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Bolivia Opens School to Train Soldiers in Fight Against ‘Imperialist’ Powers

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With the creation of what the Evo Morales administration has dubbed the Anti-Imperialistic Military School (Escuela Militar Antiimperialista, EMA), Bolivia has made good on one of the stated goals of the Union of South American Nations (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas, UNASUR), which it helped found in 2008 (NotiSur, May 30, 2008, and Jan. 23, 2009). Bolivia intends for the school to spark a debate on the proper role of the armed forces in South American democracies.

The academic courses, in which military personnel from the 12 UNASUR countries have been invited to enroll, will be obligatory for Bolivian officers who aspire to advance to the rank of Army captain or its equivalent in other military branches. EMA will begin regular operations in March with 200 students. However, as of its Aug. 17 inauguration, it housed 100 officers. For now, all instructors are Bolivian, but beginning next year, they will be joined by Ecuadorans, Venezuelans, and Cubans. In order to obtain an “integral formation of military cadres,” it plans to foster closer relations with civil intellectuals from Argentina and Uruguay.

“...This school is a political and ethical commitment with the country, the region, and the world, not only because it is fair, but because it is morally necessary to live in conditions of equality, dignity, fraternity, and complementarity,” President Morales said at the academy’s inauguration ceremonies. “Our struggle requires forging an anti-establishment discourse and creating a great motherland for the construction of a strong Latin American state.”

Contrasted to the School of the Americas

Although he emphasized that EMA is not an answer to “other celebrated military institutions”—an obvious reference to the School of the America, which operated on Panamanian soil between 1946 and 1964 and was directed by the US Department of Defense—the comparison arose immediately among those attending the event (NotiSur, May 26, 2006, and NotiCen, May 31, 2007). And at the end of his speech, Morales spoke directly: “Historically, the empire indoctrinated our military personnel, stripping them of their nationalistic spirit,” he said, referring to the US. “While the empire teaches world domination, at our school, we will learn to free ourselves from oppression, it will be a school for the defense of the people.”

In describing the project’s philosophy, the government said EMA would be an “ideological center to revise the continent’s history,” and would follow the model of other institutions growing out of the 2010 establishment of Bolivia as a “plurinational state,” such as the academy for diplomats (Academia Diplomática), which combines political formation with training. Morales, who was received on the school grounds with cries of Patria o muerte (Fatherland or death), said, “The new armed forces—responsible for more than 150 coups since their republican origins in 1825—must now promote decolonization, gender equality, and social inclusion, and in order to maintain this anti-imperialistic conviction, it is essential to first promote a change in the formation of our cadres.”
Defense Minister Reymi Ferreira said it was crucial to foster a way of thinking that could “stand up to the cultural, ideological, political, and economic domination of the empire and liberate the people,” adding, “for this we will have this new institutional space for discussion, knowledge, and the development of unifying anti-colonial thought for the armed forces and social movements.”

Overthrown president honored

The institution’s name—Escuela Militar Antiimperialista Juan José Torres—is significant because it honors a military man who served as president for just 10 months from October 1970 to August 1971. However, during that short time, his government nationalized hydrocarbons, expropriated major multinational mining and energy companies, expelled the controversial Peace Corps volunteers (which he called “an instrument of penetration”), and ended the existing agreements between the armed forces and the Pentagon. Following his overthrow, Torres exiled himself to Argentina, where he was assassinated in 1976, one of the first actions carried out within the framework of Operation Condor, a coordinated and repressive plan by Southern Cone dictatorships in the last quarter of the 20th century (NotiSur, July 7, 2000, July 13, 2001, and June 19, 2009).

For Ferreira, opening EMA is culmination of a process that established a new concept of security for Bolivia. The process, he said, was begun by two former presidents, Germán Busch (1937-1939) and Gualberto Villarroel (1943-1946), whom he called “strongly anti-imperialistic.”

“I haven’t seen anyone—either in civil society or the armed forces—honoring dictators,” Ferreira said. “Those who have advanced positions are recognized, and today, justice is accomplished for the great military man Juan José Torres.”

In mid-July, Deutsche Welle, the German radio and television network, reported on a press conference held to announce EMA’s upcoming inauguration where Morales spoke freely about the School of the Americas, without constraining himself for the sake of diplomacy.

“Before, there was a major school, the School of the Americas, where the best of our military men and police went to learn ideology,” he said. “It is a right, we respect it, but we also have another school, not from the empire, but of the people, an ideological, programmatic school, to revise the history of how Latin American peoples and the world were subjugated.”

Morales then went on to remind the journalists of some aspects of the School of the Americas: More than 60,000 military men and police from Latin American studied there, among them Gen. Manuel Contreras, head of Chile’s secret police (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, DINA) under Augusto Pinochet, and responsible for the assassination of hundreds of dissidents (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 1995, Oct. 27, 1995, and Aug. 28, 2015). Also receiving instruction at the School of the Americas were Argentine dictators Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri (NotiSur, July 19, 2002, and Jan. 17, 2003) and Eduardo Viola; Manuel Antonio Noriega of Panama (NotiCen, Oct. 8, 2015); Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala (NotiCen, Aug. 7, 2003, Aug. 2, 2012, and Jan. 23, 2014); the Salvadoran Roberto D’Aubuisson, who was head of the death squads that murdered Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero (NotiCen, Feb. 21, 1992, and June 4, 2015); and the Peruvian Vladimiro Montesinos, executor of Alberto Fujimori’s repressive policies (NotiSur, July 13, 2001, July 5, 2002, and Oct. 6, 2006). In 1984, the School of the Americas was moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, and its name was eventually changed to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) (NotiSur, May 26, 2006, and July 13, 2012). Jorge Illueca, the
Panamanian president between February and October 1984, described the school as “the largest base for the destabilization of Latin America.”

The regional debate has a wide range of opinions, which Deutsche Welle illustrated with the reproduction of a 2015 interview with Chilean sociologist and analyst Raúl Sohr. He spoke about the new role the armed forces have in Latin American democracies and about UNASUR’s decision to establish its own defense academy, which Bolivia now made a reality. Sohr agreed with Morales that the role of the armed forces should be a topic of study in the new school.

“The question should be framed this way: If their main role is to seek integration, not to intervene in politics as has been their tradition, what will the mission of these armed forces be?” Sohr said many of the regions’ armed forces have sought an international role through the UN peacekeeping forces. For example, he said, “it’s significant that only Latin American armed forces are participating in the so-called program for the stabilization of Haiti, an interesting experience for the South American militaries because they have worked together in a specific mission, and in doing so have overcome many of their misgivings.”

Sohr was referring to the participation of nine of the 12 UNASUR countries in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, a project known as MINUSTAH, an acronym for its French name, Mission de Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (NotiCen, Aug. 9, 2007, and Oct. 3, 2013). The only UNASUR military units not participating are those of Venezuela, Surinam, and Guyana.

EMA may be useful in consolidating policies of peaceful coexistence and regional integration. But Sohr said that, in the end, “it is not the military that starts border and territorial disputes between countries. Many times, the civilians are the worst hawks.” He said that military organizations often have a high degree of integration and that there are periodic meetings between leaders of the armed forces during which there are friendly sports competitions. “Military diplomacy exists and has been very successful,” he said. A case in point is the relations between the armed forces of Chile and those of Bolivia and Argentina, two countries with historic border disputes. In the first case, Chilean military hospitals have given complex medical treatment to Bolivian officers. Chile has also repaired Bolivian Air Force planes. Chile has jointly patrolled Antarctica with the Argentine military, sharing the use of ships.

Like Sohr, many regional analysts believe the Bolivian project is going in the right direction, although the caveat should be made, Sohr said, that “in many respects, the military forces are more integrated that other sectors of society.”

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