

5-13-2015

## Land-Rights Defenders Face Growing Threat

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### Recommended Citation

Lauren Carasik, Land-Rights Defenders Face Growing Threat, ALJAZEERA AMERICA (May. 13, 2015), <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/5/land-rights-defenders-face-growing-threat.html>

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# Land-rights defenders face growing threat

*Environmental activists in Latin America need a global effort to protect their lives*

May 13, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

The murders of land and environmental defenders are on the rise. According to a [recent report](#) by London-based advocacy organization Global Witness, at least 116 environmentalists were killed last year. More than 75 percent of the deaths occurred in Central and South America. Most people died resisting oil and mineral extraction, land grabs by agribusiness, logging and other mega-development projects.

Latin America topped the list of countries where environmental activists are imperiled, in part because of its vibrant tradition of social movements. Yet as noted by Global Witness, the figures likely underestimate the victims because murders of environmental activists are often unreported or written off as common crimes, especially in remote areas. And the tragic death toll does not reflect the climate of threats, violence, stigmatization and intimidation designed to chill activism. As global competition for resources and energy heats up, environmental defenders on the front lines are increasingly under threat. The international community must act to protect them.

Honduras, where at least 111 activists have been killed since 2002, was the deadliest country per capita for environmental defenders last year. Among the struggles chronicled in the Global Witness report is the work of Honduran indigenous leader Berta Cáceres, one of the winners of the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize. She co-founded the [National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras](#) in 1993 with the aim of protecting indigenous communities from threats to their ancestral land.

The attack on environmental defenders in Honduras occurs against the backdrop of a searing human rights crisis dating to the 2009 coup. The government has since accelerated the exploitation and privatization of natural resources, escalating conflicts with activists. But the danger facing Honduran activists is far from unique. More than [900 people were killed from 2002 to 2013](#) defending their land and environment. There were 147 murders in 2012, three times more than the number of people killed in the previous 10 years. Most of these killings were carried out with impunity: Less than one percent of crimes result in conviction and punishment.

The global demand for natural resources is increasingly intruding on the territory and rights of local and indigenous communities, pitting marginalized groups against powerful transnational economic interests. State and foreign investors, often with the backing of multilateral development banks such as the World Bank, covet indigenous lands that sit atop precious resources. The fierce resistance to dispossession and environmental degradation is seen as an obstacle that can be surmounted, often through force, intimidation or efforts to divide communities.

Cáceres was honored with the world's leading environmental award in part because of her leadership around the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River in Honduras. The government authorized Desarrollos Energéticos SA, a private Honduran company, to build the Agua Zarca dam, without properly consulting the local communities, ignoring the [International Labor Organization Convention 169](#) and the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), which require such consultations. The local Lenca community vehemently opposed the dam's construction, fearing that it would sully a river of profound [spiritual and ancestral importance](#) and threaten their livelihood.

**Those who encroach on the land possessed by local communities and repress leaders who resist resource**

## **exploitation and environmental degradation must be held accountable.**

Cáceres led the fight against the project. She helped the Lenca community file complaints against the dam at various governmental venues. In April 2013, when their legal efforts failed and their cause generated little support, the community set up a human roadblock to halt the dam's construction. In August 2013, [Sinohydro Group, the Chinese company involved in the project](#), backed out, and the Central American Mezzanine Investment Fund, which has ties to multilateral development banks, [followed suit](#).

Cáceres deserves gratitude and respect for her courage. But environmental defenders need more than recognition. As the world grapples with measures necessary to avert cataclysmic climate change, those on the front lines of environmental defense need a global framework to protect their lives.

The controversy over the Agua Zarca dam symbolizes the challenges environmental defenders face the world over. Activists often hail from communities whose survival and traditions are integrally tied with the land on which they reside, typically located in remote areas where communication is difficult. These marginalized communities are pitted against actors who command far deeper reservoirs of political capital and financial resources.

Conflicts over land are often compounded by the lack of formal land title securing property rights for indigenous and local community groups. And despite protections guaranteeing indigenous community participation, local processes are often either ignored entirely or tainted by threats, fraud and financial incentives intended to divide communities. Yet it is these communities who have shown good stewardship for the land, because of their spiritual connections and the fact that their lives are intertwined with the health of the ecosystem that sustains them.

The Lenca community's [struggle in Rio Blanco](#) has become an inspiring symbol of community resistance. And they have succeeded, against all odds, in halting

the construction of the dam, at least for now. But that resistance has cost the community dearly. At one protest in July 2013, a Honduran military officer shot and [killed unarmed community leader Tomas Garcia and wounded his son](#). Two others have perished as well.

Those who encroach on the land possessed by local communities and repress leaders who resist resource exploitation and environmental degradation must be held accountable. This includes governments, corporations and international financial institutions that operate within a pervasive culture of [impunity](#). The Global Witness report implored states and the international community to monitor, investigate and punish the surging crime against those who seek to protect their land. Last year, the [U.N. passed a resolution](#) calling on member states to protect environmental defenders. We must take that admonition seriously, not only for the benefit of those on the frontlines of environmental defense but the rest of us who inhabit an increasingly frail planet.

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.*