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Demands to End Impunity in Honduras Mark Anniversary of Activist's Unpunished Murder

by *George Rodríguez*

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On the first anniversary of the murder of human rights and environmental activist Berta Cáceres ([NotiCen, April 7, 2016](#)), which remains unpunished, Honduras saw thousands take to the streets demanding an end to one of this country's historic problems: impunity.

In demonstrations held mainly in Tegucigalpa and La Esperanza, the slain leader's hometown, protesters called for justice—in this case as well as in the more than 120 other murders of environmental and land activists that have taken place since 2009 ([NotiCen, Aug. 18, 2016](#)).

Although eight arrests have been made, indigenous and other grassroots organizations see no progress in the legal proceedings regarding Cáceres' murder and point to irregularities in the process, including the disappearance of the case files ([NotiCen, Nov. 10, 2016](#)).

In an article published on Feb. 28, the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported that three members of the Honduran military who are among the eight people under arrest had received US training, a fact that Cáceres' family members and other activists say strengthens their certainty that the crime was a well-planned operation

Cáceres was gunned down shortly after midnight on March 3, 2016—the day before her 45th birthday—in La Esperanza, a town 180 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital. She was one of the leaders of a peaceful struggle against the construction of a hydroelectric mega project in the Gualcarque River, which is a sacred body of water to the indigenous Lenca people.

Demonstrations to mark the anniversary of her murder began March 1, when protesters in Tegucigalpa marched to the headquarters of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice, CSJ) to demand the reversal of the environmental permit granted to Desarrollos Energéticos SA (DESA), the company in charge of the Gualcarque project.

Leaders and members of the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, COPINH), the Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (Honduran Black Fraternal Organization, OFRANEH), and other civil society organizations called for justice as well. While hundreds of students blocked one of Tegucigalpa's main avenues, gathering in front of the public Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (Honduras Autonomous National University, UNAH) to demand punishment for those responsible for the crime.

The protesters held up signs with photos of Cáceres, chanted slogans, and painted graffiti such as "Berta vive, la lucha sigue!" ("Berta lives, the struggle goes on"), "Berta, semilla de libertad" ("Berta, seed of freedom"), and "Estado terrorista" ("Terrorist state").

Protesters hold government responsible

During a press conference in La Esperanza on Feb. 27, representatives of COPINH held President Juan Orlando Hernández responsible for the crime.

“JOH’s government is responsible for the murder of Berta Cáceres because it did not protect her and for keeping the Honduran people under a dictatorship, because it protects impunity and favors the interests of those he represents at the expense of the Honduran people,” COPINH said in a press release titled “One Year of Impunity.”

The organization said the Honduran government had “persecuted and criminalized” Cáceres because of her community work, charging that “those who ordered her murder are still unpunished and surely planning more murders against social organizations.”

The press release went on to call DESA “a murderous company that, through terror, wants to dispossess the Lenca people of their resources and kill those of us in the opposition.”

Taking part in one of the marches was Bertha Isabel Zúniga, one of Cáceres’ daughters, who said, “We’re here to expose the fact that there’s no justice, that we don’t feel the case has been solved ... We’re saying that the whole process is permeated with flaws, with gaps, by mediocrity.”

Zúniga said she worried that there was no guarantee that the people in custody for the crime would ever be sentenced, and repeated the family’s demand for an independent international investigation to find the intellectual authors of the crime.

Involvement of the military?

The fact that three members of the military are among the arrested suspects “shows us that death squads are operating in the armed forces, which are being used to get rid of people opposing government plans,” Zúniga said. “It shows us that human rights violations are state policy in Honduras.”

Zúniga’s statements about the involvement of the military echoed COPINH’s press release, which called the Honduras military “the breeding ground for the development of contract killings.” In the press release COPINH charged that the armed forces “train murderers and death squad members who, for crumbs, end the lives of peoples and communities.”

The Guardian’s report added details to COPINH’s charges. Based on what it described as “leaked court documents,” The Guardian linked three of the people arrested—identified as Maj. Mariano Díaz Chávez, Lt. Douglas Giovanni Bustillo, and Sgt. Henry Javier Hernández—to US-trained, specialized Honduran military outfits.

According to The Guardian’s report, written by freelance journalist Nina Lakhani, “leaked court documents raise concerns that the murder of the Honduran environmentalist [Berta Cáceres](#) was an extrajudicial killing planned by military intelligence specialists linked to the country’s US-trained special forces.”

Lakhani reported that officials “have denied state involvement in the activist’s murder, and downplayed the arrest of the serving officer, Maj. Mariano Díaz, who was hurriedly discharged from the Army.” Díaz and Bustillo both received military training in the US, she wrote, and Hernández “was a former special forces sniper, who had worked under the direct command of Díaz.”

Lakhani added that prosecutors believe Hernández may also have worked as an informant for military intelligence. Citing phone records and Hernández’s testimony, she reported that Bustillo and Hernández had gone to La Esperanza several times in the weeks before

Cáceres' death.

Lakhani quoted "a legal source close to the investigation" as saying that Cáceres' murder had "all the characteristics of a well-planned operation designed by military intelligence, where it is absolutely normal to contract civilians as assassins." The source called it "inconceivable" that the killing would have taken place "without at least implicit authorization of military high command," considering Cáceres' renown and the fact that her "campaign had made her a problem for the state."

Further highlighting the involvement of military officers, whether active or retired, The Guardian reported that Roberto David Castillo Mejía, DESA's president, is a former military intelligence officer, and that DESA's secretary is Roberto Pacheco Reyes, a former justice minister. Lakhani also wrote that Bustillo had been employed by DESA as head of security between 2013 and 2015.

The daily also referred to statements made last year by a military source attesting that he had seen Cáceres' name on a list of activists targeted for murder.

But in statements to the Honduran television news program Once Noticias (Eleven News) Defense Vice Minister Fredy Díaz dismissed the story published in The Guardian as "total speculation."

"There are serious institutions in Honduras, such as the armed forces, that would never go along with a situation like that," he said. "Honduran men and women who are in the armed forces are persons committed to complying with the law ... when there are persons who have not taken on that commitment, the armed forces themselves will take them to court for the full force of the law to fall on them."

For his part, President Hernández said he fully supports the investigation being conducted by the Ministerio Público (Public Prosecutor's Office, MP) in relation to Cáceres' murder, saying that "Honduras has to do what's in the law and in its hands to do justice, because it [the murder] can't remain unpunished."

-- End --