

U.S.-Trained Human Rights Abusers

By John Lindsay-Poland

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President Barack Obama has reversed a few of the Bush administration's most egregious policies violating human rights and international law, such as the announced closure of the detention center in Guantánamo. But it remains to be seen to what extent he will lead the military toward respect for human rights, and change the institutional impunity to which American commanders and U.S. military allies have become accustomed.

In March, combatant commanders came before Congress to make their case for funding. Southern Command Chief Admiral James Stavridis didn't hesitate to say how critical funds are for military training, especially the former School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). "The camaraderie developed among our military officers at these institutions," Stavridis said, "and the schools' strong emphasis on democratic values and respect for human rights are critical to creating military establishments capable of effective combined operations."

But what evidence is there that the specific military units in 149 other nations receiving U.S. training and other assistance actually respect human rights more after receiving the training? Legislation known as the "Leahy Law" since 1997 has prohibited U.S. assistance to foreign military units that have committed gross human rights abuses. But the focus is on abuses committed before assistance is given. The United States doesn't conduct any institutional evaluation of the human rights impacts of its military assistance after it's given.



The United States trains thousands of foreign troops without evaluation of the human rights impact of that training.

Is It the Students, Or the Training?

The underlying article of faith for evaluating other nations' human rights records to see if they are worthy of U.S. military assistance, is that such assistance will "professionalize" other armies, or at worst be neutral for its impact on respect for human rights.

In fact, sometimes the opposite is true. A study of School of Americas graduates in 2005 found that soldiers taking more than one course at the school were several times more likely to have allegedly committed abuses than those who took just one course. A 2006 study by the RAND Corporation found that U.S. military training supported forces that continued to commit gross violations in Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Similar claims could be made about assistance given to Iraq and Israel, to consider two obvious examples. In Colombia, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Amnesty International reviewed data on army units receiving U.S. assistance—especially training. We found that nearly half (47%) of civilian killings reportedly committed by the army in 2007 were committed by units that had been reviewed and received U.S. assistance in 2006 and 2007. Many more were committed by units from which individual officers were drawn and received leadership and other training at U.S. military schools.

Periodic evaluation is a basic prerequisite for any government program, but especially one that imparts lethal skills and equipment. As Congress' comptroller, the General Accountability Office should study whether assistance

is fulfilling U.S. human rights policy objectives. Instead its reports focus on limited questions of efficiency in the use of funds. A GAO evaluation of Plan Colombia last year, for example, that was two years in the making, didn't once address the impacts on respect for human rights—for good or bad—of the \$5 billion in U.S. military aid to Colombia since 2000.

In Colombia, progress on human rights is measured by macro-factors, such as overall levels of political violence, instead of by violations by the institutions that were directly assisted by the United States or by the extent that those violations were prosecuted in civilian courts. The result is that, while political violence has diminished as a result of dominion by the State and—in many areas—the mafia, over insurgent groups, killings of civilians by the Army trained and equipped by the United States has risen dramatically, 72% since 2002.

The Colombian military's long history of gross human rights abuses should have suggested long ago that the departments of State and Defense evaluate their military training for human rights. But although international military training aims to "emphasize an understanding of internationally recognized human rights," the military doesn't evaluate human rights performance, either. The U.S. Southern Command, for example, typically measures success of training by promotions of officers receiving assistance, by the officers' positive image of the United States, and whether they rise to positions of prominence such as defense attaché, or even the presidency.

Addressing the Problem

Today, a reform process of the Foreign Assistance Act undertaken by the House Foreign Affairs Committee offers an unprecedented opportunity to require periodic and comprehensive evaluation of the human rights impacts of U.S. military assistance. As part of such evaluation, the government should establish an independent commission to investigate the past activities of U.S. military schools, and make recommendations to establish safeguards to prevent violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The commission should include representatives of relevant government agencies, as well as human rights organizations and academics. Most importantly, such a commission should be given access to detailed data on who has received U.S. assistance and on human rights violations over long periods.

Periodic evaluation of the human rights performance of military training beneficiaries could draw on information already gathered by U.S. embassies from local courts, human rights NGOs, intelligence and enforcement agencies, and media reports. Basic criteria for evaluation should include whether there are credible reports of beneficiaries or troops under their command committing gross human rights abuses, and whether civilian courts are successfully trying those crimes. This evaluation should be transparent and made available to the public, and it should apply to assistance given through the Defense Department and other agencies, as well as the State Department.

Policymakers aren't given to asking "why" questions. In the case of the human rights performance of client armies viewed as strategic allies, however, we should all be asking: If the United States is excluding abusive units from assistance, and training the rest in human rights, why so many of these armies continue abuse and kill their civilian compatriots? In the meantime, where the results of U.S. assistance are executions, torture, forced displacement, and other violations, the Obama administration should terminate military aid and cooperation.

Sign petition asking Nicaragua to withdraw from the School of the Americas!



The US grassroots movement to close the Army School of the Americas (now called Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) is mobilizing for victory this summer under a new administration and a new Congress. Last year the vote to close the SOA would have succeeded had we changed only six votes. Five Latin American countries have already announced their withdrawal from the SOA.

Please sign the petition, co-sponsored by the Nicaragua Network and SOA Watch, asking Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to withdraw Nicaragua from the SOA. To sign go to www.nicanet.org and scroll down. Click on the link to sign!