

## Obama administration reviewing White House status task force

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### *F*ocus is on full inclusion of Puerto Rico into national policies

The Obama administration is reviewing whether a White House status task force fits into its overall aim of fully including Puerto Rico into national policy initiatives.

White House Director of Intergovernmental Affairs Cecilia Muñoz, the Obama administration's lead official on Puerto Rico, said the role of the task force was under review when asked if it would be constituted in time to comply with a December deadline for a new status report.

"We are looking very closely at the role of the task force, if it is consistent with the other work we are doing," Muñoz told CARIBBEAN BUSINESS in an exclusive interview. "The big picture here is that we are looking at ways to ensure Puerto Rico is really included in every policy discussion in a meaningful way."

The President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status was created through executive order in December 2000 by former President Bill Clinton and continued through the Bush administration. It has sparked criticism from Commonwealth supporters for finding that the enhanced commonwealth status pushed by the Popular Democratic Party was unconstitutional and for stating in a 2005 report that Puerto Rico was a territory under the authority of Congress.

Muñoz also said the administration has yet to take a position on Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi's status bill, which cleared a committee vote last week.

"We are obviously keeping a close eye on it because you know it is the first utterance of any proposal to address the issue of Puerto Ricans themselves deciding," she said. "The president remains committed to trying to resolve the status issue by giving the Puerto Rican people the opportunity to speak on this issue."

For the White House, however, the priority is the economy and ensuring the island is included in the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (**ARRA**), the national economic-stimulus package pushed by President Barack Obama.

"The administration understands very well the depth of the economic crisis in Puerto Rico. We are focusing our attention on ensuring the policies that have been put in place to deal with that have some impact here," Muñoz

said.

A top priority remains **ARRA**, passed in the first three weeks of the Obama administration, she said. Officials are still “deeply engaged” with its implementation to ensure its maximum effect on the economy and in creating and retaining jobs.

“We have been in a time of quite intensive policy work that has real implications for the island, so we have been investing our time in ensuring those policies work for the island,” Muñoz said, adding that the first tangible outcome of this focus is **ARRA**, which will send some \$5.7 billion to Puerto Rico over the next two years.

“We are also focusing on health reform and a number of policy areas, broadly speaking, with respect to Puerto Rico. We are trying to take a more comprehensive look at all the questions facing the island,” she added.