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Ecuador stops sending troops to U.S. military training

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Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, left, meets with Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa in Quito, Ecuador, June 27 (Photo taken from the official Flickr account of the Ecuadoran president)

Ecuador will no longer send troops to the U.S. military training school at Fort Benning, Ga., formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA), whose graduates who have been implicated in human rights abuses, the country?s foreign minister announced Wednesday afternoon.

The announcement, first reported by the Spanish news agency EFE, comes after a meeting Wednesday between Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa and members of SOA Watch, a group founded by Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois to work for the closure of the military training school.

Confirming the news Wednesday, Ecuadoran foreign minister Ricardo Patiño posted on Twitter in Spanish that "Ecuador will no longer send members of its armed forces nor its police to the sadly famous former School of the Americas in the United States."

Hendrik Voss, SOA Watch?s national organizer, said in a phone interview Wednesday that the group first became aware of the news when several of its members met with Correa in the Ecuadoran capital, Quito, earlier that day. When the members, including Bourgeois, arrived for the meeting, Correa immediately told them of the decision, said Voss.

Calls to the U.S. Department of Defense and the Ecuadoran embassy in Washington for comment were not immediately returned Wednesday afternoon.

With today?s news, Ecuador becomes the fifth Latin American country to announce that it will stop sending personnel to the training school, which is officially known as Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, and Uruguay previously made such moves. After meeting with SOA Watch members in 2007, Costa Rica?s then-president Óscar Arias publicly said his country too would stop sending personnel, but then quietly reinstated the training six months later.

Voss said that today?s decision by Ecuador "shows that countries in Latin America are now exerting their sovereignty over U.S. dominance."

Voss noted Ecuador also rebuffed U.S. military interests in 2009, when Correa refused to renew a 10-year lease the U.S. Air Force held for a portion of Manta Air Base on Ecuador?s western coast.

In news reports at the time, Correa was quoted as saying: "We can negotiate with the U.S. about a base in Manta, if they let us put a military base in Miami."

Ecuador?s decision today, shows that the times when the United States could have its troops everywhere with military access everywhere "are over," Voss said. "It also shows that by continuing the operations at the School of the Americas, the U.S. is losing a lot of its credibility with its human rights rhetoric in Latin America, given the bloody history of the school."

SOA Watch, founded by Bourgeois in 1990, is known for a vigil it hosts every year at the gates of the base in Fort Benning to call for the closure of the military training school.

According to estimates by the group, the school has trained over 65,000 military personnel, including some who participated in the successful coup against President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras in 2009 and an attempted coup against President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela in 2002.

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