

# HONDURAS

## Indigenous Human Rights and Environmental Defender Berta Cáceres Assassinated

IRTF sent several RRN letters to officials in Honduras and the US to protect the life and liberty of Berta Cáceres

IRTF's team of Rapid Response Network (RRN) letter writers responds to six urgent human rights cases each month. Since the military coup in Honduras in June 2009, many of those letters have been in response to threats against (and assassinations of) human rights defenders there. Peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have been targeted by private companies (some with World Bank funding) who try to forcibly expel them from their lands in order to establish mega projects like dams, mines and industrial agriculture.

Berta Cáceres was the general coordinator of the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares y Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH), which, for the past two decades, has been fighting for higher standards of living for indigenous communities and defending their rights to territory, natural resources and the environment. Berta Cáceres and other indigenous and environmental defenders have been routinely criminalized for their legitimate activities in organizing nonviolent resistance.

Tragically, **on March 2, 2016 Berta Cáceres was assassinated** in her hometown of La Esperanza, Intibucá Department. At 11:45pm, two armed individuals broke down the door of the house, shot and killed here.

The courage and persistence of Berta Cáceres has been celebrated throughout Central America and across the globe. In 2015 she was awarded the Goldman Prize, the world's leading environmental award. She is greatly missed, but her leadership lives on in the resilient people of Honduras.

### Human Rights Solidarity Groups Organize Letter from Congress to US State Dept & Treasury Dept, Expressing Outrage, Demanding Investigation

Immediately after the assassination of Berta Cáceres, human rights groups organized to circulate a sign-on letter in the US House of Representatives to demand an investigation and suspend US military aid to Honduras.

On March 18, U.S. Reps Hank Johnson, D-Georgia, and Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, sent a [letter](#) to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Treasury Secretary Jack Lew requesting support for an independent, international investigation into the murder of Cáceres. **Rep. Marcy Kaptur (OH-9)** was among the 62 US House Members who signed the letter, calling on the State Department and Treasury to pressure Honduras to: support an independent international investigation, implement protection measures for the Cáceres family and COPINH members, ensure that US-funded international banks are not undermining land rights, and review the involvement of Honduran military and police in extrajudicial killings.

March 2016

Bertha Cáceres led protests, filed complaints and organized a local vote against the Agua Zarca dam, which would cut off hundreds of indigenous Lenca people from access to water and hunting grounds they consider sacred. She brought the case to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and lodged appeals with project financiers. The government ignored her appeals, offered bribes to locals and doctored the minutes of community meetings to indicate unanimous support.

In 2013, Cáceres and the local Lenca community organized a blockade at the dam site, which continues today. Protesters have endured violent attacks with machetes, unlawful arrests and torture by security contractors and Honduran soldiers. One of the community leaders, Tomás García, was shot and killed.

The human rights abuses caused financial backers to back away. In late 2013, the project partner from China, Sinohydro, terminated the contract with Desa, the Honduran dam contractor. After public pressure in the US, the International Finance Corporation, a private sector arm of the World Bank, also withdrew from the project, citing concerns over human rights violations. The project continues at another site along the river.

**Rapid Response Network**  
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IRTF calls together the people of northeast Ohio to walk in solidarity with oppressed peoples of Central America and Colombia to achieve peace, justice, human rights, and systemic transformation through nonviolence.  
[www.IRTFcleveland.org](http://www.IRTFcleveland.org)



# US House of Representatives Demands Investigation into Assassination of Berta Cáceres, Indigenous and Environmental Defender of Honduras

Rep Keith Ellison of Minnesota spoke on the US House floor on March 18, 2016

*“These assassinations fit into a pattern of attacks against Honduran activists since the 2009 military coup...It’s time to suspend assistance to the Honduran security forces until such time that we know that they are not penetrated by illegal actors. Until such time that we can assure that when they say they are going to protect somebody those people are protected, and that we can know and have confidence that American taxpayer dollars are not being used to assassinate leaders who are doing nothing more than trying to improve the environment and increase the rights of indigenous people.”*

[letter excerpted]

Dear Secretary Kerry and Secretary Lew:

We write to urge you to act expeditiously to address appalling levels of violence and extreme violations of civil rights in Honduras. We are profoundly saddened and angered by the brutal assassination of Berta Cáceres, and appalled by our government’s continuous assistance to Honduran security forces, so widely documented to be corrupt and dangerous.

To combat harsh violations of human rights and a growing culture of impunity in Honduras, we request that the Department of State and the Department of Treasury use all possible resources to achieve the following:

- Significant pressure on the Honduran government to sign an agreement with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to create an independent international investigation into the murder of Berta Cáceres, as requested by her family;
- Strong pressure on the Honduran Public Prosecutor to allow Berta Cáceres’ family limited access to the investigation, including proposing independent experts.;
- Significant pressure on the Honduran government to implement and comply with the precautionary measures granted by the IACHR to Berta Cáceres’ family, members of COPHIN, and Gustavo Castro;
- Significant pressure on the Honduran government to immediately institute and fund a system of protection for the social activists, human rights defenders, and members of the political opposition who remain at risk from providers of each individual’s choosing. This system could be modeled after other systems in place in countries such as Colombia and Mexico;
- A review of the scheduled increase in funding for the Honduran security forces. We strongly believe that the U.S. government should immediately stop all assistance to Honduran security forces, including training and equipment, given the implication of the Honduran military and police in extrajudicial killings, illegal detentions, torture and other violations of human rights;
- The review of U.S. support for loans to projects in Honduras from U.S.-funded multilateral development banks, including the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund to ensure no future awards are funding projects in Honduras that undermine the land rights of indigenous people and small farmers; and
- Significant pressure on the Honduran government to immediately and permanently stop the Agua Zarca dam, following the request made by Senator Leahy.

The killing of Ms. Cáceres fits into a broad pattern of attacks against and targeted killings of Honduran activists, and community leaders since 2009, in which state security forces have allegedly been involved ...

Honduras and the world have lost an extraordinary advocate for environmental and social justice. We must now do everything in our power to ensure that her tragic assassination will serve as a catalyst for positive change in Honduras, not just empty promises and more of the same. Therefore, we urge you to carefully rethink our country’s close and supportive relationship with the Honduran government.

We look forward to your response to our heartfelt concerns about terrible human rights violations in Honduras.

Sincerely,

(signed by 62 US House Members, including Rep. Marcy Kaptur of Ohio’s 9th district.)