

Washington D.C.- Grassroots organizers from across the country traveled to the nations capitol on March 30th to lobby Members of Congress to support the Latin America Military Training Review Act of 2003 (HR 1258), sponsored by Rep. James McGovern (D-MA). HR 1258 calls for the closure of Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, the successor institute to the notorious School of the Americas (SOA), and a full assessment of all Defense Department training in Latin America. Participants educated Members of Congress about new research findings that detailed the fraudulent nature of cosmetic reforms made in 2001, and pointed to the fact that the WHINSEC continues to train and support known human rights abusers. This information was made public at a press and congressional briefing on Monday March 29th, and included testimony from two Colombians on the notorious reputation the SOA/WHINSEC has in their home country. Intensive lobbying efforts resulted in five new co-sponsors signing onto HR 1258, bringing the total of co-sponsors to 118 plus Rep. McGovern. New co-sponsors were Rep. Nydia Velazquez (NY), Rep. John Lewis (GA), Rep. John Conyers Jr. (MI), Rep. Donald M. Payne (NJ), and Rep. William J. Jefferson (LA)

?The new research findings, coupled with the hundreds of lobby visits made by grassroots organizers, strongly reaffirms that closing the SOA/WHINSEC is a viable political issue?, stated Jacqueline Baker, SOA Watch Legislative Coordinator.

Weekend lead-up events on March 27 and 28 included lobby trainings, a human rights film festival, and other workshops highlighting anti-oppression organizing and nonviolent direct action. SOA Watch activist?s re-enacted scenes of massacres as part of an action to bring attention to the devastating effects that graduates of the SOA/WHINSEC continue to have on people throughout Latin America. Hundreds of Congressional staffers, interns, tourists, and commuters who were on their way to House and Senate office buildings witnessed these actions in front of the Capitol South Metro and the Supreme Court.

On Tuesday, April 6, a group of human rights activists including, nuns, priests, a member of the American Postal Workers union, a former New York firefighter, and a Noble Peace Prize Nominee will begin serving federal prison sentences for acts of civil disobedience protesting the SOA/WHINSEC in November 2003. The human rights activists were found guilty of federal trespass in January 2004, and received sentences ranging from three to six months.

SOA Watch, founded in 1990, is a national, grassroots, faith and conscience- based group committed to nonviolence. We have offices in Columbus, GA, Washington, DC and chapters in communities and on campuses around the country. Our goal is to expose and close SOA/WHINSEC.