

Third US-trained Honduran officer found guilty in killing of environmentalist Berta Cáceres

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On Monday, a Honduran court issued the eighth guilty verdict in the March 2016 killing of Berta Cáceres, a world-renowned environmental and indigenous rights activist.

David Castillo Mejía, a US-trained military intelligence officer and president of a hydroelectric firm, DESA, was found guilty as an “intellectual co-author” of the murder. The ruling was largely based on evidence from the electronic communications between Castillo and accomplices that revealed “a plot to eliminate any obstacle that interfered with DESA’s operations in the Gualcarque River,” as charged by the prosecutors.

The sentence will be announced on August 4. The other seven received prison terms of 30 years.

In a country where less than 5 percent of murders lead to guilty verdicts, including numerous killings of activists and local leaders, the rulings are being presented by the Honduran government and the corporate media as “historic” and a beacon of light.

The Public Ministry said it was “a historic guilty ruling in a public, oral proceeding” and pledged to “work to identify other intellectual authors involved in the murder of the human rights activist.” The official social media of the Judicial Branch live-streamed the reading of the ruling and uploaded several commemorative pictures of Cáceres. President Juan Orlando Hernández had earlier proclaimed the investigation a “priority” for his administration.

However, the very notion that the sentencing of several minor players in Cáceres’s murder plot can help boost the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime installed by the 2009 coup backed by the Obama administration speaks to the desperate political crisis

facing not only the Hernández clique, but the entire US-backed Honduran oligarchy.

On Monday, Cáceres’s family and the organization she founded, the Civic Council for Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), issued a statement that described the ruling as a “victory” and a “step toward ending the pact of impunity.”

However, it then states that Castillo was merely an “instrument” of the Atala Zablah family, the richest in the country and the majority shareholder of DESA.

“It isn’t over,” the statement says, adding, “We demand the immediate cancellation of the concession over the sacred Gualcarque River of the Lenca [indigenous] community and the prosecution of everyone involved in its illegal and corrupt concession. We demand the dismantling of the criminal networks that persist and acted during the trial to promote impunity...”

As the evidence presented in court itself showed, these networks go far beyond the Atalas and even the Hernández regime. The Cáceres murder exposed the fascistic forces that have been set up over decades by US imperialism to repress opposition to the interests of finance capital and that are aimed chiefly against the working class.

As the Obama administration sought to legitimize the coup regime, with then-vice president Biden carrying out repeated trips to Honduras in leading these efforts, the police, military and associated death squads were unleashed with a vengeance to crack down on the opposition to the 2009 coup and the slew of social cuts, privatizations and profitable concessions that followed, including the Agua Zarca Project.

The Agua Zarca dam, opposed by Cáceres and the Lenca community, was being financed by the World Bank, the Chinese state-owned Synohydro, the Central American Bank of Economic Integration, the German companies Siemens and Voith-Hydro, the Dutch Development Finance Company, and the Finnish Fund.

The Atalas on the DESA Executive Board, whose text messages asking the Security Ministry to “eliminate those Indians” were presented in court, base their fortunes on their role as local administrators of Wall Street and foreign-based corporations, just like the rest of the Honduran oligarchy. For instance, Eduardo Atala sits on the DESA executive board, is president of the Honduran-American Chamber of Commerce, and owns the official distributor of John Deere in Honduras.

Besides David Castillo, who graduated from the US West Point Military Academy, two other members of the death squad that killed Cáceres were soldiers trained in the US, including Mariano Díaz Cháves who joined US forces in Iraq.

Monday’s ruling takes places amid a worsening humanitarian crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, years of droughts along the Pacific coast and the devastating Eta and Iota Hurricanes of last November. One third of the population of 9.5 million is suffering from severe hunger.

With less than 5 percent of the population fully vaccinated, the arrival of new and more contagious variants of the coronavirus and the refusal of the government to implement any lockdowns is driving an exponential increase in new cases. In what is widely seen as a vast undercount, the country has officially reported 7,149 deaths from COVID-19.

As the Biden White House continues the Trump administration’s violation of asylum rights and a militarized crackdown against hundreds of thousands of Honduran refugees with the collaboration of the Mexican, Guatemalan and Honduran regimes, social tensions in Honduras are reaching a boiling point.

At the same time, even as Washington continues its intimate security collaboration and aid, the Honduran regime has been labeled a “narco-state” by the US Department of Justice amid overwhelming evidence of President Hernandez’s ties to drug cartels. With all candidates for the November presidential elections basing their campaigns on worn-out anti-corruption slogans, none offers any solution for the deepening

social crisis.

The rulings in the Cáceres case are little more than window-dressing for the fact that the Honduran ruling class and its imperialist patrons offer no other response to the crisis than further police-state preparations to crack down on an imminent social explosion.

Dismantling the networks behind Cáceres’s murder and the ongoing repression requires the development of a political movement of the working class, leading behind it all the impoverished and oppressed masses and fighting for the dismantling of Honduran and global capitalism.



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