



Berta Cáceres  
2 March 2016  
La Esperanza, Honduras

# BERTA CÁCERES

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ON 2 MARCH 2016, two gunmen stormed a house on the outskirts of La Esperanza, a town in Honduras, and murdered Berta Cáceres. A life-long activist who had successfully mobilized indigenous communities and their allies to fight illegal land-grabs by powerful corporations backed by political elites, Cáceres was aware that she might one day become a martyr.

For a time, there was hope among Cáceres’s friends and family that her international acclaim, which saw her meet with the Pope, speak to audiences across the globe, and win the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015, would somehow protect her. Killing someone such as Cáceres would surely draw international attention and, in theory, demands for accountability. ‘I thought that perhaps they wouldn’t be able to kill her because of that,’ her mother, Austra Berta Flores, told the author.

Honduras has been described by Human Rights Watch as a place where ‘impunity for crime and human rights abuses is the norm’, and where, according to a 2017 report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, ‘corruption is the operating system’. In the end, Cáceres’s assassination was a harsh reminder that in this kind of setting, anyone who challenges the interests of powerful businesses and political elites is in danger.

The political climate in Honduras is particularly dire for environmental activists. A two-year investigation by watchdog group Global Witness determined that Honduras is the deadliest country in the world for environmental

activists. ‘Nowhere are you more likely to be killed for standing up to companies that grab land and trash the environment than in Honduras,’ the report concluded.

Cáceres came from a long line of activists, none more trailblazing than her mother, who became the first woman to be elected governor of the department of Intibucá in 1981, and who went on to serve as a congresswoman at the national level. As part of her fight for the rights of indigenous people, Austra Flores was among those who led the push for Honduras to ratify the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, also known as International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, or ILO-169. ‘This is the instrument that defends the life and property of indigenous people and their territories, their languages, their customs, all of which had been constantly under attack,’ explains Flores.

Berta, or Bertita, as her loved ones often refer to her, inherited her mother’s penchant for breaking down barriers. ‘Bertita learned from me in this huge struggle,’ Flores said. ‘She learned to know the needs of all indigenous peoples.’

In 1993, in response to threats posed to indigenous Lenca communities by illegal logging activities, Berta co-founded the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, known by its Spanish acronym, COPINH. The work of fighting to protect the territorial rights of indigenous Hondurans took on a new urgency in the mid-2000s amid a spate of government-approved logging, mining and energy projects, which threatened to displace entire communities.



Underpinning Cáceres’s activism was a belief in solidarity across struggles. Through COPINH, she was able to broaden and intensify the fight for the rights of poor and indigenous people whose livelihoods and, in some cases, cultural existence, were under attack. ‘Bertita used to say, “Together we are stronger. Organized, we are stronger”,’ explains her brother, Gustavo Flores. The result, according to those who joined the struggle, was a political awakening for indigenous communities who had previously been marginalized and ignored by their own government. ‘This was not a mixed people’s revolution, which is what we had heard before, or a white people’s revolution,’ said Cáceres’s daughter, Bertha Isabel Zúñiga. ‘This had to do with recovering and rescuing our identity.’

The most high-profile battle began in 2006, when Lenca people from the Río Blanco community noticed the arrival of heavy machinery and construction equipment in their town. This, it turned out, was for the Agua Zarca Dam along the Gualcarque River, a hydroelectric project to be constructed by Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) in partnership with Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro,



Cáceres was opposing construction of a hydroelectric project that would have put local communities at risk

with funding from the World Bank, the Dutch development bank (FMO) and development financier FinnFund. Yet despite the fact that ILO-169 calls for free, open, and prior consent of the indigenous communities affected by such projects, no such consultation had taken place. In fact, Honduran politicians continued to promote and facilitate the project’s implementation despite the fact that local communities expressed overwhelming opposition to it, citing concerns that indigenous communities would be cut off from the water supplies they relied on.

COPINH and Cáceres worked with the community in Río Blanco to lead the fight against the Agua Zarca Dam both through direct action in the form of blockades and demonstrations, as well as through legal channels, bringing the case to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. The powers that backed the project responded by targeting COPINH and its allies with harassment, death threats, mass arrests and violence meted out by paramilitary actors and private security contractors.

Several years later, in 2013, Honduran security forces operating out of DESA’s local headquarters opened fire on protesters, killing one indigenous leader, Tomás García, and injuring several others. Cáceres, her children and several other activists were forced to go into hiding for a period of time amid constant death threats. But Cáceres remained undeterred, and her activism eventually led to two of Agua Zarca’s main backers, Sinohydro and the World Bank, withdrawing their support for the project.

Years of constant harassment, death threats, and attempts on Cáceres’s life eventually culminated in her murder in March 2016. Two gunmen broke into the house where she was staying, killing her and wounding Mexican environmentalist Gustavo Castro, who survived by pretending to be dead until the attackers had left. At first, Honduran authorities suggested her death was the result of a robbery. Then, they implied that it may have been a crime



Bertha Isabel Zuniga continues the work of her mother at COPINH

of passion. Yet even after it became undeniable that Cáceres’s death was an assassination ordered by opponents of her activism, the investigation and subsequent judicial proceedings were marred by delays, irregularities and attempts at sabotage. In one incident in 2016, two vehicles stopped an appellate court judge and she was robbed of the Cáceres case file.

Amid delays, a team of international lawyers conducted their own investigation, concluding that state agents and high-ranking business executives were directly involved in the planning, execution and subsequent cover-up of the murder.

The process was thrown into further disarray, however, in September 2018 when lawyers representing Cáceres’s family formally accused the three judges overseeing the trial of abuse of authority and a cover-up. The judges responded by ousting the family’s lawyers, leaving the victims without representation.

Through it all, Cáceres’s family remained steadfast in their efforts to ensure that at least some of those responsible for her murder would be held accountable. On 29 November 2018, more than two and a half years after her assassination, Honduran authorities finally delivered a guilty verdict for seven of the eight

defendants accused of participating in Cáceres’s murder. They included a manager for DESA, the former head of security for DESA and several men who had served in the Honduran military.

It is a rare case in which those responsible for the death of an activist in Honduras have been arrested, tried and convicted. Yet there is still a belief among activists, lawyers and others who have followed the case closely that political and business elites who were the architects behind the assassination have not been brought to justice.

Until this happens, Cáceres’s family and their supporters have vowed to continue their quest for true justice: ‘We will continue fighting until we see the real masterminds in jail and until we bring down this corrupt government,’ said Flores, holding back tears as she spoke about her daughter. ‘Bertita’s soul is what keeps us in the struggle,’ Cáceres’s brother told the author in 2018. ‘Berta taught us that fear paralyzes actions of the people. Despite all the great efforts to persecute us and try to inject fear into our lives, we double our efforts. We will never give up, even if we get killed, even if they murder us,’ he continued, echoing a common refrain among the activists who carry on Berta’s legacy.

‘That’s why we say, Berta didn’t die. She multiplied.’ ●

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