

Berta Cáceres Did Not Die, She Multiplied

(<http://us9.campaign-archive2.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=3ff6ae1d46>)

Rights Action re-distributes this article by Karen Spring of the Honduras Solidarity Network. From 2009-2014, Karen worked with Rights Action, based in Honduras. If you have supported Rights Action, you have supported the work of Karen, ... along with the work of Berta Cáceres, her organization COPINH, and dozens of amazing community based groups across Honduras and Guatemala.

Urgent Action and Support Needed: See below

Help support the family of Berta Cáceres and COPINH as they seek justice for the assassination of Berta and the release of Gustavo Castro, a Mexican man shot and wounded in the attack that killed Berta and now illegally detained in Honduras, possibly to be made a suspect (!!) by the corrupted Honduran administration of justice.

Berta Cáceres, the Murdered Honduran Activist, Did Not Die. She Multiplied.

03/23/2016, by Karen Spring, Honduras Solidarity Network

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-spring/bertha-caceres-murder_b_9500088.html



LA ESPERANZA, Honduras — As was our habit, I chatted with Berta Cáceres the day before she was murdered. She asked me to help coordinate with communities who were struggling against mining and hydroelectric dams in Honduras. Nothing felt unusual. Berta was always on the move.

“Listen, a *compañero* from Mexico will be here,” she wrote to me. “We brought him for a COPINH event.” COPINH is the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, an indigenous grassroots organization Berta co-founded, and the *compañero* was Gustavo Castro. “This *compañero* is incredible, he’s from Chiapas,” she wrote. He was a long-time friend and fellow activist, and he was scheduled to participate in a forum scheduled for March 9, advocating for territorial defense and community-led development — one of the pillars of COPINH’s organizing strategy.

Berta [died](#) in Gustavo’s arms the next day. At least two assassins broke in the back door of her new house in a peaceful neighborhood in the western town of La Esperanza. They shot her and Gustavo. Gustavo survived. When I got the call a few minutes after she died, I was in shock. I still can’t believe someone dared to take her life.



A vigil for Cáceres on International Women’s Day in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on March 8. (ORLANDO SIERRA/AFP/Getty Images)

Berta was the first activist I met in Honduras. Our experiences together are intertwined with key moments in recent Honduran history — the [2009 military coup](#) that overthrew President Manuel Zelaya, [two fraudulent](#) elections, innumerable events and assemblies where Berta and others from COPINH advocated for indigenous rights and environmental protection.

Since her teens, Berta had been involved in defending the collective rights of the Lenca, an indigenous people who inhabit much of western Honduras. Berta co-founded COPINH in 1993. In the two decades since then, she has been directly involved in the Lenca’s victories against scores of logging and hydroelectric projects that would have decimated their ancestral forests and rivers. She has led the way in pressuring the Honduran government to ratify an important

law that requires the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous communities before projects can proceed on their land.

Berta's mother, Doña Berta Flores, was also an outstanding role model — a midwife, the first female congressional representative from the department of Intibucá and a mother of 12 children. It's easy once you meet Doña Berta to understand where her daughter got her energy and love for humanity.

I'll forever remember Berta's fierce, tireless, committed and determined activist side. On occasion, I saw her as a mother and a daughter as well. That's just how she was — she lived and breathed la lucha — the struggle. She was uncannily firm in her political positions, rooted in an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist and an anti-racist worldview.

But she was much more than just an environmentalist or just an indigenous leader or just a feminist — she had a unique and rare political clarity that made her a well-respected leader in the wider Honduran social movement. This, of course, came with great personal sacrifice and difficulty.

Weeks after the June 2009 military coup, I arrived in Honduras in the middle of chaos. I was told by my mentors — both old friends of Berta's — to stick with her: "If you stay with her, you will be fine," they said. "Just listen to what she tells you to do."

It was good advice.

Zelaya was overthrown in a coup d'état, which was supported by the [U.S.](#) and [Canada](#). In the early hours of the morning on June 28, 2009, he was [held](#) at gunpoint by the Honduran military and flown out of the country. He had pushed for a referendum on rewriting the constitution via a National Constituent Assembly.

Knowing that a potential coup was looming, COPINH members had spent days in the presidential palace, even sleeping there, to show support for the president's proposal. The coup was seen as an attack on Zelaya's progressive social and economic policies and on the poor, who had been hopeful that transformational change would be made under a new constitution.



Army soldiers break into the presidential residency in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on June 28, 2009 to arrest Zelaya. (AP/Esteban Felix, file)

In 2009, I lived with Berta and her daughters who had temporarily moved to Tegucigalpa to attend the anti-coup protests. Berta would leave in the early hours of the morning and return late at night. She went from meeting to interview to protest to event, all while taking dozens of calls on multiple cell phones. She was a center-point for information and advice in the country, and she always had a phone to her ear, particularly when a crisis hit, as it did often in post-coup Honduras.

I remember staying up late waiting for her to come home and talk about the latest news. It was a chaotic and dangerous time — protests were viciously suppressed, people were harassed by state security forces in the streets, military curfews were imposed. But it was also a time of unity for the Honduran social movement. Naturally, Berta was in the center of it.

My first “adventure” with Berta and COPINH started about a month after the coup. Zelaya was [trying to return](#) to Honduras over the southern border from Nicaragua. We gathered in the capital early one morning and piled into a big yellow school bus that a COPINH member flagged down on the road. We were headed to the border to meet “Mel,” as he was known, even though southern Honduras had been completely militarized in order to stop people trying to accompany the ousted president back into the country.

“If we are stopped at military checkpoints, we are missionaries,” Berta said. “Put the cheles” - white people - “at the front of the bus.” I stood squished between COPINH members on the steps of the moving bus, holding on to whatever or whomever I could. Berta thought we could fool the military. Ten minutes later, our bus was stopped. We were forced to abandon it and continue on foot.

For two days, Berta and I and a hundred or so COPINH activists hiked along the main road from Tegucigalpa to the Nicaraguan border, a distance of almost 70 miles. Almost the entire time,

Berta had a phone to one ear and a small portable radio held to the other, trying to stay connected. Thousands of Hondurans were fleeing to the border.

Berta and Salvador Zuniga, her long-time compañero and the father of her four children, kept us going during the long, exhausting walk with little food and water.



COPINH members march to the Honduras-Nicaragua border on Jul. 27, 2009. Berta is at the head of the crowd, leading the way. (Karen Spring)

When we got close to the border, we hit military checkpoints set up to stop us, so we detoured on a dirt road. I was walking in the crowd; Berta was ahead of me. All of a sudden we heard gunfire. I'm pretty sure it was Berta yelling at us to run into the grassy fields on either side of the road. We hid there for a few minutes. When we got back up, Berta asked me to go back to the capital to get the word out. With the road blocked, she and Salvador had no choice but to lead the other COPINH members through the mountains to the border.

Days later, emerging from the mountains, Berta and the COPINH members met hundreds of other Hondurans who had also defied military curfews and road blockades to reach the border. Having walked so far in difficult conditions, dehydrated and tired, with swollen and wounded feet, they were monitored by paramedics.

Despite the wide range of support for Zelaya, he was unable to enter Honduras that day. Berta and COPINH returned to Tegucigalpa, and there they joined daily protests demanding his return.

Absurdly, the Honduran government [seems to be focused](#) on Berta's COPINH colleagues in the investigation of her murder. During the critical 72 hours after she was assassinated, that is who the investigators - some of whom are [advised and trained](#) by the U.S. - scrutinized. I can almost see Berta shaking her head in response, cursing the government and its ridiculous attacks on COPINH. This isn't the first time COPINH's been targeted.



Posters of Cáceres are carried during a demonstration in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on March 8. (ORLANDO SIERRA/AFP/Getty Images)

Berta's voice is there in my head as I watch how the "investigation" of her assassination unfolds. Gustavo, the sole witness and also a victim, has been prevented from leaving the country. COPINH [reports](#) that eight of its nine coordinating members have been brought in for questioning by Honduran prosecutors.

Aureliano Molina — who along with Berta was targeted by the government over the fight to protect the Gualcarque River from a hydroelectric dam project in 2013 (Berta was ordered to be jailed but went into hiding) — was detained for 48 hours even before Berta's body arrived at the morgue. Investigators are ignoring dozens of threats made against Berta in the months leading up to her assassination.

Instead, they are focusing on COPINH members, some of whom have had their vehicles, shoes and cell phones [taken](#) as evidence. Some were questioned during her funeral and prevented from joining thousands of Hondurans and international friends from accompanying her casket through the streets of La Esperanza to her final burial site. [Others](#) have been threatened by unidentified armed men, held for days without charge or been followed by police.

Two weeks after her murder, the strategy to weaken and attack COPINH continues. On the morning of March 15, a community leader named Nelson Garcia was [shot and killed](#) in northwest Honduras. Alongside a community of indigenous Lenca families, he had spent the

morning watching as the police and military destroyed the community's houses and crops. More than a hundred families were forced to leave their land — land they had been given two years earlier but which the government said didn't belong to them. Like many landless campesinos, Garcia had dreamed of one day owning his own property and building a home for himself.

His killers haven't been identified.

One thing that made Berta such a powerful activist was the way she always named our "enemies" — those threatening the livelihood of the Lenca and Honduran people. Just read one of COPINH's communiqués during Berta's time as the general coordinator, and you will see the names of international financial institutions — Finfund and the Dutch development bank FMO — both of which [back](#) the Agua Zarca dam in Rio Blanco.

In [interviews](#), Berta blasted Canadian and U.S. corporations and governments for supporting the 2009 military coup and working alongside the Honduran elite to promote development projects that COPINH and Berta considered threats to their very existence because they eliminated access to the rivers, forests and mountain environments critical for agriculture and food and water access. Most importantly, these projects ignored community-based development, defined and carried out by the Lenca themselves.



Roberto Micheletti, widely seen as the coup leader, salutes as he is sworn in as interim president in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on Dec. 10, 2009. (AP/Esteban Felix)

Naming enemies was why Berta was loved by many — and despised by many others. It may not sound all that brave and daring, but in Honduras, where environmentalists, journalists, lawyers and women are [killed in almost complete impunity](#), it certainly is. She was clear and unforgiving; she faced down repeated threats against her and her family. She sent her kids out of the country to ensure their safety. She would be proud to see how determined they are to keep their mother's memory alive and to keep COPINH going strong.

Another vivid memory I have of Berta is of an international educational delegation I led to Rigores, in the Bajo Aguan region, in July 2011. We had learned that a [violent eviction was going to take place](#) — only a week after the community had been burned to the ground and then reoccupied. I was concerned that the situation was dangerous and the delegates might be at risk. I called Berta. “Take them there,” she said. “It’s important that they see how we live and how they treat us. I will be waiting for any news.”

So we went. Honduran police and military — some hooded, some dressed in casual clothes with bulletproof vests, all with heavy weapons — invaded Rigores that day. I don’t think any of the delegates will forget what it was like to see the houses burning in the distance, and to feel the fear, anguish and helplessness of a community being destroyed.



Residents of Rigores stand in front of the remains of their house after it had been burned and bulldozed to the ground. (Karen Spring)

Hondurans are outraged by Berta’s death. Shortly after her assassination, numerous organizations of activists, women’s groups, indigenous communities, unionists and, of course, COPINH members, have come together to demand justice and the cancellation of the Honduran company DESA’s concession to build the Agua Zarca dam. Protests and demands for justice in the capital [turned violent](#).

Banners, posters, graffiti and the energy projected by hundreds of people in the streets are all signs of how inspirational my friend Berta was. All around Tegucigalpa, her face has been spray-painted next to the words, “Berta did not die. She multiplied.”

Write and Write and Write Again

Find here (<http://us9.campaign-archive1.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=29af29c555>) a Letter to U.S. Secretary of

State John Kerry, and a Letter to Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of International Development, Minister of International Trade, Ambassador of Canada to Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Keep on writing to your elected officials. Pressure them to add their voices to efforts to have the U.S. and Canadian governments (the most important supporters of the Honduran regime since the 2009 military coup) –a- demand that the Honduran regime let Gustavo Castro go home to Mexico, and –b- demand that the Honduran regime accept the establishment of the independent international judicial commission to directly join the criminal investigation in Honduras.

Short of this, corruption and impunity will prevail again in Honduras.

Funds Needed for Family of Berta Cáceres and COPINH

Since 1998, Rights Action has funded and worked with COPINH, co-founded and directed by Berta Cáceres. Since her assassination on March 3, 2016, Rights Action has channeled over \$15,000 of your donations to her family and to COPINH, as they are in emergency response mode trying to ensure that justice is done.

Tax Deductible Donations in the U.S. or Canada

Make checks to "Rights Action" (write Berta/COPINH on memo line) and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

Credit-Card Donations:

- Canada: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/rights-action/>
- U.S.: <http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations> (click on NetworkForGood)

Articles

- Berta Cáceres' Acceptance Speech, 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize. To view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR1kwx8b0ms>
- Murdered for Activism in Honduras, by Silvio Carrillo (Berta's nephew), March 11, 2016, New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/12/opinion/international/murdered-for-activism-in-honduras.html?emc=edit_tnt_20160311&nlid=45556342&tntemail0=y
- Berta Cáceres: Who She Is & What She Lived For, by Grahame Russell, March 3, 2016: <http://us9.campaign-archive2.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=026d1728a3>
- Fight With Joy: Remembering Bertha Cáceres, by Sandra Cuffe, March 7, 2016: <https://intercontinentalcry.org/fight-joy-remembering-bertha-caceres/>
- Eulogy For Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores, by Bev Bell, March 9, 2016: <http://otherworldsarepossible.org/bertha-lives-life-and-legacy-bertha-caceres>
- Blood Flows Where Canadian Capital Goes, by Tyler Shipley, 03/6/2016: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/blood-flows-where-canadian-capital-goes-371189471.html>

- Berta Cáceres, the Murdered Honduran Activist, Did Not Die. She Multiplied, by Karen Spring, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-spring/berta-caceres-murder_b_9500088.html

More Information

- www.BertaCaceres.org (established by Berta's family)
- Honduras Solidarity Network: <http://www.hondurassolidarity.org/>
- Other Worlds: <http://otherworldsarepossible.org/>
- Common Frontiers: <http://www.commonfrontiers.ca/>
- School of the Americas Watch: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/what-is-the-soawhinsec>
- Witness For Peace: <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/>

Berta Cáceres did not die, she multiplied. Thank-you for your multiplying commitment, support and activism. Please share this information far'n'wide.

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