

# The Honduras Killing Field

The murder of prominent Honduras environmental activist Berta Cáceres recalls Hillary Clinton's role in supporting a right-wing coup in 2009 that ousted an elected progressive president and turned Honduras into a killing field, writes Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

An apparent resurgence of death-squad violence in Honduras, including the March 3 murder of prominent Honduran indigenous rights activist Berta Cáceres, is a harsh reminder of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's role in defending a 2009 coup that ousted leftist President Manuel Zelaya and cleared the way for the restoration of right-wing rule in the impoverished Central American nation.

Cáceres, the recent winner of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, was murdered in her hometown of La Esperanza, Intibucá, in the highlands near the Salvadoran border. Her good friend and close associate, Gustavo Castro, was shot twice but survived the assassination and is now being held against his will by the Honduran Government.

Castro held Cáceres in his arms as she lay dying and played dead to avoid his own execution. He has since been forcibly stopped from leaving Honduras.

The Honduran Government has characterized the killing of Cáceres as a common burglary gone bad, but her friends and close associates reject the government claims as preposterous and part of an emerging cover-up.

In a statement, COPINH, the indigenous rights group that Cáceres was closely associated with, characterized her close-range murder as an assassination. In a press release the day after the murder, the group talked about the multiple death threats that Cáceres faced prior to her slaying.

"In the last few weeks, violence and repression towards Berta, COPINH, and the communities they support, had escalated," COPINH stated. "In Rio Blanco on February 20th, Berta, COPINH, and the community of Rio Blanco faced threats and repression as they carried out a peaceful action to protect the River Gualcarque against the construction of a hydroelectric dam by the internationally-financed Honduran company DESA.

"As a result of COPINH's work supporting the Rio Blanco struggle, ... Berta had received countless threats against her life and was granted precautionary measures by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. On February 25th, another Lenca community supported by COPINH in Guise, Intibuca was violently

evicted and destroyed.”

Cáceres received the Goldman Environmental Prize after she led a high-profile, peaceful campaign to stop one of the world’s largest dam builders from pursuing the Agua Zarca Dam, which would have effectively cut off the ethnic Lenca people from water, food and medicine. When Cáceres won the Goldman Prize last year, she accepted in the name of “the martyrs who gave their lives in the struggle to defend our natural resources.”

Friends, co-workers, intellectuals and activists are outraged by the killing and many track this and many other murders of activists in Honduras back to the tenure of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. They say Clinton’s lead role in supporting the 2009 oligarch-backed coup that drove the elected progressive President Zelaya from power. Zelaya’s ouster opened the door to a restoration of right-wing rule and out-of-control “free trade.” Honduras soon became the murder capital of the world.

When the Honduran military removed Zelaya from power, the international community – including the United Nations, the Organization of American States and the European Union – condemned the coup and sought Zelaya’s restoration. But Secretary of State Clinton allied herself with right-wing Republicans in Congress who justified Zelaya’s removal because of his cordial relations with Venezuela’s leftist President Hugo Chavez.

In her memoir, *Hard Choices*, Clinton took credit for preventing Zelaya from returning to Honduras, as if it were a major victory for democracy instead the beginning of a new era of death-squad violence and repression in Honduras.

“We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras,” Clinton wrote, “and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot.” In other words, rather than support the right of the elected president to serve out his term, Clinton allowed his illegal ouster to lead to an interim right-wing regime followed by elections that the Honduran oligarchs could again dominate.

Since then, the violence in Honduras has spiraled out of control driving tens of thousands of desperate Hondurans, including unaccompanied children, to flee north to the United States where Clinton later supported their prompt deportation back to Honduras.

On Tuesday, I spoke with Beverly Bell from Other Worlds who worked closely with Berta Cáceres and Gustavo Castro. She was deeply concerned about the safety of Castro and other close associates of Cáceres. She described the situation as follows:

“One person saw the assassination, Gustavo Castro Soto, coordinator of Otros Mundos Chiapas / Friends of the Earth Mexico. A Mexican, Gustavo had come to Berta’s town of La Esperanza to provide her with peace accompaniment, and spent the night at her house on her last night of life. Gustavo himself was shot twice and survived by feigning death. Berta died in his arms.

“Gustavo was immediately detained in inhumane conditions by the Honduran government for several days for ‘questioning’. He was then released and accompanied by the Mexican ambassador and consul to the airport in Tegucigalpa. He was just about to go through customs when Honduran authorities tried to forcibly grab him. The Mexican government successfully intervened, and put Gustavo into protective custody in the Mexican Embassy.”

But according to Bell, the matter didn’t end there: “The Honduran government issued a warning that Gustavo may not leave the country. In a gross violation of international sovereignty, the Honduran government has reclaimed Gustavo from the Embassy, taking him back to the town of La Esperanza for questioning.”

In a March 6 note to close friends, Gustavo Castro wrote, “The death squads know that they did not kill me, and I am certain that they want to accomplish their task.” Shortly after the murder of Berta Cáceres, I interviewed her close friends Beverly Bell, Adrienne Pine and Andres Conteris.

The interviews follow in two parts below, first the interview with Beverly Bell and Adrienne Pine, an associate professor at American University and a Fulbright Scholar who has been doing research in Honduras for nearly two decades. She is the author of *Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras*.

The second interview is with Conteris, a producer with Democracy Now! Spanish language programming, who lived for years in Honduras and was there throughout the military coup in 2009. He worked as a human rights advocate in Honduras from 1994 to 1999 and is a co-producer of “Hidden in Plain Sight,” a documentary film about U.S. policy in Latin America and the School of the Americas.

DB: Beverly let me start with you. ... There was more than one person shot, correct, Beverly Bell?

BB: There were actually three people shot ... in addition to Berta, who was shot fatally. Her brother was also shot and a third person, who will be familiar with many of your listeners, and that is Gustavo Castro, who is the coordinator of the social and economic justice group, Otros Mundus, “other worlds” in Spanish, in Chiapas, who has also worked very closely with Berta for years. He spent the night in Berta’s house, as part of a peacekeeping team, which Berta had had for many years now, off and on, because her life has always been so at risk.

And he was shot in the ear, he is okay from that, but the concern that you mention is Gustavo went down this morning to give his testimony to the local court, and he is a very inconvenient witness to them. ... So there is an international alert out right now to guarantee Gustavo Castro free passage back to Mexico, together with his wife.

DB: Now, that's a double-edged sword, because if they hold him, he's in danger, his life is in danger. And if they release him, his life is in danger. His life is in danger as being a witness to the murder, right?

BB: That's absolutely correct. In Honduras, pretty much anybody's life is in danger for anything that relates to peace, to justice, to indigenous rights, to participatory democracy, and notably to opposing the role of the U.S. We are working with peace accompaniment teams right now to try and guarantee Gustavo's safe passage to Mexico, if the government doesn't let him go. ...

DB: We know that the United States government, Hillary Clinton played a key role in overthrowing the duly elected president, leading us down this path of regular mass murder of human rights activists, and anybody who resists sort of free trade government so what can we say? Has the U.S. expressed its deep concern about the killing?

BB: Yes, cynically and sickly, the U.S. came out ... lamenting the murder of Berta Cáceres. And yet, we know that the U.S. has funded to the tune, well this year alone of more than \$5,500,000 in military training and education. We know that many of the people who have threatened Berta's life over the years have been trained at the School of the Americas.

We know that the U.S. government has stood fiercely by the horrible succession of right-wing governments that followed the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Zelaya. And as you mentioned, Hillary Clinton was deeply involved in that. In fact, she even bragged about it in her recent book.

DB: I know, that is shocking that she is proud, this self-declared human rights activist and sophisticated diplomat was proud to brag in her book that she played the key role in keeping Zelaya from going back and assuming his legitimately won presidency. So this is your, as we have called her before, the deposer in chief. And, on that note, let's bring into the conversation anthropologist Adrienne Pine, who has spent many years, written extensively about Honduras. Adrienne I know that you're at an airport now, but let me get your initial response to what happened here.

AP: Well, with Bertita, it's hard to talk about her in the past tense. She's one of the most amazing activists and advocates I've ever met. And also, one of the

most compassionate, wonderful people. The fact that they would kill her really sends a message. I mean this is an intentional message that all Hondurans, I think, would understand as such that nobody is safe. Berta, has a sort of, what those of us in the international solidarity community had considered...she had just some sort of protection because she was so well known, because she had won the Goldman prize.

And, of course, we have learned since the coup, the U.S. supported military coup, and I think Beverly laid that out very well, we've learned that the international protective measures actually don't count for much, in Honduras. But this is really ramping up of the criminalization of activism that has occurred since the U.S.-supported military coup in 2009, and it really speaks to the incredible impunity that reigns right now in what is in fact a military dictatorship, a U.S.-supported military dictatorship. That, I think you're right, it would not have been possible without the direct intervention of Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State.

Berta Cáceres blood is on Hillary Clinton's hands.

DB: And, of course, Donald Trump could not have been more violently right-wing when it comes to what happened in Honduras. He could have never out-done her. Because she was more sophisticated, and understood better how to solidify the right-wing, representing corporate America, and make sure that things continued ever since the Monroe Doctrine. Let me come back to you, if I could, I'm getting a little bit angry, Beverly Bell. Let me ask you to talk a little bit about Berta. How you met her, when's the last time you spoke with her?

BB: I spoke with her, I guess, a couple of months ago, and it was the same content as so many of our conversations have been over the last 15 years, or so, that we've worked with each other, which was yet another threat. And how we were going to get protection for her, from what was a long, long, long journey of hideous oppression. She has been terrorized, she just a week or two ago, she and a whole team of people who were at the site of a river which the Honduran government and a multi-national corporation had been trying to dam, but which had been blocked by the organization that she headed, the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras or COPINH.

A bunch of them were put into a truck and taken away. And it was certainly shaky hours there for a while until they emerged free. So just to answer your question, I have worked with Berta, very, very closely for about 15 years. I'm sitting right now in a house in Albuquerque where she used to live with me. We have fought together, like so many others, against the World Bank, against the U.S. government, against so-called free trade accords, against Inter-American Development Bank, against the Honduran government, against the Honduran

oligarchy.

Basically Berta has stood for pretty much anything that any of your listeners would believe is right. She has been at the forefront for decades of the movement for indigenous rights, for indigenous sovereignty, for the environmental protection of land and rivers, for women's rights, for LGBTQ rights in a country that has grossly persecuted and assassinated LGBTQ activists. She is, as Adrienne said, just the most extraordinary person, certainly one of the most that I have ever known and it is impossible to speak of her in the past tense.

And, in fact, I have refused to because Berta's spirit has impacted so many people around the world. If you could be in my in-box today and see the countries from which condolences and denunciations have come, it's amazing who she has touched, and that spirit will live on in the fight of all of us, for justice, for indigenous rights, for a world that is not tyrannized by the U.S. government, by trans-national capital, and by the elites of various countries.

DB: I'm sure, Beverly Bell, her spirit will be on the tongues and in the hearts of many women as they celebrate, if you will, International Women's Day. ... I'm sure she had some plans for that. It's an amazing assassination. It's troubling. Adrienne Pine, when is the last time you saw Berta? What did she mean to you?

AP: It's so hard for me to accept. I think, like Beverly said she was somebody who I stood with side by side on more times than I could count ... protesting the U.S. military base. We've been tear gassed together. And she's helped me through a number of very dangerous situations. It's hard. It's hard to lose somebody who was not just such an amazing leader, but also such a good friend, and not just to me but to so many people.

Bertita lives on, with all of us. And I think the most important thing right now if you look at the social network...Beverly is right. My in-box is exploding with condolences, as well. And if you look at the social networks right now, Honduras is ready to rise up, at the murder of somebody who was so dear, so beloved by so many people. And I think one of the things that's special about Berta which Beverly also mentioned is that she has a much longer trajectory than many of the activists, in Honduras. I mean, she has been on it for many decades fighting the forces that only recently following the coup the massive number of Hondurans came out to join her to fight the forces of corporatization, destruction of indigenous land, the violence of the patriarchy as Beverly mentioned. I mean she has been right all along.

And people in Honduras are furious. There are lots of different protests around the country that have been organized. There's a protest in Washington, D.C.

tomorrow, at the State Department, that's been organized. And I think it's going to be pretty big. She's just moved people around the world, so deeply. And I think if Honduras is giving a signal that nobody is safe in Honduras then around the world we need give a signal that this regime cannot stand, any longer. And the U.S. has to stop supporting it.

DB: And, Adrienne, say a little bit more about the way in which she resisted. ... I mean, it's important for people to understand that in the face of so many threats...the idea that she won the Goldman Environmental prize here, given out here with huge fanfare in San Francisco. I mean, it really is clearly a message to everybody on the ground. But say a little bit more about what she meant to the people on the ground, how she worked with people. What were some of the actions that she helped to organize? You mentioned some protests and demonstrations, but is there one issue? This was about this dam. I guess resisting this dam was huge in Honduras. It means a lot to the corporate 1%, and a lot to the people who were resisting it.

AP: Well, absolutely. I mean the Aqua Zarca Dam, that Berta and her organization, COPINH. managed to successfully stop was an incredible victory for the Lenca people, and for the people of Honduras against the corporatization that is part and parcel of the U.S.-supported military coup of 2009, which was fundamentally a neo-liberal coup, and which vastly increased vulnerability of the already most marginalized groups, that Berta herself was part of, the indigenous groups of Honduras.

And so as somebody who had been organizing to resist this kind of government and corporate intrusion on sovereign indigenous lands and waters for decades, Berta was a natural leader. After the coup, when those forces became even stronger, against the participatory democracy, in Honduras, and Berta really stood alone in that. She was a woman leader among mostly male leaders.

And you've got a social movement that has traditionally been male led and there were a whole lot of feminists during the resistance movement that stood up against that. But Berta was just amazing. She held her own in very male-dominated forum, and it was through her inclusive insistence on fighting the patriarchy alongside the fight against the predatory violence of capitalism and neo-liberal capitalism, and U.S. militarism.

I mean, she tied it altogether in a way that very few Honduran leaders have managed to do. And yet she was uniquely not about her ego. I mean, she was somebody who gave so much to so many people. And I think that's why in the protests people weren't afraid to go up to her. She would ... it's hard to put into words. I mean I'm devastated by this loss and I'm not the primary mourner. I think there are thousands of people today who are devastated just as much as I

am.

DB: And back to you Bev Bell. So maybe describe a little bit from your perspective what this loss looks like.

BB: As Adrienne said it's huge. There are two indigenous movements in Honduras, and both of them have really been about the construction of indigenous identity. Which is to say that both the Garifuna people, that is the afro-indigenous people who reside on the Atlantic coast, and the Lenca people of which Berta was one, had had their indigenous identity stamped out. And Berta, and remarkably another woman, Miriam Miranda, who has also been terrorized and persecuted, who was head of the Garifuna indigenous movement had been able to shape together, with so many other people whom they pulled into participatory leadership, as Adrienne said.

They really were not about the sort of top down leaders that we see, well certainly in the U.S. government, but also in so many social movements, and in the NGO context in the U.S. They really were about empowering everybody, and led with humility. It's huge. There is not anyone else in COPINH who is anywhere close to the capacity or the stature of Berta.

Most campesinos indigenous peoples are denied the right to education. They're denied a lot of things that would allow them to also become leaders. That Berta who grew up in a very, very humble home, was able to become a leader was remarkable and really was due to her mother who was a fierce fighter. She was the mayor of the town, and the governor of the state, in a time when women were neither of those things.

And Berta grew up, for example, listening to underground radio from Cuba and Nicaragua that they had listened to, secretly, during the revolutions there. She was very engaged in the revolution in El Salvador. She has just had an incredible history that is really unparalleled. So the loss is huge. It's irreparable, and as we said it's not just a loss for Honduras, but for social movements everywhere, because Berta was all over.

I mean, she just met with the Pope in Italy, a couple of weeks ago. She was a leader in global social movements, not just Honduran ones, and not just indigenous ones. However, it is important to say and I know that Berta would say this: That the social movements in Honduras are strong. She loved to say that Honduras is known for two things. First, for having been the military base for the U.S.-backed Contra, and secondly for Hurricane Mitch. But in fact Honduras holds another fact which is that it is home to an extraordinary movement of feminists, of environmentalists, of unionists, of many sorts of people. And they are much stronger because of the life of Berta Cáceres. And that is not



hyperbole. She single-handedly helped shape the strength of that social movement. But they will live on, and they are a part of the legacy of Berta Cáceres.

DB: Well, I know Adrienne it's not going to be the last word on this subject. But, for the moment, what do you think you're going to be doing in the context of fighting this fight, and standing with your friend and friends, where you've worked so long...how you've worked so long within Honduras. I swear there's a traffic jam between my heart and my mind here, but final words, from you for now.

AP: You know I think we need to stand by the people of Honduras, who have been given a clear message that their lives are at risk, if they stand up for their own rights. And in part, a big part of what that means is standing up for democracy here in the United States. And if we had had a democratic system, and if we had been able to decide for ourselves as a people if we wanted to allow that coup to stand, I don't think that would have happened.

And instead Hillary Clinton who is now running for president, is...and she proudly made sure that that coup would stand. I think we need to fight here at home for democracy, just as strongly as it is fought in Honduras, and in solidarity with people around the world. I mean, this is a call to action. We have to honor Berta's life, by continuing to fight, and fighting even stronger. ...

DB: It's a tragedy that is has to be in this context and I hope we can continue this dialogue about these important issues and I'm sure there are going to be many people on the ground who are going to need these microphones, who are going to need the support of all of us, to resist this policy that was really instituted by Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State.

ANDRES THOMAS CONTERIS

DB: We are now joined by Andres Conteris who is the founder of Democracy Now en Español, and who was in Honduras during the 2009 coup, all through the coup. We spoke to him many times, several times from the palace as the coup was in progress. ...

AC: It's a very difficult day because of the news that we're talking about, and the horrible assassination of dear Bertita.

DB: Tell us a little bit about your time with her, your impression of what her work was like, what she was like?

AC: Well, I'm very glad to follow both Beverly and Adrienne, who have spoken very eloquently about Berta's life. I go back a little bit further because I

lived in Honduras from 1994 to 1999. And when I met Berta was in May of 1997. I can recall it very clearly. And it has to do very much with the context of what just happened today, in Honduras.

At that time there was a horrible assassination of an indigenous leader, in Honduras. He was part of the nation of the Chorti, the Mayan Chorti people. It's 1 of 8 different indigenous communities in the nation, in Honduras. ... His name was Candido Amador. He was assassinated in May of 1997 and what Berta, and her partner, Salvador, at the time, and other indigenous leaders did is, they gathered all indigenous nations in Honduras at that time, and they organized the most amazing pilgrimage to the capital.

And, Dennis, it was so awesome to be there at the time, and to see the stalwart nature in which these people were willing to risk everything, and leave their communities, and not even know how they would get back home. And go and camp in front of the presidential palace. It was incredible. And that is the context in which I met Berta. And she was such a leader of her people. And the entire indigenous peoples that gathered together, and collaborated with one another very closely to resist this kind of repression, that slaughtered Candido Amador at that time.

And what happened, Dennis, was truly amazing. The President, because he was going to go to receive this human rights prize had to do everything to get rid of them. And he ordered a military eviction, a forced, militarized, brutal repression against the indigenous who were camped out in front of his presidential palace. But they refused to leave the capital. And they only moved 2 miles away, and then just continued to camp out there.

And that put him, the president, in a dilemma whereby he was then forced to negotiate. And this is where Berta's skills just really came forward. She was part of a negotiation of an accord that the president signed. And representatives from each of the indigenous nations also signed it. And what they did is they put together what they called a commission of guarantees or a guarantors commission, which was signed by international leaders and human rights leaders in order to guarantee the compliance of this accord.

I was invited by Berta and Salvador to be part of that guarantors commission. And as part of it, then, in the following months one of the clear memories that I have is that the government, of course, was not living up to the agreements that it had promised for education, for electrification, for health. And most of all, for land for the indigenous people. And they were not living up to these accords. And so I was part of non-violent training of the indigenous who were rising up. And they engaged in occupations of embassies, like the Costa Rican embassy for one. And they also did a blockade of the tourist attraction that is

most popular in Honduras which are the Mayan ruins.

And I spent the night with the Chorti people and with Berta Cáceres, in front of those ruins, blocking them so that tourists could not go, so the government would be forced to negotiate in a much more honest way, with the indigenous. And that is how I knew Berta, living her life in her country. She was always there accompanying her people. She would make sure that everyone had enough to eat and she would not tend to herself until she knew ...

Well what Berta would do is just make sure that the people were really as cared for as much as possible. And this she showed in so many clear ways. But one thing that needs to be said is that she was not only a leader of her people, a leader in the environmental movement, a strong model for women, a strong model for indigenous leaders, but she was an amazing mother herself. She's a mother of four children, and one of whom I was just with last week. It's her oldest, her name is Olivia.

And I was there in the town La Esperanza where Berta was assassinated. And Olivia is turning out to be the spitting image of her mother, in so many ways. She's 26 years old. She's the age now when I met Berta in 1997. And Olivia is now basically becoming one of the women leaders, one of the indigenous leaders that is leading her people. And it's just incredible and impressive to see that.

I remember joking with Olivia just last week about her mother, Berta, being concerned for her during the coup, because she was at the university protesting the violent military coup. And, Berta, of course, was concerned, as a mother for her daughter. And her daughter said "Hey, you lived out in El Salvador, for instance, the revolution. Give me a chance to live out my revolution during my age."

So, of course, Berta wanted to do that but she also is a mother and she's got two children who are studying medicine in Buenos Aires. Another, a daughter, who is in Mexico City, studying. And then her oldest daughter, Olivia, is there in La Esperanza working with indigenous people and organizing them.

DB: A huge, huge loss, that the family is probably devastated. We know that people are rising up right now in Honduras and the loss to the community is hard to evaluate.

AC: It's really unspeakable. I've not been able to talk to Mama Berta, who is Berta's mother, who I saw last week. Mama Berta, as Beverly shared was the Mayor of La Esperanza, the Governor of the Department...but also Mama Berta is this incredible midwife. She helped to give birth to probably over 1,000 people over the decades. And she is an incredible woman herself. And I cannot imagine how

devastated she is right now, with this incredibly horrible, horrible news. ...

One other thing before I go, and it's important to point out that there's a petition going around on social media to sign to make sure that the U.S. Congress guarantees an international investigation into this brutal murder and also, Senator [Patrick] Leahy has already signed a statement with regard to this assassination. You know, Berta was in Washington, D.C. and met with over 30 members of Congress, many of whom she met personally including Senator Boxer.

So Berta's name is familiar in Washington. And so this should be a very important event that causes change in U.S. policy towards Honduras, which I'm so glad both Adrienne and Bev mentioned the complicity of Hillary Clinton in the coup in Honduras. And not pressuring, at all, this horrible regime of Juan Orlando Hernandez, who is very, very complicit in the horrible human rights violations against LGBT, against women, against journalists, and against Indigenous and against others in the country.

It's been documented that Honduras is near the murder capital of the world, outside of hot wars going on. And it's very much related to the militarized situation that this man, Juan Orlando Hernandez, who came to power in an illegitimate way. Hillary Clinton did not denounce that, she did not denounce the coup strong enough.

DB: Did not denounce? ... She made sure that the coup was sustained and it is really troubling Andreas, on the one hand her work as deposer in chief sent people running out of the country, and turned it into the murder capital. ...

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of Flashpoints on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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