



HONDURAS

A boat on the waters of Río Patuca in an indigenous bioreserve in Honduras.
(Photo by Marcio Martínez.)

Unquiet Waters

By Rosemary Joyce and Russell N. Sheptak

In 2009, the Honduran military forcibly took President José Manuel Zelaya Rosales to Costa Rica, initiating a coup d'état muddled in popular understanding by claims of constitutional succession. In an effort to address “the confusion encouraged by lack of basic knowledge about Honduras” and to continue to call attention to the work of Honduran writers and scholars who are best positioned to place the struggle into broader context, we began a blog — Honduras Coup 2009 — that we sincerely hoped would end when the crisis did. Since this crisis never ended, this is a hard report for us to write.

Seven years later, we continue to write a successor blog: Honduras Culture and Politics. From time to time, we are inspired by the evidence that activism using the information we can provide has an influence on policy making in countries like the United States and Canada, which provide support for a Honduran government that is systematically dismantling civil society and whose international corporations are profiting from the post-coup changes in Honduras.

We no longer expect to see a day when the crisis in Honduras has ended and our work is done.

Probably no one engaged in advocating for policy changes concerning Honduras or seeking to improve

understanding of the complicated terrain in that country would claim to be optimistic today. The national government elected in 2009, while a de facto regime was in place, handed over power in 2014 to another government from the same party in an election in which the winning candidate received far less than a majority of the votes. That government has pursued an even more drastic approach to consolidating power, institutionalizing militarization of civilian policing and supporting projects that trample protections of the environment and indigenous rights under the guise of economic development.

As UC Santa Cruz professor of history Dana Frank argues, U.S. financial assistance has allowed the current Honduran president to maintain power, even in light of mounting evidence regarding the corruption of his government. With U.S. policy in the region narrowing its focus to two issues — drug interdiction and stemming the flow of unaccompanied minors and

others migrating to the United States in search of safe haven — the Honduran political and economic elite has enjoyed almost complete impunity.

No event of the past year more clearly underscores the failure of international policy toward Honduras than the assassination of Berta Cáceres, an internationally recognized indigenous leader, environmental activist, and Goldman Environmental Prize recipient.

Berta Cáceres was a co-founder of COPINH, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, originally organized in 1993 to fight logging in Lenca territory. She first gained visibility as a leader of resistance to the construction of dams that would disrupt access to water traditionally used by Lenca communities. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs identifies the Lenca people as the single largest indigenous group in Honduras, by their estimate numbering more than 700,000 people. Other sources place the number of

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Photo courtesy of the Goldman Environmental Prize.

Berta Cáceres in the Río Blanco region of western Honduras in 2015.

Lenca at around 100,000 individuals in more than 600 communities. These Lenca towns, located in the southwest part of Honduras, have long been remote from the main corridors of land developers' economic exploitation. This distance has spared the Lenca some of the challenges that confront other traditional groups, like the Garifuna of the north coast where tourism projects have appropriated traditionally held land.

Yet the natural resources of the mountains in central and southern Honduras provide major incentives for development of mines and hydroelectric energy projects. Such projects became more feasible after the 2009 coup, when the Honduran Congress reversed commitments to environmental protection. In September of that year, the de facto regime created a fast track for environmental approvals: the time expended in reviewing license requests, including environmental impacts, fell to nine days. These shortcuts led a succeeding government official to worry that some permits would need to be rescinded. Due to proposed construction of dams on the Río Patuca despite objections from the local indigenous people, UNESCO placed the Río Platano Biosphere in eastern Honduras on the list of "World Heritage in Danger" in

2011. One source says there are 17 dam projects currently proposed in Lenca territory alone.

The Honduran government routinely turns a blind eye to the lack of substantive consultation with indigenous communities affected by such projects, even though this step is required under the International Labor Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169, which Honduras signed in 1995. As we discussed during our talk for CLAS in October 2016, in reporting compliance with ILO Convention 169, Honduras makes claims that are, at best, misleading. As one example, we considered a 2013 report of consultation with Miskitu and Garifuna communities that would be affected by oil and gas prospecting in eastern Honduras. Drawing on public records, we showed that in this case, "consultation" took place after the government had approved the project and the contractor. By not including the actual timeline in its submission, Honduras gave the impression it had complied with ILO Convention 169 while, in fact, violating the requirement for consultation to come first.

The same report by Honduras skated over the situation of the Agua Zarca dam, the very project that Berta Cáceres

was leading opposition against when she was killed on March 3, 2016. Some of her accused murderers were employees of the Honduran company that was a partner in construction of the dam. The Honduran agency charged with environmental protection approved this dam project in 2011, but as legal sources in the country show, the "consultation" in this case, while at least preceding project approval, was also deficient:

...there was no prior consultation in the case of the Agua Zarca dam on the border between the municipalities of Intibuca and San Francisco de Ojuera. The court said that SERNA did carry out consultation with the residents of San Francisco de Ojuera on December 8 and 9, 2010, but they live downstream from the project. The residents of Río Blanco, in Intibuca, where the dam was to be constructed, were never consulted, nor were they invited to the consultation session in San Francisco de Ojuera.

In the immediate aftermath of Berta Cáceres' death, Honduran government statements tried to portray her murder as a crime linked to personal — not political — circumstances and blamed her for

supposedly not notifying them of her whereabouts so they could "protect" her. Meanwhile, there was a clear trail of threats on her life from the military, police, and employees of Desarrollos Energéticos, S.A. (DESA), a closely held Honduran company that was co-developer of the Agua Zarca dam with the Chinese energy company Sinohydro. Under international pressure, Honduran authorities finally made six arrests in the case. Among those arrested were two men described as military or police, and two identified as present or former staff of Desarrollos Energéticos. The remaining two were said to be hired assassins, brothers from the northern port city of La Ceiba. The accused included Sergio Rodríguez Orellana, described as DESA's "manager for social and environmental issues," a man we noted in our March 2016 blog post as having previously threatened protesters with death.

Activist Annie Bird captured the sense of disbelief we all felt at this crime: "If they can kill Berta in this way, they could kill anyone who's working for the same causes that she was working for."

Yet, while the assassination of Berta Cáceres was shocking, it was not unthinkable. Prior to her death,

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A COPINH protestor marches against U.S. military bases in Honduras.



Photo by Felipe Canova.

Honduras had become a killing field for environmental activists. Indeed, we are unsure whether we have managed to keep track of all the victims. In June 2015, the international NGO Global Witness reported that five environmental activists had been killed just in the community of Locomapa, which is occupied by members of another indigenous group, the Tolupan, who are fighting illegal logging and mining in their territory. Global Witness previously tallied more than 100 deaths of environmental activists in Honduras between 2010 and 2014. While there were earlier killings of activists, the recent deaths represent an acceleration in the wake of the 2009 coup: 101 of 111 murders identified since 2002 occurred during the 2010–2014 period. As a result, Global Witness has labeled Honduras “the most dangerous country to be an environmental defender.”

Global Witness also noted the deaths of three fellow activists against the Agua Zarca dam before Berta Cáceres was targeted. Since her killing, the murders of other activists from her own group have continued. Also in March 2016, COPINH leader Nelson García was killed the same day as a violent eviction of indigenous opponents of the Agua Zarca dam. In July 2016, there was another victim: Lesbia Yaneth Urquía, a COPINH activist working to stop appropriation of water for power projects in another part of southwestern Honduras. Again, the police suggested a personal motive for her death.

International attention to the killing of Berta Cáceres may have led to arrests, but there is no certainty that prosecution of those arrested will be successful or that anyone will pay for the crime if convicted. In the latest twist on the case, the entire original of the case file was stolen from the car of a Honduran Supreme Court judge on September 28, 2016. Judge María Luisa Ramos states that her car was stolen at gunpoint as she drove home with the case file in her trunk. A spokesperson for the Honduran Supreme Court said Ramos was taking the case file home to draft her decision on an appeal by the defense lawyers challenging the evidence offered against their clients. The spokesperson said that taking home the original case file was a normal practice of judges when a decision was due. The Universidad Autónoma Nacional de Honduras issued a statement decrying the removal of the original case file as unconscionable, particularly given that the judge had access to a certified copy, and calling the incident a “severe blow to the credibility of the justice system and the government.” Whether this setback will compromise prosecution is, as yet, unknown.

“The police obstructed the investigation; the head of homicides threatened the prosecutors on the case (...). He’s the person who is in charge of investigating murders, and he told the prosecutors that they had to stop investigating — that they didn’t know what sort of trouble they were getting into.”

– Julieta Castellanos, *Rector of the National Autonomous University of Honduras, on the investigation into the Honduran national police’s murder of her son*

While the situation of environmental and indigenous activists is bad enough, the climate of impunity in Honduras and the move to more conservative policy after the coup has endangered an even wider gamut of activists. In April 2016, Index on Censorship examined the evidence of systematic violence against the LGBTQ community in Honduras. Relying on Honduran NGOs, this publication reported a sharp upsurge in fatal violence against members of the LGBTQ community after the 2009 coup: deaths rose from an average of two a year between 1994 and 2008 to an average of 31 every year since the coup. Some of this violence followed the association of gay rights activists with resistance to the coup, partly due to recognition that the overthrow of a government that was endorsing rights of minorities opened the door to a renewed suppression of sexual minorities.

Women’s rights advocates also have faced extraordinary increases in violence. After the coup, the de facto regime reversed legislation favoring reproductive rights, banning the morning-after pill that had been in use for more than a decade. Since then, pressure on women’s rights activists has continued. Gladys Lanza was convicted of defamation in 2015 for her role in supporting a woman fighting sexual harassment by the head of a Honduran government development agency. Reporting on her case, *The Guardian* cited 525 cases of harassment endured by women’s rights activists in the two-year period of 2012–2013 alone. As with Berta Cáceres, the Honduran government failed to provide the protection for Lanza requested by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

All of this violence has unfolded against a backdrop of U.S. government-funded militarization of civilian

policing in Honduras under the guise of solving police corruption. When the U.S. Congress passes legislation to fund Honduran government programs, it includes a variety of measures tracking government effectiveness and transparency that the Secretary of State is supposed to certify before funds are released. Before the murder of Berta Cáceres, we commented on the authorization bill from December 2015 that:

The Secretary of State will have to certify that the Honduran government is taking effective steps to “create a professional, accountable civilian police force and curtail the role of the military in internal policing.”

One could not certify that for Honduras today. Not only is there no viable mechanism for removing corrupt, crime-linked police officers...but the current government is expressly in favor of militarizing the police and abolishing the civilian police force by progressively defunding it in favor of increased funding to the militarized police force it is building up from scratch.

The death of Berta Cáceres may have been an international scandal, but it has not yet been enough to

Berta Cáceres’s daughter, Berta Zúñiga Cáceres, at a commemoration of her mother.



Photo by Daniel Cima/Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos.

push the United States to cut off funding to the Honduran state that took actions leading to her murder.

In June 2016, a group of U.S. Congress members introduced a bill, “The Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act,” that would “suspend United States security assistance with Honduras until such time as human rights violations by Honduran security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice.” It has yet to be advanced from congressional committee, and the website Predict.gov gives it a one-percent chance of passage.

Meanwhile, activists remain at risk, and no one expects that justice will be done in the deaths already registered.

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References for this article are available online.