

Mexican Activist Gustavo Castro Soto Detained as Honduran Government Ostensibly Investigates Berta Caceres' Killing

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A series of murders have earned Honduras the title of murder capital of Central America. Following the gunning down of the indigenous human rights activist Berta Caceres, local authorities' competence is being rigorously questioned. Her shooting death on March 3 was the latest act of homicide in a rash of killings of activists and other government opponents that puts into question Honduras's credibility as a safe country for its citizens.¹ Hondurans, especially indigenous Hondurans, have expressed their demands toward the government's actions regarding the events behind Caceres' killing.

Now, Gustavo Castro Soto, the well-known Mexican environmental campaigner who was with Caceres the day she was shot dead and was himself wounded in the episode but survived by feigning death, continues to be in danger.² Questioned by local authorities, he established that he was trying to return to Mexico, but Honduran authorities refused to let him leave the country. Castro Soto is being detained in Honduras as a key witness in the Caceres' case, and many fear for his safety.³

Castro Soto said he provided Honduran authorities with reliable testimony but had not been informed about procedures concerning the legitimacy of his protection while he continues being held in Honduras.⁴ A nephew, Silvio Carrillo, contends that Castro Soto has not been treated with sufficient respect -- he was denied the opportunity to change his clothes after the attack and was not provided medical attention until three days after he was injured.⁵ Now the Honduran government is being challenged not only as to its ability to solve Caceres' killing, but also with regard to its ability to protect Castro Soto.

Where does Washington stand on all of this? As Larry Birns, Director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, sees it, the U.S. government had no problems when the Obama administration released a presidential order declaring Venezuela a threat to U.S. national security and criticized human rights violations in that South American nation. By contrast, Birns observes, the State Department hesitates to deal with the human rights violations carried out in Honduras, an ally.

Unprotected Protected Witness

Honduran officials have called Castro Soto a "protected witness" and a key figure in their attempt to solve Caceres' killing. Activists note, however, that the Honduran Attorney General's office issued a 30-day immigration alert against Castro Soto, preventing him from leaving the country.⁶ In effect, his rights of free movement have been denied and he has been

made a hostage in a foreign country. In an open letter Castro Soto suggests that the Honduran government is ignoring the danger he still finds himself in: "They have denied me copies of my declarations," he declared. "They have threatened me if I go to Tegucigalpa for my security, and they will file papers to get me."⁷

Additionally, he alleged the authorities were working not to discover who were the true assailants in the crime, but rather to find a so-called plausible suspect among the members of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations in Honduras (*el Consejo Civico de Organizaciones Populares e Indigena de Honduras*, or COPINH), co-founded by Caceres.⁸ Castro Soto suggests in his letter that the crime scene was tampered with and that the government has tried to discredit COPINH's role while giving the authentic criminals the benefit of a doubt.⁹ According to Castro Soto, the government is trying to undermine COPINH's opposition to hydroelectric projects by pointing to COPINH members as primary suspects and declaring that Caceres's murder was an internal matter within that organization.¹⁰

Given the compromised condition of the murder scene and given that Castro Soto has been barred from leaving the country, social organizations following events from Mexico are demanding that Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto ask that the Honduran government release Castro Soto immediately.¹¹ These activists call the measures taken by Honduran authorities "unjustified and excessive."¹² Their petition was signed by 79 organizations affiliated with the National Network of Civic Organizations for Human Rights (*Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos*, or *Red TDT*); 27 member organizations of the Mexican Coalition of Organizations for Water Rights; and organizations including Greenpeace Mexico and Habitat International Coalition America Latina.¹³

Unclear Signals from Tegucigalpa

Castro Soto declared that while the Honduran government insists on pinpointing possible responsibility for Caceres' death, the actual hitmen know he is still alive and may want to return to finish the job.¹⁴ Additionally, various international actors have called attention to suspicious procedures the Honduran government has used in the investigation.

Amnesty International (AI) denounced the investigation of Caceres' killing and criticized the measures taken against Gustavo Castro Soto, the only witness to the crime.¹⁵ The organization observed that Caceres had denounced threats made against her in the past and that the authorities had not yet had the opportunity to question all of the individuals actively accused of the crime, which include policemen, military officials, and landowners. Erika Guevara-Rosas, director of Amnesty for the Americas, said Castro Soto's well-being was at risk given that Honduras does not possess "conditions to guarantee his security."¹⁶

Many suggest that the U.S. State Department has information pertaining to the uncertainties presented in the Caceres case. Eric Holt Gimenez, Executive Director of the Institute for Food and Development Policy at the organization Food First, said in a release that the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project, which Berta was actively opposing before she was killed, exemplifies the U.S. government's intent to privatize the economies of Central American countries, with the help of the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The "modernization" of the Central American infrastructure's "trove

of resources requires energy; hence the demand for hydroelectric power," Holt Gimenez said.¹⁷ The State Department's response to events leading to the killing of Cáceres and other activists furthers its image as "the apex of what has become a structure of terror bent on violently dispossessing the indigenous people of the Rio Lenca of their land," Holt Gimenez said.¹⁸ Central Americans, especially members of the Honduran indigenous communities, have raised resentment against U.S. participation in activities triggering violence in their countries.

Despite protection from the Mexican Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Gustavo Castro Soto is still in danger. Activists in New York have joined their counterparts in Mexico in demonstrating their concern. Today, Tuesday, March 15, demonstrators there will deliver a letter to the Mission of Honduras at the United Nations (UN) in New York demanding that Castro Soto be released and allowed to return to Mexico.¹⁹ Considering that 118 activists have been killed in Honduras in the past 10 years, the country's government and its current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, face a long road in meeting the demands of Hondurans and the international community. The killings of Berta Cáceres and her fellow activists represent an assault on the rule of law and on the reliability of the judicial system in Honduras, even if Gustavo Castro Soto escapes with his life. The Honduran government needs to begin acting in accordance with decency and respect for human life. Its credibility and that of its strongest ally are hanging in the balance.

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¹ García, Mercedes. "The Murder of Berta Cáceres: Highlighting the Dangers Faced by Human Rights Activists in the Northern Triangle." COHA. March 10, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.coha.org/the-murder-of-berta-caceres-highlighting-the-dangers-faced-by-human-rights-activists-in-the-northern-triangle/>.

² Agren, David. "Berta Cáceres Murder: Honduras Blocks Sole Witness from Leaving Country." The Guardian. March 08, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/08/berta-caceres-honduras-blocks-sole-witness-from-leaving-country>.

³ "Exigen a Peña Que Solicite a Honduras El Retorno Inmediato De Activista - Proceso." Proceso. 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/432855/exigen-a-pena-solicite-a-honduras-retorno-inmediato-del-activista-gustavo-castro>.

⁴ Agren, David. "Berta Cáceres Murder: Honduras Blocks Sole Witness from Leaving Country." The Guardian. March 08, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/08/berta-caceres-honduras-blocks-sole-witness-from-leaving-country>.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Castro Soto, Gustavo. "Mexicano Dice Que Escenario Del Crimen De Berta Cáceres Fue Modificado." Diario La Prensa. March 7, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/937438-410/mexicano-dice-que-escenario-del-crimen-de-berta-caceres-fue-modificado>.

⁸ García, Mercedes. "The Murder of Berta Cáceres: Highlighting the Dangers Faced by Human Rights Activists in the Northern Triangle." COHA. March 10, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.coha.org/the-murder-of-berta-caceres-highlighting-the-dangers-faced-by-human-rights-activists-in-the-northern-triangle/>.

⁹ Castro Soto, Gustavo. "Mexicano Dice Que Escenario Del Crimen De Berta Cáceres Fue Modificado." Diario La Prensa. March 7, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/937438-410/mexicano-dice-que-escenario-del-crimen-de-berta-caceres-fue-modificado>.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ "Exigen a Peña Que Solicite a Honduras El Retorno Inmediato De Activista - Proceso." Proceso. 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/432855/exigen-a-pena-solicite-a-honduras-retorno-inmediato-del-activista-gustavo-castro>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Castro Soto, Gustavo. "Mexicano Dice Que Escenario Del Crimen De Berta Cáceres Fue Modificado." *Diario La Prensa*. March 7, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/937438-410/mexicano-dice-que-escenario-del-crimen-de-berta-caceres-fue-modificado>.

¹⁵ "Exigen a Peña Que Solicite a Honduras El Retorno Inmediato De Activista - Proceso." *Proceso*. 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/432855/exigen-a-pena-solicite-a-honduras-retorno-inmediato-del-activista-gustavo-castro>.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Gimenez, Eric Holt. "Truth Held Captive: Murder, Honduras and the Democratic Primaries." *The Huffington Post*. March 10, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/truth-held-captive-murder_b_9424526.html.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ "Piden Ante ONU Que Salga Castro Soto De Honduras -." *La Jornada San Luis*. March 06, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://lajornadasanluis.com.mx/nacional/piden-ante-onu-salga-castro-soto-honduras/>.