

Canada Is Not Honduras' Friend: Coups, Repression and Profits

By: RadioFree Winnipeg interview with Grahame Russell

[Telesur English version: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Canada-Is-Not-Honduras-Friend-Coups-Repression-and-Profits-20161105-0013.html>]



{November 3, 2016, on the streets of La Esperanza, Honduras, home town of Berta Caceres. 8 months ago, on March 3, Berta was assassinated in her small home here in La Esperanza. That same day, Gustavo Castro was shot and left for dead ... and he survived. No justice has been done. This is Honduras, repressive, corrupt and “open for business” .}

- To listen: https://tumblr.co/ZCYRZj2DDj5_b

Grahame Russell: For over 20 years, I have worked with a small NGO - Rights Action - that has charitable status in the U.S. and Canada. I have been working mainly in Guatemala and Honduras. To put it simply, we do two main things: we directly fund community based organizations in Guatemala and Honduras involved in community, environmental and human rights defense struggles; and we do education and activism work focusing on how Canada and the U.S., in different ways, are part of these problems in Honduras and Guatemala.

RadioFree Winnipeg: We wanted to concentrate on Honduras in this interview, although we would like to hear from you in the future about Guatemala, because there’s a lot happening there. But the thing with Honduras, there was a coup in 2009 that has unfortunately shaped Honduras in the years since. Can you explain what happened in the coup, why it happened, who benefitted from it, and what was going on there in 2009?

GR: Today, in 2016, Honduras is recognized as having one of the highest murder rates in the world, one of the highest levels of societal violence in the world, especially across the Americas. It has the highest rate of State-sponsored repression in the Americas - the repression in

Honduras today is as high as it was in the 1980s when it was dominated by U.S. backed military regimes.

By all standards, Honduras has the highest levels of corruption and impunity in the Americas, and all of these indicators - murder, violence, repression, impunity and corruption - spiked after the 2009 coup, a coup that was directly supported and legitimized by the governments of the United States and Canada.

Historically, the United States has played a very negative role in supporting coups and military regimes and overthrowing governments across the Americas, and some listeners would be very familiar with that story. What people are less familiar with is with the role that Canada plays.

Whereas in the past I would say that Canada often quietly acquiesced to the interventionist role the U.S. has played in the Americas, with the Honduras coup in 2009, Canada played an explicit, front seat role in both legitimizing the coup and then politically and economically supporting the post coup regimes in power since then. As I said, it is a very repressive regime in power in Honduras, profoundly undemocratic, operating with high levels of repression, corruption and impunity.

Who benefited from the coup? Inside of the country, the coup was carried out by the elite economic and military sectors that have long ties with the U.S. economically, militarily and politically. The two countries that most supported and benefitted from the coup were Canada and the United States. I will focus on Canada more than the U.S.

I say benefited because Canada has promoted openly and aggressively Canadian economic interests in Honduras since the coup. It's not that Canada didn't have economic relations with Honduras before the coup, it did. It's not that Honduras had a healthy, vibrant and just society before the coup, it did not, but the coup made everything worse in Honduras in terms of human wellbeing, human rights, exploitation and violence, and Canada has directly benefited from that.

There's been an increased push in mining, tourism and maquiladora sweatshops by Canadian investors and companies. At the same time, the Canadian government that supported the coup, pushed for and got a free trade agreement signed with the post coup regimes in power in Honduras.

In 2011, Prime Minister Harper went to Honduras with a high level delegation of business interests and politicians. Harper was the first leader of a foreign country to visit Honduras since the coup and this did two things: it legitimized the post coup regimes that had been ostracized across the Americas - the majority of countries across the Americas did not support the coup, they claimed it to be illegal, they suspended diplomatic relations with Honduras, etc, while Canada and the U.S. were propping up the post coup regimes. When Prime Minister Harper led this delegation in 2011, it was in the news in Honduras and Canada, and made it appear as a

'business as usual' political trip – 'We're going down to deal with our democratic partners', ... and it was anything but that.



{Photo 2011. Harper – first foreign leader to visit Honduras after the June 27, 2009 military coup – meets with de facto President Pepe Lobo, put in power after the coup.}



{Photo 2011. Harper and Lobo, upon signing framework of Canada-Honduras free trade agreement.}

This visit legitimized the post-coup Honduran regime, and put in place preparations for the signing of one more free trade agreement, which was the last thing the majority of Honduran people need. They do not need that type of economic development model. As I said, there's been a maintaining or increase in Canadian mining, tourism and maquiladora sweatshop activity in Honduras, effectively benefitting from the conditions of corruption, impunity and violence.

Radio: Since the coup you've mentioned an increase in Canadian mining there, maybe you could mention who some of these companies are.

GR: The two main companies to talk about would be Goldcorp Inc. and Aura Minerals. But to take a step back, not only did Canada put in place the workings of this free trade agreement in 2011, which signed and ratified a couple of years later, but in 2012 or 2013 Canada's foreign

assistance program, that used to be called CIDA, now it's under global affairs, was directly involved in funding reforms to Honduras' mining law.

This was presented as "aid", but the result was a new mining law brought into force in 2014 by a pro-military coup Congress, that was a sell out to the global mining industry, investors and corporations. Canada not only had a hand in signing a free trade agreement but had a hand in reforming their mining laws to favor international mining companies, the majority of which are Canadian.

In 2008, the government of Honduras, under President Zelaya, put a moratorium on handing out new mining concessions because there had been so many problems with Goldcorp Inc.'s open pit, cyanide leaching gold mine. At the time, the government of President Zelaya grandfathered in Goldcorp's mine, saying you can operate your mine because you've already been operating here for 8 years, but we are putting a moratorium on handing out any more licenses and we are going to seriously look at prohibiting open-pit cyanide leaching mines in the future.

While this moratorium didn't affect Goldcorp's mine, it sent a message to the global industry that the government of Honduras under President Zelaya was not going to end mining but was going to bring about some serious reforms.

So there are a number of reasons why the military and economic elites carried out the coup, supported by Canada and the U.S., but mining always comes up as one of those factors as to why they wanted to oust the government of President Zelaya.

Now, go ahead 5 years after the coup, in 2014, and the mining law that the government of President Zelaya had suspended, well the post-coup government brought it back in to force [with "aid" funding from Canada] in ways that were favorable to foreign investment and foreign mining company operations.

Goldcorp operated its mine from 2000 to 2008, and then they moth-balled it, put it on hold. They say formally that they've closed it but no one in Honduras believes they have closed it permanently because they still have all of their licenses and concessions. Today, in 2016, there is an ongoing blood poisoning health crisis in the communities right around Goldcorp's mine and there is no doubt in my mind, or in anyone's mind there, that this blood poisoning epidemic is due directly to the open pit mining operation they had there from 2000 to 2008.



{Photo 2014, Siria Valley Environmental Committee. Typical health problems suffered by community members near Goldcorp's cyanide leaching, open pit gold mine.}

As a bit of an aside, in the days and weeks after the coup in 2009, Goldcorp's subsidiary company in Honduras, Entremares, was paying local campesinos some 15 dollars a day, giving them lunch and a free tee shirt, to go by bus into Tegucigalpa and participate in pro-coup demonstrations. Goldcorp later denied this but it was documented at the local level.

The other Canadian company involved in conflict now is Aura Minerals operating in the western part of the country. This is another open pit, cyanide leaching gold mine, and it has been in operation since the 1990s, before the coup. The most recent owner of the mine is Aura Minerals - they purchased it before the coup in 2009. It is a vast open pit mine and Aura is tearing down mountain after mountain. There is widespread opposition at the local level, but Aura is supported by the regime in power.



{Photo: 2016. Aura Mineral's cyanide leaching, open pit mine.}

As we speak, there is an intense community resistance struggle going on because Aura wants to destroy a 200 year old cemetery. What with the open pit operation and the taking down of mountains in this area, local citizens have sort of drawn their final line in the sand and said, well, you're not taking our cemeteries - you've destroyed 3 communities so far that were

forced to move, you've contaminated our water, you've created health harms, etc., but you will not take our cemetery. This pitted battle is going on right now.



{Photo 2016. Community spiritual gathering along with a visiting Canadian delegation, by their cemetery, that Aura aims to destroy.}

Aura is supported by the regime and its police and military, and community members are saying those are our family members there, those are our ancestors, you will not move our 200 year old cemetery. This is playing itself out now.

Radio: I wanted to talk about another aspect of the coup. You talked about the high murder rate, but specifically a lot of journalists and activists have been targeted and some more famous activists have wound up dead, so can you talk about how dangerous it has become for journalists and activists who challenge the elites in Honduras?

GR: It's very sad stuff. As I said, I've worked in Honduras since 1998, 18 years now, and we've worked in Guatemala for about 21 years. Through my work with Rights Action, I know a lot of the community based leaders, the human rights leaders, the indigenous leaders, etc. It's all very sad because they are living and working now in conditions of extreme risk and tension.

At the outset I said that not only does Honduras today have one of the highest murder rates in the world and highest general levels of violence in the Americas, which is sort of proof of complete societal breakdown and high levels of corruption and impunity at the highest levels of society, trickling down through all levels of society, it also has the highest levels of state repression since the early 1980s, when it was dominated by military backed regimes.

There's been an extraordinary spike in politically motivated murders and disappearances since 2009. Hundreds of Honduran men and women, boys and girls even have been murdered. The most repressive, violent sector of the country is in the northern region, called the Aguan region,

along the north coast. This is where there are huge plantations producing African palm for global “green energy markets”, and the World Bank, amongst other international investors, is invested in African palm production by large landowners. The most reknown producer is the family of Miguel Facusse, the largest landowner in Honduras - his family illegally controls vast swaths of land. They acquired their land illegally through corruption and violence, and since the coup, somewhere between 150 and 200 campesinos in the northern Aguan region have been murdered by government, police and military forces, and/or by paramilitary forces and thugs in the hire of the landowners.



{Photo 2013, Karen Spring. Exhumation of remains of Gregorio Chavez, community leader in Aguan region, victim of targeted assassination by African palm producers.}

Since the coup, if any person, around the country, any person at a community level stands up and becomes known defending the environment, defending water sources, struggling against illegal mining, illegal logging, against the illegal construction of hydroelectric dams, etc, those people become targets of repression themselves.

The most well-known case in the last 7 years was the March 3, 2016 targeted assassination of Berta Caceres. I can go on for hours about her, she was a very dear friend. Rights Action has been supporting Berta Caceres’s work with her organization COPINH since 1998 and her story in most ways is no different than all of the other assassinations and killings in Honduras - she is simply one of hundreds of people who has been targeted and killed because they’re standing up to defend community interests, to defend indigenous rights, to defend mother earth, to defend their forests and their water sources, from rapacious economic development. And these

economic development interests always have foreign investors and foreign companies behind them.



Berta's assassination case has become very well known because she was so articulate, so knowledgeable, so courageous and so empowering for anyone who worked with her or listened to her. I am fairly certain that the orders to assassinate her came from the highest political and military levels of the country. This was not some local scrap, she was seen as a threat to the regime in power because her political vision and her courage, and her capacity to educate and motivate people was so high, so she was assassinated on March 3rd of this year and - like in all the cases of political killings since 2009 - there's been no justice done in her case, and that sends a message to everyone else in Honduras and in other countries like Guatemala: 'We can target and assassinate someone as well known as Berta Caceres, who won a Goldman environmental prize and other international human rights prizes, and we can get away with it, and the so-called international community will not change their business, political and military relations one iota'.

So the situation of repression, violence, corruption and impunity in Honduras is really serious and very depressing.

Do Not Write Letters of Protest to the Regime

In power since the 2009 coup, the economic, military and political elites care about two things: maintaining their mutually beneficial economic and political relations with and support from the international community (primarily: governments of U.S., Canada and the European community; the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank; and a host of global investors and companies working in the sectors of African palm, sugar cane, bananas, garment

“sweatshop” factories, mining and tourism); and, maintaining relations with and support from the U.S. military.

The repression, corruption and impunity in Honduras are not “Honduran” problems. They are problems of this so-called “international community” together with the Honduran elites. International economic and military relations are the lifeblood of the regime. This is how power works. Through our denunciations and activism, we have to make this “international community” take responsibility for its actions. If accountability is not brought to complicity of the military, economic and political backers of the Honduran regime, the repression, corruption and impunity will not stop.

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