

Club of Assassins

FORT BENNING, GEORGIA, USA was in the news once again in the third week of November. More than 22,000 people had gathered there to attend the demonstration demanding the closure of the innocuous sounding 'Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation' stationed there. In fact, it has become an annual affair where people from all over US gather to pressurise the government to close the Centre. The year 2003 saw 10,000 people converging there for protest and the figure surged to 16,000 the next year. An added feature of this year's protest would be that there would be simultaneous demonstrations in major Latin American cities.

After all what is so significant about this *Institute* that it is looked with revulsion the world over.

Established in 1946 in Panama and later shifted to Fort Benning in the year 1984, the Institute (earlier it was called 'School of Americas') has till date trained more than sixty thousand military personnel from different Latin American countries. Many SOA alumni have been linked to many of Latin America's most heinous human rights atrocities, from widespread torture to massacres of young children. It was one such graduate Leopoldo Galtieri who headed Argentina's military during the country's dictatorship, thirty-thousand people were killed or disappeared in mid-seventies.

It was the year 1996 when Pentagon had brought out a training manual used in this school which advocated coercive interrogation methods and extra-judicial executions. It is another matter that despite its bloody record till date there has not been any independent investigation into its functioning.

Of course the ascendance of leftist wind in different Latin American countries has definitely brought about a change in the situation. It was the year 2004 that Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela announced that henceforth no military personnel from his country would be sent there for training. Uruguay, another protege of US at one time and Argentina also followed suit.

But as far as the US government is concerned, it looks impervious to all this criticism. In fact in face of mounting rejection of US military influence in Latin America it has been striving to increase its influence. As reported in *USA Today* (November 10, 2006) it has rather exacerbated the long-running controversy over the SOA and US training. According to the report, the White House decided on October 2 to waive restrictions on US military training and funding in an attempt to "blunt a radical trend" in Latin America.

Pablo Ruiz, one such Chilean torture survivor who is fervently gearing up for the Santiago protest explained in simple terms the rationale behind this protest : "We plan to protest because we want future generations to live in peace and with justice." ~~██████████~~

[Contributed]