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Protests in Honduras over Murder of Human Rights Leader

by George Rodriguez

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Honduras has been mercilessly battered by corruption, violence, and impunity, and those who seek to fight this state of affairs place themselves at high risk—too frequently, at the highest risk. Activists who defend human rights, natural resources, justice, and the rule of law become targets for powerful forces that, feeling a threat to their interests when corruption is exposed, do not hesitate to kill.

The problem is not limited to Honduras, but also to other countries in the region like Guatemala (NotiCen, April 7, 2016).

Honduran history is filled with examples. The political murders of civil society leaders in the 1980s led to the creation of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (Committee of Relatives of Detained and Disappeared People, COFADEH). The systematic violation of the rights of peasants and indigenous peoples led to the emergence, a decade later, of the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations, COPINH).

And now, after 23 years of a tenacious and risky struggle as a staunch activist for human rights in general and for the rights of women and indigenous peoples in particular, and as a strong advocate for natural resources, Berta Cáceres has been gunned down. Cáceres was also a leader of the Lenca people, the largest of the seven indigenous groups in Honduras.

But because of Cáceres’ relentless leadership, because her voice echoed beyond national borders and her commitment was uncompromising, her murder stands as an emblematic crime in Honduras’ long history of violence. As such, and in the face of the national tradition of impunity for political killings, Cáceres’ assassination poses a major challenge to the Misión de Apoyo Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras (Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, MACCIH).

The work group was created by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Honduran government (NotiCen, Nov. 12, 2015), which was already under pressure from the country’s civil society, angered by last years’ revelation that the Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social (IHSS) had been plundered, and allowed to collapse (NotiCen, July 2, 2015, Aug. 27, 2015, and Oct. 29, 2015).

For months, thousands of Hondurans, united as the Oposición Indignada (Indignant Opposition), held weekly demonstrations demanding an independent investigation of the case, punishment for those responsible for the rip-off, and an end to corruption and impunity. They also demanded that Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández step down, since part of the money swindled from the IHSS was, according to local media reports, used in his successful presidential campaign.

Now, there’s an angry call for an independent investigation of the Cáceres assassination. In peaceful street demonstrations as well as on social networks, outraged Hondurans have repeatedly been calling for justice, for impunity not to prevail, and for those responsible for the murder to be tried.

Exactly a week before Cáceres was killed, Chilean diplomat and political scientist John Biehl, who played a key role in assembling MACCIH, told NotiCen that, should the mission fail, this Central
American nation could become an nonviable state. “If this effort were to fail—and I hope it won’t—it will be very difficult to change what’s happening, and (...) the road leads to a failed state, definitely,” he said.

Asked about the outlook for MACCIH, he replied, “I wouldn’t dare say,” and referred to the Honduran government’s strongly stated enthusiasm regarding the mission. “I believe that, right this instant, for political reasons (...) everyone is betting on the project to be a winner, everyone. And that makes me even more suspicious,” he said. “I’d even prefer they’d keep silent.”

**Protest against hydroelectric mega-project**

Only days before the murder, Cáceres had headed an indigenous-peasant protest—one of several—against the building of a hydroelectric mega-project called the Agua Zarca Initiative in western Honduras.

The government green-lighted the project in 2010, without having previously consulted the communities involved, thus violating the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, written in 1989 and ratified by Honduras in 1995. In its sixth article, the agreement reads, “In applying the provisions of this convention, governments shall (...) consult the peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever consideration is being given to legislative or administrative measures which may affect them directly.”

A key component of the project was a dam planned for the Gualcarque River, which is a sacred body of water for the Lenca people. The massive structure would severely damage the environment, harming indigenous and campesino communities in the area, local community leaders told COPINH when they sought the organization’s help to stop the recently initiated construction work. Years of peaceful yet tenacious—and suppressed—protest, headed by Cáceres, led the state-owned Chinese company Sinohydro—the world’s biggest dam builder—and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC), an investor in the initiative, to withdraw from the project. But the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) revived the hydroelectric plan, and mobilization quickly resumed, with Cáceres again actively heading the communities’ opposition to the initiative.

In a report quoted by local media two days after the assassination, the Jesuit Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación (Reflection, Research and Communication Team, ERIC) pointed out that Cáceres had been threatened by state agents and that the authorities had not taken the precautionary measures ordered by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to protect the indigenous leader. “We hold the State of Honduras responsible, because it did not provide Berta with the protection demanded by the IACHR, because it did not investigate the threats and harassment against her by the police, military and paramilitary,” ERIC said, adding that “her situation of vulnerability [had been] deepened by criminalizing her through illegitimate actions by judges and attorneys.”

The day of the murder, the human rights website Defensores en Línea (Defenders Online) had posted a press release pointing out that, as a consequence of the bloody 2009 civilian-military coup, “Honduras has witnessed an explosive growth in environmentally destructive megaprojects that would displace indigenous communities.” It pointed out that almost 30% of the country’s land was earmarked for mining concessions, creating a demand for cheap energy to power future mining
operations. “To meet this need, the government approved hundreds of dam projects around the country, privatizing rivers, land, and uprooting communities,” it added.

“Repression of social movements and targeted assassinations are rampant (…) Honduran human rights organizations report there have been over 10,000 human rights violations by state security forces, and impunity is the norm—most murders go unpunished,” it went on to say.

Cáceres’ relatives told local and international media that the crime had powerful masterminds and that it was a well-planned operation. Hours after the assassination, Cáceres’ brother, Gustavo Cáceres, and her former husband and co-founder of COPINH, Salvador Zúñiga, told reporters, in separate statements, that Cáceres’ was not an ordinary killing, and that it was a terror message both to the indigenous peoples in particular and to Hondurans in general.

“We believe that the investigative entities, if they’re thorough, should look not at a low level but at a high level, in big international corporations, in big national corporations. Because this is not a common murder,” Gustavo Cáceres said. “It’s a more political murder, a murder in which (…) they killed a human being who looked after the population’s rights, looked after rights, after land not being handed over to trans-nationals for them to build their majestic hydroelectric dams (…) then, I believe that it’s from there that my sister’s death comes.”

Zúñiga offered a coinciding view: “There are masterminds linked to the powers that be behind this crime, which aimed not only to frighten and send a message of terror to the indigenous peoples, but it’s a message of terror to all of the Honduran people.”

Cáceres’ eldest sister, Ana Cáceres, said her sister had been threatened on several occasions. “She seemed prepared,” Ana Cáceres said. “They’d follow her all the time, and she was always afraid for her life.”

Their father, José Cáceres, also told reporters that his daughter expressed, on several occasions, that she was being intimidated because of her human rights work. He said he had advised her to engage in another activity. “But she answered that it was her calling, and that she was going to die at the foot of the flag, and if she had to die for a just cause, she would gladly accept it,” he added.

Charges of manipulation
In a lengthy statement issued three days after the murder, COPINH warned that local authorities were manipulating the investigation, demanded an independent inquiry, and called on Honduran authorities to sign an agreement with the IACHR.

“COPINH emphatically denounces that the Honduran state is manipulating the investigation (…) We denounce that the state intends to hide the reality behind Berta Cáceres’ political murder saying that it was a crime of passion, or a personal crime. We denounce that the Honduran state is focusing its investigation on holding members of COPINH themselves responsible,” it said.

On March 5, the Spanish news agency EFE reported on the arrest of a man named Tomás Gómez as a suspect in the murder, adding that according to the brief police report, Gómez was a member of COPINH.

Cáceres’ commitment to protecting Honduran natural resources led the US-based Goldman Environmental Foundation to grant her the Goldman Environmental Prize, which every year honors efforts by what the group describes as “grassroots environmental heroes” worldwide.
In her acceptance speech on April 20, 2015, in San Francisco, Cáceres explained that “in our cosmology, we are beings emerged from the land, water and corn. We, the Lenca people, are ancestral keepers of the rivers, also protected by female spirits that teach us that to give one’s life, in multiple ways, for the defense of rivers, is to give one’s life for the good of humanity and of this planet.”

Her message closed with a universal call: “Let us wake up! Let us wake up, humanity! There is no time left.”

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