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Blood in Honduras, Silence in the United States

LAUREN CARASIK

August 16, 2016

Honduran indigenous and environmental rights leader Berta Cáceres, who was assassinated by masked gunmen in the spring, had long lived under the shadow of threats, harassment, and intimidation. The slain leader of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) was gunned down in her home in La Esperanza on March 3 after months of escalating threats. She was killed, it appears, for leading effective resistance to hydroelectric dam projects in Honduras, but she understood her struggle to be global as well. For Cáceres, the fight to protect the sacred Gualcarque River and all indigenous Lenca territory was the frontline in the battle against the unbridled transnational capitalism that threatens her people. She felt that as goes the Gualcarque River, so goes the planet. Her assassination sent shockwaves through the Honduran activist community: if an internationally-acclaimed winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize can be slain, there is little hope for anyone's safety.

The Agua Zarca Dam, which put Cáceres in the crosshairs, is one of many to have been funded by foreign capital since the 2009 Honduran military coup. The ousted president, Manuel Zelaya, had alarmed the country's elites—and their international allies—with his support of agrarian reforms and increased political power for laborers and the disenfranchised. After his removal, the Honduran government courted investors, declaring in 2011 that Honduras was “**open for business**.” Among the neoliberal reforms it undertook, which included gutting public services and cutting subsidies, the government granted large mining concessions, creating a demand for energy that heightened the profitability of hydroelectric dam projects. The aggressive privatization initiatives launched the government on a collision course with indigenous and *campesino* communities, which sit atop rich natural resources coveted by investors. The ensuing conflicts between environmentalists, traditional landowners, and business interests have **often turned lethal**.

These killings have taken place in a climate of brutal repression against labor, indigenous, and LGBTI activists, journalists, government critics, and human rights defenders. Cáceres, a formidable and widely respected opposition leader, was a particularly jagged thorn in the side of entrenched political and economic powers. Miscalculating the international outcry the murder would incite, Honduran officials at first couldn't get their story straight: Cáceres's murder was a robbery gone wrong, perhaps, or internal feuding within her organization, or a crime of passion. However, activists within and outside Honduras have successfully resisted all efforts to depoliticize Cáceres's killing.

Unfortunately, Cáceres's death was not the first violent assault on COPINH leaders, nor has it been the last. In 2013 unarmed community leader Tomás García was shot and killed by a soldier at a peaceful protest. Less than two weeks after Cáceres was

murdered, COPINH activist Nelson García was also gunned down, and just last month, Lesbia Janeth Urquía, another COPINH leader, was killed. Honduran authorities quickly arrested three people for Urquía's murder, characterizing it as a familial dispute, but members of COPINH dispute this. "We don't believe in this [official] version," Cáceres's successor, Tomás Gómez Membreño, told the **Los Angeles Times**. "In this country they invent cases and say that the murders have nothing to do with political issues. The government always tries to disconnect so as to not admit that these amount to political killings."

Urquía was murdered soon after an **explosive report** in *The Guardian* in which a former member of the Honduran military said Cáceres's name was at the top of a "hit list" of activists targeted for killing. The list, he said, was circulated among security forces, including units trained by the United States. The Honduran government vehemently denies these claims, despite **evidence** supporting many of the allegations. Cáceres had previously **said she was on** a list of targeted activists. At a U.S. **congressional briefing** in April, Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva Nativí testified that activists had not faced such dangers since the 1980s. "Now, it's like going back to the past," she said. "We know there are death squads in Honduras."

After an initial investigation into Cáceres's murder that was tainted by multiple missteps, officials arrested four suspects, including an active member of the military, and later detained a fifth man. But many believe that the orders for her murder were issued higher up the chain of command, and that the government cannot be trusted to police itself. However, state officials have refused calls for an independent international investigation.

Nonetheless the United States continues to send Honduras security assistance that aids the government in militarizing the "war on drugs" and enforcing the aggressive neoliberal policies Washington favors for the region. Some American lawmakers have been paying close attention, sending letters to the U.S. State Department expressing concern about the role of state security forces in human rights abuses. In a sign of increasing impatience with State Department inaction, Representative Hank Johnson of Georgia and other legislators introduced a bill in Congress on June 14, the **Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act**, which seeks to suspend "security assistance to Honduran military and police until such time as human rights violations by Honduran state security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice." As the bill's original cosponsors argued in an **op-ed in *The Guardian***, "It's even possible that U.S.-trained forces were involved in [Cáceres's] death," since "one suspect is a military officer and two others are retired military officers. Given this information, we are deeply concerned about the likely role of the Honduran military in her assassination, including the military chain of command."

As the hit list story broke, State Department spokesperson John Kirby maintained at a **June 22 press briefing** that "there's no specific credible allegations of gross violations of human rights" in Honduras. That assertion is contradicted by the State Department's own **2015 human rights report on Honduras**, which documented "unlawful and arbitrary killings and other criminal activities by members of the security

forces,” findings **echoed by the United Nations**. ***The Guardian* reported** on July 8 that the State Department is reviewing the hit list allegations, repeating the claim that it had seen no credible evidence to support them. U.S. ambassador to Honduras James Nealon told the Guardian, “We take allegations of human rights abuses with the utmost seriousness. We always take immediate action to ensure the security and safety of people where there is a credible threat.” Under the Leahy Law, the State Department and the Department of Defense are prohibited from providing support to foreign military units when there is credible evidence of human rights violations. Yet the mechanics of compliance with the Leahy law are shrouded by state secrecy, making it difficult to have confidence in the legitimacy of an investigation into the conduct of a close ally. And satisfying Leahy law obligations alone is insufficient. Half of the \$750 million in aid that Congress approved in December for Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador comes through the **Plan of the Alliance for the Prosperity in the Northern Triangle**, a package of security and development aid aimed at stemming immigration from Central America. And disbursement of that money is conditioned merely on **the Secretary of State certifying** that the governments are making effective progress toward good governance and human rights goals.

This is not the first time the Obama administration has undermined human rights in Honduras. In the aftermath of Zelaya’s removal, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton helped cement the post-coup government. Cáceres herself **denounced Clinton’s role** in rupturing the democratic order in Honduras, predicting a dire fallout. As historian Greg Grandin told ***Democracy Now***, “It was Clinton who basically relegated [Zelaya’s return] to a secondary concern and insisted on elections, which had the effect of legitimizing and routinizing the coup regime and creating the nightmare scenario that exists today.” The election held in November 2009 was widely considered illegitimate.

When questioned by Juan González during a meeting with the *New York Daily News* editorial board in April, Clinton said that Washington never declared Zelaya’s ouster a coup because doing so would have required the suspension of humanitarian aid. In so doing, she relied on the technicality that an aid cutoff is triggered by the designation of a military coup. Therefore the term was never officially used, despite the military’s clear involvement in removing Zelaya from the country. **Clinton claimed** the legislature and judiciary had a “very strong argument that they had followed the Constitution and the legal precedents,” despite nearly universal condemnation of the coup, including by the United Nations, the European Union, and the Organization of American States. And Clinton’s account is contradicted by then U.S. ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens, who concluded in a **leaked cable** “there is no doubt” that the ouster of Zelaya “constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup,” a characterization repeated by the State Department many times. Yet the administration stalled the suspension of aid to Honduras, in contrast to much **quicker cutoffs following coups** in Mauritania (August 2008) and Madagascar (March 2009).

The dire human rights situation in Honduras may receive more attention following Clinton’s selection of Tim Kaine as her running mate. The Virginia senator, who touts the nine months he spent in Honduras as a Jesuit volunteer as a formative experience, has added his voice to those pressuring Secretary of State John Kerry for a thorough

investigation into Cáceres's death. But Grandin argues that Kaine "has consistently supported economic and **security policies** that drive immigration and contribute to the kind of repression that killed Cáceres." This critique of U.S. economic policy was recently echoed by one of Cáceres's four children, Laura Zuñiga Cáceres, who joined a caravan from Cleveland to Philadelphia demanding justice for her mother. She was among those protesting outside the Democratic National Convention, linking Washington's trade policy with the misery it engenders in Honduras. "We know very well the impacts that free trade agreements have had on our countries," **Zuñiga said**. "They give transnational corporations, like the one my mom fought against, the power to protect their profits even if it means passing over the lives of people who defend the water, forest and mother earth from destruction caused by their very own megaprojects."

Washington is again signaling to Honduras that stability and its own self-interest trump human rights concerns. Historically the United States has been agonizingly slow to cut off support for repressive Latin American governments so long as they advance its geopolitical and economic agenda. But there have been pivotal moments in history when the tide has turned against U.S.-allied repressive states, such as the killing of Jesuit priests in El Salvador in 1989, which spurred international condemnation of the Salvadoran government and prompted Washington to rethink its support. The death of Cáceres should be one of those moments. This time, Washington should act quickly to stop its money from funding human rights abuses in Honduras before more blood is spilled.

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