

US-Funded & Trained Honduran Army Unit (Death Squad) Had Berta Caceres on Hit List

<http://us9.campaign-archive1.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=4b1b954424>

- Please read The Guardian article below, slowly and carefully.

This is how brutal and intentional the Honduran regime is that, since the 2009 military coup, has been completely supported militarily, economically and politically by the governments of the US and Canada. North American corporate and investor activity in Honduras (in mining, garment industry, tourism, banana and fruit production, African palm, etc.) have continued or increased since the military coup.



No justice has been done for the assassination of Berta Caceres and attempted killing of Gustavo Castro, let alone the 100s of people killed and assassinated by the regime since the 2009 coup.

- In the US: Please pressure – and pressure again - your elected representatives to pass U.S. Legislation: "The Berta Caceres Human Rights In Honduras Act" (H.R.5474)
<http://us9.campaign-archive2.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=b3565f6620>

- In Canada: Please sign (and pressure your own Member of Parliament to sign) this Petition to the Canadian Government: “Justice for Berta Cáceres, Investigation into Canada’s Role in Honduras”: <https://petitions.parl.gc.ca/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-412>

Berta Cáceres's Name Was On Honduran Military Hitlist, Says Former Soldier

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/21/bertha-caceres-name-honduran-military-hitlist-former-soldier>

By Nina Lakhani, 21 June 2016

A unit trained by US special forces was ordered to kill the environmental activist who was slain in March, according to an ex-member who now fears for his life. One human rights expert said: ‘This ... reinforces calls that the US must withdraw military aid from Honduras where there’s been a bloodbath since the 2009 coup.’

Berta Cáceres, the murdered environmental campaigner, appeared on a hitlist distributed to US-trained special forces units of the Honduran military months before her death, a former soldier has claimed.

Lists featuring the names and photographs of dozens of social and environmental activists were given to two elite units, with orders to eliminate each target, according to First Sergeant Rodrigo Cruz, 20.

Cruz’s unit commander, a 24-year-old lieutenant, deserted rather than comply with the order. Cruz – who asked to be identified by a pseudonym for fear of reprisal – followed suit, and fled to a neighbouring country. Several other members of the unit have disappeared and are feared dead.

“If I went home, they’d kill me. Ten of my former colleagues are missing. I’m 100% certain that Berta Cáceres was killed by the army,” Cruz told the Guardian.

Cáceres, an indigenous Lenca leader who won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015 for a campaign against the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam, was shot dead in her home in March. Before her murder, she had reported 33 death threats linked to the campaign and had warned international human rights delegates that her name was on a hitlist.

According to Cruz, Cáceres’s name appeared on a list given to a military police unit in the Inter-institutional Security Force (Fusina), which last summer received training from 300 US marines and FBI agents.

Five men have been arrested for her murder, including Major Mariano Díaz Chávez, an active-duty major in the Honduran army. Díaz had previously participated in joint US-Honduran military operations in Iraq, and is reported by local media to be a graduate of the elite Tesón special operations course which is partly taught by US special forces. Diaz was a military police instructor when arrested, but has since been given a dishonourable discharge.

Annie Bird, director of the group Rights and Ecology which documents human rights abuses in Honduras, said: “Cruz’s testimony suggests death squads are targeting political opposition, but the justice system is so broken, and directly controlled by figures implicated in corruption, that there is no one [in Honduras] who can credibly investigate.”

The Guardian interviewed Cruz several times by telephone and video call, and spoke with several people – academics, community leaders and activists – who have interviewed Cruz and confirmed his identity and military background.

Cruz enlisted in the army in December 2014, and after three months of basic training, was transferred to the 7th Battalion of the military police, which was created in 2013 to replace a civilian police force mired in allegations of corruption and abuse.

He completed two gruelling specialist training camps, including the Tesón course, where he received instruction from foreign military advisers including Americans, Colombians and instructors who spoke a foreign language which Cruz could not identify. Last year, the Tesón course became the subject of intense controversy when footage emerged showing a trainee being forced to eat the head of a dog.

During his training, Cruz was hospitalized twice with dehydration, but he completed the course and in October last year, Cruz and 15 other men from his battalion were picked to serve in the Xatruch taskforce – one of two multi-agency forces in Honduras deployed on specialist counter-narcotics and anti-gang operations.

The Xatruch force covers the Caribbean coast, which has become an important way station for drug cartels smuggling cocaine from South America to the US. The second taskforce, Fusina, operates nationwide.

In mid-December, Cruz’s commander gathered his subordinates after a Tuesday evening football match and showed them several sheets of paper with names, photographs, addresses and phone numbers of each target. One list was assigned to their unit; the second to a similar unit in Fusina.

“The lieutenant said he wasn’t willing to go through with the order as the targets were decent people, fighting for their communities. He said the order came from the joint chiefs of staff [and] he was under pressure from the Xatruch commander to comply,” Cruz said. A few days later, the lieutenant left the base and has not been seen since.

It was not the first time Cruz had seen the lists. A few weeks earlier in Punta Piedra, a town on the Caribbean coast, similar sheets of paper had fallen out of his commander's vest in the jeep which Cruz drove. "I only had them in my hand for 20 or 30 seconds but I recognised some faces as leaders from the Bajo Aguán [region]. I didn't say anything," Cruz said.

The Bajo Aguán region – where the Xatruch taskforce is based – has been the setting for a string of violent land disputes between powerful palm oil magnates and local farmers. More than 100 people, mainly peasant activists, have been killed, many at the hands of state or private security forces.

Among the names on the hitlist seen by Cruz was that of Juan Galindo, an activist who had fled the region after receiving threats, but was murdered in November 2014 after returning home from exile to visit his sick mother.

Cruz also recognised Johnny Rivas and Vitalino Álvarez, high-profile members of the United Peasant Movement (Muca). Both men were among 123 activists in the Bajo Aguán named by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in 2014 as requiring urgent protective measures.

Álvarez, 52, who has survived four assassination attempts since 2010, said: "There's been a systematic strategy to eliminate the most belligerent social leaders. Since they killed Berta, the rumours are I'm now top of that list."

Human rights groups have condemned US support for Honduran security forces amid mounting evidence implicating police and military in systematic abuses. In April, activists warned Congress that death squads were targeting opposition activists, much like they did during the "dirty war" in the 1980s.

The US has given Honduras an estimated \$200m in police and military aid since 2010 as part of its efforts to stem organised crime and undocumented migration, according to defence and state department figures. In addition, Honduras shares the \$750m Alliance for Prosperity fund approved by Congress last year for Central America's violent Northern Triangle.

Both aid packages include human rights conditions, but neither has been restricted, even though the state department's most recent human rights report says that "unlawful and arbitrary killings and other criminal activities by members of the security forces" remain one of the country's most serious problems.

Neither the Honduran defence ministry nor the US state department responded to repeated requests for comment by the Guardian.

After Cruz's lieutenant deserted in mid-December, the other members of his unit were redeployed separately. Cruz worked for about 10 days with the commander of the Xatruch taskforce.

During this brief deployment, Cruz said he was woken up in the middle of the night to transport black plastic bags to the River Tocoa, in Bajo Aguán, where colleagues emptied out human remains over the bridge.

He also described seeing a “torture room” near a military installation in the town of Bonito Oriental. “I didn’t see anyone but there was fresh blood, a hammer, nails, a chain and pliers in the room.”

Shortly afterwards, Cruz and his colleagues were all sent on extended leave. Now increasingly anxious for his own safety, Cruz fled, crossing the border illegally as his identification documents were still with the army. He is now in hiding and his family have reported that military policemen have questioned their neighbours over his whereabouts.

Lauren Carasik, director of the International Human Rights Clinic at Western New England University, said the US must stop turning a blind eye to the lawlessness. “This is disturbing smoking-gun evidence which reinforces calls that the US must withdraw military aid from Honduras where there’s been a bloodbath since the 2009 coup.”

Violence in Honduras increased dramatically after a military-backed coup in July 2009 forced President Manuel Zelaya from power. Environmental campaigners bore the brunt of the repression after the new rightwing government licensed hundreds of mega-projects, including mines and hydroelectric dams in environmentally sensitive areas. At least 109 activists were murdered between 2010 and 2015, making Honduras one of the world’s most dangerous countries for environmental defenders.

A growing number of US politicians have expressed concern over the situation.

In August 2015, 21 members of Congress wrote to the secretary of state, John Kerry, raising specific concerns about US support for Fusina, which has repeatedly been accused of human rights violations.

Last week, the Berta Cáceres Human Rights Act in Honduras – which would suspend US security assistance until human rights violations by security forces cease – was introduced to Congress by Representative Hank Johnson.

“We provide millions of dollars in security assistance to Honduras but these same forces have been found to attack and kill environmental, labour and human rights activists like Cáceres without any effective response from the authorities,” said Johnson.

Cáceres’s daughter, Bertita Zúñiga, said Cruz’s testimony strengthened the family’s calls for an independent international investigation to find the intellectual authors. “This shows us that death squads are operating in the armed forces, which are being used to get rid of people

opposing government plans. It shows us that human rights violations are state policy in Honduras.”

Funds for Berta Caceres’ family and COPINH

To support Berta Caceres’ family and COPINH’s on-going work for justice in her case and for fundamental transformation and change in Honduras, make tax-deductible donations (write “Berta & Copinh” in the memo line) to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

Credit-Card Donations

- Canada: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/rights-action/>
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More Information / Get Involved

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- Jen Moore, Mining Watch, jen@miningwatch.ca

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