

“School of Assassins”: Protests Demand Closure of Notorious School of the Americas Training Camp

By [Nadia Prupis](#)

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We have to take an honest look at the violence the United States is exporting all over the world. If we don't do that, nothing is going to change.

Thousands of activists and dozens of peace groups converged this weekend in Georgia to call for the closure of the School of Americas (SOA or WHINSEC), a controversial training facility for Latin American soldiers, and the nearby Stewart Immigrant Detention Center.

Hundreds protested outside SOA's gates in Fort Benning, calling it the "School of Assassins," while others marched through the town of Lumpkin to hold a vigil outside of Stewart's facilities. A handful of protesters were [arrested and later released](#) after they crossed onto the grounds of the detention center, where organizers say approximately 1,800 migrants are being held in inhumane conditions as officials prepare to deport them en masse.

The weekend of action also included testimonies from victims of torture, who held up images of civilians murdered by death squads trained at SOA. Others spoke out about their experiences as families of disappeared persons.

Annual actions organized by the grassroots movement SOA Watch are being held throughout the weekend to speak out against militarization and demand accountability and reform of the U.S.'s foreign policies toward Latin America.

"Despite a shocking human rights abuse record, the School of the Americas continues to operate with US taxpayer money. Closing the SOA would send a strong human rights message to Latin America and the world," said SOA Watch founder Father Roy Bourgeois.

Ahead of the actions on Friday, SOA Watch national organizer Hendrik Voss told [local media](#), "We have to take an honest look at the violence the United States is exporting all over the world. If we don't do that, nothing is going to change."

"We say we are standing in solidarity with people of Latin America," Voss told the *Columbus Ledger-Inquirer* on Saturday. "When those people are forced from their home country because of SOA violence, they are being mistreated. We extend our solidarity with them."

The weekend of action expanded its focus to include Stewart Immigrant Detention Center about nine years ago. "We have to address the root causes of migration, which to a major part lie in the deplorable economic and military policies, which the United States has imposed on Latin America," Borgeois said.

For many activists, SOA has become a notorious symbol of U.S.-backed human rights abuses in Latin America. The taxpayer-funded school now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation educated several dictators from the region, as well as their military officials, and included torture, extortion, and execution in its curriculum. Yet as SOA Watch points out, despite evidence of human rights abuses connected to the school's graduates, "no independent investigation into the facility has ever taken place."

Follow the action on Twitter under the hashtag #SOAWatch2015.

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