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## Activists Killed, Harassed Across Latin America

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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The murder of a high-profile environmentalist in Honduras and the arrest and imprisonment of a social activist in Argentina have set off alarm bells among regional and international humanitarian organizations and turned new attention to the serious dangers human rights and ecology advocates face in Latin America.

“The criminalization of social protest as evidenced by the judicial harassment of people opposed to polluting mine operations, transgenic crops or unsustainable logging, and by the persecution of people who lay claim to their ancestral lands, or denounce the systematic violation of human rights, is back to being a common occurrence,” said Argentine activist and Nobel Peace Prize (1980) recipient Adolfo Pérez Esquivel.

Regional statistics paint a troubling picture. In the first 11 months of last year, 87 human rights defenders were killed in Latin America, according to Front Line Defenders (FLD), a humanitarian organization based in Ireland. More killing have taken place since then, including the murder in Honduras of Berta Cáceres, an environmental activist who, allied with the Lenca indigenous group, had been challenging multinational energy and mining interests ([NotiCen, March 24, 2016](#), and [April 7, 2016](#)). Cáceres was assassinated on March 3 by a paramilitary unit, just hours after four indigenous activists were also killed.

Another case garnering international attention of late involves Milagro Sala, an Argentine political activist in the northern province of Jujuy, where the local government has made use of sympathetic judges to jail her on questionable charges ([NotiSur, April 22, 2016](#)).

“The rise of rightist political forces in countries that were led in the past decade by progressive governments acts as an incentive for extremists who promote strident nationalism and pursue their opponents judicially, as well as for paramilitary or Nazi organizations that kill, threaten and humiliate,” said Javier Díaz Moreno, a member of the Asamblea por una Sociedad sin Fascismo, an anti-fascism organization in the Argentine city of Mar del Plata, where ultra-Catholic groups are particularly active.

### *Killed for speaking out*

The FLD’s most recent annual report, titled “Stop the Killing of Human Rights Defenders,” points to Colombia—with 54 such killings in 2015, an average of one every six days—as South America’s most dangerous country. The group presented its findings Jan. 8 in Bogotá, the Colombian capital.

The people most at risk in Latin America, according to FLD, “are environmental, indigenous peoples and land rights defenders; they were the victims of 41% of the killings in the region.” The report went on to say that in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru, “HRDs (human rights defenders) working on those issues have also suffered judicial harassment, physical attacks, threats, intimidation, and smear campaigns.”

Most of the cases, according to the FLD, involved opposition to so-called mega-projects, especially in the mining sector. “Their work involved speaking out about the negative impact of business

activities and the lack of proper prior consultation with affected communities,” the report reads. The FLD found that the second most common group of HRD victims in Latin America (16%) were LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) advocates.

### *Region-wide concern*

On March 3—the same day Cáceres was killed—Christopher Moyer, an activist with the British organization Global Witness, told the BBC in London that between 2012 and 2014, 11 environmental defenders were murdered in Honduras. He said that in Bajo Aguán, near the Caribbean coast, more than 80 campesinos (small farmers) were killed by private police working for Dinant, a palm oil producer.

In Mexico, numbers regarding violent deaths and forced disappearances are imprecise but always frightening. The Procuraduría General de la República (attorney general’s office, PRG) estimates the number of victims to be approximately 23,000 since 2008, when the US, Mexico, and Central American nations launched the Mérida Initiative. This number is less than half of the 50,000 the Secretaría de Gobernación (Ministry of the Interior) estimated at one point, but the Frente Nacional de Lucha por el Socialismo (National Front to Fight for Socialism) says the number of disappeared detainees could be higher than 110,000.

The case of Brazil is similar. Since April 7, when military police in the southern state of Paraná killed two campesinos involved in the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Movement of Landless Rural Workers), contrasting figures have emerged regarding the number of victims in the past 13 years. According to complaints presented to the Catholic Church’s Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Committee on Land), “There is clear complicity between the private security guards employed by large landowners, the military police, and the judiciary.”

Paraná, interestingly enough, is where Judge Sérgio Moro made a name for himself by launching investigations that the political opposition used to mount its impeachment campaign against Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s constitutional president ([NotiSur, April 29, 2016](#)).

In Paraguay, where authorities don’t even keep good tabs on basic economic indicators, it has been reported that 115 campesino activists were killed between 1989, when the decades-long Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) ended, and 2013. Updated figures compiled late last year by the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, a civil society organization, upped the number to 157.

“Murders of campesinos take place in areas that are razed by deforestation and used to grow transgenic soy,” the entity explained in its “Chokokue” report. Chokokue means small farmer in Guaraní, one of Paraguay’s official languages alongside Spanish. The areas in question are in the “northeastern departments along the border with Brazil and are part of the boom in soy that is genetically modified by the multinational corporation Monsanto,” the report goes on to say.

### *Rescuing a river*

Cáceres, the murdered Honduran activist, was a major figure, both locally and internationally. She had strong leadership abilities that allowed her to mobilize the Lenca people to the point of halting, in western Honduras, the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project, financed jointly by the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation, the International Monetary Fund, and companies from the People’s Republic of China. The indigenous opposition movement has been challenging the project since 2011. In late 2013, Sinohydro, a Chinese company, pulled out of the deal, citing “persistent

community resistance” as its motive. Months later, the IFC also withdrew support, saying it was “concerned about the repeated violation of human rights.”

Cáceres’s actions in defense of human rights and nature earned her a Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015. The Goldman distinction is often hailed as the environmental equivalent of a Nobel Prize. She won the respect of people beyond the campesino and indigenous communities but also suffered from constant legal persecution and lived in fear, during the last four years of her life, that she would be killed for implicating various top-level military people in the murders of union and community leaders.

In 2014, in remarks before the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and other internal forums, Cáceres said, “Honduras is a militarily occupied country, not just by its own army, but by Pentagon troops.” Her accusation was in reference to US military personnel stationed in the Bay Islands, which are between 15 and 60 kilometers offshore from mainland Honduras and are technically one of the country’s 18 departments.

As head of the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras), an umbrella group, Cáceres managed to expel some 30 lumber companies from community lands and block two hydroelectric ventures slated for the Gualcarque, a river the Lenca hold sacred. Global Witness says that three indigenous leaders were killed as part of that standoff.

“In our world-view, we are beings who come from the earth, the water, and corn,” Cáceres said in April 2015 upon accepting her Goldman award at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, California. “The Lenca people are ancestral guardians of the rivers, in turn protected by the spirits of young girls, who teach us that giving our lives in various ways for the protection of the rivers is giving our lives for the well-being of humanity and of the planet.” For many of the people in attendance that night, the language and concepts Cáceres used brought to mind the words of Chief Seattle, of the Duwamish indigenous tribe in western Washington state, when he rejected, in 1854, a US government offer to buy the group’s community lands.

### *‘A bad example’*

In Argentina, another outspoken activist, Milagro Sala, remains locked up despite pleas from across the world that she be released. “With the arrival of a right-wing president in Argentina [Mauricio Macri] and with the [uptick in activity] by ultra-Catholic and Nazi groups, a persecution of social activism has begun and taken on different forms,” historian Osvaldo Bayer wrote in a column for the Argentine newspaper *Página 12*.

Sala’s situation is a case in point. With the support of the previous administration, and through the creation of labor cooperatives, the indigenous leader organized construction of neighborhoods—complete with schools, hospitals, lighting and running water—for low-income families. But for the new government, “Sala is a bad example,” Pérez Esquivel said. “And so without any proof whatsoever, with accusations that change every week, and a clear racial and social bias, they’ve kept her locked up since Jan. 16, even though the judges still haven’t come up with reasons to try her.”

Calls for Sala’s freedom put forth by bodies such as the UNHRC, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and even the Vatican—Pope Francis has sent two message of support—have been to no avail. Nor were efforts by PARLASUR, the legislative arm of the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR) trade group, to which Sala was elected as a deputy last October.

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