



Guilty by Association: How the United States is Permitting Human Rights Abuses in Honduras

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Guilty by Association: How Washington is Complicit in Human Rights Abuses in Honduras

In an opinion piece that appeared in the *New York Times* on August 11, titled “How the Most Dangerous Place on Earth got Safer,” Sonia Nazario paints a misguided picture of Honduras as a country that was once ravaged with violence, but has since been bravely rescued and is now stable thanks to aid from the United States.ⁱ On the one hand, the author highlights an important point: *some* violence-prevention programs funded by the United States in Honduras are indeed working, and their focus on human capital and social justice is a welcome departure from the “iron-fisted” security measures that have characterized U.S. aid in the past. What the author neglects to mention, however, is that an enormous portion of the same aid package is also funneled to a government that, in conjunction with a corrupt military and police force, is carrying out massive human rights violations against its citizens. Given the increasing number of activists killed with impunity under the rightwing government, whose power the United States helped to consolidate following the 2009 coup against democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya, continued funding to Honduras deserves additional scrutiny.

A Contradictory Approach

As Nazario rightfully acknowledges, the withdrawal of all funding to Honduras could be harmful because it would interrupt successful violence-prevention initiatives at the local level. The pilot programs she describes, in which the U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.) partners with community leaders to implement programs that engage and counsel gang members and other vulnerable youth, are both novel and exemplary. With such programs, the United States finally seems to acknowledge that simply intensifying security measures to kill off gang members does nothing but fuel the fire. Nazario admirably emphasizes the need to address the long-term structural factors behind gang violence and advocates for the implementation of more of these types of programs throughout Central America. Furthermore, in “a striking rebuke against the rising isolationists in American politics,” Nazario highlights

the positive impact that U.S. spending can have for both Americans—in terms of stemming the flow of migrants— as well as for marginalized populations in the developing world.ⁱⁱ The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), a longtime proponent of grassroots and social justice programs, applauds Nazario for her intentions in this respect.ⁱⁱⁱ

While Nazario is not wrong to shed light on the specific U.S. initiatives that are succeeding in violence prevention, it is far too soon to claim that the United States has single-handedly created a dramatically safer Honduras. On the contrary, such a position ignores the complex roots of the violence in Honduras, and leads one to question whether the author is not trying to obfuscate U.S. complicity in the violence. As Nazario mentions in her article, crime and violence are major issues plaguing Honduran society, but she erroneously attributes most of this violence to gangs, narco-trafficking and other forms of organized crime that the Honduran government needs help in dealing with. To genuinely contribute to the overall sustainable development of Honduras, it is essential for the United States to acknowledge that much of the gang and drug-related violence, as well as the scores of uninvestigated murders of activists, are politically motivated and are carried out at the urging of elements of the military and the police. The article effectively distracts readers from the government’s abysmal human rights record and its own role in perpetuating violence in a country where 98 percent of crimes go unsolved.^{iv} Amnesty International’s Marselha Gonçalves Margerin recently told National Public Radio that “the U.S. government has been treating these [Central American] governments as victims of organized crimes and not really making them responsible for how they are treating, and failing to protect, their citizens.”^v

Berta Cáceres: A Symbol of Impunity

This year, the collusion between private actors, the military and the government in Honduras, was placed in the international spotlight. The assassination of indigenous activist Berta Cáceres six months ago is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of human rights violations in Honduras over the past seven years. Her death, however, is the “smoking gun” that makes it impossible for the United States to turn a blind eye to the Honduran government’s complicity in human rights violations against opposition activists.

Just before midnight on March 2 of this year, 44-year-old Berta Cáceres, founder of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Hondurans (COPINH), was gunned down in her home. In the months leading up to her death, Berta had been carrying out a peaceful yet vocal campaign to prevent the construction of the Agua Zarca dam on a sacred river belonging to the indigenous Lenca population. While the government was entirely aware of the threats to Berta’s life, and was repeatedly urged by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to offer her protection, any protection given was clearly inadequate. Given Berta’s stature as the winner of the international 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, and an inspiring leader of a global

movement to preserve indigenous rights, her death triggered fear among activists all over Honduras.

The response of the Honduran government to Cáceres' death was wholly inadequate and emblematic of the way it deals with human rights violations against opposition leaders. Instead of immediately interviewing individuals from any of the 33 construction companies against whom she had lodged complaints of death threats, the government selectively interrogated individuals within Berta's own COPINH organization. It was not until May 2, exactly two months after Berta's assassination, that the government finally launched a so-called "comprehensive" investigation to find the culprits.^{vi}

This state-led "Jaguar Operation," initiated in large part due to growing international scrutiny over the government's inaction, finally resulted in the arrests of five individuals. Unsurprisingly, two of the charged individuals were linked to the construction company behind the dam, *Desarrollos Energéticos S.A.* (DESA), two others were active members of the military and one was a retired military officer. Yet evidence increasingly indicates that the assassins were not alone in plotting the attack, and that they received their orders from the state.^{vii} In a previous article, COHA referred to the Jaguar Operation as a "sham investigation" that "was designed not to serve justice," but was rather a "strategy to protect the masterminds behind Berta Cáceres' murder."^{viii}

What the inherently biased investigation did reveal, however, is "the blatant collusion between private interests linked to DESA, active members of the Honduran army, and a corrupt administration," according to COHA Research Associate, Emma Tyrou.^{ix} A June report in *The Guardian* exposed further proof of the state's ties to the murder. The article disclosed testimony from a former Honduran military sergeant Rodrigo Cruz, suggesting that Berta's name had appeared on a military "hit-list." "I'm 100% certain that Berta Cáceres was killed by the army," he told the newspaper.^x The government's reluctance to interview the sole eyewitness to the murder—Mexican activist Gustavo Soto who was also a victim of the attack—as well as its initial attribution of the crime to little more than a failed attempt at burglary, further suggests the government's likely role in scuttling the investigation.^{xi}

In the six months since Berta's death, the administration of President Juan Orlando Hernandez has continuously neglected the pleas of her family and the international community to allow an independent investigation to take place. Since the IAHCR derives its mandate from the Organization of the American States, and is therefore a competent authority in Honduras, it is the only body that can create a commission of independent experts to carry out an impartial investigation.^{xii} "The Honduran state is too closely linked to the murder of my mother to carry out an independent investigation," Berta's youngest daughter, Laura Cáceres, 23, told the *Guardian* in May.^{xiii} "It is the government who awarded the dam commission and the government who sent military and police to work with DESA's private security guards,

who threatened my mother.”^{xiv} To date, the Honduran state has refused to allow experts from the IACHR into the country, further suggesting it has something to hide.^{xv}

As the closest ally of the right-wing Honduran government and the country’s largest bilateral donor, the United States is uniquely positioned to pressure President Hernandez to do something about the appalling state of human rights in Honduras. At the very least, such pressure could seek to persuade him to allow an independent investigation of the Cáceres murder to take place.

The Honduran government’s murky role in the case of Berta Cáceres illustrates the controversial nature of U.S. aid to the country. Berta’s assassination is not an isolated incident and the United States cannot view it as such—she remains a symbol of the hundreds of Honduran activists targeted and killed by government, military, and police forces. Just days after Berta’s death, environmental activist, Nelson García was killed, and in July Lesbia Yaneth Garcia, another COPINH employee, was found dead with a machete wound in her skull. At least one member of the military and one man working on the hydroelectric project she was protesting have been implicated in Yaneth García’s death.^{xvi} *Global Witness* recently reported that Honduras is the second most deadly country in which to be an environmental activist, and the Spanish newspaper, *El País*, described the nation as “a field of death for environmentalists.”^{xvii} So while the overall number of homicides in the country may have decreased over the past few years, as Nazario notes in her article, the number of activists killed has markedly increased. Since 2010, 114 environmentalists have been murdered in Honduras.^{xviii} And environmental defenders are not alone; anyone who publicly voices opposition to the state faces similar danger. According to the National Human Rights Commissioner of Honduras (CONADEH), 43 journalists were murdered between 2010 and 2014, and only twelve of the alleged murders had been brought to trial by the end of that year.^{xix} The IACHR received reports of the murders of 86 legal practitioners and 22 human rights defenders in the same period.^{xx} The Human Rights Watch World Report 2016 also found that peasants’ rights activists as well as LGBTQ activists have been victims of hundreds of uninvestigated attacks.^{xxi} Essentially, it is no longer possible to express dissatisfaction with the government without becoming a target of the state.

Towards a “More Safe” Honduras

The uptick in activist murders can be traced back to the period directly following the 2009 coup d’état against President Manuel Zelaya. Zelaya had supported rural peasant and environmental movements, such as Berta’s, in their fight against land dispossession and mining. However, after 2009, the new administration led by President Porfirio Lobo cut subsidies for social programs, rolled back progressive land reforms, and sought to open infrastructure construction to foreign investors, declaring in 2011 that Honduras was “open for business.”^{xxii} Encouraged by the United States, the successive rightwing governments have proceeded to grant mining concessions and dam-building contracts to foreign companies, displacing many indigenous communities

in the process.^{xxiii} This has made peasants' rights groups and indigenous activists—who argue that the affected communities were not properly consulted by the foreign firms—political opponents of the government.^{xxiv} As Greg Grandin reported in *The Nation*, “since Zelaya’s ouster, there’s been an all-out assault on these decent people—torture, murder, militarization of the countryside, repressive laws, such as the absolute banning of the morning-after pill, the rise of paramilitary security forces, and the wholesale deliverance of the country’s land and resources to transnational pillagers.”^{xxv}

While the existing evidence is not sufficient to prove the United States’ involvement in plotting the coup, it is now clear that the State Department under Hillary Clinton was a key player in legitimizing the post-coup government and effectively prevented Zelaya from running for re-election. Though the Obama administration initially criticized the military coup that put Roberto Michelletti in the presidency and other leaders of the coup in his cabinet, the United States was the first to recognize the new Porfirio Lobo government that was put in place by elections months later.^{xxvi} This recognition was granted despite the fact that all opposition candidates had boycotted the elections and all international observers (besides the U.S. Republican party) withdrew, refusing to recognize the elections’ legitimacy.^{xxvii} While the U.N. General Assembly called for the “immediate and unconditional return of Zelaya,” and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) refused to recognize the outcome of the elections, the U.S. State Department blocked the Organization of American States’ (OAS) resolution to not recognize elections held under the de facto government.^{xxviii} Instead the United States praised Lobo for “restoring democracy” and promoting “national reconciliation.”^{xxix}

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Washington continues to stand idly by as the rule of law in Honduras deteriorates. While former Secretary of State and current presidential candidate Hillary Clinton continues to deflect criticism of her involvement in the 2009 coup and her running mate, Tim Kaine, touts his time in Honduras as the most formative eight months of his life, the U.S. government maintains its commitment to propping up the very agents who are perpetuating injustice. Since 2009, the U.S. has sent \$200 million USD in aid directly to the military and police force in the name of fighting crime and drug trafficking.^{xxx} Instead, this money has allowed the state and the military to maintain the status quo, which is the violent repression of its citizens. Only a shallow analysis could describe such aid as a heroic contribution towards a safer Honduras. By solely focusing on the role of *non-military* spending in Honduras, Nazario’s article upholds the narrative that an infusion of U.S. taxpayer dollars will help to pull Honduras from the depths of poverty and violence. Last year, Congress approved a \$750 million USD budget for the Alliance for Prosperity Plan (APP) to be administered by the U.S., Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran governments. The plan aims to address the “push factors” of violence in the so-called Northern Triangle. As analyzed in previous COHA articles, the APP could, in theory, be beneficial, but an alarming 60 percent of the funds to Honduras go to military financing and training.^{xxxi} It remains to be seen how the vague conditions on this aid play out in practice.^{xxxii}

With so much money invested in the training of the Honduran security forces, the United States cannot remain oblivious to the mounting evidence that the military is behind the recent murders. *Fusina*, one of the units of the military that allegedly received the “hit-list” with Berta Cáceres’ name on it, receives direct military training from the U.S. Marine Corps and the F.B.I.^{xxxiii}

The Honduran police force teems with corruption as well. Marvin Ponce, Vice President of the Honduran Congress estimates that over 40 percent of the police force is involved in organized crime.^{xxxiv} Additionally, Human Rights Watch reports that “the use of lethal force by the national police is a chronic problem... Investigations into police abuses are marred by inefficiency and corruption ... and impunity is the rule.”^{xxxv} Perhaps even more concerning, the assassinations of two Honduran investigators (in 2009 and 2011) looking at the complicity between drug traffickers, police leaders, and organized crime, were found to be linked to top Honduran police officials, according to leaked documents.^{xxxvi} Of course, the Honduran government has fiercely refuted claims that either the state or the military are involved in human rights violations.^{xxxvii} Following President Hernandez’ lead, U.S. State Department spokesperson John Kirby claimed at a June 22 press briefing that “there’s no specific credible allegations of gross violations of human rights” in Honduras.^{xxxviii}

So why is it that the United States so steadfastly supports the Honduran state, despite all the evidence that it is allowing its citizens to be murdered with impunity? The answer stems from the strategic economic and military importance of Honduras. Honduras holds the United States’ only air base between South America and the United States, and since the contra war in Nicaragua in the 1980s, Honduras has served as the regional hub for U.S. military operations in Central America. American corporations also have extensive mining and hydroelectric investments in Honduras, as well as banana companies like Dole and Chiquita, and apparel, auto industry and other manufacturing plants. Out of all the Central American governments, the Honduran government is also the most ideologically aligned with the United States.

Public Pressure Mounts in the United States

Aside from Berta Cáceres’ three daughters who have traveled the world in recent months to call for international pressure on the Honduran government, international organizations, civil society groups, and U.S. policymakers alike have urged the Obama administration to leverage its financial support of the Honduran state to call for justice. Ever since 2009, in the face of mounting evidence that the United States is funding a criminal regime whose collusion with private interests is now well-documented, pressure on the U.S. government has grown. In 2010, thirty congressmen sent a letter to then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, urging the Obama administration to stop funding the Honduran state, especially the police and military, until the culture of impunity is addressed.^{xxxix}

After years of similar pressure on the State Department, including another congressional letter to Secretary John Kerry last year with lackluster results, opposition to the funding reached a crescendo this summer after Berta's death. In June and July, a vocal campaign to "Stop Aid to Honduras" gained traction in the United States, using the U.S. Leahy law as the crux of its argument. Under this law, the State Department and Department of Defense are prohibited from contributing funds to any foreign military unit where there is "credible evidence of human rights abuses."^{xi} The United States is also prohibited from providing funds to a government instituted through a military coup.^{xii} Despite a Wikileaks-exposed email from the U.S. ambassador to Honduras stating that the overthrow of Zelaya undoubtedly "constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup," the Obama administration has avoided calling it a *military* coup so that aid can continue unabated.^{xiii}

On June 14, Henry C. Johnson (D-GA) proposed the Berta Cáceres Human Rights Act, which offers the opportunity for the United States to hold the Honduran government accountable for its actions. The bill would halt all aid to Honduras for military operations, training, and arms until the government carries out exhaustive and transparent investigations into the deaths of activists that have been linked to the Honduran police and military.^{xiiii} This is the bill to which Nazario refers in her article, classifying the legislation as "an attack from the left." Though she acknowledges that the human rights concerns that the bill represents are legitimate, she claims that its passage "would be a mistake," due to the beneficial violence prevention programs carried out by the police.

Conclusion

Because of the United States' tightly bound relationship with Honduras—most importantly, the Honduran government's dependency on U.S. aid—Washington has a responsibility to the Honduran people to make a serious commitment to ending the ongoing human rights crisis. Simply providing the government funds to "reform itself" will no longer suffice. It is time for the United States to recognize its complicity in funding a criminal regime, and halt all aid to the Honduran military and police until that government can prove its own commitment to justice. Once this happens, the United States can continue to fund beneficial social justice programs such as the ones Nazario mentions in her article. Until that happens, however, human and environmental rights defenders will face extreme peril at the hands of a government that does nothing to protect them and is in collusion with the very actors who use violence to maintain control over marginalized groups. In Berta Cáceres' own words in her acceptance speech of the 2015 Goldman Prize, "*Despertemos, despertemos humanidad, ya no hay tiempo*"—wake up humanity, we're out of time.

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