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House vote forces release of SOA names

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The U.S. House of Representatives voted today to force the School of the Americas (renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation - WHINSEC) to release the names, ranks, country of origin, courses and dates attended of students and instructors at the institute.

The amendment was offered by Representative Jim McGovern (D-MA), Representative Joe Sestak (D-PA), Representative Sanford Bishop (D-GA) and Representative John Lewis (D-GA) and won by a margin of 224:190.

For the past few years, despite the SOA/ WHINSEC PR machine proclaiming an open and transparent school, the SOA/ WHINSEC has been unwilling to provide information about the students and instructors. The Pentagon secrecy took effect after research revealed that the SOA/ WHINSEC continues to train known human rights abusers, and that instructors have been involved in numerous crimes.

Freedom of Information Act requests since FY 2005 have all been denied, proof of SOA/ WHINSEC's unwillingness to submit to oversight from the public whose tax-payer dollars help fund the school.

Access to information regarding SOA/ WHINSEC graduates of previous years has been a valuable asset to human rights organizations who have been able to identify Latin American military officers and police that have committed human rights abuses or engaged in criminal activity in their home countries after attending the school as instructors or students.

SOA Watch issued a statement saying it "celebrates" the release of the names:

"We support the release of this important information at all U.S. military training facilities in the spirit of openness, transparency, and the public's 'right to know.' We see gaining access to the names of SOA/ WHINSEC graduates and instructors as a crucial step towards closing the SOA/ WHINSEC for good."

The School of the Americas is a U.S.-military training school for Latin American soldiers, located in Fort Benning, Georgia. It was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

Dubbed the ?School of Assassins,? the SOA/WHINSEC is a school that its critics say is synonymous with torture and military repression around the world. Graduates of the school, they say, have a long history of participating in and orchestrating killings, rapes and the suppression of popular movements for social change.

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