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Torture should never be U.S. policy

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Revelations of torture in Abu Ghraib and other U.S.-sponsored prisons have shocked the world. They also have brought the subject of torture and our country's participation in this practice into our consciousness. Perhaps even more shocking is the knowledge that torture has been practiced for years, right here in the Americas.

For the second time in the past four years, I find myself in a federal prison as a result of my protest against these inhumane policies. My country's involvement in torture was at the heart of my decision to leave my post as pastor of St. Boniface Catholic Church in San Francisco's Tenderloin district in order to speak out against these crimes.

I was arrested at the annual vigil and protest at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the School of the Americas, which has been renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. The institute has trained Latin American military and police forces in counterinsurgency warfare for more than 60 years. Numerous graduates have been involved in documented human-rights abuses, including rape, torture and the massacre of innocent civilians in Latin America.

During the 1980s, I, and others from across the country, met with Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. He told us that the lot of many of his countrymen in El Salvador -- especially those working on behalf of the poor for economic justice and democratic political change -- was "to be captured, tortured, disappeared and found dead." Shortly after our meeting, Romero was assassinated by graduates of the School of the Americas.

In 1996, after pressure by School of the Americas Watch and other human-rights organizations, the Pentagon was forced to release torture manuals that had been translated into Spanish and used in courses at the School of the Americas for at least a decade. I have interviewed many survivors of these horrendous tragedies, including some who were actual participants in the death squads. They told me that those involved in their training were U.S. military officers, some of whom were even present at the scenes of torture. After hearing this firsthand testimony, I and others committed civil disobedience at Fort Benning at the annual protest in November 2001. As a U.S. Air Force veteran, I wanted to speak out against the role my country had played in these atrocities. For this action, I was sentenced to three months in federal prison.

Last November, once again I joined 19,000 people at the gates of Fort Benning in the solemn vigil. Thirty-seven of us crossed onto the military base in a nonviolent witness of conscience. This time, we protested not only the history of torture at this place, but the apparent continuation of these practices by our own military in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay Naval Station or outsourced by U.S. agencies to other countries, such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan, according to Amnesty International. Survivors of torture in Latin America addressed the crowd at this massive gathering, and many asked the same thing, "Why are the same methods of torture now being committed by the U.S. military so similar to those that were used on us?"

I was tried and convicted of trespass and am serving my six months' sentence in Crisp County Jail in Georgia.

During my time in prison, I have reflected on questions regarding these issues:

-- Will Congress hold an independent investigation (as recommended by Amnesty International and required in HR1217, legislation introduced by U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., to suspend operations of the School of the Americas) into past practices and history of the School of the Americas, whose legacy still haunts the people of Latin America?

-- Will there be a responsible congressional investigation into U.S. policies that enable these cruel torture practices to continue in our own military services and agencies?

These activities have raised troubling questions for all concerned citizens. True democracy cannot be imposed by the use of force that breeds anger and desperation; but can be through policies that promote understanding, fairness and compassion.

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