

Ft. Benning, Georgia: 22,000 Protest the U.S. “School of Assassins”

On November 19, more than 22,000 people held a protest vigil outside Fort Benning, Georgia, to demand the shutdown of the School of the Americas (SOA). The SOA is a U.S. Army combat training school for troops and officers from pro-U.S. countries in Latin America in subjects like torture, political assassinations, counter-insurgency, and covert operations against anti-government movements. According to the School of the Americas Watch, the Nov. 19 vigil (part of a weekend of protests at Ft. Benning) was the largest protest yet in the 17-year history of opposition to the school. Sixteen people were arrested over the weekend and charged with trespassing onto SOA property; they face up to six months in federal prison.

Since it was first set up in Panama in 1946, the SOA (known to many as the “School of Assassins”) has trained over 60,000 military personnel from repressive Latin American regimes. The School of the Americas Watch notes that “These graduates have consistently used their skills to wage a war against their own people... Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, assassinated, 'disappeared,' massacred, and forced into refuge by those trained at the School of Assassins.” (In 2001 the U.S. renamed SOA the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.)

One protester, Rev. John Dear, told the *Toledo Blade* : “We are living in a terrible, terrible moment in history...with the United States government waging war around the world, brutally killing children in Iraq and Afghanistan... Christians have to speak out against this. These wars have to end. We have to dismantle our terrorist weapons of mass destruction.”

The weekend of vigils and rallies at Ft. Benning coincided with protests in ten other countries around the world demanding that the SOA be shut down.

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