

“The Rot in Honduras Goes to the Top”

Background article about justice struggle for assassination of Berta Caceres

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/the-rot-in-honduras-goes-to-the-top>

- **Below:** “A Rot in Honduras That Goes All the Way to the Top”, about the assassination of Berta Caceres and struggle for justice. The article is based substantially on Nina Lakhani’s book: “Who Killed Berta Caceres?”.

“The question “who killed Berta Cáceres?” has several answers: there’s the hit men who pulled the trigger, the corporate bosses who ordered the hit, the narco-state that fostered crooked industries, and the imperialist power that propped up the narco-state and trained its mercenaries.”

(Hilary Goodfriend)

The “Rot in Honduras” goes through to Honduras’ international partners, primarily the US, with Canada, the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, Spain and the EU, International Monetary Fund and a host of global corporations

The “Rot in Honduras” goes through to Honduras’ international partners



The Honduran regime remains in power because of:

- the US and Canadian support for the June 28, 2009 military coup, that ousted Honduras' last democratically elected government, and
- the ensuring 12 years of economic, political and military support from the US, Canada and the international community.

A Rot in Honduras That Goes All the Way to the Top

BY HILARY GOODFRIEND, MAY 27, 2020

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/05/bera-caceres-murder-honduras-nina-lakhani>

A full investigation into the murder of Honduran indigenous leader Berta Cáceres doesn't just uncover the story behind her assassination. It also provides a glimpse into the US-backed militarized narco-state of post-coup Honduras.

Near midnight on March 2, 2016, armed gunmen broke into Berta Cáceres's house in La Esperanza, Honduras. She was shot three times. Mexican environmentalist Gustavo Castro, visiting for a workshop, played dead after a bullet went through his hand and mangled his ear. When the assassins left, Berta called out to her friend, who rushed to hold her as she died.

In a new book from Verso, [*Who Killed Berta Cáceres? Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet*](#), journalist Nina Lakhani recounts the events surrounding the murder of the celebrated movement leader. Part biography, part murder mystery, Lakhani's research reveals the vast dimensions of the conspiracy to assassinate Berta, as well as the disturbing questions that continue to haunt the case.

Berta gained international renown after winning the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015. But she was a lifelong radical. Berta participated in the Honduran national liberation struggles of the 1980s, resisted the country's neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, and was a leader in the movement against the [2009 coup d'état](#) that toppled president Manuel Zelaya and the ensuing authoritarian regimes. She spent her last days defending indigenous lands and waters from the imposition of a hydroelectric dam in Honduras's Río Blanco community.

The title question, "who killed Berta Cáceres?", has several answers: there's the hit men who pulled the trigger, the corporate bosses who ordered the hit, the narco-state that fostered crooked industries, and the imperialist power that propped up the narco-state and trained its mercenaries.

Lakhani's chronicle of Berta's death is a chilling indictment of global capitalist development and the violence of its uneven patterns of accumulation and dispossession, of which Berta is one casualty among many.

Berta's Struggles

Berta Cáceres came from a long line of political dissidents. Her grandfather was exiled in El Salvador from dictatorship in the 1930s and 1940s; her eldest brother was a student leader in the 1970s and lent clandestine support to the guerrillas in El Salvador and Nicaragua during the liberation struggles of the 1970s and 1980s.

Berta joined her mother, a midwife, on trips to local Salvadoran refugee camps, where they delivered medical aid together with clandestine messages from the guerrilla commanders they frequently harbored at home.

Berta became a militant student activist herself in the 1980s, as she trained to be a schoolteacher. At eighteen, just weeks after birthing her first child, she and her partner, Salvador Zúñiga, traveled to El Salvador to join the guerrilla offensive of November 1989. Lakhani's book offers a unique glimpse into this little-known chapter of Berta's militant formation: she served with the [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front](#) for months, largely in non-combative roles providing logistics and health care, and returned to El Salvador several times before the war's end.

In 1993, Berta and Salvador founded the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, or COPINH). According to Lakhani, the couple's experiences with the Salvadoran insurgency convinced them that armed struggle was not a viable strategy for their movement, but they embraced militant direct actions to disrupt extractive industries devastating Lenca territories.

Inspired by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico, COPINH led marches of indigenous communities into Tegucigalpa.

The movement, which soon gained national dimensions, scored important victories, like the 1995 ratification of ILO convention 169 on indigenous self-determination, which allowed for the subsequent designation of protected indigenous territories. COPINH also played a key role in restoring the visibility of and pride in indigenous practices. "Some would argue that Berta's greatest legacy is the rehabilitation of Lenca culture," writes Lakhani, which had been suppressed and denigrated by the Ladino capitalist state.

These gains occurred even as the United States and its international financial appendages pushed neoliberal reforms in Honduras and across the region, wrenching the country even further open to transnational capital through deregulation, privatization, and free-trade agreements. The reforms ignited further land struggles, as newly empowered corporations sought to appropriate indigenous territory to build hydroelectric dams, African palm plantations, and privatized "charter cities."

Berta and Salvador separated in 2000, but the pair continued to lead the organization together for years as indigenous and campesino communities fought to defend their territories from rapacious accumulation, extraction, and exploitation. As Berta's leadership developed, so did her understanding of the relationships between the systems of oppression she was fighting.

Lakhani recounts that it was Berta's increasing embrace of feminist analysis and practice that fueled an acrimonious split within COPINH in 2013, with Salvador leading a defecting faction to found a new organization.

When democratically elected president Zelaya was ousted in "an old-fashioned coup d'état plotted by a powerful cabal of ultra-right business, political, religious and military players," — a maneuver [shored up by the Clinton State Department](#) — Berta and her comrades found themselves on the front lines on the struggle against dictatorship.

Lakhani quotes Guillermo López Lone, one of several judges unceremoniously removed from the bench for denouncing the coup: "The coup marked a before and after in the country. At first, I thought it was a move against Mel [Zelaya], but actually it was a political decision to expand the economic model and roll-out of extractive industries which his reforms threatened. Congress plotted the coup, and then approved the concessions. Anyone threatening the model had to be sent a message. Berta was a threat to the model."

The Dam

Lakhani notes the unique history of Honduras' ruling class. Compared to the formidable oligarchies of neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala, elite landowning families in Honduras were relatively poor and toothless, subordinate to the foreign capital that dominated vast portions of the country's territory throughout the twentieth century.

It wasn't until the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s that the local bourgeoisie, comprised largely of mid-century immigrant merchants from Europe and Palestine, expanded into the growing industries of maquiladora manufacturing, monoculture crops, and tourism, acquiring significant political power.

In the resource-rich Bajo Aguán, for example, local land baron Miguel Facussé Barjum emerged as a primary adversary for the indigenous and peasant movements that arose in this period. Facussé's fortune was founded in Dinant Chemical; he acquired vast territory in the Aguán for African palm cultivation for biofuel production, dispossessing indigenous and Garifuna communities of their communal lands through a series of duplicitous dealings, dubious legal maneuvers, and outright violence and fraud.

"This toxic mix of ambition, political connections, bullish tactics and military alliances helped turn the Aguán into one of the deadliest parts of the country," writes Lakhani. "The violence was fueled by the West's drive for 'clean energy'."

The coup inaugurated an auction of sorts on Honduras's natural resources. Honduras was "open for business," as post-coup president Porfirio Lobo declared. Most of these concessions are opaque at best. Following the money in Honduras is hard, Lakhani stresses, and it is only because of COPINH's attention to the Agua Zarca dam and Berta's murder that anything is known about the deal.

The dam was licensed in 2010, part of the post-coup corporate free-for-all. The communities around the sacred Río Blanco in the predominantly Lenca region of southwest Honduras are largely subsistence farmers. They enlisted COPINH's support, using every available institutional channel and direct action to prevent the construction.

The project was granted to Desarrollos Energéticos SA (DESA), and it was backed by the oligarchic Atala family. DESA was founded in 2009 for the sole purpose of the Agua Zarca dam; the company won the contract without conducting the requisite environmental impact study, and it was granted its environmental license without securing the requisite free, prior, and informed consent from the Lenca community, as required per ILO 169. After residents voted 401 to 7 against the project in 2011, the local mayor issued the permits anyway.

As Berta had long suspected, the project received funding from the World Bank Group, which, as Lakhani notes, "has a mandate to give socially responsible development loans to alleviate poverty . . . By channeling development money through local intermediaries, the World Bank almost got away with keeping its role in Agua Zarca quiet."

Honduran billionaire Camilo Atala Faraj's bank, Ficohsa Honduras, received multimillion-dollar loans from the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC), and it appears to have invested indirectly in the project. Lakhani traces a loan from Ficohsa Honduras to the DESA majority shareholder that was channeled into the company.

The pool of blood around the DESA project is not Ficohsa's only liability. Miguel Facussé's Dinant Corporation is a major client, accused of using private and public security forces as mercenaries to murder campesino leaders in the Bajo Aguán. These and many other cases make the financial organization a dubious partner for community development, but that never stopped the World Bank. The IFC didn't relinquish its equity share in Ficohsa until after Berta's murder.

David Castillo, a West Point graduate and sleazy dealmaker, was one of sixteen people indicted for corruption in 2019, part of a massive fraud operation tied to the dam project. He used proxies to create DESA and secure lucrative contracts with his employer, the public energy company. Castillo's name is connected to an assortment of firms with lucrative "clean" energy contracts with the Honduran government, and many of his industry associates have proven ties to drug trafficking; these contracts were routinely secured through fraud and corruption, including cash bribes from organized crime directly to post-coup president Lobo.

DESA security chief Douglas Geovanny Bustillo, following an eighteen-year career in the military that included US training at the School of the Americas, had served as Lobo's head of security when he was president of the Congress. Bustillo "immediately put his military intelligence skills to work identifying and cultivating several informants in the communities." The company was aided by military battalions, which operated out of DESA property, further blurring the line between the state, private capital, and organized crime.

In 2013, COPINH supported the community as it maintained a roadblock encampment for months, during which time protesters were met with sometimes lethal violence from public and private security forces stationed at the site. That fall, Berta was convicted on trumped-up charges for damages to DESA equipment and went underground.

Counterinsurgency

Lakhani traces the counterinsurgent practices deployed by DESA to the [US-backed anti-communist doctrine](#) that devastated the region during the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s: “The US, with its psychological warfare handbooks, torture manuals and death squads, turned Central American armies into well-organized killing machines,” she writes. The machine set its sights on so-called subversives: from guerrilla combatants to social-justice-minded nuns, priests, and catechists; union organizers; student radicals; and peasants.

Lakhani recounts the history that, for more than a century, has bound Honduras to US capital. When massive mid-century plantation-worker strikes threatened the banana export industry, Honduras signed a 1954 military assistance agreement that “authorized the US to treat Honduras as a military satellite” from which the CIA would stage its famous coup d’état against democratically elected reformist president Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala that very year. A deft combination of repression and reform quelled the flourishing campesino movement in Honduras, while Guatemala descended into a forty-year civil war.

Ronald Reagan’s ambassador [John Negroponte](#), “a zealous anti-communist action figure” and Vietnam veteran, oversaw the counterinsurgency in Honduras during the 1980s. As military aid to the country skyrocketed, “the US gained free rein over Honduran territory in exchange for dollars, trainings in torture-based interrogation methods, and silence.”

Under Negroponte’s watch, Honduras became a principal staging ground for the illegal US paramilitary [Contra war](#) against the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, a clandestine venture of dizzying depravity that enlisted drug traffickers, mercenaries, and dictators from across the globe. The de-facto military occupation of the country was a key factor in the suppression of Honduran insurgencies in this period.

The United States founded the Honduran Special Forces in the wake of the 1979 Sandinista victory. These elite troops and their regional counterparts specialized in US counterinsurgency methods, often trained at the School of the Americas or the US Regional Military Training Center in Honduras’s Bajo Aguán.

After the Cold War, these security structures formed the foundations of the repressive forces that, deeply entwined with organized crime, increasingly served as mercenaries for capital.

In the early 2000s, Honduran police operated death squads targeting the incipient street gangs, groups that were exported, largely, from the United States at the dawn of the mass deportation regime. In the wake of the coup, counterinsurgency tactics inherited from the dirty wars were

increasingly deployed against dissidents like Berta and organizations like COPINH. Indeed, Berta's assassination "bore the hallmarks of a military-intelligence-backed special operation."

The Investigation

It took more than two years of bitter struggle to reach a conviction in Berta's murder, and more than three before the perpetrators were sentenced.

Berta was buried on March 5, 2016, her forty-fifth birthday. Initially, the Honduran authorities tried to frame Aureliano Molina, an ex-boyfriend of Berta's and member of COPINH, for the murder.

On March 7, Gustavo Castro, having barely survived the attack, was stopped at the airport and prevented from returning to Mexico by police, who forced him to remain in Honduras for a month. As officials pushed a "crime of passion" hypothesis, DESA leadership followed the investigation closely, receiving regular reports from the police.

But Molina's alibi proved indisputable. As international attention mounted, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights offered to send a team of investigators to Honduras; president Juan Orlando Hernández declined.

Finally, with Hernández's authoritarian regime under immense pressure, DESA's Tegucigalpa offices were raided, and over the course of several months, eight arrests were made: Douglas Bustillo, DESA security chief from 2013–2015, and DESA communities and environmental manager Sergio Rodríguez; Mariano Díaz, a US-trained special forces major implicated in an ongoing narco-trafficking investigation; former army captain Edilson Duarte Meza and his fraternal twin, Emerson; former special forces sergeant Henry Hernández; as well as two local ne'er-do-wells, Elvin Rápalo Orellana and Óscar Torres.

The state's investigation was spotty, especially when it came to the source of the orders to assassinate Berta. On thirty-five occasions, prosecutors refused to comply with court orders to share information to the family's attorneys: "the refusal to share evidence fueled the family's fears that authorities were protecting the real criminal masterminds, and perhaps even their political patrons."

Investigators hired by Berta's family signaled DESA executives Daniel Atala and David Castillo, together with company security chief and US-trained ex-cop Jorge Ávila, as the masterminds.

Shortly before the pretrial evidentiary hearing, the attorney general announced that "key expert evidence including ballistics, phone and computer analysis and financial reports, could not be shared because they still weren't complete or in some cases had not even been started."

Berta's family requested that top DESA shareholders and personnel be called to testify, as well as the police commander who liaised with DESA during COPINH protests, but the requests were denied. So was every single expert witness they proposed:

The family's case presented the murder as the grand finale of an intelligence-driven terror campaign against Berta Cáceres and COPINH, which could only be properly understood by identifying the whole criminal structure and defining the role played by each person and agency before, during and after.

But the court was restricting focus on the murder as an isolated attack by unconnected individuals. In other words, it had decided to only hear the state's case.

The trial, scheduled to begin September 2018, was delayed by the family's petition that the judges be recused, alleging obstruction, negligence, and dereliction: "With these judges, justice is obviously impossible," Berta's daughter Bertita told the press. The recusal was denied.

When the proceedings resumed in October, the judges banned the victims' lawyers from participating, leaving only the public prosecutors to make the case. Berta's family and COPINH boycotted the trial, appearing only to testify.

DESA employees Sergio Rodríguez and Douglas Bustillo, together with major Mariano Díaz Chávez and his former subordinate, ex-sergeant Henry Hernández, were accused of planning the attack. Óscar Torres, Elvin Rápalo Orellana, and Edilson and Emerson were the alleged sicarios.

Ultimately, only Hernández testified at trial. He implicated Rápalo as Berta's assassin, and fingered Torres for shooting Gustavo, who corroborated the allegation, recognizing Torres's photo from the night of the assault. Edilson drove the getaway car. Emerson, his twin, was not involved.

The prosecution never bothered to propose a theory of how this criminal structure was assembled. Gustavo Castro was prevented from returning to testify against his assailant. The most notorious DESA informant and hired goon testified at trial but was not interrogated by prosecutors. Bullets that killed Berta matched a gun in Emerson's possession, but the gun from Gustavo's shooting was never found. The bullets discovered at Edilson's home were never tested, nor was the weapon found in Díaz's possession.

The state's case, such as it was, was based on location data and WhatsApp messages extracted from the suspects' cell phones. Messages revealed regular payments to informants and conspirators, as well as a failed February 5 assassination attempt, coordinated by Díaz with Hernández and a hired shooter. Notably, Díaz's phone was already tapped as part of a narco-trafficking investigation, yet authorities never intervened in the ongoing murder plot.

In the end, Emerson was cleared; the other seven defendants were convicted of murder and sentenced to thirty-plus years in prison. On the second anniversary of Berta's murder, David Castillo was arrested, but at the time of this writing, his murder trial was ongoing.

Deadly Development

Lakhani's investigation provides a glimpse into the militarized narco-state of post-coup Honduras, or what she calls a "criminal" or "mafia state." The Agua Zarca project is but one example of the dense, obscure nexus of international developers, energy industry giants, heads of state, and organized crime at the vanguard of contemporary capitalist growth.

The rot goes all the way to the top: President Lobo's son trafficked cocaine for the Cachiros criminal group, which laundered money through front companies that secured rigged contracts with the administration. In a rare twist, Lobo's wife was imprisoned in Honduras for embezzling hundreds of thousands in public funds.

His successor's brother, Tony Hernández, was convicted in the United States for drug and weapons trafficking.

Testimony in the New York trial of El Chapo Guzmán alleged President Juan Orlando Hernández received millions in campaign donations from narco-traffickers in exchange for permission to operate in the country. After two fraudulent elections, he remains in power.

"It's unclear what it would take for the US government to stop propping up an illegitimate government accused of operating a narco state," Lakhani muses.

At the same time, the book reveals the horrifying consequences of this reality on a micro scale. By bribing informants, co-opting impoverished peasant leaders, and sowing terror and distrust, the DESA megaproject left in its wake a community torn apart. The trial, though it marked an unprecedented challenge to the reigning impunity, was a far cry from justice.

Lakhani makes clear that the tragedy in Honduras is no distortion of the development process. For the World Bank and US embassies across the globe, it is the acceptable cost of doing business.

But Berta's heirs are multitude. They struggle on what [Kate Aronoff](#), [Alyssa Battistoni](#), [Daniel Aldana Cohen](#), and [Thea Riofrancos](#) call the "extractive frontiers," fighting for decolonized, feminist, ecological, anti-capitalist alternatives to our dystopian present. "They tried to bury us," goes the Latin American refrain. "They didn't know that we were seeds."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Hilary Goodfriend is a doctoral student in Latin American Studies at the National Autonomous University of México (UNAM). She is a member of the NACLA Editorial Board.

More information

Karen Spring reports: <https://www.aquiabajo.com/> + <https://twitter.com/springkj>

Archives – COPINH & Berta Cáceres: Over 20 years of Rights Action archives related to work in support of COPINH: <https://rightsaction.org/archcopinh>

Book: 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-bertha-caceres-behind-the-brutal-of-an-environment-crusader>

Inside The Plot To Murder Honduran Activist Berta Cáceres

Text and WhatsApp messages show that the conspiracy against Berta Cáceres reached the highest ranks of the company whose dam she had been protesting.

By Danielle Mackey, Chiara Eisner, December 21 2019, The Intercept

<https://theintercept.com/2019/12/21/bertha-caceres-murder-plot-honduras/>

Films & videos: Berta Cáceres

The Life and Death of Berta Cáceres (2020)

In 2016, environmental activist Berta Cáceres was shot dead in her home in Honduras. This film by Trocaire features interviews with Berta's daughter, sister and mother.

<https://vimeo.com/390771524>

Berta Cáceres: In Her Own Words / En sus propias palabras

Based on a 2012 interview we did with the Honduran environmental activist and co-founder of the Council of Indigenous People's Organizations of Honduras (COPINH).

<https://skylight.is/2016/03/bertha-caceres-in-her-own-words>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjM81tYBew4>

Berta Cáceres, Goldman Environmental Prize (April 19, 2015)

In a country with growing socioeconomic inequality and human rights violations, Berta Cáceres rallied the indigenous Lenca people of Honduras and waged a grassroots campaign that successfully pressured the world's largest dam builder to pull out of the Agua Zarca Dam. She is the South & Central America winner of the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, the world's largest award for grassroots environmental activists.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zh9Sn9oJR94&feature=youtu.be>

Berta Cáceres acceptance speech, 2015 Goldman Prize ceremony (2015)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR1kwx8b0ms&feature=youtu.be%C2%A0>

Berta's Daughters Speak (2019)

Berta Cáceres was killed for defending the river on which Indigenous communities depend. Her daughters continue that struggle, despite the risks – as witnessed in this Amnesty International interview.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMdXkXR7U6k&feature=youtu.be>

Austra Berta Flores, mother of Berta Cáceres, speaks

Calling on international community to demand the full truth, so that those who paid and ordered the murder of her daughter be prosecuted.

<https://oxfam.app.box.com/s/ygf6fvlp19fg08znt7irav78jpp44lz1>

Assassination of Berta Cáceres: repression, impunity, corruption & profitable businesses in Honduras (April 4, 2017)

Wide Angle interview with Grahame Russell about assassination of Berta Cáceres; the U.S. and Canadian backed 2009 military coup; U.S. and Canadian business interests with the post-military coup regimes; why so many Hondurans flee to the U.S., year after year.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVMsJyMIIRw&t=83s&list=PLztbi9KA9roUoj_SKm_cehOB_LWo9uTFW&index=25

Dos años después de su asesinato, Berta Cáceres no se murió, se multiplicó (Febrero 2018)

<https://www.franceameriquelatine.org/6370-2/>

Honduras: Blood and the Water (September 2016)

AlJazeera Faultlines 25 minute report on assassination of Indigenous, anti-imperialist, feminist, environmental activist Berta Cáceres.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/faultlines/2016/09/honduras-blood-water-160920064355648.html>

Berta Vive (2016)

On March 2016, the assassination of Berta Cáceres shook the world. Gustavo Castro, Mexican environmental activist witnessed the crime and survived the horror of that night but was then trapped in Honduras. The defense against the construction of a dam at the Gualcarque River is the preface to this story. We follow Miriam Miranda, leader of the Garífuna people as well as a friend and comrade of Berta. Both women share the struggle for decolonization in a country that is being sold to transnational capital and where death is delivered in so many different ways.

<https://vimeo.com/229310580>

4 Years Seeking Justice (January 17, 2020)

Democracy Now interview with a daughter of assassinated Indigenous leader Berta Cáceres

https://www.democracynow.org/2020/1/17/bertha_caceres_laura_caceres_interview

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