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LEGISLATIVE FOCUS

Attempts to Close the United States Army School of the Americas

by Barbara Cochrane Alexander*

In 1989, then-Speaker of the House of Representatives, Thomas Foley, initiated a Congressional investigation into the murders in El Salvador of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter. The investigation began amid growing concerns that U.S. funds were used to train the murderers in military tactics. Representative Joseph Moakley headed a commission (the Moakley Commission) that traveled to El Salvador to investigate the deaths. The Moakley Commission learned that 19 of the 26 Salvadoran officers responsible for the murders received military training at the United States Army School of the Americas (SOA). The SOA is a controversial U.S.-operated military training school, funded by U.S. taxpayers, which instructs members of Latin American militaries in combat tactics and strategies, with questionable results from the perspective of human rights activists. After the Moakley Commission discovered the U.S. involvement in the 1989 murders, a movement to close the SOA began. Subsequently, this movement has endured many unsuccessful legislative attempts.

Legislative Background

In the 103rd, 104th, and 105th Congresses (spanning from 1993 to 1998), Representative Joseph Kennedy introduced several bills seeking to severely reduce funding to the SOA or simply close the school. These pieces of legislation either died in committees, were unanimously withdrawn, failed to make it to vote, or were defeated when brought to a vote. During these years, Representative Kennedy was able to gather growing support in opposition to the SOA. When Representative Kennedy left Congress, Representative Moakley reassumed the lead role in the ongoing campaign to close the school.

Substance of H.R. 732

On February 11, 1999, Representative Moakley introduced a bill (H.R. 732) to close the SOA. The House of Representatives (House) referred H.R. 732 to the House Committee on Armed Services, where it has remained since its introduction. The bill outlines Congressional findings that there is a history of SOA graduates committing human rights abuses (sec. 1(2)). These graduates include Salvadoran death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, Panamanian dictator and drug dealer Manuel Nor-

iega, and Argentinian dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, a leader of the "dirty war," during which some 30,000 civilians were killed or disappeared. The Congressional findings also linked the SOA with the 1989 murders, as well as the well-publicized murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980.

Recent Events Delaying H.R. 732

On July 29, 1999, the House voted 230-197 to include House Amendment 368 (H.AMDT 368), which reduced SOA funding in the House version of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2000 (H.R. 2606). On August 3, 1999, the House passed H.R. 2606 and H.AMDT 368 by a vote of 385 to 85 (14 representatives abstained). According to both proponents and opponents of the bill and the SOA, if the SOA did not receive its funds, it would be forced to close. The bill was referred to both the House and Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations Conference Committees. On September 22, 1999, however, House and Senate conferees voted to restore the funding that H.AMDT 368 restricted. The result is that the SOA will remain open for at least another year.

Implications of H.R. 732

According to Representative Moakley, closing the SOA will send the message that the United States will not condone human rights abuses such as those that SOA graduates perpetrated. Opponents of H.R. 732, such as Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera, however, argue that the SOA plays an important role in addressing real threats to U.S. security interests.

Those persons wishing to see the SOA closed hope that the U.S. Army received a message from H.AMDT 368. According to Representative Moakley's office, there are indications that the Army's leadership is prepared to make substantive changes in the SOA. In the interim, Representative Moakley will continue to work on gathering support to push forward with H.R. 732 and related legislation, such as an amendment to next year's appropriations bills in the 107th Congress. ☉

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slavery does not exist in Ghana and that women and girls held in the shrines are priestesses, not slaves. These traditionalist groups organize press conferences, circulate defamatory information to discredit the work of the abolitionists, and have even tried to disrupt abolitionist press conferences. In fact, resistance has proved so strong that many activists have received death threats for their work.

Conclusion

The disheartening effect of such heavy resistance is that some children, such as nine-year-old Abba Kotor, remain enslaved. Abba is in a race against time. According to Mensah Wisdom, Programs Coordinator of International Needs Ghana, it appears that Kotor-

uor Akorli has decided to sexually initiate Abba and has not allowed her release. Following *trokosi* practice, Akorli may treat her as his concubine as soon as Abba experiences her first menstruation. Although International Needs Ghana has succeeded in negotiating the release of thousands of former *trokosi* slaves, Abba has not been one of the lucky ones and remains enslaved to this day, a stark reminder to activists challenging this practice that the fight to eradicate *trokosi* slavery is far from over. ☉

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