

One year later - Assassination of Berta Cáceres fails to move Honduras, or the U.S., Canada, Europe, the World Bank, etc.

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“Today, we mourn not just the loss of Berta Cáceres. We mourn the loss of all the other Bertas in Honduras, like Tomás García, María Enfirquesta Matte, Francisco Martínez Márquez and many more.” (Silvio Carrillo)

The on-going violence and government repression, exploitation and poverty, corruption and impunity of Honduras are “American” and “Canadian” issues. The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies (mining, sweatshops, tourism, bananas and African palm, etc) and investors (including pension funds) maintain profitable economic and military relations with Honduran elites and regime, directly contributing to environmental harms, exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity that force so many to flee.

An Idealist’s Martyrdom Fails to Move Honduras

By Silvio Carrillo, March 2, 2017

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/opinion/an-idealists-martyrdom-fails-to-move-honduras.html?_r=0



A mural of Berta Cáceres in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Credit Fernando Antonio/Associated Press

LA ESPERANZA, Honduras — Precisely a year ago, I awoke to a garbled text message from my mother. She was too distraught to write clearly, but I understood her immediately, and my heart dropped. Murderers had finally gotten to my aunt Berta Cáceres, who, as a child, had been young enough to be [my playmate Bertita](#), and later, as a woman, was courageous enough to stand up to evil in [Honduras](#).

As we mark this sad anniversary in the town where Berta died, there is no solace for my family. Neither Honduras nor the United States seems to have learned anything from this loss.

Berta spent most of her short life defying some of Honduras's most powerful economic and political figures, in defense of the rights of native peoples.

Her assassination prompted horrified reactions around the world, especially in communities that cared about human rights, democracy and the notion that all humans are born equal. Her final, fatal campaign was against construction of a [hydroelectric](#) dam on indigenous lands without the consent of the Lenca community she had been born into. Her efforts had earned her international acclaim, including the [Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015](#).

On March 3, 2016, intruders broke into her home in the middle of the night and shot her dead, leaving tens of thousands of activists around the world to hold vigils and rallies demanding justice for Berta. But in Honduras, justice is elusive. In recent years, hundreds of social activists have been killed here. Very rarely are the killers caught. Corruption and criminality are widely believed to reach into the highest levels of government.

Meanwhile, the United States, which maintains troops, equipment and trainers at several military sites in this tiny and poor country, has made matters only worse by shoring up the corrupt government of President Juan Orlando Hernández with hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance and overt political support.

In the year since the assassination, Honduran authorities have captured eight suspects, none of whom seems important enough to have ordered the crime. At least two were employed by the company building the dam, and at least two others had served in the Honduran military. One soldier was an instructor for Honduras's notorious military police force.

Four months after the assassination, [The Guardian reported that a unit from this force had maintained a hit list](#) with Berta's name at the top, according to a soldier who deserted the unit and fled Honduras.

Berta knew about this list, and since 2013, she had regularly received threats. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights repeatedly told the Honduran government that Berta should be protected; these requests were ignored. Meanwhile, the government provided military and police protection for the Agua Zarca dam.

A year after the killing, the situation in Honduras has become only worse. Activists and [journalists critical of the government continue to be targets of violence](#). The public prosecutor's office consistently fails to conduct proper investigations into the killings of activists. Yet the office receives full-throated backing from the United States' ambassador and its State Department.

A recent report by the human rights group Global Witness notes that the United States gives Honduras tens of millions of aid dollars "directed to the police and military, both of which are heavily implicated in violence against land and environmental activists."

United States support dates to the 1980s, when the country was a platform for the American-backed contras fighting in neighboring Nicaragua. Military and police assistance was ramped up after [a 2009 military coup](#) against a left-leaning elected president, Manuel Zelaya. Aid was also increased after an

influx of Honduran children migrating through Mexico to the United States in 2014, in theory to help stem the flow. But much of this aid has been made up of yet more security assistance, as well as economic assistance meant to attract foreign investment in Honduras — money that most often supports elite business interests to the detriment of poor communities subject to exploitation.

The Honduran government and the United States claim that the aid has helped lower the crime rate. Ambassador James Nealon made a point of saying so in a meeting I attended, alongside human rights advocates, in Honduras in December. What he was talking about were pilot projects intended to tamp down gang violence so that fewer Honduran children would be feel compelled to flee north to the United States.

The ambassador didn't disagree that Honduran officials manipulate crime statistics and that, as a result, the United States tries to get good numbers elsewhere. But whatever the true crime rate is, each time an activist or journalist is killed or attacked, the government shrugs it off as just another example of the country's rampant violence.

Indeed, police officials tried to do that after Berta's killing, suggesting at first that she was the victim of a botched robbery or a crime of passion. But their comments only bolstered the widespread belief that killings of activists are the work of state security agents.

Under great pressure from the Vatican, the European Parliament and other foreign entities, Honduran officials did conduct a partial investigation of Berta's murder, but they continue to stonewall demands for an international, independent, expert inquiry. Small wonder. Dozens of policemen and soldiers tramped through the crime scene.

When my family was allowed to return to the house six months later, each room had been ransacked. A laptop and a tablet are still missing, as is one of three mobile phones Berta used. None of these was on a list of belongings that officials took from the house.

In the United States, dozens of members of Congress have sponsored legislation that would cut off security aid to Honduras until "human rights violations by Honduran security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice." The supporters are led by Representatives Hank Johnson of Georgia, Keith Ellison of Minnesota, Jan Schakowsky of Illinois and other Democrats; it has been labeled the Berta Cáceres Act.

But our taxpayer dollars continue to flow to Honduras to support the government of Juan Orlando Hernández, thus enabling the climate of terror that is fed by his party's corruption.

Today, we mourn not just the loss of Berta Cáceres. We mourn the loss of all the other Bertas in Honduras, like Tomás García, María Enfirquesta Matte, Francisco Martínez Márquez and many more.

Wherever unprotected activists stand up to governments and corporations that encroach on indigenous land rights and other human rights, we must do all we can to stop our governments, corporations and lending institutions from playing the role of enabler.

[Silvio Carrillo is a freelance film and news producer based in California whose work has included coverage for CNN, Al Jazeera English and The South China Morning Post.]

Funding for Berta Caceres' Family, COPINH, Otros Mundos

Since 1998, Rights Action has been funding the community development, indigenous rights and environmental defense work of COPINH. Since Berta's assassination –March 2, 2016-, we have increased funding to Berta Caceres' family, COPINH and Gustavo Castro's organization Otros Mundos.

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