

20,000 demonstrate against US military torture training center

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Some 20,000 people, the vast majority of them college and high school students, demonstrated Saturday and Sunday outside the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, demanding the shutdown of the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation, the new nameplate of the School of the Americas, a notorious US training center which has educated two generations of Latin American military dictators and torturers.

It was the largest turnout ever in what has become an annual demonstration against US government complicity in military repression in Latin America, swelled by the growing popular hostility to the war in Iraq. Several antiwar speakers addressed the crowd and the Iraq Veterans for Peace had a prominent role in the event. Only three days before the demonstrators converged on Columbus, Georgia, a Fort Benning soldier became the first enlisted woman to refuse service in Iraq and Afghanistan as a conscientious objector.

Spc. Katherine Jashinski, 22, of Austin Texas, a cook with a Texas National Guard unit, appeared at a news conference in Columbus, Georgia Thursday to explain her case. She applied for a conscientious objector discharge in June 2004, but the Army rejected it in October 2004. Jashinski has appealed the decision to a federal court in Texas, seeking a court order to release her from military service. Her unit, the 111th Area Support Group, is now at Fort Benning, training for deployment in Afghanistan. Last week US District Judge Orlando Garcia rejected Jashinski's request for a temporary restraining order, declaring, "The interests of one soldier do not outweigh the interests of an entire country."

Fort Benning has experienced a heavy death toll in recent months from combat in Iraq. At least 11 soldiers

based at Fort Benning have been killed since October 15, most of them from roadside bombs. Five were killed in a single attack near Ramadi on October 15.

Most of the weekend's events were symbolic commemorations of the tens of thousands of innocent victims of US-backed military repression in Central and South America. There was a procession past the gates of Fort Benning with thousands carrying white crosses marked with the names of those murdered or "disappeared" in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Argentina and other Latin American countries.

Survivors and relatives of victims spoke from the platform of a memorial service on Saturday evening. Also speaking were Patricia Roberts, mother of Jamaal Addison, the first soldier from Georgia killed in Iraq, and Sister Helen Prejean, the anti-death-penalty campaigner. Roberts, of Lithonia, Georgia, told the press, "I have been supporting the peace demonstrations nationwide. I feel that this is all linked together. It's all one entity because violence promotes war."

The yearly protest takes place on the anniversary of one of the most notorious atrocities perpetrated by graduates of the School of the Americas, the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter by a Salvadorean death squad in 1989. Fr. Roy Bourgeois, a Jesuit priest, initiated the protests a year later and they have continued since then. Thousands of those participating this weekend came from schools run by the Catholic religious order: all 28 Jesuit colleges were represented, including Georgetown, Boston College, Loyola of Chicago and St. Louis University, and 44 of 46 Jesuit high schools.

Demonstrators came from throughout the United States, including a high school delegation from St.

Ignatius High School in San Francisco which traveled more than 2,000 miles to attend. On Sunday morning, when 41 people were arrested for acts of civil disobedience at the gates of Fort Benning, those jailed came from 17 states (mainly in the northeast and Midwest) and the District of Columbia.

While police did little to interfere with protest activity during the weekend and there was no violence against the demonstrators, the first sentence handed down by US magistrate G. Mallon Faircloth was extremely severe: six months in jail and a \$2,000 fine for Christine Gaunt, an assistant librarian at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. Gaunt, 49, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, served a three-month term in 2002 for the same offense, and was under court order to stay away from the base for five years, until 2007.

Some 20 students from Grinnell attended the Fort Benning protest. One of them described the event as "really powerful, because it was 20,000 people who genuinely believe that good will triumph over evil, which you don't see very often. They really believed in what they were doing. There were people speaking about their experiences, victims of torture, speaking in Spanish and English. It was very bilingual."

Most of those arrested, unlike Gaunt, did not plead guilty at their arraignments and were released on bail pending trial, posting bonds of between \$500 and \$2,500.

There have been repeated failed efforts in Congress to curb the operations of the School of the Americas. In 1999, in the wake of disclosures about torture manuals being used in the training, the House of Representatives adopted a bill to abolish the school, but the measure was blocked in a House-Senate conference committee. As a cosmetic gesture, the Pentagon changed the name of the school in 2001 to the Western Hemisphere Institute of Security Cooperation.

A new bill to abolish the school is before the House Armed Services Committee, with 123 co-sponsors, but there is zero prospect for its passage through the Republican-controlled Congress (Democratic-controlled congresses before 1995 also rejected such action).

While many congressional Democrats give lip service to opposing US aid to Latin American death squads, the Clinton administration provided vigorous support for

the counterinsurgency campaign in Colombia, which has caused even more civilian deaths than the bloody interventions of the Reagan administration in Central America.

Whatever the Democrats say to well-intentioned delegations of college students and nuns, American imperialism is not about to cut its ties with the stooge regimes it props up throughout Latin America. Last year, the Bush administration sanctioned the ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti by gangs of cutthroats who served the previous Duvalier dictatorship. Currently, Venezuela and Bolivia are being targeted for US covert operations, in addition to the ongoing military aid to the Colombian regime.



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