

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

NYDIA M. VELAZQUEZ

7TH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

July 17, 2019

Eric S. Dreiband
Assistant Attorney General
United States Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Assistant Attorney General Dreiband:

I write to express my deep concerns over the escalation of violence in Puerto Rico and request the Department of Justice (DOJ) immediately act to preserve Puerto Ricans' civil rights. Specifically, I ask that you deploy DOJ personnel on the island to observe and document police activity during this period.

As you know, the island has seen an increasing number of protests based on recent corruption arrests and other grievances stemming from inappropriate messages written by the Governor and top officials.¹

The escalation comes despite Police Commissioner Henry Escalera's previous assurances that protests would not turn violent.² Recent social media footage suggests that this has not been the case, and that questionable riot control practices have been implemented to disperse or arrest protestors. One particularly disturbing video showed a female civilian who was encouraging protestors to refrain from throwing objects at police. In response, police discharged a rubber bullet at her back and fired again as she turned around.

Puerto Rico's police force, unfortunately, has a history related to problematic policing practices and disproportionate use of force.³ It is my belief that the federal government must employ all appropriate mechanisms to prevent and address grievances stemming from alleged abusive practices. I am also troubled by reports that federal personnel from agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement will be involved in law enforcement activities related to the protests.

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/puerto-rico-governor-ricardo-rossello-defies-calls-to-resign-despite-escalating-protests/>

² <https://caribbeanbusiness.com/puerto-rico-police-chief-monitors-protests/>

³ <https://www.prd.uscourts.gov/puerto-rico-police-department-reform-case-documents-civil-case-number-12-2039-gag>

Therefore, I immediately urge the Department to coordinate a concrete strategy that focuses on protecting these Americans' civil rights.

Such strategy should include, at minimum:

- Deploy DOJ personnel on the Island to observe and document police activity during this volatile period;
- Provide a telephone hotline, email inbox, and bilingual social media avenues to ensure that citizens with grievances are able to provide footage or detailed accounts of abusive policing practices; and
- Include a review of the federal government's current response to unrest in Puerto Rico and remove agencies whose responsibilities are not appropriately matched to meet current needs.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress