

The Venezuelan government has announced that it is going to cease all training of Venezuelan soldiers at the School of the Americas (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), the controversial US military combat training school for Latin American soldiers, based in Fort Benning, Georgia.

The official announcement was made by Venezuelan Vice President José Vicente Rangel in an address to the Venezuelan National Assembly on Thursday, February 26, 2004. In an earlier meeting with a delegation of U.S. human rights activists, Rangel stated that the SOA/WHISC is a training school for dictators, torturers and terrorists, and a country such as the U.S. which considers itself to be a democracy should not have such a school on their soil. During a visit of religious leaders from the United States in Venezuela in January, President Hugo Chávez also spoke out against the SOA as he stated: "This school [the SOA/WHISC] deformed the minds of many Latin American soldiers, who from there went on to become dictators." (El Nacional, January 19, 2004)

The SOA graduates Efraim Vasquez Velasco (the Army Commander in Chief) and General Ramirez Poveda were key players in the coup attempt against democratically elected President Hugo Chavez in April 2002. Another SOA graduate, Lieutenant German Rudolfo Varela, who is currently in INS detention in Miami, FL, is wanted in Venezuela for his involvement in embassy bombings in Caracas in February 2003.

SOA Graduates have been found responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses in Latin America. In 1996 the Pentagon was forced to release manuals used at the school that advocated torture, extortion and execution.

Initially established in Panama in 1946, the SOA was kicked out of that country in 1984 under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty. Former Panamanian President Jorge Illueca stated that the School of the Americas was the "biggest base for destabilization in Latin America."

Over its 58 years, the SOA has trained over 60,000 Latin American soldiers in counter-insurgency techniques, sniper skills, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics. Graduates have consistently used their skills to wage a war against their own people. Among those targeted by SOA graduates are educators, unionists, religious workers, student leaders, and others who work for the rights of the poor. Thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, assassinated, "disappeared," massacred, and forced into refuge by those trained at the SOA.

The School of the Americas (SOA/WHISC) continues to be a "key element of US foreign policy" — a foreign policy that is using military repression to ensure US control. The official SOA/WHISC propaganda that the school is "promoting democracy, human rights and civilian control of government" has too many times been contradicted by the actions of its graduates. New legislation to close the school was introduced by Representative Jim McGovern (D-Mass) and is currently co-sponsored by 106 Members of Congress. In January, 24 human rights advocates were sentenced to 3-6 months in prison for committing civil disobedience when 10,000 people demonstrated at Ft. Benning, home of the School of the Americas (SOA/WHISC) on November 23, 2003. Opponents of the SOA/WHISC are preparing for a large-scale Lobby

Day in DC on March 30, 2004.