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Why we call for the closure of the School of the Americas

Mary Ann McGivern | Nov. 27, 2013 NCR Today

I went to Fort Benning, Ga., over the weekend to join the call for the closing of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, also known as the School of the Americas.

On Friday, 275 of us vigiled outside the detention center in Lumpkin, Ga., in the poorest county in Georgia. Charlie King sang "Sing Mandela Free," and I cried standing there. All of Friday and Saturday, there were workshops in the Columbus Convention and Trade Center. Some of the topics: nonviolent resistance, mining in Guatemala, the facts of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, ending torture, and grass-roots fundraising.

Sunday, about 2,000 of us processed in front of the gates of the school, carrying crosses and chanting the names of thousands of people killed by graduates of the school. After each name, we sang, "*Presente*." I cried again listening to the names. Watch the beginning of the 2009 procession here [1]; the chanting begins at 2 minutes, 45 seconds.

The institute teaches squadrons from Latin American military services how to use various weapons we have given them, how to function as officers, and how to develop and implement appropriate military strategies and tactics. It also requires attendance at a course on some variation on the theme of military support of democratic principles. In the past, when the institute was based in Panama, it taught torture as one of the appropriate civilian control strategies.

When then-Maryknoll priest Roy Bourgeois was working in Latin America 40 years ago, he heard rumors that there was a U.S. military base in Panama where Latin American soldiers were being taught to infiltrate and spy on civilian organizations and how to torture people. Roy became convinced of the truth of these rumors just as growing community outrage in the southern hemisphere led the school to move its operations from Panama to Fort Benning -- far, the Pentagon hoped, from Latin demonstrations.

In 1983, Father Roy and two other men climbed a tree near the new barracks and played a tape of Archbishop Oscar Romero's final homily, spoken moments before his assassination. From that day, protests grew slowly at Fort Benning and SOA Watch [2] was founded, with an office in a housing complex at the gates of the fort.

One of the SOA Watch staff members sent a Freedom of Information request to the institute, requesting the names of all the school attendees. I think she waited a couple of years, but she finally she received thousands of names, and then the work began. Staff members took the names of the soldiers who had been linked to atrocities throughout Latin America and found matches with the graduate list! For example, according to SOA Watch [3]:

> Of the twenty-six soldiers subsequently implicated in the murders of the Jesuit priests and women in El Salvador, nineteen had received training at the School of the Americas. Three officers had received some human rights training while at the school. Additionally, one soldier had attended the Special Forces Officer Course at Ft. Bragg in late 1988 and early 1989.

Eleven dictators, including Efraín Rios Montt (Guatemala), Hugo Banzer (Bolivia), and Manuel Noriega and

Omar Torrijos (both from Panama) are graduates [4]. In the last year, 20 graduates from eight countries have been charged for their leadership in various massacres [5].

The institute is not the only school the Pentagon operates for foreign soldiers. We train everybody we give weapons to around the world. Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, the man now in command in Egypt, took a U.S. infantry basic training course at Fort Benning in 1981 [6]. Many foreign officers study alongside U.S. officers around the world. The theory has always been that the U.S. will fare better if the Pentagon has an inside track in foreign armies.

But the story goes on. After the overthrow of dictator Alfredo Stroessner of Paraguay, torture manuals published by School of the Americas were found in government offices. In 1996, the U.S. General Accounting Office publicly reported [7] that the school had written and used these torture manuals.

Today, the institute is monitored by a governing board, but that's not so for all other training facilities around the world. The institute is a symbol of oppression in all of Latin America. It is also the tip of the iceberg.

Other years, as many as 20,000 protesters have gathered at Fort Benning's gates, and 100 have been arrested and served prison time for trespassing there. But the last two years, the numbers are way down. Since Roy declared his support for women's ordination and was laicized, none of the Jesuit universities and colleges have participated in the protests, even though the date is set to commemorate the 1989 deaths of the Jesuits and the two women working for them in El Salvador. However, a lot of nuns were there, and a lot of college students from other schools. I estimated 4,000 present Sunday morning (I'm pretty good at counting), but the newspaper reported 1,700.

We have a small window into the practice of one small branch of our military operations because Roy Bourgeois protested, investigated, went to jail and gathered a dedicated staff committed to shedding light on torture and on those who teach torture. Consider coming to Fort Benning next year to call for the closure of the School of the Americas, aka the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PihenVUkT4
[2] http://www.soaw.org/
[3] http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/history
[4] http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/13-soawhinsec-graduates/840
[5] http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soawhinsec-grads/grads-in-the-news
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