

November 2007 Vigil and Direct Action to Close the School of Assassins

I. What Can We Expect?

What will happen at Fort Benning, November 16-18?

November 16 marks the anniversary of the assassination of 14-year-old Celina Ramos, her mother and six Jesuit priests in El Salvador in 1989. Nineteen of the 26 Salvadoran army officers cited by a UN Truth Commission as responsible for this atrocity were trained at the School of the Americas (SOA). Since 1990, people have gathered at the gates of Fort Benning, home of the SOA, to memorialize these eight people and all those who have died at the hands of soldiers trained at this school -- as well as to take action in opposition to this training and the racism, repression and failed policy it represents.



In November of 2006, 22,000 people raised their voices for justice at the Vigil to Close the SOA. Thousands listened to the stories of social movement leaders and torture survivors from across the Americas and varied musical performances. Scores of people participated in workshops and caucuses, attended film showings, networked with others and left feeling more inspired in their work for social transformation.

A more detailed **schedule of events** for our 2007 gathering will be available at www.SOAW.org as we get closer to the Vigil. Here is a brief look at the weekend and prior week's events:

Monday, November 12 – Wednesday, November 14: SOA Watchers from around the country arrive in Columbus, Georgia to create artwork, puppets and banners for the Vigil.

Thursday, November 15: Nonviolence trainings, organizing trainings and film showings begin. SOA Watch former prisoners and probationers of conscience meet. Peacemaker trainings.

Friday, November 16: Trainings and film showings continue. Labor and student caucuses, the Colombia teach-in, meetings of groups like Veterans for Peace, Witness for Peace, Pax Christi, catholic workers, direct action planning and event celebrations.

Saturday, November 17: An opening plenary kicks off the days of hope and resistance. **Rally at the gates from 11:30 am to 5 pm with music and speakers from across the Americas.** Cultural events, a concert, organizing meetings, the Ignatian teach-in, a meeting of women religious and a spokescouncil meeting for affinity groups and final direct action preparation happen in the evening after the rally.

Sunday, November 18: **Massive memorial service and symbolic funeral procession at gates of Fort Benning,** followed by puppets and festival of resistance, from 8:30am to 3pm.

What is the scenario for nonviolent action?

Direct action and nonviolent civil disobedience has been a critical part of the campaign to close the SOA/ WHINSEC and of the annual Vigil. This year, early on Sunday morning at the gates of Fort Benning, we will hold a memorial service for those killed and targeted by SOA/ WHINSEC violence in Latin America. Thousands of mourners, lined up several abreast, will follow coffin bearers in a powerful, symbolic funeral procession. Many people carry a white wooden cross, a Star of David, flowers or other

memorial symbols of their choosing (*please bring your own crosses and banners*). Many symbols will bear the name of someone killed by an SOA graduate.

The funeral procession will be part of a nonviolent direct action for those that choose to take part, and **affinity groups*** are invited to implement creative nonviolent actions of their own as part of the scenario at the main gate, on the street, on the military base or at other places. Each affinity group is encouraged to express themselves as they feel called. Some of these actions may be reverent in tone, similar to the traditional funeral procession, while others will have a spirit that is more celebratory. We ask only that actions remain within the SOA Watch **nonviolence guidelines** (*see the guidelines in this packet*). Affinity group representatives at a **spokescouncil**[™] meeting on Saturday night will finalize the scenario and coordinate how and when the actions occur. All who will engage in civil disobedience should participate in a direct action preparation meeting on Friday or Sunday.

It's important to remember that almost all successful direct actions occur within the context of an ongoing campaign. This means that political - not only logistical - work has been done before the action. This improves the chances that your action will be understood and successful. This also means you intend to follow up on your action.



What are the risks if I “cross the line”?

Anyone “crossing the line” – entering military property – is technically at risk for arrest, prosecution and imprisonment. We cannot predict with certainty how the police, MP's and courts will react this year. In the past some people thought that first-time crossers were rarely prosecuted. That has changed. **You should not cross onto the base unless you are prepared for the possibility of prosecution.** *Though we cannot predict what will happen this year, we can tell you our assessments of the risk levels based on years of experience with nonviolent direct action at Fort Benning:*

- The fence and gates are across the Fort Benning property line. Anyone who approaches the fence has technically crossed the line onto base property. In the four years since the fence has been erected, no one who did not go around, under, or through the fence has been arrested during the funeral procession. Those who adorned the fence with their memorial symbols or participated in a die-in in front of the gates were not arrested. Over the past few years while Magistrate Faircloth has presided over court cases, he has made it clear that those who have circumvented the fence have trespassed while those who have remained on the city side of the fence have not crossed onto the base.
- In the past four years, people who have gone around, under, or through the fence have generally been prosecuted and almost all have been sentenced to probation or prison. Some received fines. In November of 2006, 16 people crossed onto the base and were arraigned and then released to await trial. Most protesters had to pay a \$1,000 bail.

It is difficult to predict what will happen this year. **There is much more legal information available on the SOA Watch website, and we encourage you to read it and to get in touch with us if you or someone in your group is planning a civil disobedience action.** Again, everyone entering the Fort Benning property for any reason, whether or not they have a ban and bar letter, should be prepared to face arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. If you are planning on crossing and can't provide money for bail, please contact SOA Watch for assistance.



Will legal representation be provided?

The SOA Watch Legal Collective will provide representation for all who desire it and will work with SOA Watch to provide extensive support for those who are a part of civil disobedience actions. Legal and support information is available at www.SOAW.org for those arrested and/or being prosecuted.

II. Decision-Making

How are decisions made for the November Vigil and action?

The **SOA Watch Council**, made up of 12 regional representatives and delegates from partner organizations, work with the **staff** to affirm a broad scenario for the November action. The **November Coordinating Team**, made up of a representative from each November Working Group, then organizes the Vigil, incorporating the vision of the Council and the **working groups** with information from the annual SOA Watch strategy meeting to make the scenario more specific and to implement it. Working groups include puppets, stage & program, peacekeepers, direct action, legal, medics, logistics, media and others. **Working groups are open to new members.** See the working group information page in this packet to get more involved.



How will on-site or crisis decisions be made this November?

Decisions about how to coordinate the nonviolent direct actions within the framework of the overall gathering will be made by the **affinity group* spokescouncil[‡]**. The coordinating team will make crisis decisions affecting the gathering as a whole.

III. Nonviolence Trainings and Logistics/ Orientation

It is important that everyone participating in the vigil and action be well prepared. We ask that all participants attend a local nonviolence training session before coming to Fort Benning or attend a training in Columbus on Thursday, November 15 or Friday, November 16. Many vigil participants have also found it very helpful to attend the **main plenary meeting on Saturday morning** in Columbus to get detailed information about this year's scenario. A **detailed schedule** of the weekend's events is available on our website. Contact the SOA Watch office if you are unsure of which session to attend.

Do I need to attend a nonviolence training session?

Everyone planning to cross the line or engage in any form of nonviolent direct action should attend a nonviolence training session either in her or his area or on Thursday or Friday of the Vigil. Everyone attending the vigil is also encouraged to attend a session. The skills learned are useful for people participating in any vigil, demonstration or public event. It is better to begin thinking through and discussing these things now than when you arrive in Columbus.

Trainings will be offered on Thursday, November 15 and Friday, November 16 in Columbus. For people arriving on Friday or later, we recommend attending a nonviolence training session in your local community before coming to town[‡]. Contact the SOA Watch office with questions.

Will the plenary or orientation sessions substitute for nonviolence training?

The logistics and orientation sessions are large group gatherings that provide important information about the scenario, including possible last minute changes. While they will include a review of the nonviolent action guidelines and the opportunity to ask questions about the scenario, the guidelines and legal issues, they are not a substitute for a nonviolence training.

Photos by Linda Panette www.soawne.org. Graphic by Rini Templeton, www.riniart.org.

^{*} An affinity group is a self-sufficient support system of about 3 to 15 people. A number of affinity groups may work together toward a common goal in a large action, or one affinity group might conceive of and carry out an action on its own. Sometimes, affinity groups remain together over a long period of time, existing as political support or study groups. These groups often form so that people with common values or goals can be of support to each other during nonviolent direct action. Ideally, the group will begin meeting well in advance of any action to build trust, clarify common values and come to consensus on a plan of action.

[‡] The **spokescouncil** is a body made up of empowered representatives from each affinity group which meets Saturday evening to discuss and finalize the Sunday scenario. Decisions of the spokescouncil will be made by consensus.

[‡] Training teams are preparing to conduct sessions in several regions of the US and some parts of Canada. Look on the SOA Watch website for a state-by-state listing of training teams and specific training events.