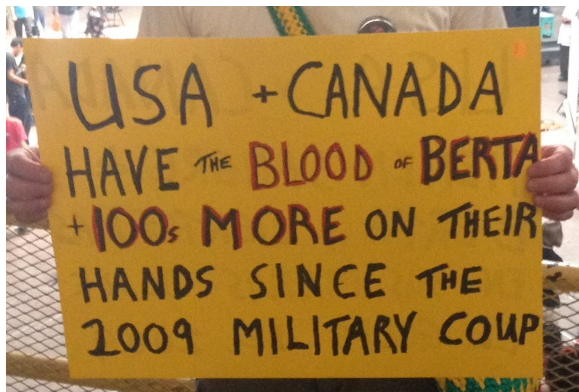


End U.S. [& Canadian!] Support for the Thugs of Honduras

<http://us9.campaign-archive1.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=b999d6a564>

“Rather than continue to shore up a repressive government by paying for its thugs, the United States [and Canada] should suspend all police and military aid to Honduras immediately, including funds for training and equipment. And instead of promoting cosmetic reforms as cover for the security forces’ abuses, the [U.S. and Canadian governments] should address the demands of Hondurans for a truly independent, United Nations-backed commission on corruption and impunity.” (Dana Frank, New York Times)



End U.S. Support for the Thugs of Honduras

New York Times, by Dana Frank, Sept.22, 2016

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/opinion/end-us-support-for-the-thugs-of-honduras.html?_r=0

Santa Cruz, Calif. — Around midnight on March 2, the indigenous peoples’ rights and environmental activist Berta Cáceres was shot dead by gunmen who entered her residence in La Esperanza, Honduras. A longtime campaigner against illegal logging operations, Ms. Cáceres had been repeatedly threatened because of her opposition to the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project, one of the largest of its kind in Central America.

“I have no doubt that she has been killed because of her struggle, and that soldiers and people from the dam are responsible, I am sure of that,” her 84-year-old mother told a local radio station. “I hold the government responsible.”

On June 21, The Guardian reported the testimony of a Honduran soldier who said that his elite unit of United States-trained special forces had been given a hit list of activists to be killed that included Berta Cáceres. (He had deserted from the army, he said, rather than comply with the orders.) Six men have subsequently been arrested in connection with her case, including a serving army officer and two retired members of the military, but it remains to be seen if whoever commissioned the crime will be brought to justice.

It took the brutal assassination of Ms. Cáceres to finally provoke a public debate in the United States over the Obama administration's funding of Honduras's dangerous police and military forces. On June 14, Representative Henry C. Johnson Jr., Democrat of Georgia, and co-sponsors introduced the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act, which called for the immediate suspension of security aid to Honduras. In response, the Obama administration has tried to justify continuing its support by pointing to an array of initiatives that are, at best, weak and token, and that, at worst, may even be harmful.

In the aftermath of the 2009 military coup that ousted its democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya, Honduras has degenerated into a quagmire of government corruption, rampant criminality and gang violence. The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, was himself a key backer of the coup and led the 2012 overthrow of part of the Supreme Court. His 2013 election campaign and his party received funds siphoned from a reported \$300 million fraud scheme in the national health service.

During his presidency, Mr. Hernández has developed a new military police force at least 3,000 strong that, riding roughshod over the Honduran Constitution, has taken over much of the responsibility for domestic policing. Honduran security forces already have a well-documented record of committing human rights violations with nearly complete impunity. The Associated Press has reported on death squads acting from within the police force, while the military has been accused of a series of killings of small farmers and land-rights activists over disputes in the Aguán Valley, near Honduras's Caribbean coast.

The shooting of Ms. Cáceres is only one in a grim litany of political murders since the 2009 coup. This year alone, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, at least eight human rights activists have been killed. As the United Nations reported last month, "Honduras has become one of the most hostile and dangerous countries for human rights defenders."

The bill now before Congress follows a series of letters from representatives and senators to the secretary of state questioning, from 2010 onward, United States support for Honduran security forces.

"As long as the United States funds Honduran security forces without demanding justice for those threatened, tortured and killed," the six initial co-sponsors of the bill wrote in The Guardian, "we have blood on our hands." Led by Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of

Vermont, Congress passed a law last year that makes 50 percent of aid for 2016 conditional on the Honduran government's meeting certain human rights standards and addressing concerns about corruption and impunity. In past years, however, the State Department has gone ahead and certified that funds could be released despite evidence that similar conditions set by Congress had been violated; it remains to be seen what the department will do this year.

The Obama administration has pushed back against the criticisms by promoting a program of "violence prevention" projects as evidence that the security crisis in Honduras is improving, thanks to United States aid. Yet the success of these programs is questionable, and there is no credible independent evidence that crime over all has dropped.

On a visit to Honduras last month, I heard terrifying testimony about how gangs were continuing their murderous march through neighborhoods, summarily executing those with small businesses who did not pay "taxes" — that is, extortion — or who reported them to the police. In aggregate, the United States funding of the Honduran police and military does not prevent violence; it exacerbates it.

A police reform commission recently dismissed a number of police commanders, but this commission is widely seen as loyal to Mr. Hernández. None of the purged officers have yet been prosecuted, and there's little to suggest that their replacements are any less dangerous. Last year, Hondurans took to the streets in mass protests to demand an independent investigation of corruption and impunity, to be sponsored by the United Nations and modeled on the successful commission in Guatemala. In response, the United States has promoted the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras; but this weak alternative has few powers and lacks teeth.

Rather than continue to shore up a repressive government by paying for its thugs, the United States should suspend all police and military aid to Honduras immediately, including funds for training and equipment. And instead of promoting cosmetic reforms as cover for the security forces' abuses, the Obama administration should address the demands of Hondurans for a truly independent, United Nations-backed commission on corruption and impunity.

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