Written by Sallyann McCarthy
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The Sisters of St. Francis, their Associates and Sojourners, and students from Ashford University are inviting the public to join in a prayer vigil in solidarity with the thousands of persons who will gather at the gates of the U.S. Army base at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, this month. Fort Benning is home to the Army's infamous "School of the Americas" (SOA).

The vigil will be held in the chapel at The Canticle, home of the Franciscan Sisters, 841-13th Ave. No., Clinton, and begins at 6 pm, Thursday evening, Nov. 15.

November 16 marks the 23rd anniversary of the 1989 massacre of 6 Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the University of San Salvador, El Salvador. A U.S. Congressional Task Force reported that those responsible were trained at the SOA. Since 1990, the organization SOA WATCH has been holding prayer vigils outside the gates of the base to draw attention to the evils perpetrated by SOA graduates and to lobby for an end to US funding for the program.

Clinton Franciscans have been participating in the vigil since 1996. Over 20 Sisters plus Associates, friends and students have travelled to Georgia in the ensuing years to join the 10,000 + people from around the world who gather annually to pray and work for change through creative nonviolence.

The Pentagon has responded to the growing movement and Congress' near closure of the SOA with a PR campaign to give the SOA a new image. In an attempt to disassociate the school with its horrific past, the SOA was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in January of 2001

News reached the public earlier this month that one of the perpetrators of the 1989 massacre has been located in the U.S. and is being deported to Spain for trial on murder charges.

Thousands of other Latin Americans and North Americans including four American church women and two bishops have been killed by forces linked to the SOA. Several bills have been introduced in Congress to halt funding for the SOA, only to be narrowly defeated,

“We hope many people will join us for this brief prayer vigil of solidarity,” said Anne Martin Phelan OSF, president of the Clinton Franciscans who has participated in the vigil at Fort Benning many times. On one trip, she joined hundreds who “crossed the line” onto Army property in nonviolent civil disobedience.

“It is vital that we not participate in the training of those who are terrorizing their fellow citizens in Central American, Mexico, Peru and Columbia. By holding a vigil in Clinton, we hope to involve more citizens in this form of prayerful, peaceful protest,” she said.

For more information, call Sisters of St. Francis, 563-242-7611 or visit www.clintonfranciscans.com .