

# Witnessing at the School of the Americas Watch

By Sister Rita Specht

This year's School of the Americas (SOA) Watch gathering in Fort Benning, Georgia, coincided with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the November, 1989 killing of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by SOA graduates at the Central American University in El Salvador. It was the first time I had attended the SOA Watch, and I was very moved by the experience.

Though I was aware of the way U.S. policies have contributed to the abuses of repressive governments in many Latin American countries, I felt overwhelmed and saddened by what I learned that weekend about the extent of the devastation caused by these policies.

In the presentations on Saturday, we heard of the threats to and deaths of human rights activists in many of these countries, most memorably the murder of Berta Cáceres in Honduras, who was trying to defend indigenous rights against takeover of their lands.

We heard from the mother and grandmother of Jose Antonio, the boy who was killed in Mexico seven years ago by a border patrol agent shooting from the United States. This agent has never been brought to trial.



***(From left) Jean Stokan, Sister JoAnn Persch, Jonathan Gonzalez (from Panama) Sister Rose Marie Tresp, Mike Poulin, Sisters Rita Specht and Pat Murphy, and Laurel McGrath outside the gates of the School of the Americas.***

The School of the Americas (now called WHINSEC) is a place where soldiers are trained in techniques that are used against their own people. Border Patrol Agents are trained there, and I was saddened to hear that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are being trained there, as well. We learned that model cities are being built at SOA to simulate ICE raids in Chicago and Arizona. I fear that we will see more migrants in the jails that we visit in the Chicago area.

At one point, men and women who have done civil disobedience while protesting the School of the Americas (also referred to as the School of the Assassins) were introduced, which brought tears to my eyes, and admiration for people who are willing to go to jail for months or years for their beliefs.

On Sunday, we went to the gates of Fort Benning. We processed with crosses bearing the names of people killed by soldiers trained at the SOA as the names of those who have died crossing the desert or in Border Patrol custody were read. We responded "Presente" as the hundreds of names were read. Afterwards, we placed our crosses on the fence at Fort Benning.

I close with some of the cries that we heard: "Basta. No Mas. It's enough, no more." And also, "Not in our name."

As Sisters of Mercy who have Critical Concerns of nonviolence, immigration and antiracism, we need to pray and take action against the School of the Americas and the violence it perpetuates.