

## Who killed Berta Cáceres?

### Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet

by Nina Lakhani, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/who-killed-berta-caceres>



- This is an extract from “Who Killed Berta Cáceres? Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender’s Battle for the Planet”, by [Nina Lakhani](#), published by [Verso Books](#) on 2 June
- **Join conversation:** with Nina Lakhani and Guardian US international editor Martin Hodgson to discuss the story behind Cáceres’s assassination
- **When & how:** Tuesday, June 9, 1pm EST/10am PST/5pm BST. To sign up, email: [events.us@theguardian.com](mailto:events.us@theguardian.com)

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**Who killed Berta Cáceres? Behind the brutal murder of an environment crusader**

By [Nina Lakhani](#), 2 Jun 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/02/who-killed-berta-caceres-behind-the-brutal-of-an-environment-crusader>

Could there ever be justice for someone like Berta in a country like Honduras, where impunity reigns supreme?



Berta Cáceres at the banks of the Gualcarque River, Río Blanco region, western Honduras.

Photograph: Tim Russo/Goldman Environmental Prize

The final few months of Berta Cáceres's life were filled with ominous signs. Just before Christmas 2015, she confided in her sister Agustina that her life was in danger. "The messages never stop, the harassment never stops, they have me under surveillance. They don't care that I have children. Those sons of bitches are going to kill me."

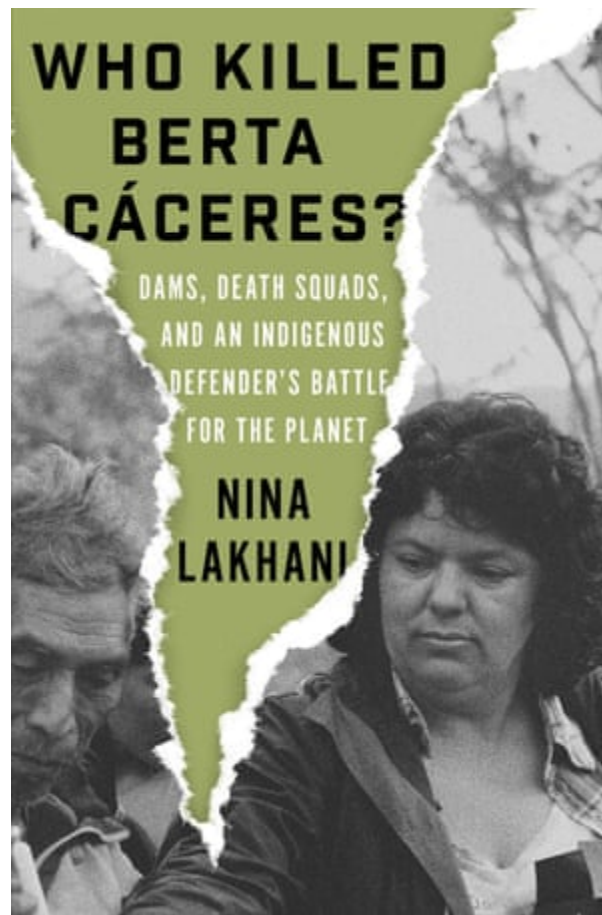
Berta was involved in numerous land and water struggles alongside indigenous Lenca communities across western [Honduras](#). But the battle to stop construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque river, in the community of Río Blanco, had her more worried than usual. Berta told her children she was scared, and that they should take the threats seriously. "Mum said there was a group of dangerous sicarios [hitmen] attacking the Río Blanco community and asking about us, her daughters," said Laura, 23, the youngest, home from midwifery college for the Christmas break. "I knew the threats were serious because she wouldn't leave me alone in the house, not even for a night."

Berta had reasons to suspect the hitmen were hired by Desa, the dam construction company. Desa's trumped-up criminal charges against her and other leaders of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Copinh) had failed to silence them. Was it now it was pursuing other means to stop the opposition?

Her sense of unease intensified on 12 February 2016. Douglas Bustillo, a thuggish former army lieutenant and Desa's ex-security chief, messaged her Copinh deputy, Tomás Gómez, out of the blue, accusing Berta of cashing in on the Río Blanco struggle to win the prestigious Goldman environmental prize.

Four days later, driving out of Río Blanco, Berta's car was shadowed by two SUVs carrying armed locals she knew were linked to Desa.

On 20 February, Berta led a convoy to the Gualcarque, a river considered sacred by the Lenca people, to make a stand against the company's attempt to circumvent indigenous land rights by moving the dam across the shore. Desa was warned about the demonstration via its network of paid informants, and summoned its political and security allies to wreck the event. First, Copinh's buses and cars were detained at a checkpoint where everyone was forced out, registered and photographed by police and military officers. Then, a small crowd threw stones and insults. "You old witch, you'll never come back here!" screamed the pro-dam deputy mayor at Berta.



As the crowd jeered, Sergio Rodríguez, Desa's communities and environmental manager, politely greeted Berta before warning her to turn back. "There are armed men at the river, we won't be responsible if something happens to you."

"We're not leaving, we have a right to be here," retorted Berta, and marched on.

But the public road to the river was blocked by company machinery, so Berta set off on foot in the blistering sun towards the dam encampment. Waiting along the gruelling unshaded track

were hired thugs and armed security guards and police officers, including some Tigres – an elite US-backed special weapons and tactics (Swat) team trained for urban combat.

A drone buzzed overhead taking photographs as Copinh protesters threw rocks at the company machinery. Desa's security chief, former police major Jorge Ávila, appeared with a grisly warning: "In a few days, you'll be eating someone's liver," he said.

Still undeterred, Berta continued with the exhausted group to the river, where they sat on the shady bank to rest and connect with the Gualcarque's sacred spirit. When they finally left it was dark, and Berta's car was pelted with beer bottles and rocks, smashing the rear window.

Less than a week later, around midday on 26 February, a double-cabin pickup truck with polarized windows drove up the narrow dead-end street leading to the Copinh head office in the city of La Esperanza. A tall man with a military-style haircut got out and asked for Berta, while the driver kept the engine running. When asked to identify himself, he jumped into the car and sped off.

These incidents made Berta even more nervous, and she arranged to stay at Utopía, Copinh's bustling training centre in La Esperanza, so as not to be at home alone when Laura returned to university in Buenos Aires.

She also contacted her friend Brigitte Gynther, a researcher at the School of [Americas](#) Watch (SOAW), who catalogued threats against Copinh. "I need to talk to you," she wrote in a text message on 29 February. "I have news." Brigitte was working in Colombia, but they agreed to speak later.

On the morning of 1 March, Berta drove Laura to Toncontín airport on the outskirts of the capital, Tegucigalpa. "I'm proud of you," she said. "Enjoy life, make the most of it, but remember this is where you belong, in Honduras, fighting to make this a better place."

Just before Laura went through security Berta hugged her youngest child one more time. "This country is fucked, but if anything happens to me, don't be afraid."

Laura assumed she was worried about being arrested again. "My mum was so well known that I really doubted anything serious would happen to her. I thought meeting the pope and winning the Goldman prize would protect her."

At 2.08pm, Sergio Rodríguez sent a WhatsApp message to Desa shareholders and senior managers, among them company president David Castillo, a US-trained former military intelligence officer, confirming that Berta would be in La Esperanza the following day.

Laura's plane took off just as Berta's old friend Gustavo Castro, a politically astute Mexican environmentalist, was landing at San Pedro Sula international airport on the other side of the country. Berta had invited Gustavo to give a workshop on alternative energy for Copinh

members. The pair hadn't seen each other in several years and spent the evening catching up at Berta's new house in Colonia Líbano, a gated community on the southern edge of La Esperanza.

Berta told him about the turmoil generated by the campaign to stop the dam, a construction project backed by members of one of the country's most powerful clans, the Atala Zablah family, as well as international banks. "I had no idea how much pressure she was under," Gustavo would recall.

They were both tired, so Berta suggested calling it a night and offered to take Gustavo to his lodgings, but he was worried about her safety. "It's so dark and isolated here, will you be alright driving back alone so late?" he asked. "I'll be fine. But why don't you come and stay here with me from tomorrow night?"

The next day, Tuesday 2 March, Berta opened the workshop in Utopía before heading to the outdoor kitchen area, carrying her three constantly chiming mobile phones and customary notebook and pen. She messaged Laura, telling her not to worry as Gustavo would be staying at the house. She also called her close colleague Sotero Chavarría, who was in Tegucigalpa for medical treatment. "Hermano, I need you back here, come soon, I have to tell you something, it's important," she said.

Shortly after, Sotero received another call: security chief Ávila and a dozen Río Blanco locals aligned with Desa were approaching La Esperanza in a Toyota pickup truck.

What business did they have that day, were they coming to keep tabs on Berta? On his way back to La Esperanza, Sotero noticed the police checkpoint at the city entrance was unmanned. This was so unusual that he mentioned it to colleagues.

Later that morning, Lilian Esperanza, the Copinh finance coordinator, arrived at Utopía with a handful of cheques and a donor letter that needed Berta's signature. "We need to change the signature," Berta said. "What if something happens to me? I could be jailed or killed. If you have problems accessing money, then what would happen to Copinh? I keep on reporting the threats, but no one takes any notice."

"Don't be silly. Nothing's going to happen to you," Lilian insisted.

Why was Berta acting as if time was running out?

It was late morning when she left the workshop with Gaspar Sánchez, Copinh's young sexual diversity coordinator, heading for the central market where Berta was helping vendors oppose the mayor's plan to replace it with a shopping mall. Later, in the car on their way back to the workshop, Gaspar interviewed Berta for Copinh's community radio station. "Energy is not just a technical issue, it's a political issue to do with life, territories, sovereignty and the right to community self-determination. We believe this is the moment to profoundly debate capitalism

and how energy is part of the domination of indigenous communities and violation of their rights ... That's what Lenca communities like Río Blanco are living through right now."

It would be her last interview.

Berta then called her friend Ismael Moreno, a Jesuit priest known as Padre Melo. "She was scared, but it was Camilito she was most worried about," Melo said: Berta had recently received an anonymous message threatening to chop her only grandchild into pieces.

Back at the workshop, Berta messaged SOAW's Brigitte Gynther at 4.44pm, asking when she'd be back from Colombia. "I never found out what she wanted to tell me," said Brigitte. "But she only contacted me when something was seriously wrong."

Berta and Gustavo then left Utopía, popping in to visit her mother before heading to her favourite downtown eatery, El Fogón, for dinner and a beer. Just before 9.30pm, a black double-cabin Toyota Hilux with polarized windows and no number plates was seen by a neighbour outside her mother's house. Soon after, Berta and Gustavo arrived back at her place.

Berta's green and gold bungalow stands amid a scattering of garishly painted houses enclosed by a mishmash of wire and white wooden fencing, with views of a lake and distant pine-forested hills. The bungalow is on a dirt road about 150 metres from the security gate, which is operated by two guards working in 12-hour shifts.

The layout is unusual, with the front door leading into the open-plan lounge and a flimsy wooden back door leading into the kitchen. She and Gustavo sat on the front patio talking for half an hour or so, enjoying the breeze. Then he smoked a cigarette, while Berta finished working on a document.

Gustavo retired to the guest bedroom nearest the lounge. Berta's room was at the other end of the narrow hallway. After changing into an olive-green T-shirt and black shorts, she sat on her bed and kept working. At 11.25 she sent a message to Juan Carlos Juárez, a police liaison officer charged with overseeing her protection. "Wherever you are, I wish you well. Please be careful. Besos [kisses]."

At around 11.35, Gustavo heard a noise. Tap! Tap! Tap! He thought it was Berta cleaning or fetching something from the kitchen, and barely looked up from his laptop. A minute or less later there was a louder, duller sound. Thud! Gustavo assumed Berta had dropped something in the kitchen. Then he heard her call out: "Who's there?"

"It was then I realized that someone was in the house and something bad was going to happen," Gustavo recalled. Seconds later, a tall, dark-skinned youth with cropped hair, wearing a black top and white scarf, kicked open the bedroom door and aimed a gun at his head from about two metres away. He heard the fuzzy sound of a walkie-talkie.

Seated on the bed, Gustavo was looking straight at the gunman, when he heard Berta's bedroom door being forced open. It sounded as if she was struggling to push someone away. Then he heard three shots. Bang! Bang! Bang! Berta's legs gave way and she fell backwards. She tried to defend herself and scratched at the gunman as he bent over her. But she was weak, and the killer stamped on her bleeding body until she could no longer resist.

Gustavo jumped up off the bed and in a split second lifted his left hand to protect his face as the gunman fired a single shot. Bang! The bullet grazed the back of his left hand and the top of his left ear. Gustavo lay completely still on the floor as blood oozed from the wounds. The gunman was convinced and left, but still Gustavo dared not move. Moments later he heard Berta's voice. "Gustavo! Gustavo!"

He ran to her and saw his friend sprawled on her back between the bedroom door and the wooden closet, struggling to breathe. Her curly black hair was sticky with the blood from three bullet wounds, spreading across her shorts and T-shirt.

Gustavo squeezed through the small gap between the door and her shivering body. He knelt down and wrapped his arms around her, trying to keep her warm and alive. "Don't go, Berta! Don't die! Stay with me," he begged. But Berta Cáceres was bleeding to death.

"Get my phone," she murmured. "On the table." At around a quarter to midnight Berta uttered her last words. "Call Salvador! Call Salvador!"

Then she was gone.

Berta Cáceres had been murdered. Killed in her bedroom less than a year after winning the foremost prize for environmental defenders.

Gustavo survived. But would his eyewitness evidence be enough to identify the gunmen? And who was behind this bold execution? Could there ever be justice for someone like Berta in a country like Honduras, where impunity reigns supreme?

Would we ever know who killed Berta Cáceres?

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### **Rights Action's COVID-19 Response Fund**

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/rights-action-covid19-response-fund-update>

Rights Action continues to prioritize getting emergency funds to partner group in Guatemala and Honduras. Their Covid19 response work is about saving lives. The funds we are sending are drops in a bucket, and they are important.

Our work is also to contribute to discussion and hopefully empower political activism premised on the basic notion that: We are not "all in this together" / There should be no "getting back to normal".

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