

Honduran Government covers up involvement in murders of indigenous rights leaders

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Human rights and indigenous activists took to the streets of Tegucigalpa, Honduras's capital, Wednesday to demand explanations for the murder of Honduran indigenous rights activist Berta Cáceres and a halt to the rampant killing of activists throughout the country.

Since, the March 3 killing of Cáceres, the Honduran government has continued to divert the blame back to the indigenous movement to cover up its own responsibility in allowing the murder to happen.

Less than two weeks earlier, Nelson García, a member of the organization led by Berta Cáceres, was shot four times in the head and killed as he arrived at noon at his mother-in-law's house. That morning he had been helping families move their belongings out of the Río Chiquito community, where they were being evicted by the police, military police, and army.

Governing over the second poorest country in Latin America, Honduras's oligarchical elite solidified its grip on the state after a 2009 US-backed military coup overthrew the elected government of President Manuel Zelaya. It has since made clear its commitment to fully opening up the country's resources to corporate plundering by keeping popular discontent in check with a militarized campaign of fear. To that end, it has worked to obscure the systemic character of the assassinations of leading activists, putting up a façade of defending human rights and fighting against corruption.

The NGO Global Witness declared Honduras the "worst country to be an ecologist", having "a climate of near total impunity" that contributed to the killing of 109 environmental activists between 2010 and 2015, the highest per capita rate in the world.

Billy Kyte, a Global Witness campaigner,

commented: "Hondurans are being shot dead in broad daylight, kidnapped, or assaulted for standing in the way of their land and the companies who want to monetize it."

Since 2009, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had asked for Cáceres' protection, given the increased danger she was facing as a leading opponent of the 2009 coup and subsequent fraudulent elections.

At the head of the Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), Cáceres also led the fight against over 10 hydroelectric projects, primarily the Aguas Zarcas dam, to protect sacred and natural resource-rich lands inhabited by the Lenca, the largest indigenous population in the country. At Aguas Zarcas, the successful exposures of human rights violations made the Chinese transnational Sinohydro and the World Bank drop their funding and, thus, earned Cáceres the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize.

Cáceres stated that, days after the June 28 coup in 2009, concessions were given out for several rivers. According to the Goldman Prize organization, hundreds of hydroelectric and mining projects were approved, ceding about 30 percent of the country's land through concessions.

Cáceres commented, "Capitalism is in a state of dementia to grab all goods left in nature, precisely because it can't hold on any longer and needs to continue finishing and eating up the planet."

The first president to be elected after the coup, Porfirio Lobo, reduced social spending by 20 percent, accepted \$1.75 million from the US ambassador to support "efforts by Honduran law enforcement" and

initiated an IMF structural adjustment program in return for \$202 million in credits.

These measures have exacerbated the country's decades-long economic stagnation, with devastating social consequences. Since the coup, the poverty rate has soared, reaching a peak of 66.5 percent in 2012; 36 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, including a striking seven out of ten rural households.

The official unemployment rate saw a significant jump last year from 5.3 percent to 7.3 percent, and it has been estimated that close to a million young people are neither working nor studying. Impoverishment since the coup has fed rising gang membership, a 50 percent increase in the murder rate and increased numbers of children and mothers fleeing the violence to the United States.

The Obama administration has continuously acted in support of the regime's violations of democratic rights, as indicated by Hillary Clinton's assertion in her book *Hard Choices* that they worked to "restore order" in Honduras in a manner that would "render the question of Zelaya moot." Cáceres herself had condemned Clinton for legitimizing the coup.

For 2016, the US government has allocated \$1 billion to its Alliance for Prosperity with Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. While overseeing the intensification of deportations and raids against Central American refugees living in the US, Washington continues to be responsible for the worsening conditions fueling the flight of refugees.

Last month, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández—under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the US embassy—put into effect Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (Macchi) and its executing arm, Operation Avalanche, supposedly to "win back the respect of the Honduran people and to become an essential piece in the democratic system."

Instead of regaining any control in the deepening crisis of governability and lawlessness, by favoring certain organized criminal groups over others, the government has only intensified the lucrative and violent struggles between gangs and cleared the way for further corruption and impunity, leading to more violent deaths of activists.

A poignant expression of the danger and sense of powerlessness felt by many is that Cáceres' eulogy, by

coworkers in COPINH and other organizations, had been written "years before her death."

The National Police has blamed Cáceres for rejecting their protection, allegations the IACHR and COPINH have denied. The day after the incident, the police arrested Aureliano Molina Villanueva, a COPINH member, as primary suspect, only to release him under vigilance a day later.

Shortly after Nelson García's killing, the National Police released a statement insisting, without any evidence, that it was an isolated crime completely unrelated to the evictions that took place earlier that morning.

The Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) and Amnesty International (AI) have joined the denunciations of the government for attempting to cover up its responsibility. After President Hernández refused a meeting over Cáceres' murder, AI Director for the Americas, Erika Guevara-Rosas, declared that "Honduran authorities say one thing and do the opposite."

COPINH has blamed the government for attempting to "clean its own image at the national and international levels" by creating the illusion of a "crime of passion or personal crime." By painting these crimes as subjective and by obscuring the objective connection between violent oppression against communities and their leaders and a greater opening to finance capital, the Honduran government is protecting its own interests which are bound up with increased militarization and US imperialist exploitation of the region's workers and resources.



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