

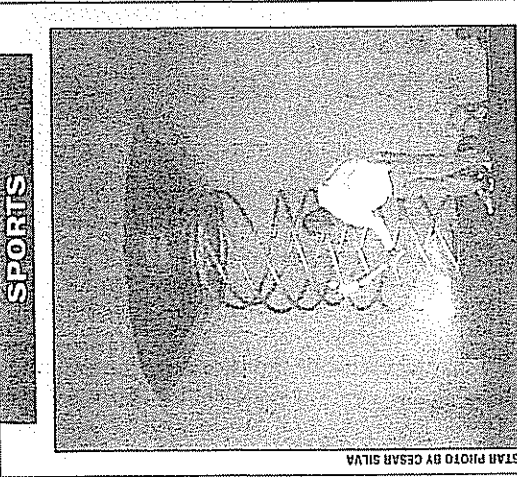
# The San Juan Star <sup>50¢</sup>

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Fortuño: That's 50 years of operations if facility stays open

# Observatory closure may cost \$200 million

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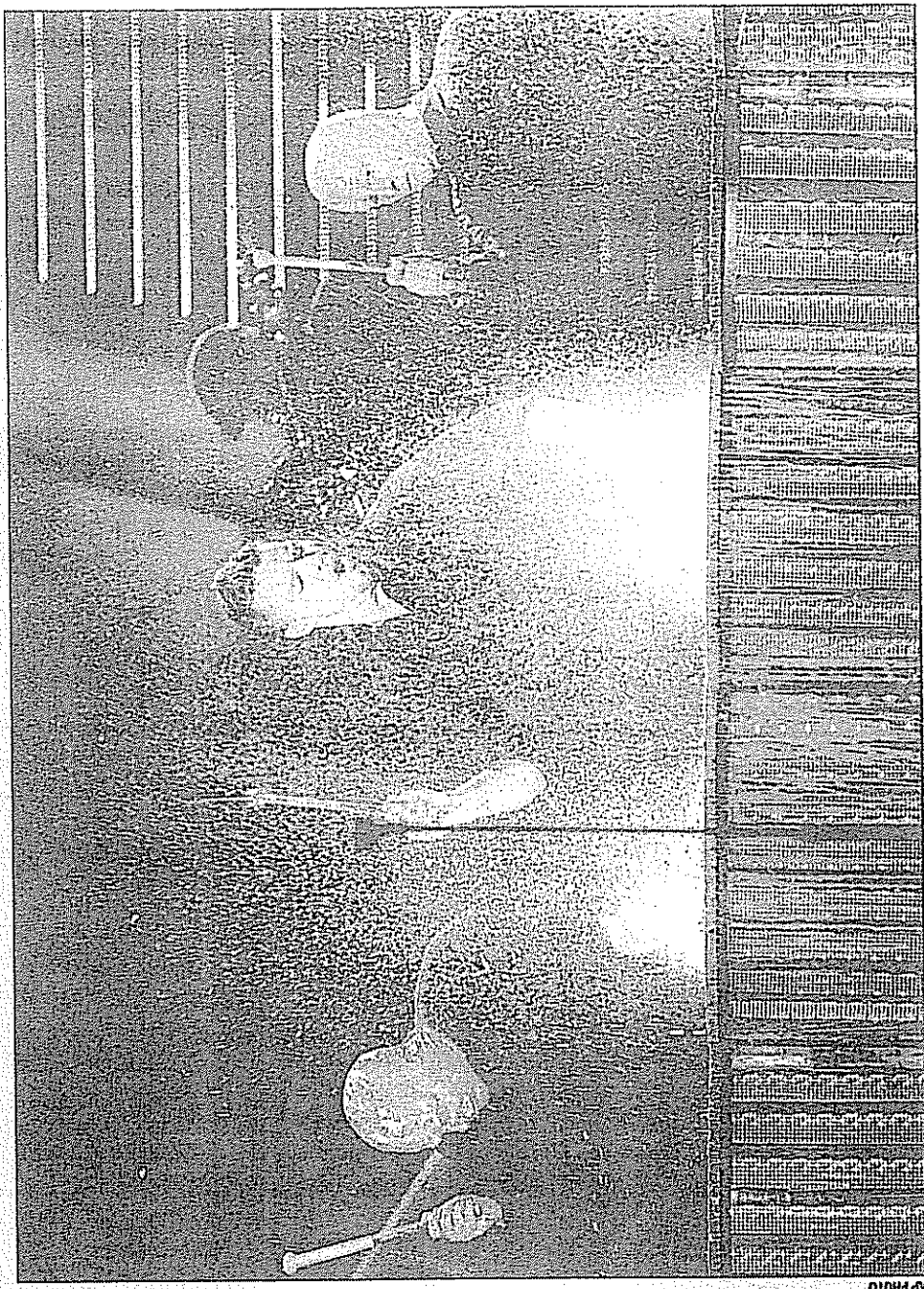


STAR PHOTO BY CESAR SILVA

**P.R. opens CAC Games with baseball victory**

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**Latin Grammys open with a Vegas-style bang**



AP PHOTO

Ricky Martin and duo Man Group perform during the opening act of the 6th annual Latin Grammy Awards telecast in Las Vegas on Thursday.

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# Complete observatory closure could run \$200 million

## Fortuño: Same sum would keep facility operating for 50 years

BY ROBERT FRIEDMAN  
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STAR Washington Bureau

**C**losing down and dismantling the Arecibo Observatory and returning the land to its original state could cost some \$200 million, according to estimates cited Thursday by Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño.

That sum, appropriated over 50 years, would allow the observatory to operate its current projects — including the tracking of asteroids that could be on a course to smash into the Earth and possibly killing untold millions — for the next half-century.

That was one of the deductions to come out of a hearing of the House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee on what is known as NEOs (Near Earth Objects), which include comets and asteroids that could pass close, in astronomical terms, to the Earth's orbit, and those that could be potentially hazardous.

Fortuño said if the observatory is closed down by the National Science Foundation then the governor of Puerto Rico could demand that the forested area near the north coast island town where the facility is located be restored to its original state. The cost of the restoration has been put at \$200 million, he said.

But the resident commissioner said a strong bipartisan feeling in the panel could go a considerable ways to saving the observatory before its funding gets cut from the current \$8 million to \$4 million annually in 2011.

If the NSF doesn't agree to keep the observatory going, then pressure would be applied in Congress to legislate its continuance, Fortuño said.

The observatory's budget of \$10.5 million already has been sliced to \$8 million and the NSF plans to further cut it by another \$4 million in four years. Meanwhile the federal science agency is contemplating whether to shut down the observatory completely. NASA, the federal government's agency dealing with space, so far has not been willing to help fund the observatory at Arecibo.

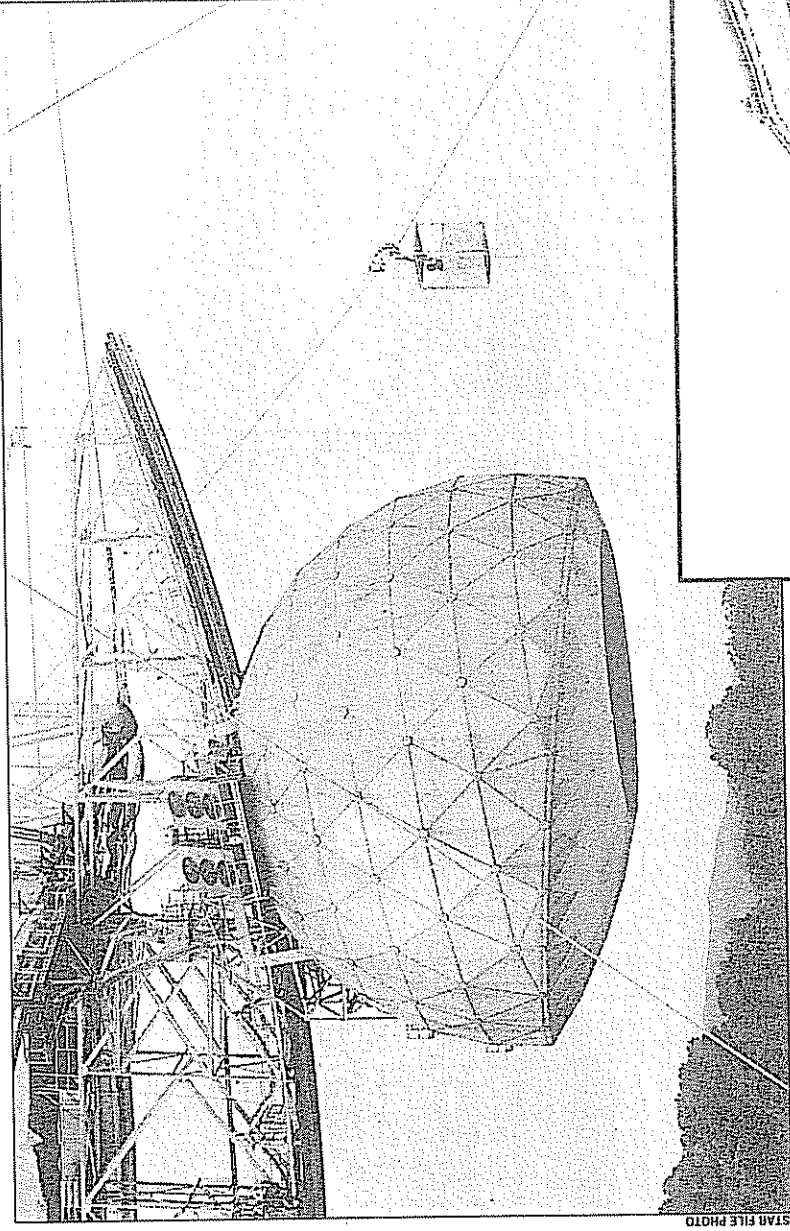
The hearing Thursday included contemplation of a bill co-sponsored by, among others, Fortuño, House Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., a member of the subcommittee. The bill would halt any plans by the NSF to close down the Arecibo operation.

In their introductory remarks, both panel chairman Mark Udall, D-Colo., and ranking member Tom Feeney, R-Fla., indicated that they favored keeping the observatory going.

Udall raised the possibility of NASA providing funds to keep the Arecibo facilities operating and Feeney said it would be a "mistake" if the NSF financial cuts cause the radar facility to shut down.

### Focus on Near Earth Objects

In his testimony, Fortuño linked the observatory's ability to track NEOs with the purpose of the hearing: to make sure the



STAR FILE PHOTO



PHOTO COURTESY TO THE STAR

**Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño, right) makes a case for keeping the Arecibo Observatory open during a House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee hearing on Capitol Hill on Thursday.**

government is working to ensure public safety from falling cosmic material.

"Closing the observatory," Fortuño said, "will severely limit our ability to quickly and accurately refine the orbits of newly emerging threats, and reduce our monitoring capabilities. . . . The observations performed with the radar are critical for identifying asteroids that might be on a collision course with Earth."

The subcommittee and a panel of scientists discussed a scheduled close encounter on Friday, the 13th of April, in the year 2029.

On that day, asteroid 2004 MN4 is scheduled to fly past Earth 18,600 miles above the ground, close enough to be considered by NASA an "eye-popping close encounter."

In 2004, astronomers were predicting that asteroid might

crash into the Earth and cause destruction across an area the size of Texas.

But the possible direct hit was shown not to be accurate the following year. Radar observations that gave the Earth a reprieve were made at the Arecibo Observatory. The size of the asteroid, according to NASA, is about the size of the 1,000-foot telescope dish in the mountains of Puerto Rico.



STAR FILE PHOTO

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