

Activists peacefully object SOA

November 20th, 2008 by Eric Owen

Genital electrocution, waterboarding, sleep deprivation, sensory confusion and starvation are a few elements of the curriculum of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) in Fort Benning, Ga.

On the weekend of Nov. 15 and 16, hundreds of activists from across the country, including about a dozen from NAU, met in Tucson and Sierra Vista to protest U.S. torture policies. This event, the culmination of the "Southwest Week of Witness," focused primarily upon WHINSEC and Ft. Huachuca, a Sierra Vista military base linked to the teaching of torture techniques.

"A lot of the people that were involved in Abu Ghraib, as well as at Guantanamo...actually were from — and I believe one of the women still works at — the interrogation school at Ft. Huachuca," said Russell Crawford, a senior political science major and president of Peace and Justice at NAU.

WHINSEC, a United States Department of Defense facility formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA), has taught "military tactics and interrogation techniques" to over 61,000 military personnel, mostly Latinos, since its inception in 1946 in Panama.

The SOA changed its location in 1984 and was technically closed in 2001, the year WHINSEC was established.

"It's the exact same thing, they just changed the name," Crawford said. "They're still using the same policy books and manuals — it's even in the same building."

Defenders of the institute point out, according to WHINSEC's mission, "Eight hours of democracy and human rights instruction is mandatory."

However, critics argue that those teaching these subjects at WHINSEC are not the most appropriate teachers, that the army is not a very democratic institution, and does not have the best credentials in regard to human rights.

"Graduates of the school and even instructors at the school have become some of the worst human rights violators in the western hemisphere," said Reverend Kenneth Kennon, a general coordinator of the demonstrations.

Through educating the public via films and newsletters, petitioning congressmen and other means, the organizers of the Southwest Week of Witness aimed to raise awareness of the SOA, and thus to come closer to establishing civilian oversight of United States torture policies.

"The overall goal of the movement is to create more transparency in the policies the U.S. uses and to condemn the torture used in interrogation techniques," Crawford said.

Peace and Justice organized several events around NAU from Nov. 4 to 14, including a letter writing campaign, an anti-torture candlelight vigil and procession on Flagstaff City Hall's lawn and a forum given by Roddy Brett, assistant professor of politics and international affairs.

On Nov. 14 at Cline Library Auditorium, as well as on Nov. 15 at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Hector Aristizabal, a torture survivor from Medellin, Colombia gave his dramatic performance, *Nightwind*, in which he recreates the scenario in which he was tortured, and recounts his discovery of his brother's death at the hands of those who tortured him. After these performances, Aristizabal led largely non-verbal workshops, which he said are aimed to empower those present to take action against torture rather than merely retreating into denial.

"It's to hopefully work with people in the idea that we all need to heal, not just the torture survivors, but the torturers and the whole society that allows it...because torture dehumanizes us all," Aristizabal said in regard to *Nightwind*. "We need communal healing, not just protests."

The NAU students, mostly Peace and Justice members, arrived at Pima Community College in Tucson on the afternoon of Nov. 15, along with several other activists, where nine discussion-based workshops were held on issues related to torture and war. Some of these discussions were titled, "Counter-recruitment," "Farms not Arms," "100 days to shut down Gitmo" and "Why do people torture?"

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From there, the activists proceeded to Southside Presbyterian Church to make signs, eat dinner and participate in the “Theater of Oppressed,” a series of poetry readings and musical performances followed by Aristizabal’s *Nightwind*.

Then, the activists began a procession to the federal building where they lit candles with the names of those who suffered torture at the hands of those trained by the SOA, at Abu Ghraib and at Guantanamo Bay. These candles were laid on top of butterflies drawn by the children of families affected by torture.

The next day, activists drove to Veteran’s Memorial Park in Sierra Vista, where they listened to speakers and music until the early afternoon.

One of these speakers, Frankie Flores, a man from El Salvador, was tortured in 1980 by the National Guard, who accused him of working with the guerillas, when, in reality, he was working with the Catholic Church.

“I believe when we raise our voices against torture, people learn more and they take a position,” Flores said.

However, in addition to speakers and musicians supporting the movement, the event was attended by counterdemonstrators. Members of the American Legion Riders and Patriot Guard, a group of military veterans and troops, circled the parking lot driving motorcycles waving large American flags.

“There are a lot of people out there protesting American soldiers and America, and we are just trying to let people know there still are patriots out there,” said James Goodman, a member of the American Legion Riders.

Many of the activists, however, emphasized that they were targeting United States policies, not troops.

“The soldiers...are not the ones we’re targeting,” Kennon said. “In fact, since they are defending the American laws, and torture is against the law, they should be on our side.”

Nonetheless, given that 10,850 people, approximately 37 percent of the workforce, from Sierra Vista are employed at Ft. Huachuca, the protesters met much hostility as their procession approached the fort’s gates.

The protesters, many of whom wore orange jumpsuits with black hoods over their heads to resemble tortured detainees, marched through a stream of counter-demonstrators waving American flags, signs with slogans such as “Gitmo rocks” and “Bin Laden loves lefties” and blaring Lee Greenwood’s “Proud to be an American.”

The protestors decided not to speak with the counter-demonstrators to avoid confrontation and keep the attention on their demonstration.

This did not stop counter-demonstrators from saying, “Osama bin Laden loves you!” to the passing demonstrators.

The protesters marched past this demonstration and stood along Buffalo Soldier Trail, facing Ft. Huachuca, where they sang and danced to songs such as “This Little Light of Mine,” and held signs with slogans like “Torture is Terror.”

Next weekend, similar protests will be held at Ft. Benning.

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One Response to “Activists peacefully object SOA”

James Dean Says:

November 20th, 2008 at 2:22 pm



Individuals protesting persuasive means of interrogation, need to be reminded that the free world is at war with radical terrorists. The protestors should be thankful they’re in the free part of the world.

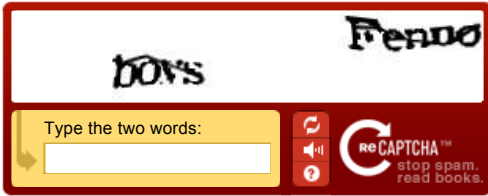
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