

Honduran indigenous rights campaigner, Berta Cáceres wins Goldman prize

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Berta Cáceres has won the world's leading environmental award for her campaigning against the construction of the Agua Zarca dams.

The odds of survival, let alone success, could hardly be more stacked against Berta Cáceres, the Honduran indigenous rights campaigner who has been declared the winner of this year's Goldman Environmental Prize [1].

Working in the most murderous country in the world for environmental activists, the mother of four is facing down one of Central America's biggest hydropower projects, powerful landowners, a US-funded police force, and a mercenary army of private security guards.

She has received threats of rape and death, been followed, and several of her supporters have been killed, yet those suspected of such wrongdoings have walked free while Cáceres has been forced into hiding and courts have twice issued warrants for her arrest.

The Goldman prize – the world's leading environmental award – is a recognition for the courage she has shown in a long and – so far – effective battle to stop construction of the Agua Zarca cascade of four giant dams in the Gualcarque river basin.

The project – which is being built by local firm Desa with the backing of international engineering and finance companies – would choke the main source of irrigation and drinking water for the community.

As the coordinator of the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (better known by its Spanish acronym Copinh), Cáceres first led a fight against illegal loggers, then plantation owners and is now at the head of a campaign against the dams, which she says are being built without the prior consultation required by international law.

The often bloody campaign struggle has achieved notable successes. In 2013, China's Sinohydro [2] – the largest dam builder in the world – backed out of the Agua Zarca project, saying it was concerned about "serious conflicts" and "controversial land acquisition and invasion" by its local partner. International Rivers and Friends of the Earth, are calling upon a German company, Voith Hydro, to end all involvement in the scheme [3], which has yet to begin construction.

Cáceres scored another victory when the World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation, also withdrew from the project, citing concerns over human rights violation.

She said the award would strengthen the group's campaigns. "It is an opportunity to give higher visibility to the violence of plunder, to the conflict, and also to the denunciations and resistance," she said in an email response to questions by the Guardian. "It is an honour, and an acknowledgement of the enormous sacrifice and commitment made by Copinh and its planetary contributions."

The prize coincides with a new report that identifies Honduras as the most dangerous country in the world for environmental and land activists, particularly those from indigenous groups.

Between 2010 and 2014, 101 campaigners were killed in Honduras, a higher death toll relative to population than anywhere else, according to the study *How Many More?* by NGO Global Witness [4].

The group said Honduras was at the forefront of a disturbing rise in murders worldwide. Last year, it documented 116 killings of activists across the globe, 20% higher than in 2013. Four in ten of the victims were from indigenous communities who resisted development projects or the encroachment of farms on their territory.

"In Honduras and across the world environmental defenders are being shot dead in broad daylight, kidnapped, threatened or tried as terrorists for standing in the way of so-called 'development'," Billy Kyte, a campaigner at Global Witness, said in a statement. "The true authors of these crimes – a powerful nexus of corporate and state interests – are escaping unpunished. Urgent action is needed to protect citizens and bring perpetrators to justice."

Cáceres is all too familiar with the dangers. In 2013, a fellow leader of Copinh, Tomás García, was shot and killed by a Honduran soldier [5] – whose commanders are trained in the US School of the Americas – during a demonstration against the dam at Rio Blanco. The killer was put on trial but released on the grounds that he acted in self-defence. Last October, while Cáceres was in a meeting with Pope Francis, she said another campaigner – 14-year-old Maycol Rodríguez – was tortured and murdered after his father, a leading activist, received threats. No suspects have been identified.

In part this reflects the broader violence of Honduran society, which has some of the world's worst levels of murder, organised crime, drug trafficking, gun use, inequality and corruption. But Cáceres says indigenous environmental campaigners are particularly at risk because they are up against powerful political and economic interests who have grown used to exploiting their land with impunity.

"These are centuries-old ills, a product of domination. There is a racist system in place that sustains and reproduces itself," she says. "The political, economic and social situation in Honduras is getting worse and there is an imposition of a project of domination, of violent oppression, of militarisation, of violation of human rights, of transnationalisation, of the turning over of the riches and sovereignty of the land to corporate capital, for it to privatise energy, the rivers, the land; for mining exploitation; for the creation of development zones."

Police and the courts are a threat rather than protection, she says. Cáceres has been detained twice: once for illegal possession of a firearm (which she says was planted in her car during a police check) and once for allegedly conspiring to damage property (a charge she successfully denied). She has also been followed and threatened by guards from the hydropower plant. There are four times as many private security employees as police in Honduras, according to Global Witness.

Most of the killings have taken place in Bajo Aguán valley, where campesinos trying to defend their land have been targeted by agribusiness companies, particularly since the coup of 2009 replaced the democratically-elected president, Manuel Zelaya, with Porfirio Lobo from the conservative national party. The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, a coffee magnate from the same party who is backed by big landowners, won power in 2013 with the promise of a "soldier on every corner". Many opponents of agribusiness in Bajo Aguán have "disappeared" in a chilling echo of the rightwing death squads that operated in Latin America during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. Cáceres also heads a group dedicated to raising the cases of those who have gone missing.

After a visit to the region in December, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said there was a “a complete absence of the most basic measures to address reports of grave human rights violations in the region” and noted the possible participation of the national government in the incidents of violence. Despite these concerns, the United States continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in the country in the name of the “war on drugs” and the State Department has issued statements supporting plantation owners against what it called “squatters”.

Margaret Sekaggya, a former UN special rapporteur has warned that environmental defenders in Honduras are being branded by the authorities as “members of the resistance, guerrillas, terrorists, political opponents or criminals”, with dangerous ramifications.

International civic rights, anti-poverty and environmental groups, also including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Friends of the Earth, have lined up to condemn the Honduran government for the situation faced by campaigners like Cáceres.

By naming her as this year’s winner and releasing a video about her life’s work, the Goldman Prize has also added to the pressure on the country before the periodic review of Honduras’s record by the UN Human Rights Council on 8 May.

Cáceres, though, says it is important to see her struggle as more than a single-country issue. Behind the killings are powerful external forces, including international capital, the influence of the United States (which has six military bases in Honduras) and a global drive to clear more forest and exploit more resources despite the growing risks of climate change.

“We must undertake the struggle in all parts of the world, wherever we may be, because we have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action,” she says.

“The Honduran people, along with international solidarity, can get out of this unjust situation, promoting hope, rebellion and organising ourselves for the protection of life.”

Jonathan Watts in Panama

P.S.

* “Honduran indigenous rights campaigner wins Goldman prize”. The Guardian. Monday 20 April 2015 04.01 BST Last modified on Monday 20 April 2015 19.08 BST:
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/honduran-indigenous-rights-campaigner-wins-goldman-prize>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.goldmanprize.org>

[2] <http://eng.sinohydro.com>

[3] <http://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2015-agua-zarca-siemens-hr-dossier.pdf>

[4] <https://www.globalwitness.org/fr/campaigns/environmental-activists/how-many-more/>

[5] ESSF (article 37336), [Lenca indigenous leader murdered in Honduras](#).