

Rights Action
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Why Was Tomas Garcia Murdered By Honduran Soldiers, In The Repression Capital Of The Americas, the Murder Capital Of The World?

- What To Do?: see below
- How To Support Human Rights In Honduras?: see below

THE MURDER OF TOMAS GARCIA BY THE HONDURAN MILITARY

By School of the Americas Watch (www.soaw.org)

(Original: <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/equipo-sur/263-stories-from-honduras/4129-tomasgarcia>)

Tomas Garcia was a father of seven who would have turned 50 this December. He was a husband, father, brother, and community leader, serving as an auxiliary and on his community's Indigenous Council.

On Monday, July 15, his life was brutally taken away by the Honduran military when a soldier shot and killed him at close range in broad daylight in front of 200-300 people. He did not have a gun, he did not hurt anyone. His crime? Opposing the construction of a hydroelectric dam being constructed in his Indigenous Lenca community's territory against their will, in violation of ILO Convention 169 and the Honduran government's promises to consult Indigenous communities about projects in their territory. Why Tomas? He was one of the first to arrive, leading the delegation that had come to deliver a message to the companies constructing the dam at their installations in Rio Blanco. A soldier fired at him not once, not twice, at least three times from only 6 or so feet away, according to eyewitnesses.

Tomas had gone to the day's activities with his 17-year old son was also shot several times, receiving serious injuries in his back, chest, and arm and requiring hospitalization. Two others were also injured by the army's bullets. According to eyewitnesses, a soldier who had been firing into the air lowered his M-16 and fired multiple shots directly at Tomas. Tomas had recently arrived at the company's installations as one of those who was at the front of the delegation; the whole group had not even had time to arrive and many were still walking down the hill that leads to the offices. As one woman from the community explained, "We didn't even have a conversation with them, they didn't say anything to us. They didn't even wait for us to say why we there, they didn't wait for us to say what we had to say. We saw Tomas fall, he fell from shots, including to his head."

Take action: Call for an end to US military aid to Honduras and on the Honduran authorities to respect the rights of the Indigenous Lenca people of Rio Blanco:
http://org.salsalabs.com/o/727/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=13661

"DEVELOPMENT" PROJECTS AND BULLETS v. COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

The murder of Tomas Garcia by the Honduran armed forces is only the latest escalation in a systemic campaign of repression against the Rio Blanco Indigenous Lenca people to try to force them into accepting a hydroelectric dam being illegally constructed in their territory. Since April 1, the communities in the area, organized in the Indigenous Lenca organization COPINH, have

been blocking the access road to the dam site. The access road, like the dam, is in their ancestral territory, surrounded by their fields of corn, beans, bananas, yucca, and lush forests that they have carefully stewarded for hundreds of years.

At first, the Honduran National Police evicted them multiple times – despite them being on their own land. After each eviction, they simply returned to the site. Personnel of the companies building the dam -- DESA and SINOHYDRO – threatened COPINH leaders. Community members started receiving death threats from employees of the company who live in the area. Armed men appeared at the site of the roadblock and lurked around at night.

Then on May 17, soldiers from the First Battalion of Engineers, commanded by SOA graduate Col. Milton Amaya, were deployed to the area and have stayed there ever since. They essentially serve as security guards for the dam companies, even driving company machinery to attempt to get it past the roadblock, and live, eat, and sleep at DESA/SINOHYDRO's installations. Soldiers have repeatedly intimidated those who oppose the dam: they have harassed them, told them they were criminals, came into their yards, held an M-16 up to one of them, threatened women and children, and fired shots when community leaders walked by.

Having the police and military on their side only seems to have emboldened company employees to increase their threats and attacks on those who oppose the project. According to testimonies, employees of the company who live in the area attacked a man who had just come from the roadblock with machetes —cutting up his face and sending him to the hospital. They threw rocks at another, and threatened many in the community with death, including children. “I’m going to come to the Roble and you know how you’ll all end up. In pieces.” “I’m going to kill all of you.”

Bullets passed above the site of the roadblock where people were sitting one Monday afternoon, people in ski masks appeared near the house of a family that is strongly against the dam, unknown figures lurked outside the house of the President of the Indigenous Council, and a known hitman arrived at the site of the roadblock.

In spite of all of this, the Indigenous Lenca people did not give up. Day after day, in the rain or in the heat, in spite of death threats and bullets that passed overhead, men, women, and children came to the roadblock to defend their land. After Tomas' death, they continue to do so, now continuing forward in his honor, despite the intense accusations against them aimed at discrediting their struggle in the wake of Tomas' murder.

“CRIMINALIZATION” OF COPINH (Indigenous Lenca Organization)

To justify the death of Tomas Garcia, DESA and the military launched a media campaign criminalizing COPINH and the Rio Blanco community. DESA issued a media release claiming that “because of the violent intervention of the COPINH protestors, Mr. Tomas Garcia died and Mr. Alan Garcia Dominguez was injured. This morning, minor Cristian Anael Madrid Munoz also died, who is the grandson of one of the principal leaders of the zone and was doing agricultural work on his property when he was surprised by the protestors” and that “The actions which occurred today were deliberately premeditated by the principal leaders of COPINH.”

Reading DESA's release and the corporate news accounts of what occurred, one would think that COPINH itself murdered Tomas Garcia instead of the Honduran military. Area residents who heard TV news accounts got the impression that COPINH was violent and threatening people, not that they were in fact the victims of threats and violence. DESA also accuses the protestors of a second death, which is said to have occurred in a separate location while community

members were gathered around the body of Tomas Garcia at the company's installations, in sight of the police and military. Community leaders report that the Police officer in charge even told them he was a witness that they were all still with him at DESA's installations when gunshots were heard from up the hill, where Christian Madrid lives. But that doesn't matter when DESA and Chinese owned SINOHYDRO – the world's largest dam-building company -- are losing money because the subsistence farmers of Rio Blanco refuse to let their river be privatized.

The attacks portraying the protestors as armed further contradict the reality one finds when one visits the zone. The dirt-poor Indigenous farmers of Rio Blanco have machetes and sticks, not guns. As one Indigenous Lenca woman and mother who is a leader in the struggle against the dam explained, "We don't have any guns. They do have guns because they are invading our land. They buy big guns to walk around threatening the lives of our compañeros, of all the members of Rio Blanco. They see us as an enemy and walk around with guns. Since they make money selling our land with that they can buy guns to take away the life of another person, another human life. We are all humans in this world... We have to respect each other's faces. We are all the same. Regardless of how we look, we are children of God."

The accusations of violence, murder, and possibly even terrorism against COPINH are a strategic escalation of the criminalization campaign aimed at destroying COPINH's ability to resist the Agua Zarca Dam and numerous other projects planned for Indigenous Lenca territory. On May 24, soldiers from the First Battalion of Engineers detained Berta Caceres and Tomas Gomez of COPINH, claiming to have found a gun in their vehicle to try to criminalize them.

It appears that soldiers themselves may have placed a gun in their vehicle to fabricate the charges. SOA graduate Milton Amaya, Commander of the First Battalion of Engineers, made accusations in the press. However, the soldiers couldn't even keep their stories straight and the charges were provisionally dismissed on June 13th. Nevertheless, the state has appealed and is still trying to criminalize Berta.

Now, COPINH and the Rio Blanco community have been criminalized and defamed in the press, in an effort to justify the murder of Tomas Garcia and potentially justify criminal charges against COPINH leaders or even more murders in the area. A similar tactic has been used in the Bajo Aguan, where SOA-graduate Col. Alfaro started a media campaign earlier this year accusing the campesinos (small farmers) of being armed and violent to justify the deaths in an area where over 100 small farmers have been murdered.

2009 MILITARY COUP & "HONDURAS IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS"

Why is the Honduran government so invested in breaking Indigenous Lenca resistance to the Agua Zarca Dam project in the remote western mountains of Honduras?

The Agua Zarca Dam is not an isolated project but part of the overall scheme of privatization and looting of Honduras' natural resources in the name of foreign investment. It is part of the "Honduras is open for business" scheme that was embarked upon following the 2009 military coup in Honduras to enrich the Honduran elite and multi-national corporations. Just months after the coup, the Honduran National Congress passed a General Water Law enabling the country's water resources to be concession to third parties – enabling privatization of rivers.

Then in 2010, the Congress approved a package of 41 hydroelectric dam projects throughout Honduras, including the Agua Zarca project and other dams in Indigenous territory. They also passed a new mining law, which has yet to go into effect, and a law creating Special Development Regions, commonly known as model cities. And in July 2013, the Congress passed

a law enabling the government to sell off "idle" resources, including natural resources, mining, energy, and more, in order to pay the internal debt.

All these laws passed by the post-coup governments are part of the drive to privatize and sell off natural resources – from water, to minerals, to the land itself-- for exploitation and profit by corporations, especially foreign corporations. As Honduran President Porfirio Lobo explained at the signing of an agreement with SINOHYDRO to build three other dams on one of Honduras' longest rivers, "I'm determined to promote these types of projects and make Honduras more open to all foreign investors." While enriching business executives and investors around the world, this robs Honduran communities, especially Indigenous and campesino communities who live off the land, of the land and resources they depend on to survive.

And so the Honduran military has been dispatched to destroy the resistance of the Rio Blanco Indigenous people just as they have been dispatched to the Bajo Aguan where organized campesinos struggle for land. While Tomas Garcia lived with his wife and seven children in a small house with a dirt floor, the US was sending millions and millions into military aid in Honduras. Some of this aid probably found its way to the unit that used one of its M-16s to murder Tomas and terrorize the Lenca people for standing up for their rights.

It is no accident that the military is used to enforce the turning over of Honduras' natural resources to corporations; this is part of the US neoliberal agenda. US aid includes training, whether at the School of the Americas or by the US military on Honduran soil. For instance, Second Lt. Gonzalez, who was in charge of the soldiers stationed in Rio Blanco, reported he was trained in Special Operations by US military instructors. David Castillo, the Director of DESA, the company building the dam, attended West Point Military Academy and previously served as the Assistant to the Director of Intelligence of the Honduran Armed Forces.

The military's effort to criminalize the Rio Blanco community goes up to the highest levels – General Rene Osorio Canales, the Commander of the Honduran Armed Forces who was trained at the School of the Americas, spoke out to publicly justify the military's murder of Tomas Garcia.

Click here to send an e-mail to US officials urging them to end all US aid to the Honduran military and especially ensure no aid goes to the First Battalion of Engineers, which continues to operate in Rio Blanco:

http://org.salsalabs.com/o/727/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=13661

AMERICAN-CANADIAN CONNECTION

Please send copies of this information, and your own letters, to your Member of Parliament, Congress members and Senators, and to your own media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government Honduras, the country has become the 'Murder Capital of the world'. State repression has again reached the levels of the worst years of the 1980s. Since the coup, the U.S. and Canadian governments have 'legitimized the illegitimate' post-coup regime. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup. In no small part, this repressive regime remains in power due to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada.

- CONGRESS: <http://www.house.gov/> to get info for your member of Congress, and call: 202-224-3121
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