

Rights Action
April 20, 2015

Goldman Environmental Prize Awarded to Berta Caceres of Honduras, the ‘Murder Capital of the World’, the ‘Repression Capital of the Americas’

Since 1998, Rights Action has been honored to support and work with Berta Caceres and COPINH. We congratulate Berta for receiving the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize (www.goldmanprize.org).

We congratulate so many people we work with and support for their courage, dignity and vision.

Thank-you to Rights Action’s individual and institutional donors – you enable us to support many community and environmental defenders, like Berta Caceres, and many grassroots organizations, like COPINH.

Please share this information widely. As Rights Action regularly reports, since the 2009 U.S. and Canadian-backed military coup, the situation of exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity in Honduras have reached historically high levels. The life situation remains dire.

“We must undertake the struggle in all parts of the world, wherever we may be, because we have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action. The Honduran people, along with international solidarity, can get out of this unjust situation, promoting hope, rebellion and organising ourselves for the protection of life.” (Berta Caceres)



Honduran Indigenous Rights Campaigner Wins Goldman Prize

Berta Cáceres has won the world's leading environmental award for her campaigning against the construction of the Agua Zarca dams

Berta Cáceres has received threats of rape and death, been followed, and several of her supporters have been killed.

By [Jonathan Watts](#), 20 April 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/honduran-indigenous-rights-campaigner-wins-goldman-prize>

The odds of survival, let alone success, could hardly be more stacked against Berta Cáceres, the Honduran indigenous rights campaigner who has been declared the winner of this year's [Goldman Environmental Prize](#).

Working in the most murderous country in the world for environmental activists, the mother of four is facing down one of Central America's biggest hydropower projects, powerful landowners, a US-funded police force, and a mercenary army of private security guards.

She has received threats of rape and death, been followed, and several of her supporters have been killed, yet those suspected of such wrongdoings have walked free while Cáceres has been forced into hiding and courts have twice issued warrants for her arrest.

The Goldman prize – the world's leading environmental award – is a recognition for the courage she has shown in a long and – so far – effective battle to stop construction of the Agua Zarca cascade of four giant dams in the Gualcarque river basin. The project – which is being built by local firm Desa with the backing of international engineering and finance companies – would choke the main source of irrigation and drinking water for the community.

As the coordinator of the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of [Honduras](#) (better known by its Spanish acronym Copinh), Cáceres first led a fight against illegal loggers, then plantation owners and is now at the head of a campaign against the dams, which she says are being built without the prior consultation required by international law.

The often bloody campaign struggle has achieved notable successes. In 2013, [China's Sinohydro](#) – the largest dam builder in the world – backed out of the Agua Zarca project, saying it was concerned about “serious conflicts” and “controversial land acquisition and invasion” by its local partner.

International Rivers and Friends of the Earth, are [calling upon a German company, Voith Hydro, to end all involvement in the scheme](#), which has yet to begin construction.

Cáceres scored another victory when the World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation, also withdrew from the project, citing concerns over human rights violation.

She said the award would strengthen the group's campaigns. "It is an opportunity to give higher visibility to the violence of plunder, to the conflict, and also to the denunciations and resistance," she said in an email response to questions by the Guardian. "It is an honour, and an acknowledgement of the enormous sacrifice and commitment made by Copinh and its planetary contributions."

The prize coincides with a new report that identifies Honduras as the most dangerous country in the world for environmental and land activists, particularly those from indigenous groups.

Between 2010 and 2014, 101 campaigners were killed in Honduras, a higher death toll relative to population than anywhere else, according to the study [How Many More? by NGO Global Witness](#).

The group said Honduras was at the forefront of a disturbing rise in murders worldwide. Last year, it documented 116 killings of activists across the globe, 20% higher than in 2013. Four in ten of the victims were from indigenous communities who resisted development projects or the encroachment of farms on their territory.

"In Honduras and across the world environmental defenders are being shot dead in broad daylight, kidnapped, threatened or tried as terrorists for standing in the way of so-called 'development'," Billy Kyte, a campaigner at Global Witness, said in a statement. "The true authors of these crimes – a powerful nexus of corporate and state interests – are escaping unpunished. Urgent action is needed to protect citizens and bring perpetrators to justice."

Cáceres is all too familiar with the dangers. In 2013, a fellow leader of Copinh, Tomás García, was [shot and killed by a Honduran soldier](#) – whose commanders are trained in the US School of the Americas – during a demonstration against the dam at Rio Blanco. The killer was put on trial but released on the grounds that he acted in self-defence.

Last October, while Cáceres was in a meeting with Pope Francis, she said another campaigner – 14-year-old Maycol Rodríguez – was tortured and murdered after his father, a leading activist, received threats. No suspects have been identified.

In part this reflects the broader violence of Honduran society, which has some of the world's worst levels of murder, organised crime, drug trafficking, gun use, inequality and corruption. But Cáceres says indigenous environmental campaigners are particularly at risk because they are up against powerful political and economic interests who have grown used to exploiting their land with impunity.

"These are centuries-old ills, a product of domination. There is a racist system in place that sustains and reproduces itself," she says. "The political, economic and social situation in Honduras is getting worse and there is an imposition of a project of domination, of violent oppression, of militarisation, of violation of human rights, of transnationalisation, of the turning over of the riches and sovereignty of the land to

corporate capital, for it to privatise energy, the rivers, the land; for mining exploitation; for the creation of development zones."

Police and the courts are a threat rather than protection, she says. Cáceres has been detained twice: once for illegal possession of a firearm (which she says was planted in her car during a police check) and once for allegedly conspiring to damage property (a charge she successfully denied). She has also been followed and threatened by guards from the hydropower plant. There are four times as many private security employees as police in Honduras, according to Global Witness.

Most of the killings have taken place in Bajo Aguán valley, where [campesinos](#) trying to defend their land have been targeted by agribusiness companies, particularly since the coup of 2009 replaced the democratically-elected president, Manuel Zelaya, with Porfirio Lobo from the conservative national party.

The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, a coffee magnate from the same party who is backed by big landowners, won power in 2013 with the promise of a "soldier on every corner". Many opponents of agribusiness in Bajo Aguán have "disappeared" in a chilling echo of the rightwing death squads that operated in Latin America during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. Cáceres also heads a group dedicated to raising the cases of those who have gone missing.

After a visit to the region in December, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said there was a "a complete absence of the most basic measures to address reports of grave human rights violations in the region" and noted the possible participation of the national government in the incidents of violence.

Despite these concerns, the United States continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in the country in the name of the "war on drugs" and the State Department has issued statements supporting plantation owners against what it called "squatters".

Margaret Sekaggya, a former UN special rapporteur has warned that environmental defenders in Honduras are being branded by the authorities as "members of the resistance, guerrillas, terrorists, political opponents or criminals", with dangerous ramifications.

International civic rights, anti-poverty and environmental groups, also including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Friends of the Earth, have lined up to condemn the Honduran government for the situation faced by campaigners like Cáceres.

By naming her as this year's winner and releasing a video about her life's work, the Goldman Prize has also added to the pressure on the country before the periodic review of Honduras's record by the UN Human Rights Council on 8 May.

Cáceres, though, says it is important to see her struggle as more than a single-country issue. Behind the killings are powerful external forces, including international capital, the influence of the United States (which has six military bases in Honduras) and a global

drive to clear more forest and exploit more resources despite the growing risks of climate change.

"We must undertake the struggle in all parts of the world, wherever we may be, because we have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action," she says. "The Honduran people, along with international solidarity, can get out of this unjust situation, promoting hope, rebellion and organising ourselves for the protection of life."

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To support community organizations, like COPINH, and people, like Berta Caceres, that are working for locally-controlled development, the environment, human rights, real democracy and the rule of law in Honduras and Guatemala, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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Rights Action (USA & Canada)

Rights Action believes in the interdependence of all humans and life forms on the planet, and in our fundamental dependence on the natural elements of Mother Earth. Most injustices, inequalities and environmental destructions suffered by humans and other life forms across the planet are the result of human value systems based on domination, superiority and inferiority, competition, 'winners and losers' and 'we versus them', and on separation from and domination over the natural elements of Mother Earth. Rights Action funds grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras (and less-so in southern Mexico and El Salvador) working for locally-controlled development, environmental and human rights protection, and the strengthening of real democracy and rule of law. Rights Action does education and activism work concerning how the United States and Canada (governments, companies, investors and consumers) contribute to and benefit from environmental harms and human rights violations, repression, corruption and impunity in these countries.

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- Daily News: www.democracynow.org / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca / www.rabble.ca /
- Recommended Reading: "This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate", by Naomi Klein; "Open Veins of Latin America", by Eduardo Galeano; "A People's History of the United States", by Howard Zinn
- Speakers: Invite us to give presentations about these issues
- Educational Delegation: Join an educational delegation seminar to Guatemala and Honduras to learn more about these issues and struggles

Say No To 'International Business and Investments, Militarism and Impunity As Usual'

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies and investors (including pension funds) maintain profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan, Honduran and Mexican elites, turning a blind eye to death and suffering by exploitation, repression, violence and impunity that are the norm in these countries.

Because of impunity and immunity from legal liability in Canada and the U.S., it is extremely difficult to hold our companies, investors, governments and international "development" banks accountable when they contribute to and benefit from human rights violations and environmental and health harms in other countries.

Send, and keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (MPs, Congresspersons, Senators), to your media, and to your own pension and investment funds, asking: Why our governments, companies and investment firms do nothing about the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms associated with North American businesses, while benefiting from these economic, military and political relations?

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