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No More Students To School Of The Americas, Says Costa Rica's President

by Mike Leffert

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In the quietest way possible, with neither fanfare nor ballyhoo, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias has agreed not to send any more Costa Rican police to the infamous US School of the Americas (SOA). Arias cited the school's history of involvement in military coups and human rights abuses throughout Latin America in deciding that, when the last three of the country's police have graduated, no more will be sent to the US Army's school at Fort Benning, Georgia. The 1987 Nobel Peace Prize winner made the decision after talks with a delegation from School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch), led by the Rev. Roy Bourgeois and Lisa Sullivan Rodriguez.

The SOA is now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). The name change was part of a sanitizing program aimed at keeping the SOA from being closed down. Under whatever name, the institution has trained more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, sniping, commando tactics, psychological warfare, military intelligence, interrogation, and torture. Costa Rica sends police there because it has no army.

Through the years, the country has sent 2,600 police to the institution. "When the courses end for the three policemen, we are not going to send any more," said Arias, after meeting with Bourgeois, who responded, "This is going to send a lot of energy and more hope to our movement." The movement aims to close the school down. It closed briefly in 2000, but reappeared as WHINSEC.

Lisa Sullivan explained, "In the year 2000, a vote in the Congress was at the point of closing this school, but failed by one vote. This alerted the Pentagon, which immediately changed the name but left everything else the same." Arias, who won the Nobel Prize for his efforts to bring peace to Central America, made Costa Rica the fourth country of the hemisphere to withdraw from the school. Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela, leftist countries all, precede him (see NotiSur, 2006-05-26). Arias is no leftist, and his ties to US trade policy help to explain the virtual silence with which he withdrew from the SOA. Neither he nor his office has commented on the decision, and press coverage has been minimal.

To the contrary, the government has sought to minimize the importance of the move. "We must understand that this decision does not in any way contradict our alliance with the United States in the struggle against crime, and neither does it impede cooperation in security programs to professionalize our police," said Public Safety Minister Fernando Berrocal. Rather, said the minister, the decision flows from "the most sacred principles of the country's history," a history that includes the constitutional disbanding of the army in 1948. The history is also a bit distorted.

True it is that Costa Rica has no military, but it is also true that, at 2,600, the Central American country of 4 million citizens has sent more police to SOA than Mexico with 100 million has sent

soldiers (1,600). Argentina with a repressive military past has sent 756, and Paraguay 1,140. Sullivan noted, "Costa Rica has always been for us a symbol of peace, a hope for Latin America not having an army, but it saddens us to know that so many Costa Ricans have been sent to this terrible school." The numbers are actually higher, as the figures cited do not include the years since 2004, when the school ceased to provide the data. Said Sullivan, "President Arias recognized the damage that this school has done to countries like El Salvador, Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia. We gave him the list of 2,588 graduates up to 2004, and I believe he was sincerely surprised to see so many graduates. It's something really troubling, given the image of Costa Rica as a country that symbolizes peace on the continent."

Trade at gunpoint, a moral dilemma Arias may also be surprised by the moral predicament in which the figures place him. As a figure of peace on the one hand and supporter of US trade and economic policy on the other, he appears to have failed to see the paradox laid out by Bourgeois. "In the conflicts that affect the poor, the water and gas wars in Bolivia, where there is repression, is the hand of the School of the Americas. Its graduates have told us the strongest thing they have is this link with the United States, and they are used to improve the conditions of the foreign companies and make them richer, help them to export, but not to benefit the countries where they live," he said.

Arias' decision follows a similar decision during the previous administration of Abel Pacheco (2002-2006). In 2004, Costa Rica rejected the establishment of an SOA civilian offshoot, the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), which set up instead in El Salvador. Costa Rica was second after Panama to refuse to host the institution. Costa Rican social movements pressed the legislature to place conditions on allowing the ILEA a presence. A first condition was that, according to diplomatic notes between the countries, "the academy and its installations do not seek to develop any kind of military instruction or connection with military activities." Also ruled out was diplomatic immunity for academy personnel. The US rejected these and other conditions.

A 2005-2006 report from the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas put the capacity of the academy at 1,500 students, "about twice the current enrollment of the School of the Americas." On the isthmus, Costa Rica has sent fewer students to the SOA than have most others, except for Guatemala with 1,566 and Belize with just one. Of the others, up to 2004, El Salvador had sent 6,817; Nicaragua, 4,529, Panama, 3,572; Honduras, 3,556.

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