

School of the Americas Watch Latin American Project

The immediate goals of the SOA Watch Latin America Project are to connect the grassroots movements of the U.S. and Latin America, organize and facilitate SOA Watch delegations, and to contribute information and logistical support to other human rights groups in the region.

Until 2006, the Latin America Project had consisted mostly of trips to Latin America where SOA Watch activists met with community organizers, human rights organizations and government authorities in an effort to persuade countries to stop sending troops to be trained at the SOA/WHINSEC. Thanks to grassroots organizing in Latin America and these SOA Watch delegations, countries like Argentina, Uruguay and Venezuela have ceased to send troops to the SOA/WHINSEC.

In August Of 2006, thanks to the efforts of our supporters and organizers, SOA Watch opened a Latin America office in Venezuela. In an effort to strengthen our cooperation with human rights organizations in Latin America, it is important that the movement to close the School of the Americas has a physical presence in the continent. As the first country to take the step of withdrawing its troops from the SOA/WHINSEC, Venezuela seemed an appropriate location for such an initiative.

The Latin America Project is coordinated by Lisa Sullivan-Rodriguez, a long time SOA Watch activist and former Maryknoll Lay Missioner who worked in Bolivia and Venezuela for over 20 years. She has extensive knowledge of the political and social conditions that exist in Latin America and has coordinated several successful delegations.

Following are excerpts from her written reports on some of the visits to Latin American countries. The full reports and more on the project can be found at <http://www.soaw.org/article.php?id=1510>

Mexico and Costa Rica

In our attempts to investigate any connection between the repression in Oaxaca and the SOA/WHINSEC, we ran into a wall, placed there by our own government. In past years, SOA Watch has been able to gain access to names of graduates of the SOA/WHINSEC via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). This crosscheck was the key factor to the uncovering of connections between SOA grads and hundreds of human rights abuses in Latin America. In post 9-11 reality, however, this information has been blocked. Recent lists of SOA graduates obtained through FOIA are an exercise in the use of a black magic marker. Every single graduate's name is crossed out. Needless to say, this makes investigating recent human rights abuses in Latin America, such as that of Oaxaca, impossible.

However, what did emerge from talks with Mexican human rights organizations was a pattern of increased abuse on the part of military and police forces against civilians which roughly parallels Mexico's increased enrollment at the SOA. Until the last decade, Mexico had sent relatively few students to the SOA, especially in relation to its large population. The onset of the Zapatista uprising, however, saw a ten-fold increase in Mexican enrollment at the SOA for several years and a corresponding use of violent repression.

As Mexico's enrollment in SOA has come down in recent years, a new situation has emerged, similar to much of Central America. Police forces are taking on the former role and character of the military, using violent methods as a first response to social unrest. Even their dress is reminiscent of the military, evidenced by their use of combat boots and large weapons. Concerns such as gangs and the war on drugs give the police an ever-handy excuse for abuse of power.

Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador

Bertha had enthusiastically agreed to organize our visit to Honduras, one of three countries on this leg of visits to all the countries sending troops at the SOA, as part of the Latin America initiative of SOA Watch. Our small delegation had previously visited eight South American nations where we obtained the commitment of 5 of them to some form of withdrawal or reduction of troops. In Central America, we knew that the challenges would be greater. The blood spilled by graduates of the SOA could fill rivers there, and its memory is still fresh. Monseñor Romero, the four U.S. churchwomen, the Jesuit priests at the UCA, the massacre of el Mozote, just a few of the thousands of massacres carried out by hands or orders of SOA graduates.

Bertha's passion was exhausting. Upon our arrival in Honduras after 16 hours on the road, she herded us into a taxi and onto a live tv show. Doors opened wherever she took us – to the Vice President, the President of the Supreme Court, the Defense Minister, Congress, press conferences, human rights organizations, television and radio shows. We raced through the streets of Tegucigalpa, slurping down coffee while she prepped us for our next visit. This was a woman on a mission fueled by love.

When love is the fuel, the mileage is remarkable.

Colombia and Panama

In the other countries we met with civic organizations and members of Congress who joined forces in calling for withdrawal of their country's troops from the SOA. We knew that as we moved north it was unlikely that we would encounter this same openness as we did in those countries with a renewed commitment to sovereignty. And of all countries yet to visit, Colombia would be the most challenging. Not only does Colombia hold the record for most SOA graduates - over 10,000, it also has the largest current enrollment. More importantly, the abuses taking place by SOA graduates in Colombia are taking place in the present tense.

Indeed, our formal requests to meet with government officials went unheeded. Our main purpose in coming to Colombia, however, was to hear first-hand the stories of those living in conflict zones, to understand what role the United States was playing, especially that of the School of Americas. Which is why we found ourselves on that canoe, deep in the lush river area of northern Colombia called the Magdalena Medio, in the company of our guides from the Christian Peacemaking Team. They had brought us the previous evening by canoe to the village of Puerto Matilde, a community of 25 displaced families whose new wooden houses huddled together at the edge of the river.

... Three things became clear to us in this and all of our visits in Colombia: 1. The main victims in this conflict are the civilians, 2. Plan Colombia - funded by you and me - has accelerated the violence and displacement, and 3. As U.S. citizens we have a large quota of responsibility in the Colombian violence and also a huge potential to contribute to peace there. Perhaps we can't all travel to Colombia to the rivers and sit beside citizens in meetings like this (though some of us can, please come). But we can all make at least a phone call to our congressman. Or even visit him or her. After all, it's our dollars that keep the conflict going.

And what does the SOA have to do with this? Everything, according to the human rights groups with which we met, top commanders in the war zones are SOA grads. They also told us that the SOA is in Georgia, and it is in Colombia as well. The thousands of U.S. military who have passed through Colombia are teaching those same skills, far outside the spotlight we have shined on the SOA.