OF CLAIMS AGAINST THE UNITED**  
14 **STATES FOR CERTAIN RESIDENTS OF THE IS-**  
15 **LAND OF VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO.**

16 (a) IN GENERAL.—An individual claimant who files  
17 a claim for compensation under this section with the Spe-  
18 cial Master, appointed pursuant to subsection (c), shall be  
19 awarded monetary compensation as described in sub-  
20 section (b) if—

21 (1) the Special Master determines that the  
22 claimant is or was a resident, the child of a resident,  
23 or an immediate heir (as determined by the laws of  
24 Puerto Rico) of a deceased claimant on the island of  
25 Vieques, Puerto Rico, during or after the United

1 States Government used the island of Vieques, Puer-  
2 to Rico, for military readiness;

3 (2) the claimant previously filed a lawsuit or an  
4 administrative claim, or files a claim not later than  
5 120 days after the date of the enactment of this Act  
6 against the United States Government for personal  
7 injury, including illness or death arising from use by  
8 the United States Government of the island of  
9 Vieques for military readiness; and

10 (3) the claimant submits to the Special Master  
11 written medical documentation that indicates the  
12 claimant contracted a chronic, life threatening, or  
13 physical or mental disease or illness, including can-  
14 cer, hypertension, cirrhosis, kidney disease, diabetes,  
15 or a heavy metal poisoning during or after the  
16 United States Government used the island of  
17 Vieques, Puerto Rico, for military readiness.

18 (b) AMOUNTS OF AWARD.—

19 (1) IN GENERAL.—A claimant who meets the  
20 requirements of subsection (a) shall be awarded  
21 compensation as follows:

22 (A) \$50,000 for 1 disease described in sub-  
23 section (a)(3).

24 (B) \$80,000 for 2 diseases described in  
25 subsection (a)(3).

1 (C) \$110,000 for 3 or more diseases de-  
2 scribed in subsection (a)(3).

3 (2) INCREASE IN AWARD.—In the case that an  
4 individual receiving an award under paragraph (1)  
5 of this subsection contracts another disease under  
6 subsection (a)(3) and files a new claim with the Spe-  
7 cial Master for an additional award not later than  
8 10 years after the date of the enactment of this Act,  
9 the Special Master may award the individual an  
10 amount that is equal to the difference between—

11 (A) the amount that the individual would  
12 have been eligible to receive had the disease  
13 been contracted before the individual filed an  
14 initial claim under subsection (a); and

15 (B) the amount received by the individual  
16 pursuant to paragraph (1).

17 (3) DECEASED CLAIMANTS.—In the case of an  
18 individual who dies before making a claim under this  
19 section or a claimant who dies before receiving an  
20 award under this section, any immediate heir to the  
21 individual or claimant, as determined by the laws of  
22 Puerto Rico, shall be eligible for 1 of the following  
23 awards:

24 (A) Compensation in accordance with  
25 paragraph (1), divided among any such heir.

1 (B) Compensation based on the age of the  
2 deceased as follows:

3 (i) In the case of an individual or  
4 claimant who dies before attaining 20  
5 years of age, \$110,000, divided among any  
6 such heir.

7 (ii) In the case of an individual or  
8 claimant who dies before attaining 40  
9 years of age, \$80,000, divided among any  
10 such heir.

11 (iii) In the case of an individual or  
12 claimant who dies before attaining 60  
13 years of age, \$50,000, divided among any  
14 such heir.

15 (c) APPOINTMENT OF SPECIAL MASTER.—

16 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Attorney General shall  
17 appoint a Special Master not later than 90 days  
18 after the date of the enactment of this Act to con-  
19 sider claims by individuals and the Municipality.

20 (2) QUALIFICATIONS.—The Attorney General  
21 shall consider the following in choosing the Special  
22 Master:

23 (A) The individual's experience in the proc-  
24 essing of victims' claims in relation to foreign  
25 or domestic governments.



1           (B) The individual’s balance of experience  
2           in representing the interests of the United  
3           States and individual claimants.

4           (C) The individual’s experience in matters  
5           of national security.

6           (D) The individual’s demonstrated abilities  
7           in investigation and fact findings in complex  
8           factual matters.

9           (E) Any experience the individual has had  
10          advising the United States Government.

11         (d) AWARD AMOUNTS RELATED TO CLAIMS BY THE  
12         MUNICIPALITY OF VIEQUES.—

13           (1) AWARD.—The Special Master, in exchange  
14           for its administrative claims, shall provide the fol-  
15           lowing as compensation to the Municipality of  
16           Vieques:

17           (A) STAFF.—The Special Master shall pro-  
18           vide medical staff, and other resources nec-  
19           essary to build and operate a level three trauma  
20           center (in this section, referred to as “medical  
21           facility”) with a cancer center and renal dialysis  
22           unit and its equipment. The medical facility  
23           shall be able to treat life threatening, chronic,  
24           heavy metal, and physical and mental diseases.  
25           The medical facility shall be able to provide

1 basic x-ray, EKG, internal medicine expertise,  
2 medical coordination personnel and case man-  
3 agers, ultrasound, and resources necessary to  
4 screen residents for cancer and the other pre-  
5 vailing health problems.

6 (B) OPERATIONS.—The Special Master  
7 shall fund the operations of the medical facility  
8 to provide medical care for pediatric and adult  
9 patients who reside on the island of Vieques, al-  
10 lowing the patients to be referred for tertiary  
11 and quaternary health care facilities when nec-  
12 essary, and providing the transportation and  
13 medical costs when traveling off the island of  
14 Vieques, until such time as medical testing es-  
15 tablishes that the disease levels are reduced to  
16 the average in the United States.

17 (C) ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERTISE.—The  
18 Special Master shall ensure that the Adminis-  
19 trator of FEMA provides all administrative and  
20 technical expertise and oversight in the bidding  
21 and construction of the facility but the design  
22 and abilities of the hospital shall be determined  
23 by the Special Master considering the medical  
24 and research needs of the residents of the is-

1 land of Vieques. All costs shall be part of the  
2 municipality's compensation.

3 (D) INTERIM SERVICES.—Before the med-  
4 ical facility on the island of Vieques is oper-  
5 ational, the Special Master shall provide—

6 (i) urgent health care air transport to  
7 hospitals on the mainland of Puerto Rico  
8 from the island of Vieques;

9 (ii) medical coordination personnel  
10 and case managers;

11 (iii) telemedicine communication abili-  
12 ties; and

13 (iv) any other services that are nec-  
14 essary to alleviate the health crisis on the  
15 island of Vieques.

16 (E) SCREENING.—The Special Master  
17 shall make available, at no cost to the patient,  
18 medical screening for cancer, cirrhosis, diabetes,  
19 and heavy metal contamination on the island of  
20 Vieques.

21 (F) ACADEMIC PARTNER.—The Special  
22 Master shall appoint an academic partner, with  
23 appropriate experience and an established rela-  
24 tionship with the Municipality of Vieques  
25 shall—

1 (i) lead a research and outreach en-  
2 deavor on behalf of the Municipality of  
3 Vieques;

4 (ii) select the appropriate scientific ex-  
5 pertise and administer defined studies,  
6 conducting testing and evaluation of the  
7 soils, seas, plant and animal food sources,  
8 and the health of residents; and

9 (iii) determine and implement the  
10 most efficient and effective way to reduce  
11 the environmental toxins to a level suffi-  
12 cient to return the soils, seas, food sources,  
13 and health circumstances to a level that re-  
14 duces the diseases on the island of Vieques  
15 to the average in the United States.

16 (G) DUTIES.—The Special Master shall  
17 provide amounts necessary for the academic  
18 partner and medical coordinator to carry out  
19 the duties described in subparagraphs (A)  
20 through (D).

21 (H) PROCUREMENT.—The Special Master  
22 shall provide amounts necessary to compensate  
23 the Municipality of Vieques for—

24 (i) contractual procurement obliga-  
25 tions and additional expenses incurred by

1 the Municipality as a result of the enact-  
2 ment of this section and settlement of its  
3 claim; and

4 (ii) any other damages and costs to be  
5 incurred by the Municipality, if the Special  
6 Master determines that it is necessary to  
7 carry out the purpose of this section.

8 (I) CONSULTING FIRMS.—The Special  
9 Master shall provide amounts necessary for the  
10 Special Master to contract with consulting  
11 firms for technical advice on any aspect of the  
12 Special Master’s duties.

13 (J) POWER SOURCE.—The Special Master  
14 shall determine the best source of producing  
15 independent power on the island of Vieques that  
16 is hurricane resilient and can effectively sustain  
17 the needs of the island and shall authorize such  
18 construction as an award to the Municipality of  
19 Vieques.

20 (2) SOURCE.—Amounts awarded under this Act  
21 shall be made from amounts appropriated under sec-  
22 tion 1304 of title 31, United States Code, commonly  
23 known as the “Judgment Fund”, as if claims were  
24 adjudicated by a United States District Court under  
25 section 1346(b) of title 28, United States Code.

1           (3) DETERMINATION AND PAYMENT OF  
2 CLAIMS.—

3           (A) ESTABLISHMENT OF FILING PROCE-  
4 DURES.—The Attorney General shall establish  
5 procedures whereby individuals and the Municipi-  
6 pality may submit claims for payments under  
7 this section to the Special Master.

8           (B) DETERMINATION OF CLAIMS.—The  
9 Special Master shall, in accordance with this  
10 subsection, determine whether each claim meets  
11 the requirements of this section. Claims filed by  
12 residents of the island of Vieques that have  
13 been disposed of by a court under chapter 171  
14 of title 28, United States Code, shall be treated  
15 as if such claims are currently filed.

16       (e) ACTION ON CLAIMS.—The Special Master shall  
17 make a determination on any claim filed under the proce-  
18 dures established under this section not later than 150  
19 days after the date on which the claim is filed.

20       (f) PAYMENT IN FULL SETTLEMENT OF CLAIMS BY  
21 INDIVIDUALS AND THE MUNICIPALITY OF VIEQUES  
22 AGAINST THE UNITED STATES.—The acceptance by an  
23 individual or the Municipality of Vieques of a payment of  
24 an award under this section shall—

25           (1) be final and conclusive;

1           (2) be deemed to be in full satisfaction of all  
2           claims under chapter 171 of title 28, United States  
3           Code; and

4           (3) constitute a complete release by the indi-  
5           vidual or Municipality of such claim against the  
6           United States and against any employee of the  
7           United States acting in the scope of employment  
8           who is involved in the matter giving rise to the  
9           claim.

10          (g) CERTIFICATION OF TREATMENT OF PAYMENTS  
11          UNDER OTHER LAWS.—Amounts paid to an individual  
12          under this section—

13               (1) shall be treated for purposes of the laws of  
14               the United States as damages for human suffering;  
15               and

16               (2) may not be included as income or resources  
17               for purposes of determining eligibility to receive ben-  
18               efits described in section 3803(c)(2)(C) of title 31,  
19               United States Code, or the amount of such benefits.

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