

Interview with Gustavo Castro, Co-Victim and Survivor of the Assassination of Berta Cáceres

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Honduran Government Officials Involved in Assassination of Berta Cáceres

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<http://criterio.hn/asesinato-berta-caceres-estan-implicados-funcionarios-del-gobierno-honduras/>

Gustavo Castro, the only witness of the [March 2, 2016] assassination of Berta Cáceres, explains what happened the evening and days following the attack that took the life of the indigenous leader. “The Honduran Government has not yet called me to identify the detainees even though I saw one of the hired killers”. Six months after the murder of the Honduran activist who struggled against multinational abuses, “the investigation is stalled”.



He details the days, hours and almost the very minutes in which he was seen more as a culprit than a victim. The moments in which he had just witnessed the assassination of the Honduran

indigenous leader, Berta Caceres, right after he had also been wounded by a firearm - "nobody imagined I would be there."

Despite the pain and risk it entailed, Gustavo Castro is grateful that he had been where he was that late night, exactly six months ago. "If it hadn't happened that way, I wouldn't have witnessed the assassination of the well known activist, making it impossible to refute the official version of the facts. They could have invented just about anything," explained the environmental advocate in the headquarters of Amnesty International in Spain, "But things didn't go as planned. I was there."

His account of the actions of the Honduran Prosecutors exposes the "Honduran government and judiciary's concern" that his version coincide "with the version they had elaborated."

Six months have passed since the assassination of Berta Caceres. What memories do you have of that day?

It was 20 minutes before midnight. It was all done very quietly. One of the men went to Berta's room, the other to mine, even though they didn't figure I would be there, it was practically unknown to everyone. He shot me, the bullet grazed my hand and ear (he shows the scar on his left ear and hand). When they left, Berta called out to me from her room. I was already injured when I left my room to look for her. A minute later she died.

I started calling people from COPINH [community, indigenous rights and Mother Earth defense organization Berta co-founded in 1992], but nobody answered, they were all asleep. I got in touch with the people I work with in Mexico at midnight, and they mobilized to try to find people from the COPINH so that someone could get me out of there. At 2:15AM they came to get me from Berta's house. We waited outside in a pickup truck, and the police and the army came. But the office of the Attorney General called me and told me not to go with the police until they arrived.

Did you fear they would know that you had been there?

When the police arrived at the house they realized there had been more people, they saw the blood and my suitcase was there, and it had my identification on it. So they already knew the identity of the witness, they knew it was me.

They weren't expecting me to be there. They were monitoring Berta, but that night I decided to stay in her house last minute. I needed to work and Berta said I could stay there and use the Internet. And now, six months later, I am more and more convinced that they had intended to carry out a clean assassination, in which Berta would be alone in her house, in which case any explanation they gave about the murder would have been credible or very difficult to refute.

They could have said it was a robbery or an assault. Her home was isolated. It was the ideal scene. But I was there, and they hadn't succeeded in killing me so they activated the other plans they had.

In the beginning the police suspected that members of the COPINH were involved. Why do you think they tried to accuse them?

That was their plan B. The police brought me in to take my declarations. They had already detained a member of COPINH, and put him in jail as if he was suspected of the crime, but I didn't know it at the time. I was in the police station and they were talking to the man in charge about doing the identikit image. He drew a person that wasn't the one I described.

I told him that isn't the person I saw, it's someone else. He erased it and drew it again exactly the same. I realized later that he was drawing Aureliano. He was drawing the person from the COPINH who they had arrested. I didn't know it then, I didn't know him. I realized it days later when I saw his picture in the newspaper.

Simply put, my testimony didn't coincide with the version they were trying to put together. This demonstrates that there was a clear intention to involve folks from the COPINH in the murder. But they did not achieve it.

Do you think they tried to implicate you in Berta's murder?

That was their plan C: we are going to charge that Mexican. I knew that members of the military, the police or hit-men were going to be waiting to finish off the job and this risk increased each day I stayed in La Esperanza (the town where Berta Caceres was assassinated). I hadn't slept for two days, I had two police officers watching over the place I was staying, but they could have been the same two ones that used to harass Berta.

Two days after the murder, I could have left. But in the morning they asked that I stay for another round of questioning. I did. They wanted another reconstruction of the crime. When they finished, in the early hours of the 4th or 5th, they told me it was okay that I leave.

The Mexican embassy got me a flight, but before I got on, several State prosecutors and police officers appeared and blocked the entrance. I asked who they were and they wouldn't tell me. They just responded: "You cannot leave." "Why?" "You cannot leave" they repeated. They showed me nothing, not a single paper. It was a kidnapping.

Then, the Mexican ambassador who didn't believe them, proposed we go to the Mexican embassy. Before I left the airport, they blocked the exit. They said that I needed to go with them but without telling me why. Since they saw that I wouldn't give in and get in their car, they threatened to arrest me.

So the ambassador and consul took me by the arms, one in each arm, and said “Consular protection. He is not leaving here”. Obviously they weren’t going to push the ambassador and consular officer, they didn’t dare to wrestle with them and they let me go back to the embassy.

They prohibited you from leaving the country for 30 days.

They intended to incriminate me, charge me and have me on hand there in case they achieved it. After that, my lawyer complained about several legal inconsistencies, and the judge gave an order preventing my lawyer from exercising her profession in my case, which is also illegal.

That month was psychological torture, because I was waiting for them to come to get me, inventing any excuse to do so. They also tried to link my shoes with those used by the assassins to kick in the door.

As of now, five people have been arrested, including a member of the army, and a manager and a worker from the company DESA. Do you think that covers all of them?

No, but they didn’t have another option. Because they are all involved: the [DESA] company, the army, paid assassins, judges They sacrificed the least important players, it was the least problematic thing for them to do. We are convinced that there were more people involved. They didn’t act on their own, nor did that paid killer act on his own, there were more people. More Honduran government officials, important Honduran families.

On the night of Berta’s assassination, you were able to see the face of one of the paid assassins, the one who shot you. Have you identified if he was one of the detainees?

The government has not yet called me to identify the accused who are now imprisoned. They put them in jail with very weak evidence, aware that within a year they may be freed if things continue this way. And I repeat, more people were involved. The lawyer who is a coordinator of Honduran State prosecutors also belongs to the DESA company’s law firm.

The Guardian published that Berta Caceres’s name was found on a military list of targets for elimination. Do you know if this is being investigated?

To the best of our knowledge, it hasn’t been investigated. Since this is a revelation made by one of the supposed hit men, the government has avoided dealing with it.

Considering that Honduras does not consent to the independent investigation you all are demanding, are you doing your own investigation?

COPINH is preparing a group of independent experts to aid in the investigation for my case as well as Berta’s. The group would consist of jurists and people with different expertise to bring to the investigation, to the family and COPINH. This group will be useful to exert pressure and

give assessments about the way the investigation is going. But it is going to be an effort of civil society and information-media outlets.

Moreover, I am going to declare myself as an active part of the formal legal process, which is my right as a victim-witness, meaning that I should have access to all aspects of the formal legal investigation. Lastly, we are studying the possibility of filing a formal complaint against the Honduran Government before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Why is it so risky to defend the environment?

This is the key issue. The fundamental explanation is that governments are opening their borders to foreign investments under the mechanisms of free trade agreements. Large companies are in open dispute for territories, and so what does this mean?

These are large investments, of millions and millions of dollars. We are talking about gas, fracking, electricity, control over the water, large scale agro-export business, wood and wood products, etc. A whole bunch of projects that imply extraction destined for consumption in Europe and North America. But in order for businesses to come and invest, you need to deregulate your country. If a country's legislation on foreign investment prohibited the use of beaches, coasts or oil and gas reserves by companies, for being a public good, then the laws were changed in order to privatize these goods.

Free trade agreements force governments to change laws in order to facilitate investment. If they don't do it, the company can denounce them. But, one never reads of this background analysis; one only learns of the community defender who stands up, who is beaten, assassinated, and we are never told why. Poor soul!

There is a structural explanation as to how governments are changing their laws, which entails a confrontation between the population that is defending its resources and the government that doesn't want to pay any compensation or reparations.

Therefore, according to the free trade agreements, if a government takes away the concession from a company, due to human rights violations, deforestation, contamination, etc, the government will be sued by the companies and will have to pay reparations to the companies through a Dispute Resolution Center, and the governments don't want to reach this point.

And this situation is translated into increased repression against environmental advocates?

Multinational companies exert very strong pressure. The government says: it is less costly to repress the population than to take away the concession. The concessions are for gold, silver, monocultures, So, across Latin America legislation is passed to criminalize social protests. So, I go out and protest, since they left me without water, and now they call it a crime, they call it terrorism because they people are blocking investment.

Do you also blame free trade agreements for assassinations such as Bertha Caceres's case?

The free trade agreement is the mechanism. The international companies that are after the resources at any cost and the governments that allow it are also responsible for the assassination of advocates like Berta Caceres. The free trade agreements tie the hands of these countries to force them to permit human rights violations.

How did Berta's assassination affect this struggle?

There are several hard messages we take away from this. Though valuable, the Goldman Environmental prize or other Human Rights awards do not suffice to protect the lives of advocates. The fact that human rights organisms give protection does not protect us. Ultimately, if it depends on the government to protect us, it is useless. This is a very strong message, not just for Latin America but for everyone.

Berta's assassination woke up many numbed consciences. Berta sent us a very clear message: Wake Up Humanity. Berta did not die, she multiplied. It is incredible how this has exploded all over. We didn't bury Berta, we planted her. She has begun to blossom everywhere.

Funding for Berta Caceres' Family & COPINH

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