

1 IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
2 FOR THE DISTRICT OF PUERTO RICO

3 LUZ SANCHEZ PIÑERO,
4

5 Plaintiff,

6 v.

CIVIL NO. 08-1374 (RLA)

7 DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN
8 DEVELOPMENT, et al.,

9 Defendants.

10 **ORDER GRANTING MOTION TO DISMISS AND**
11 **DENYING MOTION TO SET ASIDE PARTIAL JUDGMENT**
12 **AND MOTION TO REMAND**

13 Currently before the court for disposition are plaintiff's
14 Motion to Set Aside Partial Judgment (docket No. 35), the federal
15 defendant's Motion to Dismiss (docket No. 46) and plaintiff's request
16 for remand (docket No. 52).

17 The court having reviewed the arguments presented by the parties
18 as well as the evidence on record hereby disposes of the outstanding
19 motions as follows.

20 **I. PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND**

21 This action arose due to plaintiff's damages allegedly resulting
22 from her fall due to a slippery substance while walking down the
23 stairs at the V&B Apartments in Barceloneta, Puerto Rico.

24 Named defendants to the complaint were: United States DEPARTMENT
25 OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT ("HUD") and EXCELLENCE MANAGEMENT
26 AUDITS AND REALTY, CORP. ("EMARCO").

 The claims asserted against HUD are premised on the Federal Tort
Claims Act ("FTCA"), 28 U.S.C. §§ 2671-2680 whereas EMARCO's

2 liability is based on negligence as provided for in art. 1802 of the
3 Puerto Rico Civil Code, P.R. Laws Ann. tit. 31, § 5141 (1990).

4 On September 10, 2008 (docket No. 33), the court issued a
5 partial judgment dismissing the claims asserted against codefendant
6 EMARCO as time-barred.¹

7 Plaintiff has moved the court to set aside EMARCO's dismissal
8 arguing that this action is not time-barred inasmuch as defendants to
9 these proceedings are joint tortfeasors and the administrative claim
10 submitted to HUD on April 3, 2007 pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2675(a)
11 tolled the statute of limitations as to both.

12 Subsequently, HUD petitioned dismissal of the claims asserted
13 against it. Plaintiff did not oppose HUD's motion but rather, she
14 concurred with the arguments set forth by the federal defendant in
15 support of the dismissal and requested instead remand of the claims
16 asserted against EMARCO to the state court.²

17 Because we find the arguments advanced by HUD in its motion to
18 dismiss dispositive of the issues set forth by plaintiff in support
19 of her motion to vacate EMARCO's partial judgment, we shall address
20 them first.

21 **II. MOTION TO DISMISS**

22 First, we must note that the United States of America is the
23 sole proper party defendant in an action based on negligence filed
24 under the FTCA. Roman v. Townsend, 224 F.3d 24, 27 (1st Cir. 2000).

25 ¹ The court further found that there was no *in personam*
jurisdiction over this codefendant.

26 ² See Motion in Compliance (docket No. 52).

2 Thus, plaintiff may not prosecute her negligence claim directly
3 against HUD.

4 The United States, as a sovereign, is immune from suit unless it
5 waives its immunity by consenting to be sued. See, United States v.
6 Mitchell, 463 U.S. 206, 212, 103 S.Ct. 2961, 77 L.Ed.2d 580 (1983)
7 ("It is axiomatic that the United States may not be sued without its
8 consent and that the existence of consent is a prerequisite for
9 jurisdiction."); Bolduc v. United States, 402 F.3d 50, 55 (1st Cir.
10 2005) (United States immune except to extent it waives its immunity);
11 Dynamic Image Tech., Inc. v. United States, 221 F.3d 24, 39 (1st Cir.
12 2000) ("As a sovereign nation, the United States is immune from
13 liability except to the extent that it consents to suit."); Day v.
14 Massachusetts Air Nat'l Guard, 167 F.3d 678, 681 (1st Cir. 1999)
15 ("[a]s sovereign, the United States may not be sued for damages
16 without its consent.") Limitations to the sovereign immunity of the
17 United States such as the FTCA must be strictly construed and are not
18 subject to waiver. Patterson v. United States, 451 F.3d 268, 270
19 (1st Cir. 2006); Dynamic Image Tech., 221 F.3d at 39.

20 The FTCA waives the sovereign immunity of the United States "in
21 the same manner and to the same extent as a private individual under
22 like circumstances." See, Sosa v. Alvarez-Machain, 542 U.S. 692, 700,
23 124 S.Ct. 2739, 159 L.Ed.2d 718 (2005) (FTCA designed to remove
24 immunity from torts similar to private individuals); Santoni v.
25 Potter, 369 F.3d 594, 602 (1st Cir. 2004) ("[FTCA] provides a limited
26 congressional waiver of the sovereign immunity of the United States
for torts committed by federal employees acting within the scope of

2 their employment [similar to private parties in similar
3 circumstances]"); Roman v. Townsend, 224 F.3d 24, 27 (1st Cir. 2000)
4 ("FTCA waives the sovereign immunity of the United States with
5 respect to tort claims").

6 Pursuant to the FTCA, the United States is liable for the
7 negligence of its employees. Government employees are defined as
8 "officers or employees of any federal agency." 28 U.S.C. § 2671.
9 Federal agencies in turn are "instrumentalities or agencies of the
10 United States but does not include any contractor with the United
11 States." *Id.*

12 Hence, it is axiomatic that the federal government will not be
13 liable for the negligence of independent contractors. United States
14 v. Orleans, 425 U.S. 807, 96 S.Ct. 1971, 48 L.Ed.2d 390 (1976); Logue
15 v. United States, 412 U.S. 521, 93 S.Ct. 2215, 37 L.Ed.2d 121 (1973);
16 Larsen v. Empresas El Yunque, Inc., 812 F.2d 14 (1st Cir. 1986);
17 Brooks v. A.R. & S. Enterprises, Inc., 622 F.2d 8, 10 (1st Cir. 1980).

18 An independent contractor relationship exists in situations
19 where the United States does not have the authority to control the
20 contract's performance. Logue, 412 U.S. at 523. In this vein, the
21 determining factor is, "whether the United States directs the manner
22 in which the contractor carries out its obligations under the
23 contract." Brooks, 622 F.2d at 11. The "key question [is] 'whether
24 the day-to-day operations of the agency were supervised by the
25 Federal Government.'" Larsen, 812 F.2d at 15 (quoting Orleans, 425
26 U.S. at 815). "If day-to-day control over the contractor exists, the
United States is liable for injuries caused by the negligence of the

2 contractor's employees. We must determine, therefore, whether the
3 United States maintained sufficient control over the daily operations
4 of [the independent contractor] to subject the government to
5 liability for the negligence of [the independent contractor's]
6 employees". Brooks, 622 F.2d at 10-11.

7 It is important to note, however, that "[t]he right to inspect
8 does not nullify the general rule that the government is not liable
9 for torts of independent contractors.'" Larsen, 812 F.2d at 15
10 (quoting Brooks, 622 F.2d at 12). See also, Perez v. United States,
11 594 F.2d 280, 287 (1st Cir. 1979).

12 In this case it stands undisputed that at all times relevant HUD
13 had no interest in or control over the V&B Apartments. It did not
14 provide rental subsidies or any other financial assistance to the
15 property where the alleged incident occurred. Additionally, HUD was
16 not the financier or insurer of the mortgage securing the V&B
17 Apartments.

18 In other words, the V&B Apartments were not owned by HUD; were
19 not under its control, and do not fall under HUD's regulatory
20 jurisdiction. Consequently, HUD did not have any control or
21 jurisdiction over the accident site. As such, HUD is not liable for
22 the alleged lack of illumination of the area nor any purported
23 dangerous condition which caused plaintiff's fall.

24 Additionally, in its motion to dismiss the federal defendant
25 notes that the United States DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, RURAL
26

2 DEVELOPMENT ("RD"), does have an interest in the V&D Apartments.³
3 However, it is uncontroverted that RD's interest does not include the
4 supervision of the daily operations and maintenance of the apartment
5 complex at issue.

6 As correctly pointed out by the Government, federal funding and
7 the right to inspect to ensure compliance with a federal contract
8 terms and conditions does not render the United States liable for the
9 negligent acts or omissions of an independent contractor. Further, in
10 this case, the Government's position that RD was not responsible for
11 the day to day operations or maintenance of the physical facilities
12 comprising the V&B Apartments is unchallenged.

13 Accordingly, the Motion to Dismiss filed by the United States of
14 America (docket No. 46) is **GRANTED** and the claims asserted against
15 HUD are hereby **DISMISSED**.

16 **III. MOTION TO SET ASIDE PARTIAL JUDGMENT**

17 Plaintiff has moved the court to set aside the Partial Judgment
18 issued on September 10, 2008 (docket No. 33) dismissing the claims
19 asserted against codefendant EMARCO as time-barred. In essence,
20 plaintiff avers that she tolled the limitations period by means of an
21 extrajudicial claim submitted to the United States, EMARCO's alleged
22 joint tortfeasor.

23 In its opposition to plaintiff's request, EMARCO raises two
24 separate arguments in support of the validity of the Partial

25 ³ V&B Apartments is a rental housing project financed by a
26 direct government loan from the Rural Rental Housing Program,
42 U.S.C. § 1485. It also receives rental assistance payments under
the Rental Assistance Program, 42 U.S.C. 1490a.

2 Judgment. First, codefendant contends that any entreaties made to the
3 United States did not have any tolling effect on the claims asserted
4 against it. Additionally, EMARCO argues that plaintiff having twice
5 moved for voluntary dismissal of her suits she is now precluded from
6 filing yet a third complaint.

7 The following summarizes the relevant events for purposes of the
8 statute of limitations in this case:

9 **1/22/06** Plaintiff's accident.

10 **3/16/06⁴** Complaint filed in state court.

11 **5/18/06** Case removed to federal court.

12 **5/26/06** Plaintiff's request for voluntary dismissal in federal
13 case.

14 **5/30/06** Judgment dismissing federal case upon plaintiff's
15 request for voluntary dismissal.

16 ******* Plaintiff's request for voluntary dismissal in state
17 court case.

18 **9/27/06** Judgment dismissing state court case upon plaintiff's
19 request for voluntary dismissal.

20 **4/3/07** Plaintiff submitted administrative claim to HUD.

21 **9/24/07** Plaintiff' claim letter to EMARCO.

22 **9/28/07** HUD denied plaintiff's administrative claim.

23 **3/28/08** Instant complaint filed.

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25 ⁴ The complaint was stamped twice by the Clerk of the Court, once
26 on March 16, 2006 and the other on March 23, 2006. However, for purposes
of this Order this difference is immaterial.

2 **A. Twice Dismissed Rule**

3 According to the evidence before us, plaintiff's accident
4 occurred on January 22, 2006, and plaintiff filed her initial
5 complaint in the Manati state court on March 16, 2006 [CD06-332].
6 Codefendant HUD removed the state action to federal court on or about
7 May 8, 2006,⁵ where it was assigned Civ. No. 06-1452. Thereafter, on
8 May 26, 2006, plaintiff requested voluntary dismissal of the federal
9 suit. Judgment of dismissal was entered on May 30, 2006, pursuant to
10 Rule 41(a)(1) Fed. R. Civ. P.

11 At some point plaintiff also requested dismissal of the Manati
12 proceedings which the local court granted without prejudice on
13 September 27, 2006, pursuant to P.R. Civ. P. Rule 39.1(a)(1).

14 Codefendant raises the "two-time filing" rule which provides
15 that a voluntary dismissal filed pursuant to Rule 41(a)(1)(A) Fed. R.
16 Civ. P. is without prejudice "[b]ut if the plaintiff previously
17 dismissed any federal-or-state-court action based on or including the
18 same claim, a notice of dismissal operates as an adjudication on the
19 merits."⁶

20 Thus, the relevant inquiry for purposes of this Order is whether
21 Manati case CD06-332 and the removed action, i.e., Civ. No. 06-1452,
22 are two separate suits or should be deemed only one for purposes of
23 the "twice dismissed" rule.

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25 ⁵ See Notice of Removal (docket No. 1) in Civ. No. 06-1452.

26 ⁶ P.R. Civ. P. Rule 39.1(a)(2) essentially provides the same.

2 Removal to the federal court merely entails continuation of the
3 original suit in a different forum based on the complaint initially
4 filed in state court. "After removal of an action from state court,
5 the federal district court acquires full and exclusive subject matter
6 jurisdiction over the litigation. The case will proceed as if it had
7 been brought in the federal court originally." 14C Charles Alan
8 Wright, Arthur R. Miller & Edward H. Cooper, Federal Practice and
9 Procedure § 378 p. 390 (3d ed. 1998).

10 Based on the foregoing, we must conclude that both the state and
11 federal removal actions are but the continuation of one. Accordingly,
12 EMARCO's argument for dismissal based on the twice dismissed
13 provision established in Rule 41(a)(1)(A) is found inapposite to the
14 situation at bar.

15 **B. Timeliness**

16 In Puerto Rico, the applicable period for instituting actions
17 sounding in tort is one year as provided for in P.R. Laws Ann. tit.
18 31, § 5298 (1990). This term may be tolled either via: (1) judicial
19 proceedings, (2) extra-judicial claims, and (3) acknowledgment of the
20 debt by the person liable. § 5303.

21 **(I) Judicial Proceedings**

22 As previously noted, pursuant to § 5303 one of the options
23 available for tolling the one-year limitations period is by
24 instituting judicial proceedings. The tolling takes effect by the
25 mere filing of the complaint - without regard to service of process
26 or the fact that the court may eventually be found to lack
jurisdiction - and lasts until the judicial proceedings have come to

2 an end. Martínez Arcelay v. Peñagaricano, 145 D.P.R. 93 (1998);
3 Agosto v. Municipio de Rio Grande, 143 D.P.R. 174 (1997); Durán-
4 Cepeda v. Morales-Lebrón, 112 D.P.R. 623 (1982); Moa v. Commonwealth,
5 100 P.R.R. 572, 589 (1972).

6 Once the judicial proceedings have concluded⁷ the full one-year
7 term will commence to run anew. De León Crespo v. Caparra Center, 147
8 D.P.R. 797 (1999); Silva-Wiscovich v. Weber Dental Mfg. Co., 119
9 D.P.R. 550 (1987); Durán-Cepeda. See also, Rodriguez Narvaez v.
10 Nazario, 895 F.2d 38, 43 (1st Cir. 1990).

11 (ii) Extra Judicial Claims

12 It is plaintiff's burden to establish the adequacy of an extra-
13 judicial claim which complies with the pertinent legal requirements.
14 González Rodríguez v. Wal-Mart, Inc., 147 D.P.R. 149 (1998). See
15 also, Acosta Quiñones v. Matos Rodríguez, 135 D.P.R. 668, 675 (1994)

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17 ⁷ The Puerto Rico Supreme Court has determined that in those
18 particular instances wherein plaintiff voluntarily desists from his claim
19 pursuant to P.R. R. Civ. P. Rule 39.1(a)(1) - before the opposing party
20 has answered the complaint or filed a summary judgment request - the new
21 limitations period will run from that date and not from the date when
pertinent judgment is issued by this court. This is so because at that
particular point in the proceedings the plaintiff still has an
unconditional right to withdraw his claim. Thus, in cases falling within
the provisions of Rule 39.1(a)(1) the judgment acknowledging plaintiff's
will is a mere formality.

22 [T]he filing of the notice of dismissal with the court puts an
23 end to the litigation and, thus, is the date on which a new
24 period of limitations begins to run. The unequivocal expression
25 of the intent to dismiss the action conclusively determines
26 that the interruptive effect of the judicial action ceased.
Subsequent events, such as the date on which the court renders
judgment, files and serves notice of the same, or the date on
which the judgment becomes final and unappealable, have nothing
to do with the effectiveness of said expression of intent and
are therefore totally irrelevant.

Garcia Aponte v. Commonwealth of P.R., 1994 P.R.- Eng. 909243, 135 D.P.R.
137 (1994).

2 (it behooves claimant to prove the extra-judicial claim by direct or
3 circumstantial evidence).

4 In order for extra-judicial claims to effectively toll the
5 statutory period the demand must be made by the injured party or his
6 representative to the person responsible for the damages, prior to
7 the lapse of the statutory period, and must relate to the same cause
8 of action alleged in the complaint. De León Crespo; González
9 Rodríguez. The demand need not comply with any formal requirement.
10 However, it must convey an unequivocal desire by an injured party not
11 to lose a right when threatened to lose it. Acosta Quiñones, 135
12 D.P.R. at 675 (quoting Zambrana Maldonado v. E.L.A., 129 D.P.R. 740,
13 752 (1992)). That is, "it must require or demand the same conduct or
14 relief ultimately sought in the subsequent lawsuit." Tokyo Marine and
15 Fire Ins. Co., Ltd., 142 F.3d 1, 5 (1st Cir. 1998) (citing Rodriguez
16 Narvaez, 895 F.2d at 44).

17 (iii) The Facts

18 We shall begin by examining the previous related judicial
19 proceedings to ascertain whether or not they effectively tolled the
20 applicable limitations period. However, in order to properly assess
21 the potential tolling effect of these prior cases, we must first
22 consider the nature of the removal process and its consequences on
the underlying local proceedings.

23 Once the party seeking removal has complied with all the
24 necessary legal measures provided for in 28 U.S.C. § 1446, the local
25 court is proscribed from acting any further in the state case.
26 "[R]emoval is effected by the defendant taking three procedural

2 steps: filing a notice of removal in the federal court, filing a copy
3 of this notice in the state court, and giving prompt written notice
4 to all adverse parties" Wright & Miller § 3737 p. 381, whereupon "the
5 State court shall proceed no further unless and until the case is
6 remanded." 28 U.S.C. § 1446(d).

7 Upon movant having met the aforementioned procedural
8 requirements, "the state court is divested of jurisdiction... [and]
9 must stop all proceedings unless and until the case is remanded. Any
10 state action after the filing of the removal notice is void, even if
11 the case is subsequently remanded... Further, the state court has no
12 authority to act after a federal court dismisses rather than remands
13 a case." 16 James Wm. Moore et al., Moore's Federal Practice - Civil
14 ¶ 107.31.

15 Plaintiff's first complaint was filed in the Manati state court
16 on March 16, 2006, well within the one-year limitations period.⁸
17 However, upon the case being removed to the federal forum the local
18 action vanished for all practical purposes and merged with Civ. No.
19 06-1452. The Manati court had no authority to take any further action
20 in CD06-332 once the United States perfected the removal process in
21 May 2006. Hence, the judgment issued by the local court on September
22 27, 2006, is void and could have had no valid tolling effect.

23 Based on the foregoing, even though we take the date of filing
24 of the initial local complaint as the start of the tolling period,
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26 ⁸ The accident occurred on January 22, 2006.

2 the date when the federal removed proceedings concluded is the
3 relevant one for purposes of when the tolling period ceased.

4 The removed federal action concluded in May 2006⁹ and the instant
5 suit was filed on March 28, 2008, that is, over one year subsequent
6 thereto. This would render plaintiff's negligence claim against
7 EMARCO stale unless plaintiff effectively tolled the limitations
8 period via other means provided for in § 5303.

9 Plaintiff alleges that the administrative claim presented to HUD
10 on April 3, 2007, as mandated by 28 U.S.C. § 2675(a), also operated
11 as an extrajudicial demand with respect to EMARCO because both
12 defendants are purportedly joint tortfeasors.

13 While it is true that pursuant to § 5304 tolling as to one
14 tortfeasor will affect all other persons jointly liable for the
15 damages, see, Tokyo Marine, in this case HUD¹⁰ is not liable for the
16 allegedly negligent circumstances propitiating plaintiff's fall.
17 Specifically, based on the uncontested evidence on record, we have
18 previously concluded in this Order that the federal government had no
19 duty of care regarding the allegedly dangerous condition of the
20 premises where plaintiff's unfortunate accident took place.

21 Thus, any extra judicial demands made upon the United States
22 could have no possible tolling effect on codefendant EMARCO.

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24 ⁹ For purposes of our ruling, it is immaterial whether this period
25 is calculated from the filing of plaintiff's voluntary dismissal request
26 on May 26, 2006, or from the date when the corresponding Judgment was
entered on May 30, 2006.

¹⁰ Or any other federal agency for that matter.

2 Plaintiff did forward EMARCO a letter on September 24, 2007.
3 Assuming this correspondence complied with the prerequisites for a
4 valid extra-judicial claim under § 5303, it was forwarded to EMARCO
5 well beyond the one-year term plaintiff had available to prosecute
6 her claim against codefendant which term commenced to run anew at the
7 end of May 2006.

8 Based on the foregoing, we find that plaintiff's claim against
9 EMARCO is time-barred.

10 IV. REQUEST FOR REMAND

11 Plaintiff conceded that no viable claim exists against HUD and
12 petitioned the court for remand of the remaining cause of action
13 against EMARCO. However, apart from the fact that the claims asserted
14 against codefendant EMARCO are time-barred, remand is not a legally
15 feasible option for plaintiff in these proceedings inasmuch as this
16 case was initiated in the federal forum.

17 V. CONCLUSION

18 Based on the foregoing, it is hereby ORDERED as follows:

- 19 - The Motion to Dismiss filed by the United States of America
20 (docket No. **46**) is **GRANTED** and the claims asserted against
21 HUD are hereby **DISMISSED**. Judgment shall be entered
22 accordingly.
23 - Plaintiff's Motion to Set Aside Partial Judgment (docket
24 No. **35**)¹¹ is **DENIED**.

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26 ¹¹ See Response in Opposition (docket No. **41**), Reply (docket No. **42**)
and Sur-Reply (docket No. **43**).

2 - Plaintiff's Motion in Compliance and Requesting Remand
3 (docket No. 52)¹² is **DENIED**.

4 IT IS SO ORDERED.

5 San Juan, Puerto Rico, this 16th day of December, 2008.

6
7 S/Raymond L. Acosta
8 RAYMOND L. ACOSTA
9 United States District Judge

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26 ¹² See Federal Defendant's Opposition (docket No. 53).