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George Rodríguez

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Environmental and Human Rights Activists Threatened in Honduras

by George Rodríguez  
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Three environmental and human rights activists were murdered this year in Honduras in the span of four months, all involved in opposing ecologically unfriendly projects and in defending the rights of the country’s indigenous peoples.

The latest in the series of killing was that of Lesbia Yaneth Urquía, whose viciously wounded body was found on July 6 in Mata Mulas, a district of the city of Marcala, in the southwestern province of La Paz, bordering El Salvador and 155 kilometers west of the capital of Tegucigalpa. The fatal wounds—mostly blows to her head—were made probably with a machete, local media reported.

According to the Policía Nacional (National Police, PN), Urquía left her home early in the evening for a bicycle exercise routine but did not return, which led relatives to launch a search. They eventually found her body in a sector close to the town’s garbage dump.

Multidisciplinary investigation

PN Deputy Inspector Eddie López initially told reporters that “possible family disputes over properties” could be at the origin of the homicide. Urquía was the owner of two hotels and a small market in Marcala. A police press release later said that “the possible cause of the death could be the alleged robbery of her professional bicycle.” Almost simultaneously, the Ministerio Público (Public Prosecutor’s Office, MP) announced that an investigation was underway and that it had assembled a multidisciplinary team to carry out the inquiry.

In a press release issued immediately after news of the homicide broke, the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, COPINH) described Urquía’s murder as “a political femicide seeking to silence the voices of women who, with courage and valor, defend their rights against a patriarchal, racist, and capitalist system that increasingly nears our planet’s destruction.”

The release described Urquía as a fervent defender of communities’ rights who opposed the franchising and privatization of rivers in the department of La Paz.

Urquía, who had joined COPINH in 2009, immediately after the bloody coup which ousted Honduran President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya (2006–2009), was active in the movement against the construction of the hydroelectric dam Aurora I in La Paz.

Links with the government

In its press release, COPINH pointed out what it described as a “direct link” between the construction project and Gladys Aurora López, the president of the ruling Partido Nacional’s (National Party, PN) central committee and the vice president of Honduras’ unicameral legislature.

“We hold the government of Honduras, headed by Juan Orlando Hernández, the military, and police forces … directly responsible for this murder … and also Gladys Aurora López and her
husband, Arnold Castro, for being a permanent source of threats and conflict over the building of hydroelectric projects in the department of La Paz,” it added.

According to reports from human rights organizations, Urquía opposed the granting of licenses that allowed companies headed by Castro to build dams.

COPINH also noted that Urquía’s homicide had taken place four months and four days after the murder of its leader, Berta Cáceres Flores, adding that it “confirms an ongoing plan to disappear those of us who, organized in COPINH, defend nature’s common goods.”

Cáceres, an indigenous Lenca leader who was a staunch human rights advocate, a relentless feminist, and a committed environmentalist, was gunned down on March 3 at her home in La Esperanza, 180 kilometers northwest of Tegucigalpa in the western department of Intibucá, Bordering La Paz and also El Salvador (NotiCen, April 7, 2016, and May 26, 2016).

Cáceres co-founded COPINH in 1993 with former husband and Lenca leader Salvador Zúniga. She was killed a few days after she headed one of several indigenous-campesino (agrarian worker) protests against the construction of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric mega-project that included building a dam in the Gualcarque River, which is sacred for the Lenca people. The location of the proposed dam was the western department of Santa Bárbara, bordering Guatemala (NotiSur, May 20, 2016).

As a result of the peaceful but firm struggle Cáceres relentlessly headed for years, the state-owned Chinese company Sinohydro, which ranks as the world’s biggest dam builder, and the World Bank’s International Financial Corporation (IFC), the project’s financial partner, abandoned the initiative, which had been originally approved in 2010 by the Honduran government, then headed by Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo (2010-2014) also of the Partido Nacional.

Relatives of the murdered Honduran leader have repeatedly told local and international media that the homicide was a premeditated crime, and that powerful masterminds were behind it.

Only hours after the killing, Cáceres’ brother Gustavo told reporters, “We believe that the investigative entities, if they’re thorough, should look, not at a low level but at a high level, to big international corporations, big national corporations, because this is not a common murder, it’s more of a political murder.”

Just 12 days after Cáceres was gunned down, another COPINH leader, Nelson García, was murdered in Santa Cruz de Yojoa, a city in the northern department of Cortés, bordering Guatemala, 200 kilometers northwest of Tegucigalpa (NotiCen, March 31, 2016).

COPINH and local media have said that García was killed by security agents while taking part in a community effort to prevent a land eviction carried out by police and military personnel in the nearby town of Río Lindo. COPINH has said that García’s murder “is added to a war against COPINH that seeks to end its defense, resistance, and constructive work over more than 22 years.”

But in a press release, the PN denied the accusation, arguing that “the case has no relation whatsoever to the eviction” since García died “after he was attacked by unidentified assailants when he was leaving his house, some 20 kilometers from the place where the eviction occurred.”

The day García was killed, COPINH issued a press release demanding “that the Honduran state answer for our compañeros’ and compañeras’ deaths, and that there be no more impunity.”
Triangle of violence

One of the three sides of the area known as the Northern Triangle of Central America, which also includes El Salvador and Guatemala and ranks among the world’s most violent places, Honduras is proving to be a dangerous place for environmental activists.

In its report titled “How Many More?” the NGO Global Witness placed at 111 the environmental activists murdered in Honduras between 2002 and 2014.

“This was the highest rate per capita of any country surveyed, making Honduras the deadliest country in the world to be a land and environmental defender,” it pointed out in the Honduras case study included in the 28-page report released in April 2015. “People defending their rights to land and the environment in Honduras are subject to systematic targeting and face severe risks to their lives.”

It added, “The current right-wing government, led by President Juan Orlando Hernández, has made investments in mining, forestry, agribusiness, and hydroelectric dams a top priority. Conflict over land, extractives, and dam projects are the main drivers of violence against activists. Many attacks occur against indigenous leaders defending their land and natural resources, often in the context of the development of mega-projects without prior and informed consent.”

Global Witness cited reports that there are five times as many private security guards as police officers in Honduras and that most security companies are owned by former high-ranking police or military officers.

“The Honduran police and Army themselves have also committed human rights violations against activists,” Global Witness wrote, pointing out that “criminalization of human rights defenders by the state is especially acute.”

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