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School of Americas Watch meets with White House official

Porsia Tunzi | Nov. 15, 2012 NCR Today

Delegates of School of Americas Watch, the military watchdog group founded by Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, met Tuesday with a senior White House official to discuss their longtime efforts to close a controversial U.S. military training school.

The delegates met with Denis McDonough, a Catholic who is a deputy national security adviser to President Obama.

They discussed closing the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation, a U.S. Army training school located at Fort Benning, Ga, and formerly known as the School of the Americas.

The school, which trains foreign soldiers in counter-insurgency techniques, has long been in the crosshairs of activists, who claim some of those trained there have committed atrocities in their home countries.

SOA Watch, which was founded by Bourgeois in 1990, holds an annual vigil outside the school's gates to call attention to the matter. This year?s vigil [1] takes place Thursday through Sunday.

That gathering, Bourgeois said in an August *NCR* interview, ?is a celebration of hope.?

SOA Watch?s participants at the White House meeting included: Congressman James McGovern, D-Mass., Bourgeois, Adrianna Portillo-Bartow, Sr. Marie Lucey, Fr. Charles Currie and Bill Quigley, the associate legal director for the Center for Constitutional Rights.

According to a press release from SOA Watch, the delegation highlighted for McDonough the following in support of the closure of the school:

- A list of the six countries (Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina and Venezuela) that have removed their troops from the school
- A letter from the United Auto Workers calling for the school?s closure
- A multi-page list of religious, labor, and human rights organization in support of the SOA Watch movement
- A list of 140 Catholic bishops in Latin America, as well as the names of US bishops, who want the school to close
- 69 members of Congress have asked the President to close the school
- Provided information about four generals and SOA graduates responsible for the 2009 coup in Honduras

McGovern stated in the meeting that the ?School is a symbol of all that is wrong with U.S. policy in Latin America,? according to the release.

McGovern, a long-time SOA Watch supporter who has advocated cutting off funding for the school, also told McDonough that the Department of Defense has refused to release the names of students who attend and have

attended the school

McDonough, said the release, was unaware of that information.

Despite the delegation?s best efforts, they couldn?t convince McDonough to support the closing of the school.

?The militaries in Latin America are institutions like the church, flawed but important for those societies,? he told the activists, according to the release.

However, McDonough did promise to look into the disclosure of names and reforming that policy within the Department of Defense, the press release said.

Portillo-Bartow made a moving last statement as McDonough started to leave. ?Her voice cracking and choking back tears,? the press release said, she asked ?why so many hundreds of thousands have had to die and why so many more will have to? Closing the school is an act of justice. It is time for the US to stand with people of Latin America, the oppressed, the poor and persecuted.?

The press release says McDonough was ?moved? by the plea and respectfully excused himself.

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Links:
[1] http://www.soaw.org/