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Environmentally-Fueled Violence in Honduras: The Case Studies of Berta Cáceres and the Indigenous Tolupan People

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Abstract

Honduras has endured a long history of environmental problems that are fueled by pressure from international bodies to increase economically-fueled activities that result in extreme land degradation. Logging, dam building, mining, and deforestation operations have all been met with extensive protests by indigenous groups, coalitions and movements. In response, interests supporting the continued exploitation of resources have subjected these groups to extreme and systematic violence in the hopes of silencing them. How successful is this use of terror to coerce violence? This paper reviews two case studies of violence in Honduras: the murder of internationally-recognized activist Berta Cáceres, and the violence perpetrated against the Tolupan people.

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Honduras has experienced a long history of environmental problems fueled by pressure from international bodies to increase economically-fueled activities that result in extreme land degradation. Such activities include logging, dam building, mining, and deforestation to clear land for agriculture. The results of these activities have caused extreme levels of pollution and soil erosion, primarily on indigenous land.

To combat the spread of this land degradation, indigenous groups have formed coalitions and protest movements to try and slow the deterioration of their land at the hands of both the Honduran government and international actors who fund these activities. In turn, these powerful bodies have murdered hundreds of activists in an attempt to silence these protests, leading to Honduras earning the title "the world's deadliest country for environmentalists" (Spanne 2016). But has this use of violence succeeded in silencing Hondurans who are skeptical of the idea of development at any cost? How should these multi-layered issues be approached by third-party actors?

This paper will review two instances of the murder of environmentalists in Honduras. The first is an environmental activist and indigenous leader, Berta Cáceres, who made international headlines after her assassination in 2016. In 2015, Cáceres won the Goldman Environmental Prize for her grassroots campaign that successfully stopped one of the world's largest dam builders from building on a river in western Honduras. The second involves the indigenous Tolupan people, who, for nearly a decade, have fought against the logging-fueled deforestation of their ancestral land. Both the Honduran government and the companies involved in the logging have resorted to threats, charging activists with crimes of obstruction, starting fires on their land, and the systematic murders of outspoken Tolupan leaders. These two instances demonstrate the use of terror as a tool to coerce silence, as well as showcase how this type of systematic violence can either suppress knowledge or draw attention to the widespread use of violence against groups and individuals fighting for the preservation of their homes.

The increase of instances of violence against indigenous people and environmental activists can be traced to the 2009 Honduran coup d'état when the Honduran army at the direction of the Honduran Supreme Court ousted President Manuel Zelaya after he attempted to hold a referendum to rewrite the country's constitution (Rosenberg 2009). With the democratically-elected president deposed, Honduras descended into unrest that continues today. It was after 2009 that Honduras saw a huge influx in "megaprojects" that would displace indigenous communities (Conant 2015). Almost 30 percent of the country's land is set aside

for mining, which in turn creates a demand for cheap energy to power mining operations (Conant 2015). To meet this need, the Honduran government began approving hundreds of dam projects, including the Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Dam, the project that Berta Cáceres became internationally acclaimed for protesting (Conant 2015). Projects that further mining operations do little for the citizens of Honduras, instead they greatly benefit overseas mining companies, who, in turn, provide incentives for government officials. Subsequently, these megaprojects are approved with little care given for the impact on indigenous communities, a trend which echoed throughout Central America. Projects such as these also influenced the increased militarization of these countries, as protection for project sites became an industry in itself (Conant 2015). This, in turn, caused an increase in threats, violence, and other intimidation tactics used against indigenous activists and environmentalists.

Berta Cáceres was born into the Lenca people in southwestern Honduras. In 1993, she co-founded the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), an organization through which she led campaigns on issues from illegal logging to the presence of US soldiers on Lenca land (Watts 2015). Though she launched many campaigns, one in particular, garnered international attention and praise for Cáceres' work. In 2006, she discovered that a Honduran company, Desarrollos Energéticos Sociedad Anónima (DESA), in partnership with the Chinese company Sinohydro and the World Bank's International Finance Corporation planned to build a series of hydroelectric dams on the Gualcarque River (Shoichet, Griffiths, and Flournoy 2016). The local Lenca people had not been consulted, violating international law, and the Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Project would have disrupted access to water, food, and medicine, and therefore their traditional way of life. Beginning in 2013, Cáceres led COPINH and the local indigenous community on a year-long protest against the dam at the construction site. Throughout the protest, activists were routinely threatened and harassed by company employees and security, and on July 15, 2013, the Honduran military opened fire on the protestors, killing one and injuring three others (SOAW 2016). Following this episode, Sinohydro and the International Finance Corporation withdrew from the project, but violence against COPINH members who were associated with the protest continued, and in May 2014, two more members were murdered.

This protest earned Cáceres the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize for Central and South America and shifted her from a national figure into an international emblem for environmental and Indigenous activism. Though this was just one project that she mobilized against, the ability of small, grassroots organizations to halt

the economic and political powers of globally-reaching corporations built Cáceres an international legacy and caused several other projects to be halted as international powers withdrew funding and support from similar logging and dam-building endeavors (Goldman Environmental Foundation 2015).

On the night of March 2, 2016, Cáceres was shot dead in her home by armed intruders. Prior to this, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had recommended precautionary measures be taken by the Honduran government, due to an increasing number of threats received by Cáceres after both the success of the dam protest and the international attention environmentalists in Honduras were getting after Cáceres traveled to the US to receive her prize. However, on the day of her death, she was not under protection (GAIPE 2017). COPINH and her family requested an independent investigation into the matters of her death, but the request was ultimately ignored. After this, the Grupo Aesor International de Personas Expertas, or GAIPE, launched an investigation. They discovered that her murder was not an isolated incident, but rather one part of a strategy carried out by DESA, public officials, and State security agencies to "control, neutralize, and eliminate any opposition" (GAIPE 2017). The investigation also revealed that DESA severely lacked funds to complete the Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Project and had used funds originating from the Honduran financial system to not only maintain the project but to "systematically attack members of COPINH and Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores, among others" (GAIPE 2017). Not only does this analysis establish willful negligence by financial institutions, but it also reveals a widespread prior knowledge to the strategies undertaken by DESA and a failure to implement measures to guarantee respect for the human rights of indigenous communities and individual activists (GAIPE 2017). With respect to the specifics of Berta Cáceres' case, GAIPE found that the "planning, execution, and cover-up" of the murder began in November 2015, and many excuses have been fabricated since the murder occurred, including tales of crimes of passion or internal conflict with another member of COPINH (GAIPE 2017).

Despite these attempts to cover-up the truth of her murder, Cáceres' death received global recognition and continued awareness for the struggles of indigenous people in Honduras. The event also sparked questions of international influence in Honduras, as the US-funded police force was heavily involved in the threats issued to her and other members of COPINH in the months prior to her death (Watts 2015). This recognition also gained momentum because of a new report that cited Honduras as the most dangerous place in the world for environmentalists, which had coincided with Cáceres winning the Goldman award in 2015 (Watts

2015). Another layer to the international complexity of this case lies in the training of the soldiers who are involved in the deaths of indigenous activists. Many of them, including the soldier who killed the activist at the dam protest in 2013, were trained at the US School of the Americas (Watts 2015). And though other forms of criminal activity are high in Honduras, the violence against environmentalists and Indigenous peoples reflects a power imbalance that dates back centuries, to an imperialist mindset that has merely evolved into the capitalist-fueled projects decimating sacred indigenous land. The power in these projects lies not only in a governmental unwillingness to intervene but also with yet another layer of complex power imbalance, as many of these corporate-capitalist entities have private security forces that far outnumber Honduran police and military bodies (Watts 2015). The assassination of Berta Cáceres exposed merely a few threads of the web of corruption that has plagued Honduras for over a decade.

While Berta Cáceres is emblematic of a wider campaign of violence against environmentalists, the case of the Tolupan people demonstrates the systematic use of violence to intimidate activists and suppress Indigenous voices. The Tolupan territory is home to vast amounts of natural resources, but it is the pine forest on their land that has been the cause of extreme levels of tension and violence. Specifically, companies target the Tolpuan reserve of Montana de La Flor, where the community still practices traditional lifestyles through agriculture and the use of resources found in the pine forests surrounding the area (Encyclopedia Britannica 1998). Land degradation caused by unethical timber practices results not only in the degradation of forests, but the pollution of water and land, resulting not only in the disruption of current practices but the erasure of hundreds of years of cultural history as well. Since 2009, private timber companies have moved into the region and have set about suppressing the indigenous activists who are trying to protect their ancestral land. Measures such as the criminalization of protesting have resulted in the arrest of many indigenous people, though it is only one tool in the drawn-out strategy of removing the obstacle of the Tolupan people (Krausch 2019). One entity that has been the most active in this region is INMARE, a private timber company owned by businessman Wilder Dominguez (AWARE Simcoe 2019). Though there are measures in place to protect indigenous land, INMARE never carried out the proper consultations with the Tolupan people, and the Honduran government allowed them to continue with the project. The company seeks to harvest more than 16,000 cubic meters of wood from the Tolupan territory (AWARE Simcoe 2019). As of October 2019, INMARE, with the help of the Honduran government, was prosecuting nine indigenous

people for their participation in various protest activities (Krausch 2019).

Along with the criminalization of protests, another strategy used by timber companies is to burn large swaths of forest in the Nombre de Dios mountain range, the southern side of which includes Montaña de La Flor, a Tolupan community (Krausch 2019). However, the identity of who exactly is setting these fires has not yet been discovered (Krausch 2019). In April of 2019, the smoke was so intense that it forced a group of international witnesses from the Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective to retreat after a single afternoon, with many ill due to the smoke (Krausch 2019). The respiratory afflictions that the community now suffers from acts as another deterrent to the pursuit of further protests.

The biggest tool in the repertoire of logging companies is the systematic threats made against indigenous activists, and the murders of both the activists themselves and their families. Of the nine indigenous people who were facing criminal charges, two have had a family member murdered since October of 2019 (Krausch 2019). These are the most recent in a long list of environmental murders stretching back to 2010, nine of which have occurred since 2013 over logging (Phillips 2015). Despite the ability of the community to identify the individuals who carried out these murders, no arrests have been made, and there has been little done by the Honduran government to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future. Like Berta Cáceres, several of these activists had been identified by IACHR as needing additional protection, though none was provided.

Of the many Tolupan people who have been murdered or gone missing, the case of Milgen Idán Soto Ávila demonstrates the pattern of threats and violence that has followed the Tolupan people. On September 27, 2019, twenty-nine-year-old Milgen was killed on his way back to the protest camp, where he had been staying to raise awareness about the murders of two of his family members, José Salomón Matute and Juan Samael Matute (AWARE Simcoe 2019). The two men had died of gunshot wounds a few months previous, on February 25, 2019. They, too, had been beneficiaries of IACHR precautionary measures, after they had been subjected to threats and violence in the context of their work (Rivero 2019). An investigation has been launched, but little effort has been made to seriously address the incident or its perpetrators. The subsequent murder of Milgen returned national attention to the plights of the Tolupan people, as well as demonstrated the trend of family members of murdered individuals receiving threats and often having to relocate. When the implications of where Milgen was found are considered, it is only more evidence that points toward

timber companies. His body was on the land INMARE had just been pillaging (MADJ 2019, AWARE Simcoe 2019).

The murders of these three men are just a small example of the widespread violence experienced by Indigenous groups across Honduras, which is not just confined to the struggles of the Tolupan and Lenca people. The struggle against the ideologies of development at the expense of traditional ways of life continues to plague Honduras, as activist groups battle international powers that are built on a foundation of these ideals. The violations of human rights and the lack of dignity offered to these groups echo throughout international activist communities, but the struggles of indigenous people are not often seriously considered in international policy developments. The murder of Berta Cáceres is an anomaly in that it garnered international attention on the tails of the recognition she had gained through her activism. Her death also resulted in arrests made due to international pressure and a global call for justice, but this instance in no way demonstrates how the majority of these cases are handled. In the murders of José Salomón Matute, Juan Samael Matute, and Milgen Idán Soto Ávila, no arrests have been made.

In many ways, the violence against these groups has succeeded in silencing protests against logging and hydroelectric companies. This is due in part to the cooperation of the Honduran government for economic gain. Between 2009 and 2017, there have been 123 known murders carried out on individuals protecting their land (Gallon and Sandoval 2017).^{*} This number does not include missing individuals, the reports of which are not advertised by the Honduran government, and are difficult for third-party interveners to keep track of. Persons who have gone missing as a result of environmental action are also difficult to track due to the interwoven nature of environmental violence with economic interests and political intervention (Gallon and Sandoval 2017). Much of the violence against activists is fueled by US interests, as the US is Honduras' main trading partner (Gallon and Sandoval 2017). Questions of culpability heavily surround the relationship between Honduras and global hegemonies. Even as the US Embassy pledged \$2.9 million to an organization that helps protect human rights defenders, US-trained soldiers and US-backed companies continue to commit atrocious human rights violations and create a culture of terror in indigenous communities. While justice for the activists who have been killed—many of whom were targeted at home surrounded by their families—is a consistent goal, general global awareness of the continuous struggles of Tolupan and Lenca people could increase pressure to protect the dignity of these groups and their ancestral land.

*My research for this paper revealed the following names. These are the individuals who have been murdered protecting their land since 2009, in relation to these two cases alone: Berta Cáceres, Tomas Garcia, Willam Rodriguez, Irene Meza, Nelson Garcia, Armando Fumez Medina, Maria Enriquez Matute, Ricardo Soto Fumez, Francisco Martinez Marquez, Juan Samuel Matute, José Salomón Matute, Milgen Idán Soto Ávila, Aldolfo Redondo, Luis de los Reges Marcia, Eracimo Vieda Ponce, Fermia Romero, José de los Santos Sevilla.

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About the Author

Hannah Lahey is a senior at UC Santa Barbara, majoring in English, French, and Global Studies. She is passionate about researching and writing about the intersectional effects of globalization and environmentalism on local and regional scales, hoping that her work can foster a more profound understanding of the Global South. She currently conducts research within the English department and is the Editor-in-chief of UCSB's multilingual literary journal. After her graduation in the spring of 2020 she hopes to pursue a graduate degree in Global Studies after working for an environmentally-focused non-profit for one year.