

HONDURAS

Indigenous Rights Campaigner Wins International Environmental Award

RRN letter [excerpted] – to President and Attorney General of Honduras
September 24, 2013

We are writing to express grave concern for the freedom, safety and well-being of **Bertha Cáceres**, Tomás Gómez and Aureliano Molina, who are being punished by the criminal justice system for their activities as human rights defenders. They have been active in the Lenca indigenous people's protest of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam project in Río Blanco, Intibucá Department, by a Honduran-Chinese collaboration, DESA-SINOHYDRO. Bertha Cáceres is the general coordinator of the Consejo Civico de Organizaciones Populares e Indigenas de Honduras (COPINH), fighting for higher standards of living for the Lenca people and defending rights to territory, natural resources and the environment.[...] In May, Bertha Cáceres and Tomás Gómez were charged with carrying an unlicensed gun, which, Cáceres asserts, was planted by the soldiers who searched their vehicle at an army checkpoint.[...] We call for the immediate release of political prisoner Bertha Cáceres.

GOOD NEWS

Cáceres has won the world's leading environmental award for her campaigning against the construction of the Agua Zarca dams. The Goldman prize, the world's leading environmental award, is recognition for the courage she has shown in a long and 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.

The often bloody campaign struggle has achieved notable successes. In 2013, China's Sinohydro—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. World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation, also withdrew from the project, citing concerns over human rights violations.

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.

April 2015

Bertha Cáceres has led protests, filed complaints and organized a local vote against the dam, which would cut off hundreds of 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. For more than a year, the protesters 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 during a peaceful protest. Then, in late 2013, Sinohydro terminated the contract, citing widespread outrage over the killing of García. The project was finally halted, but Cáceres continues to receive death threats.

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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.
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