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Argentina and Uruguay Stop Training Military at the School of the Americas

by LADB Staff

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The governments of Uruguay and Argentina have decided to stop sending troops for training at the US military academy formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA), now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). Groups that have campaigned for the closure of the military school praised the move. Argentine and Uruguayan defense ministers decided in March to stop sending soldiers to train at the SOA/WHINSEC, a military academy based at Fort Benning, Georgia, according to a statement by Washington-based School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch). In the past, both countries regularly sent soldiers to Fort Benning for training.

A spokesperson for the Uruguayan Embassy in London confirmed the decision April 5. Argentina reportedly had one student at the institute but would not be sending any more. The institute, attended by between 700 and 1,000 students annually, replaced the SOA when the latter was closed in 2000. SOA became notorious when it became known that some of its graduates had gone on to become brutal military leaders in Latin America's "dirty wars," using SOA manuals on illegal interrogation and counterinsurgency techniques.

In 1996, the Pentagon was forced to publicly release training manuals that promoted torture, extortion, and summary executions. Despite that, say SOA Watch representatives, there has been no independent investigation of the institution. SOA graduates included the late Salvadoran right-wing militia leader Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson, known as Blowtorch Bob for his interrogation methods; former Guatemalan President Efraim Rios Montt (1982-1983), later accused of genocide; Leopoldo Galtieri (1981-1982), the late Argentine junta leader jailed for human rights abuses; Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer (1971-1978, 1997-2001), accused of serious human rights violations; and Manuel Noriega (1983-1989), the former Panamanian leader now serving a 40-year sentence in the US for drug charges.

In 2001, following a long campaign against it, the school was officially closed and WHINSEC was created. SOA Watch argues that it should be closed, calling the changes merely cosmetic. Annual protests outside Fort Benning draw thousands and feature prominent acts of civil disobedience by activists. The decision by the two countries to end their involvement with the school followed meetings between Uruguayan and Argentine human rights groups and SOA Watch activists.

According to SOA Watch founder Rev. Roy Bourgeois, the defense ministers told him they were discontinuing their involvement with the institute. "To Latin Americans, the SOA/WHINSEC represents nothing but the gravest violations," said Bourgeois. "No amount of reforms will repair those relationships. We must close this school if we want to show that the US is serious about human rights."

Venezuela pulls out of SOA in January 2004

Presidents Nestor Kirchner of Argentina and Tabare Vazquez of Uruguay have been encouraging strong efforts to uncover and prosecute those responsible for abuses committed under dictatorial regimes that held power in their respective countries (see NotiSur, 2004-04-02, 2005-07-01, 2006-02-10, and 2006-03-31). The two countries join Venezuela, whose President Hugo Chavez ended his country's involvement with the school in January 2004. Colombia has the highest number of students enrolled there. Colombia has received extensive US military aid, materiel, and training under Plan Colombia, a US\$4 billion program to support the government's decades-old war against guerrilla and paramilitary groups.

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