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Is the US Restarting Dirty Wars in Latin America?

by Wes Enzinna, Benjamin Dangl

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A resurgence of US-backed militarism threatens peace and democracy in Latin America. By 2005, US military aid to Latin America had increased by thirty-four times the amount spent in 2000. In a marked shift in US military strategy, secretive training of Latin American military and police personnel that used to just take place at the notorious School of the Americas, in Fort Benning, Georgia—including torture and execution techniques—is now decentralized.

The 2008 US federal budget includes \$16.5 million to fund an International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador, with satellite operations in Peru. With provision of immunity from charges of crimes against humanity, each academy will train an average of 1,500 police officers, judges, prosecutors, and other law enforcement officials throughout Latin America per year in “counterterrorism techniques.”

The academy in El Salvador is part of a network of ILEAs created in 1995 under President Bill Clinton, who touted the training facilities as a series of US schools “throughout the world to combat international drug trafficking, criminality, and terrorism through strengthened international cooperation.” There are ILEAs in Budapest, Hungary; Bangkok, Thailand; Gaborone, Botswana; and Roswell, New Mexico.

According to ILEA directors, the facility in El Salvador is designed to make Latin America “safe for foreign investment” by “providing regional security and economic stability and combating crime.” Most instructors come from US agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the FBI, the latter of which has had a

remarkably large presence in El Salvador since opening its own office there in 2005. Most of the school's expenses are paid with US tax payers' dollars.

Salvadorans refer to the ILEA as a new School of the Americas (SOA) for police. Suspicions are exacerbated by comparable policies of secrecy. As with SOA, the ILEA list of attendees and graduates is classified, as is course content. Many observers are troubled by this secrecy, considering how SOA atrocities came to light with Washington Post reporter Dana Priest's discovery, in September 1996, of SOA torture training manuals, and later with the acquisition by the founder of SOA Watch, Father Roy Bourgeois, of a previously classified list of SOA graduates, many of whom were recognized as leaders of death squads and notorious counterinsurgency groups.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ja9nXs1tQ7Q&feature=player_embedded

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf3jAVzdT3w&feature=player_embedded

After Condoleezza Rice announced plans for the ILEA in San Salvador at a June 2005 Organization of American States meeting in Miami, Father Roy wrote, "The legacy of US training of security forces at the SOA and throughout Latin America is one of bloodshed, of torture, of the targeting of civilian populations, of desaparecidos . . . Rice's recent announcement about plans for the creation of an international law enforcement academy in El Salvador should raise serious concerns for anyone who cares about human rights."

Suspicions are further aggravated by the US-mandated immunity clause that exempts ILEA personnel from crimes against humanity.

Though lack of transparency makes it impossible to know the content of courses, the conduct of the Salvadoran police—who compose 25 percent of the academy's graduates—has shown an alarming turn for the worse since the ILEA was inaugurated. In early May 2007, the Archbishop's Legal Aid and Human Rights Defense Office (Tutela Legal) released a report implicating the Salvadoran National Police (PNC) in eight death squad-style assassinations in 2006 alone. Meanwhile, the Salvadoran Human Rights Defense Office has also published reports connecting the PNC to death squads and repeated cases of corruption and misconduct.

While US interest in ILEAs is to ensure an environment that protects free trade and US economic interests, the PNC has played an active role in a crackdown against civil liberties, aimed at curbing both crime and social protest. Free trade agreements like CAFTA have been highly contentious, and President Saca's administration has gone to significant lengths to ensure that they succeed—including passing an anti-terror law in September 2006, modeled on the USA PATRIOT Act, that has been used to arrest everyone from anti-water-privatization activists to street vendors who violate CAFTA's intellectual property rules.

As ILEA graduates are employed throughout Latin America, the US military is establishing similar mechanisms of cooperation throughout the region as well. The ILEA joins a host of other police and military training facilities that are run by US agencies such as the FBI, ICE, and the

DEA, as well as programs run by private US security companies like DynCorp International and Blackwater.

Ben Dangel notes that in carrying on the legacy of Latin America's "Dirty Wars" of the 1970s and 1980s, in which kidnapping, torture, and murder were used to squash dissent and political opponents, Colombia and Paraguay also illustrate four characteristics of right-wing militarism in South America: joint exercises with the US military in counterinsurgency training; monitoring potential dissidents and social organizations; the use of private mercenaries for security; and the criminalization of social protest through "anti-terrorism" tactics and legislation.

UPDATE BY WES ENZINNA

On May 22, the US Congress approved the "Merida Initiative," which, as part of a \$450 million package for anti-gang and anti-crime programs in Mexico and Central America, provides \$2 million for the ILEA San Salvador's 2009 budget. With these new funds the academy will step up its efforts, training police from throughout the hemisphere, without public oversight or transparency as to the academy's operations or curriculum. What exactly is taught at the school remains a secret, and the involvement of the National Civilian Police (PNC) at the academy continues unabated, as does alleged PNC abuse.

While Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana (IDHUCA) director Benjamin Cuellar's presence at the school has been the source of scorn and criticism in El Salvador—a topic I focused on in my article—a US human rights organization, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), has publicly come to Cuellar's defense. At the same time, WOLA is currently negotiating with the State Department to work jointly with Cuellar and IDHUCA to monitor the ILEA. While WOLA's logic is that they hope "to press for greater transparency and accountability within the institution," they have not articulated a plan for how exactly they are going to accomplish what Cuellar has been unable to achieve (making the school more transparent, making the curriculum public), nor have they addressed the way in which their presence at the school, like Cuellar's, might offer legitimacy to the ILEA's activities without actually producing any changes in the way the academy operates. As Lesley Gill pointed out in my original piece, the use of human rights discourse and the co-optation of human rights advocates by US military and police institutions in Latin America is a tried-and-true public relations strategy pioneered at the infamous School of the Americas, and it is not, Gill reminds us, "indicative of any effort by the US to reform the military or police forces they are involved with."

Only time will tell whether or not WOLA's planned partnership with the State Department to monitor the ILEA will help make the school more transparent, or whether it will lend legitimacy to an academy that continues to be linked to copious human rights abuses.

The signs, however, are not promising. In March, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request made by this writer for ILEA course materials was rejected because, as the rejection letter states, "disclosure of these training materials could reasonably be expected to risk circumvention of the law. Additionally, the techniques and procedures at issue are not well known to the public."

Since publication of my article, PNC abuse and political assassinations in El Salvador have continued, and ILEA secrecy appears only to have become more entrenched, despite Cuellar and IDHUCA's involvement and despite increased international protest. It is still unclear whether or not the ILEA will turn out to be "another School of Assassins," as critics call the academy. If the present situation is any indication, however, these critics may prove to be correct.

UPDATE BY BENJAMIN DANGL

A number of recent developments have dramatically changed the military and political landscape of Latin America. While some electoral victories in Latin America signal a regional shift to the left, Washington continues to expand its military and navy presence throughout the hemisphere.

On April 20, 2008, left-leaning Fernando Lugo was elected president of Paraguay. His victory broke the right-wing Colorado Party's sixty-one-year rule. Lugo, a former bishop who endorses Liberation Theology, joins a growing list of left-of-center leaders throughout the region and has pledged to crack down on Paraguay's human rights violations linked to US-Paraguayan military relations. Shortly after his victory, Lugo told reporters that Washington must acknowledge the new regional environment in which Latin American governments "won't accept any type of intervention from any country, no matter how big it is."

In neighboring Bolivia, leftist indigenous president Evo Morales has faced increased resistance from the right-wing opposition. US government documents and interviews on the ground in Bolivia prove that Washington has been spending millions of dollars to empower the Bolivian right through the US Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy. (For more on this topic, see "Undermining Bolivia," *The Progressive*, February 2008).

On March 1, 2008, the Colombian military bombed an encampment of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on Ecuadorian soil, sparking a regional crisis. This attack was part of a decades-long conflict fueled by US military training and funding of the Colombian military.

The following month, on April 24, the Pentagon announced that the US Navy's Fourth Fleet would be repositioned to monitor activity in the Caribbean and Central and South America. The Fourth Fleet hadn't been operating in the area since 1950. Analysts in the region suggest that the Fourth Fleet's reactivation is a warning to Latin American leaders, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, that are working to build a progressive regional bloc outside of Washington's influence.

Though Washington continues to expand its reach throughout an increasingly leftist Latin America, regional alliances such as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas are growing between progressive Latin American leaders. Such political, economic, and military cooperation is effectively countering US hegemony. At the same time, the future of US-Latin American relations will depend largely on how the next US president interacts with this radically transformed region.

While most corporate media ignores Latin America, their reporting on the region is usually biased against the region's leftist leaders and social movements. Two online publications that provide ongoing reporting and analysis on the region are UpsideDownWorld.org, a website covering activism and politics in Latin America, and TowardFreedom.com, a progressive perspective on world events. Activists interested in confronting US military aggression in Latin America could visit the School of the Americas Watch website. For information on US military operations in the region and the hopeful response among progressive governments and social movements, see my book, *The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia* (AK Press).