

Protests Against “School of the Americas” Continue in GA

There is a considerable movement of solidarity in the U.S. with Colombia, picking up from that with Central America. This was very evident at the protest to close the School of the Americas (SOA) in Ft. Benning, GA.

Sister Jean Durel got me (Peter) a free plane ride and lodging in Columbus, GA for the Nov. 19-20 protest. We had a group of 8 sponsored by the CCVI community. Sr. Betty held the fort at home.

Days of rain and cold cut attendance, but we still had 7,000 at the gate, of whom 3,400 crossed the line to risk arrest when stopped about a half mile into the Base and 1700 were processed to be given a 5 year “ban and bar letter.” Some dozens who repeated in violation of previous ban and bar letters are likely to be brought to trial and jail for 3 to 6 months plus a fine, as were others in previous years.

In the process I had three encounters with the commander Col. Glenn Weidner, the last one a ten minute “chat” as he sat opposite me on the bus taking us off the base. Our group was one

of the first processed. Actor Martin Sheen was with us. Afterwards I had a half hour talk with Major (ret.) Joseph Blair, a former instructor at the SOA who taught Weidner. Blair is the one speaking out, taped by Maryknoll in their latest video on the SOA.

Blair told me: “If Weidner said they don’t teach torture, he’s lying. He’s a smoothie.” Yes, Weidner is a good PR guy. He is very intelligent with experience in Colombia. Guys with jobs like these are Army Intelligence. Blair himself was in Army Intelligence with time in Guatemala and with NATO in the European Defense System.

I asked Weidner about counter-insurgency and the promotion of para-military strategy and tactics including death squads and he said, “Counter-insurgency is hardly mentioned in there. It is only in one of some 30 courses they teach there.” He went on to talk about Colombia and how the para-military are rightist civilians organizing themselves against the guerrilla insurgents.

US money and military advisors are there to help the Government and the Army put down both

extremes.

This is the very same rationale used by the U.S. in El Salvador to justify U.S. support to the “middle.” But the middle doesn’t exist in such political struggle. The so-called “extreme right” is effectively connected to the Government and the Army that clandestinely organized and armed these rightist para-military. This was the case in El

Salvador in the ’80s and now in Colombia in the ’90s and escalated with Clinton’s gift of 1.3 billion.

Blair also said the SOA should be called the SOA & M-- the School of Assassination and Massacres. An interesting tid-bit: Blair, who lives retired in Columbus, GA, says there are three ex-commanders of the SOA retired who live in Columbus and never have spoken out in defense of the SOA.

“No, on the contrary, they encourage me to speak out. The thing is they won’t (speak out), for fear they’ll jeopardize pensions or jobs.”

At rallies I’ve been reading parts of Archbishop Rivera y Damas’ published statement following the killing of our four women friends in El Salvador Dec. 2, 1980 (this is their 20th anniversary) wherein he denounced the propaganda of the Government Junta pretending they were pursuing a “middle” course. Rivera points as well to the real use of U.S. arms sent to that government. All you have to do is put the word “Colombia” in the place of “Salvador” and you have exactly what needs to be said today.



Martin Lepkowski and Peter Hinde, O. Carm., at the School of the Americas protest in Columbus, GA at Ft. Benning on November 20, 1999.

Rivera y Damas: (the Apostolic Administrator) statement should have been read at the recent trial in Miami of Generals Guillermo Garcia and Vides Casanova to show their responsibility for the deaths of the 4 religious women. It shows our responsibilities in Colombia.

“In the recent assassinations, we have the situation, in addition, that the victims have been three sisters and a lay missionary, all North Americans. These sisters, who came to the country to give their lives with selflessness and generosity, deserve our tribute of admiration and gratitude, and show us the true greatness, solidarity and help of many Christians in our neighboring country, the United States. But these events also show us in what the U.S. Government assistance should not consist. Therefore we demand, as did our martyred Archbishop, Mgr. Romero, in a prophetic gesture, that the United States Government not provide military aid to our Government. Because, in spite of statements as to its use, the military aid facilitates repressions against the people and facilitates persecution against the Church.”

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