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Below, an important overview article about Canada's role – government and private sector – in Honduras, most particularly since the 2009 military coup.

Since 1998, Rights Action has been funding and working with most of the people and organizations profiled in this article, including: Berta Cáceres' family; COPINH; repression victims (like Felix Molina); communities resisting harms and repression linked to Goldcorp Inc. and Aura Minerals; sweatshop factory workers documenting harms and repression linked to Gildan Activewear; OFRANEH and Garifuna people resisting harms and repression linked to North American tourism operators; etc.

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- **"The emperor isn't wearing anything at all",** Rights Action newsletter, December 2016, <http://www.rightsaction.org/action-content/rights-action-fundraising-newsletter-december-2016>
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Canada's "looting of Honduras"

By Asad Ismi, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Monitor, Nov-Dec 2016

https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/11/Monitor_Nov-Dec2016.pdf

"The Canadian government needs to act in a responsible manner and should stop giving legitimacy to the Honduran regime which has criminalized and killed many people in my country and has created a grave situation there. The Canadian government should remove all their companies, investments and financing from Honduras."

This was the plea of Berta Zúñiga Cáceres when I interviewed her at the World Social Forum in Montreal this summer. Zúñiga is the daughter of renowned Indigenous Honduran environmentalist Berta Cáceres, who was murdered this March by assassins linked to the Honduran military. Berta was targeted for her prominent role in the Lenca nation's opposition to the construction of the Agua Zarca dam on its territory in the area of Rio Blanco.

Desarrollos Energéticos SA (DESA), a Honduran company with Dutch financing, wants to expropriate Lenca land for a dam on the Gualcarque River that will deeply affect farmland on which the community's livelihood depends. Opponents to the project and others like it in Honduras—the post-2009 coup regime has signed 40 private hydroelectric agreements without consulting affected communities—are routinely threatened, their actions criminalized. When this fails, those who speak out can end up tortured, disappeared or killed.

As Zúñiga emphasized in our conversation, Canada, as one of the first countries to endorse the right-wing government installed after the 2009 military coup in Honduras, “legitimized all the deaths and all the killings that were done in the name of this coup.” They include that of her mother, Berta, and the more than 100 environmentalists killed between 2010 and 2014, as counted by British NGO Global Witness. Before she was killed, Berta Cáceres was also helping organize Lenca opposition to a dam on the Canjel River that is being built by Hydrosys, a Canadian company.

“Yes, absolutely, the Canadian government is complicit in Berta Cáceres' murder,” says Karen Spring, the Honduras-based co-ordinator of the Honduras Solidarity Network. Shortly after backing the coup, the Conservative government signed a Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement (in 2011), “ignoring the well-documented human rights violations being committed against Honduran environmentalists, journalists, Indigenous leaders, and peasant farmers,” she says.

“The free trade agreement (FTA) has facilitated and legitimized the continued repression as well as the looting of Honduras by Canadian companies, particularly in the textile, mining and hydroelectrical sectors. Canada assisted in improving Honduras' image internationally and gave the impression to other foreign governments that post-coup Honduras is a country to invest in.”

The Canadian government provides other support to the Honduran government, including security training. As reported previously in the Monitor, the Harper government even helped write a new Honduran mining law (as it has done in other countries). These actions, according to Spring, “sent a message loud and clear to the Honduran population: Canada supports and endorses widespread human rights violations, the military coup, impunity, and corruption.”

Honduran radio journalist Félix Antonio Molina agrees that both the Canadian and Honduran governments are complicit in Berta Cáceres's murder. Molina, a prominent critic of his government, fled Honduras for Canada in May after two attempts were made on his life in one day. He is currently living under Canadian state protection. Since the coup, 59 journalists have been murdered in Honduras, according to TeleSUR, making the country the second most dangerous place to be a reporter in Latin America after Mexico.

“The Canada-Honduras FTA helped normalize the plunder of Indigenous lands and financed the repression of the national resistance against the coup,” says Molina, adding it “also gave political legitimacy to a regime that had little support in Honduran society, a regime that was economically weak, and completely militarized.”

Canadian direct investment in Honduras intensified after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, according to an article by Sabrina Escalera-Flexhaug for the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, when aid money was tied to the introduction of Canadian firms to the country. But mining concessions were threatened by the election, in 2006, of left-wing president Manuel Zelaya, who was proposing reforms to land use and mining policy before the coup that deposed him.

“Canadian mining in Honduras has a long history of committing not only severe environmental crimes but also crimes against humanity,” Zúñiga told me at the World Social Forum, accusing Goldcorp of having “destroyed the Siria Valley” with toxic pollution and “spreading lots of cancer amongst the people there with their operations.”

Spring, who has written a report on Canadian mining in Honduras, explains that Goldcorp began operations in the Siria Valley in 1999 but closed its San Martin mine there in 2008 after an eight-year fight by the community against environmental contamination, repression and the criminalization of local leaders. “Today, the population of Siria Valley and a large majority of Goldcorp's former employees are suffering ongoing health problems including hair loss, skin rashes and rare cancers caused by the environmental contamination left behind by the mine,” she says.

Another Canadian firm, Aura Minerals, which operates in western Honduras, is currently attempting to dig up and displace a 200-year old cemetery to expand its open-pit gold mining operation, despite widespread community resistance.

Besides mining, Canadian government fact sheets on Honduras note “prominent” investments in the country’s garment manufacturing sector. Montreal-based Gildan Activewear, for example, chose Honduras as its main base of operations in 1997 and is today the country’s largest private sector employer with about 26,000 workers. Honduras is the fifth largest exporter of textiles to the U.S., and Gildan increased exports to Canada after tariffs were eliminated by the Canada-Honduras FTA.

Spring describes Gildan as “one of the biggest violators of labour rights in the maquiladora sector,” with hundreds of mostly women workers subject to extremely high production quotas and suffering from “serious musculo-skeletal disorders like tendinitis and carpal tunnel from the repetitive movements on the assembly lines.” Gildan has also been accused of firing workers who tried to unionize, all allegations the company denies.

According to Canada’s trade commissioner for Honduras, speaking in 2014, investment opportunities are opening up in the country for infrastructure, such as renewable energy (presumably hydro).

Questionable land sales have also attracted investors in the tourism industry. Randy Roy Jorgensen, a Canadian known as the “porn king” (for becoming wealthy through a chain of pornographic video stores), is building several tourism projects in Honduras on Indigenous Garifuna territory in the Bay of Trujillo. Gated communities, an oceanfront commercial center and a dock for cruise ships are all part of Jorgensen’s plan, staunchly opposed by OFRANEH, the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras, which has sued to stop it from happening.

Molina is convinced Jorgensen has evaded justice so far because “his influence with ex-Honduran President Porfirio Lobo Sosa and the current president Juan Orlando Hernández provide him with impunity.”

The present Liberal government in Ottawa is not much different from the former Conservative government when it comes to Honduras and is silent about Canada’s horrendous official and corporate record there. Trade Minister Chrystia Freeland supported the FTA as opposition trade critic in 2014, but with caution.

"In implementing this trade deal, we have to be very aware of what is going on in Honduras and to the possibility that by having a trade deal with this country and having our companies engaged with it we could be complicit in political, environmental and labour violations," she said in the House of Commons. "We do not just sign a deal and walk away; we have to watch closely and be absolutely certain that we and Canada are behaving well." (Freeland’s office had not replied to my requests for comment before the Monitor went to print.)

On June 2, the 25-year-old Berta Zúñiga Cáceres spoke by videoconference to a parliamentary subcommittee on human rights during a special session on Honduras. She made it clear the Canadian government's role in Honduras, and Canadian investment there, were “part of the problem we have in our country.” She told MPs about the pattern of repression against Hondurans who speak up for human rights and against environmental impacts, especially those linked to the mining industry.

Zúñiga called the Canada-Honduras FTA “illegitimate, because it was signed by the post-coup government that was not democratically elected,” and said the new national mining code the Canadian government helped create, “legitimizes mining extraction in Honduras, and is at the root of all of the problems we are having.” She asked the Canadian government to investigate the actions of Canadian businesses in Honduras, its own participation in the coup and the impacts of the free trade agreement on human rights.

“The Lenca people have resisted colonialism for 500 years,” Zúñiga told me in August. “And now the genocide of my people started by the Spanish invaders continues through neocolonialism, with companies taking all the territories and resources, stealing the rivers, the water, the Earth. Thirty-five per cent of Honduras has been given as concessions to private

companies. Our resistance is about confronting raw capitalism, the monster that is trying to dominate us through militarization and assassination.”

In spite of the many attacks on her people, Zúñiga said “we still retain our own way of life, which is to live in harmony with nature and with other humans. We are battling to preserve this.”

[Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor's international affairs correspondent and author of the anthology The Latin American Revolution (2016) which can be ordered from the CCPA. He is also author of the radio documentary with the same title (2010) which has been aired on 40 radio stations in Canada, the U.S. and Europe reaching 30 million people. For his publications visit www.asadismi.info (currently under construction).]

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