

Rochesterians among thousands at SOA protest

By Rafe Middeke
Catholic News Service

FORT BENNING, Ga. — More than 2,300 people — including 10 from Rochester — protesting the continued operation of the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Fort Benning, risked arrest by military police Nov. 22 when they "crossed the line" and entered the military compound.

The nonviolent protest, at the main gate of the base, concluded a two-day vigil of about 7,000 participants — including 22 Rochesterians — honoring victims reportedly kidnapped, tortured and murdered by some of SOA's graduates, who are Latin American soldiers.

The SOA, nicknamed the "School of Assassins" by its critics, has trained more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers. Graduates of the school have been implicated in abuse and atrocities cited in human rights reports in Central and South America.

Ending such atrocities was one of the motivations the protesters had for crossing the line, said Sarah Brownell, who crossed the line representing the Rochester Catholic Worker movement. She said nine other Rochesterians crossed the line as well. Brownell reported that the protesters were held for a few hours, and issued orders barring them from the premises for the rest of the day. However, she said, all the protesters were released, and none were arrested.

"I think it's good to bring these issues to view with the general public," Brownell said. "People in the United States don't know these things are happening."

The vigil was organized by SOA Watch, founded by Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois, decorated Vietnam veteran, missionary and outspoken critic of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. All together the priest has spent about four years in federal prison for his civil disobedience protests.

Those risking arrest formed a memorial funeral procession, led by actor Martin Sheen. They carried coffins and small white crosses bearing the names of Latin Americans who the protesters say were victims of SOA graduates.



Bob Roller/CNS

Some of the estimated 7,000 people who joined a protest Nov. 22 at the U.S. Army School of the Americas hold crosses bearing the names of people believed to have been killed under orders of Latin American graduates of the training program at Fort Benning in Columbus, Ga.

Before leading the solemn procession, Sheen said the SOA "is an embarrassment to our Army."

A voice on a loudspeaker system read out a roll-call litany of victims' names, to which the protesters responded, "Presente."

Father Bourgeois helped lead the marchers onto the base, and was fully prepared to serve jail time for "crossing the line."

Minutes earlier, Father Bourgeois said: "We are here to honor the brothers and sisters in Latin America who have been silenced and, yes, to close the School of the Americas."

Army officials had told the demonstrators that they could be arrested and sent to prison for trespassing on the post. But military police placed the protesters onto buses and dropped them off about a mile away from the front gate.

The marchers received letters barring them from Fort Benning until midnight that day. In a press conference, Maj. Gen. Carl F. Ernst said no one's names were taken and no one would be arrested.

Ernst, who said the institution is re-

sponsible for the growth of democracy in Latin America, said officials tried a different tactic this year hoping to change the approach "on both sides of this issue."

This is the ninth year that opponents of the school have called for its closure. The annual vigil began in 1990 as a commemoration of the 1989 massacre of six Jesuits priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, and participation has grown from a handful of participants to this year's 7,000, a figure reported by organizers and confirmed by local police.

Throughout the protest, speakers and organizers said they had no fight with the military, they just wanted to close the school.

"I say to all the CIA, all workers at the SOA and all military personnel, 'You are not our enemies, you are our brothers and sisters. Join us as we close the School of the Americas,'" said Jesuit Father John Dear, the director of Fellowship of Reconciliation, the oldest interfaith peace organization in the United States. He has been arrested and jailed for many peace-related causes. In response to criticism of the SOA operation, the school's officials

have repeatedly labeled as "absolutely false" the accusations that it teaches torture and murder. "The school teaches U.S. Army doctrine which is based on over 200 years of success," according to an SOA statement.

The Army said critics have a list of 300 SOA graduates out of almost 60,000 who are supposedly linked to human rights violations.

"To pad their lists, critics frequently layer names of all superiors in the chain of command to those who may have been directly involved," the Army said. "Of these 300, only 20 have been tried and convicted by their nation's judicial system."

The Army maintains that training at the school "is based on U.S. Army doctrine which complies with universal laws governing the appropriate use of force when warranted as legal."

What is more, say Army officials, the school is regularly inspected as part of the Army's Command Inspection Program, and that a board of governors, made up of "academicians, general officers, human rights experts and ambassadors," oversee curriculum, training and administration.

However, one former military officer and now protester disagrees with the Army's assessment. Retired Maj. Joseph Blair, a former instructor at SOA and now a critic of the school, said manuals were used which recommended techniques of torture, execution, blackmail and intimidation.

Asked what motivated him to become an outspoken critic of the school, Blair replied, "I finally got fed up with the lies and distortions."

He cited the murders of the Jesuits, saying "Three of my former students murdered the Jesuits." A bill to cut funding for the SOA was narrowly defeated in the House of Representatives in September by a 212 to 201 vote.

"This is an historic moment," Father Bourgeois said at the vigil at Fort Benning. "The decision makers in Washington must pay attention to when the people speak with such a decisive voice."

Contributing to this story was Deirdre C. Mays and Rob Cullivan.

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