

¡Presente! at the Gates of the SOA and Stewart Detention Center

By Pepperwolf



2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the murders of the six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador. Human rights activists traveled to Columbus, Georgia, to commemorate the lives of the eight but also the lives of all of the thousands of other victims who have died at the hands of soldiers who have attended the School of the Americas that is located there inside Fort Benning. Since 1989, a tradition continues of chanting the names and ages of those killed—something that many feel is very profound and moving. Hearing the litany of names sung is a haunting, reflective, and somber experience. Commenting on this year’s vigil, Tom Bottolene, a peace activist from Minnesota who has come to Georgia many times for the vigil, said: “I was truly moved by the sight of thousands of people raising their crosses, each one commemorating a victim, and reciting “¡Presente!” in the pouring rain.”

Not just this school, but also many other U.S. military schools all over the world are training soldiers from other countries in counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence, and interrogation tactics. The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) replaced the school, once named the School of the Americas (SOA) in 2001, supposedly by adding classes (eight hours) on human rights to satisfy the members of Congress who voted to close the school in 2000. “New name, same shame” was the response of the activists.

Nineteen of the 26 soldiers indicted for the massacre on November 16, 1989, were students of the SOA. Activists working with SOAWatch have kept tabs as well as they can, considering the obfuscation of the U.S. military, releasing the names of soldiers implicated in the deaths, torture, and disappearances of citizens in Central and South America who have graduated from the notorious school. Vigilers fixed the crosses and Stars of David that they carried, bearing victims’ names, to a fence that

was erected by Ft. Benning specifically to keep protesters off the base while the procession takes place as a music collective sings the victims' names. Added to the names of those from past massacres are the recent deaths of activists from Honduras, Mexico, and Colombia who were killed earlier this year.



Pouring rain did not deter the crowd from progressing to the gates of Ft. Benning. (top)

Crosses raised bearing the names of SOA/WHINSEC victims. (above)

Edward Dubose of the NAACP was one of the speakers at the SOA Watch, connecting issues inside the U.S. to those of foreign policy. (below)

Photos by Tom Bottolene

Additional images from the event - [click here](#)

SOA Watch founder Roy Bourgeois, on a stage set up for the purpose of reaching the crowd, welcomed everyone, linking the many reasons people were in attendance at the rally and vigil. A variety of others spoke. One of them, Father Ismael Moreno, known as Padre Melo, is the director of Radio Progreso based in northern Honduras, which has reported on human rights abuses since the military coup in 2009 that overthrew the democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya; the coup was led by General Romeo Orlando Vásquez Velásquez, a two-time graduate of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas. Another speaker, Javier Barrera Santa, is the leader of the Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Medellín, Colombia; Colombia is one of SOA/WHINSEC's top client countries. Edward Dubose of the NAACP and Alex Sanchez, the executive director of the Los Angeles branch of Homies Unidos, also spoke, as did Jennifer Harbury, the human rights lawyer whose probe into the torture and death of her Guatemalan husband turned up a close involvement between the CIA and the Guatemalan military. She described U.S. involvement in torture in her book *Truth, Torture, and the American Way: The History and Consequences of U.S. Involvement in Torture* (Beacon Press, 2005).

Bringing us new energy and hope for the future were some of the 33 youth leaders from 18 Latin American countries who had gathered at SOA Watch's Youth Encuentro in Venezuela the previous July. And, in this time together, in addition to the speakers, and music at the gates and in workshops throughout the weekend, the creative puppetistas lifted our spirits inspiring us to continue our resistance back

home. Not waiting until they returned home, on Sunday, November 23, two protesters, Nashua Chantal, 62, of Americus, Georgia (it's the third year he has climbed over the fence), and long-time activist Eve Tetaz, 83, of Washington, D.C. (carrying a poster of one of the 43 disappeared Mexican students) were arrested for entering Fort Benning property and could face federal prison sentences of up to six months for trespassing.

While continually pursuing efforts to close the school through legislation in the United States Congress, activists with SOAWatch have another tactic: SOAWatch delegations to various countries have met with high officials resulting in five countries—Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador— making public announcements that they will no longer send students to SOA/WHINSEC. The SOAW.org website states: “In meetings with human rights organizations, these countries cited the negative human rights message this institution sends to the people in their nations. Comments from representative defense ministers include experiencing firsthand the horrors of tortures, detention, imprisonments, and disappearances caused by WHINSEC's graduates. They also stated that knowing the history of the school, ‘we have absolutely no need for training at this kind of school.’ A former Uruguayan general expressed feeling ‘used’ by the Pentagon to protect U.S. interests, to the point of leading (many of his) fellow officers to repress, torture, and kill their own people. Latin American nations are pulling away from WHINSEC and from United States policies as a whole. Closing the school would send a strong positive human rights message to these nations and to the world.”

Stewart Detention Center: This year's resistance weekend included an action at the Stewart Detention Center, about 30 miles from Columbus in Lumpkin, Georgia, the Stewart County seat and a town, according to the official Georgia state website, with a population of 2,741, named to honor Wilson Lumpkin, a former governor who also served as a U.S. representative and U.S. senator, who was a leading advocate of state rights and “Indian removal.” Lumpkin is now the site of one of the large immigration detention centers and is the largest employer in Stewart County.

The for-profit prison is a private 1,800-bed facility [under contract with ICE/U.S. Homeland Security] where undocumented immigrants can be held for months, sometimes years, while fighting deportation.[1] Drawing connections between Ferguson, U.S. foreign policies, reasons people migrate, the militarization of the border and police (both in the U.S. and in Latin America), unjust systems, Plan Mexico[2], the disappearance of 43 students inspired people to act. About 1,000 people marched a mile and a half from downtown Lumpkin. The wife of a man locked up for a year and a half spoke to those gathered about how she will never get that time back. Holding immigrants prisoner destroys families. Children can't see their parents. Five activists were arrested for crossing onto the immigration center's property in opposition to the oppressive policies. They were charged with trespassing and released on a \$250 bond each.

Pepperwolf has attended the annual vigil and rally in Georgia since 1997 after she first heard Father Roy Bourgeois. She traveled to Colombia with an SOAWatch/Witness for Peace delegation in 2002. As a member of the Minnesota chapter of SOAWatch, she conducted many workshops at area colleges to prepare for the annual vigil. Pepperwolf has served on the WAMM Board and was the WAMM director through the end of January, 2015.



Endnotes

1. Stewart Detention Center holds a male-only population and is a product of Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) CCA website, cca.com; another CCA facility is now opening: The Obama administration announced on Monday that CCA would run a 50-acre compound in Dilley, Texas, that will ultimately hold 2,400 women and children awaiting release or deportation.— “The Operators of America’s Largest Immigrant Detention Center Have A History of Inmate Abuse,” Newsweek, December 20, 2014.
2. Plan Mexico involves U.S. military aid and security training. For more information, see the Witness for Peace analysis of the Mérida Initiative/ Plan Mexico fact sheets at witnessforpeace.org