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Message to Obama: 'Time to close SOA is now!'

by Marie Dennis

Human rights activists, religious leaders, and military veterans will descend on Fort Benning, Ga. this weekend to demand the closing of a notorious military training facility that has tutored some of Latin America's most brutal soldiers and dictators.

The U.S. Army School of the Americas, renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in 2001, has a long and shameful history of teaching torture, extortion and execution to infamous graduates like Manuel Noriega, the former dictator of Panama. Nearly 60,000 alumni have returned to Bolivia, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to suppress human rights leaders, political dissidents and innocent civilians swept up in the region's often violent struggles for social justice.

Two former instructors at the school, Col. Alvaro Quijano and Maj. Wilmer Mora, were arrested last August for supporting the leader of a Colombian drug cartel who is on the FBI's most wanted list. Last year, Bolivia's government joined Costa Rica, Argentina, Uruguay and Venezuela in announcing it would withdraw soldiers from the school.

Bolivia has good reason to end its affiliation with this disgraced facility. Hugo Banzer Suarez, who ruled Bolivia in the 1970s under a brutal military dictatorship, attended the school in 1956 and was later inducted into its 'Hall of Fame.' In 1989, six Jesuit priests, their co-worker and her teenage daughter were massacred in El Salvador. A U.S. congressional task force reported that those responsible were trained at the School of the Americas.

Interrogation manuals used by the facility and declassified by the National Security Archive shed light on a grim litany of 'coercive techniques' similar to those used by U.S. military officers to abuse detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Several torture survivors from Latin America will be among the 15,000 nonviolent protestors at Ft. Benning gathering for prayerful vigils, rallies and workshops organized by School of the Americas Watch, founded by Fr. Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll Catholic priest. Rep. Jim McGovern of Massachusetts and Rep. John Lewis of Georgia have sponsored legislation to cut off funding to the facility. Last June, 203 members of Congress supported the McGovern-Lewis amendment, only six votes shy of the number needed to pass.

President-elect Barack Obama spoke eloquently on the campaign trail about the need to reclaim America's moral standing in the world. He can start by issuing an executive order to shut down the school, heralding a new direction for U.S.-Latin America foreign policy.

It's long past time to close the doors on a facility that is emblematic of how unchecked U.S. militarism often spreads violence and instability around the world. According to the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. is the leading supplier of weapons to the developing world with over \$10 billion in arms sold.

When lofty rhetoric about planting seeds of democracy is undermined by destructive foreign policies the world has reason to view our nation as hypocritical and dangerous rather than a shining beacon of freedom. As award-winning *New York Times* foreign correspondent Stephen Kizner reports in his book *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, our government has for many years pulled the strings of military, political and economic power in foreign lands with devastating consequences.

A new model for international engagement guided by a commitment to the global common good and social justice is needed in our rapidly shrinking world. This means choosing diplomacy over unilateralism, fair trade agreements, debt cancellation for impoverished nations and comprehensive immigration reform that addresses the connections between poverty and migration.

The Catholic priests and nuns, union leaders, students and committed peacemakers who will stand together in solidarity at the School of the Americas bring the best of their minds and hearts to these profound moral struggles of our time. Those of us who still believe that another world is possible should join them.

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