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Differences Between SOA, New School Emphasized

Gridley says military training 'small part'

By Jim Houston, Staff Writer

When 26 School of the Americas Watch protesters were tried in U.S. District Court this week, their comments and statements were aimed at the school that closed in December.

In its place, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation opened in January, operating under the Department of Defense instead of the U.S. Army.

U.S. Magistrate G. Mallon Faircloth asked many of the protesters arrested last November for trespassing on the Fort Benning military reservation whether they had explored the new institution and the differences between the Institute and the School of the Americas.

Each of those asked said they had read the Institute's Web site and SOA Watch literature. They unanimously replied there appeared to be no difference between the new institution and the old.

"That's not true," Lt. Col. Bruce Gridley said Friday. "There are significant differences between the two institutions."

The chief of staff of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation said those differences range from the mission, the makeup of the students and the curriculum to a change in the focus of the institute.

"Basically, the foreign policy goals of the United States changed in the new century," Gridley said. "In the last half of the 20th century, it was a policy of containing the spread of communism. We're now in the 21st century and 10 years past the time when the Cold War ended. Our policy focuses are now on engagement and enlargement of the stable democracies and economies that we find in Latin America, so our curriculum has shifted to do these kinds of things.

"The question is not whether we should deal with the military, but what kind of relationship we have with them. We can't really ignore the military or refuse to work with them. They're important institutions in their countries. We want to do our part to make this a stable and prosperous hemisphere."

Gridley said one of the significant changes is creation of a new Civil-Military Studies Department that offers courses to both military and civilian students, as well as police forces. It is designed to teach the interagency knowledge and skills

needed to improve civil-military cooperation in their countries and with the United States. It includes instruction in such areas as operational planning for peace operations, disaster preparedness and disaster relief.

"Just this week, we were working with the Columbus Emergency Management Center on an exercise simulating a hurricane coming through Columbus," Gridley said. "This taught how all of the local, state and federal agencies react. ... They get to experience that kind of thing, to see how it's done in our country, what types of training are done, so that when they go back to their countries, they can try to put these types of things into play.

It's not a tactical "bullets and bombs" type of school, the chief of staff said. The military training is a very small part of the school, although it probably never will go away completely, because it is a military school and militaries train and learn those kinds of things.

"But it's no longer the emphasis it might have been in the 1970s and '80s," Gridley said.

Military, law enforcement and civilian personnel from Latin American nations are taught at the Institute, and human rights training is an important part of that training, he said. Multinational peace training also is taught, because the Latin American nations can use the training as they continue their history of participating in international peace operations, he said.

Another college-type course on "Democratic Sustainment" teaches how the military should act and what its appropriate roles are in a stable democratic society, he said.

The growing influence of civilians in military affairs of Latin American nations is evident in comparing pictures of the countries' defense ministers of the last 10-15 years, Gridley said. Most pictures from the 1980s and early '90s would show the ministers in their military uniforms, but today more than half of those defense leaders are civilians, he said.

Gridley said the Institute is enthusiastic about explaining its role and its mission to those who are interested, including members of the SOA Watch. Members and leaders of the organization have been invited, along with other interested persons, to sit in the classrooms with the students, see the curriculum firsthand, even be a guest speaker.

The invitation was extended to those on the "banned and barred" list prohibiting them from setting foot on Fort Benning, he said.

Few protesters have taken them up on the offer, and some who have have gone away convinced they were not told the true story, Gridley said.

But the invitation remains open, he said.

