

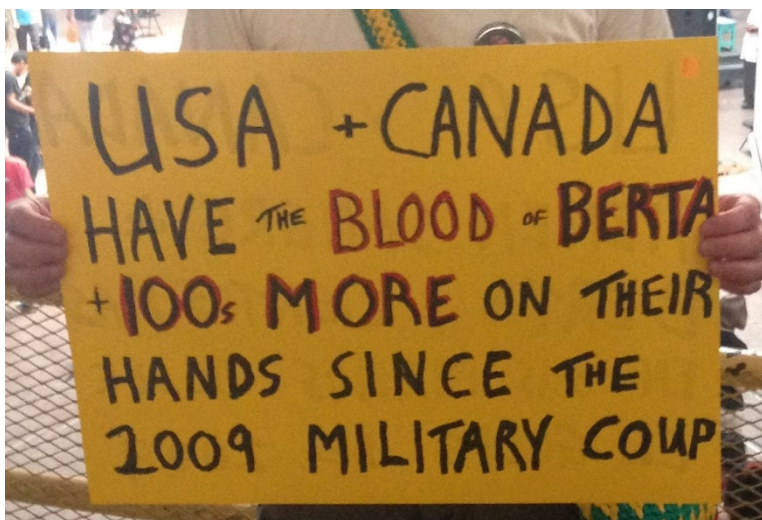
Interview: Who killed Berta Cáceres

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/interview-who-killed-bertha-caceres>

Interview with author Nina Lakhani about state of affairs in Honduras that is the backdrop for the decision to kill Berta. Lakhani's book, "Who Killed Berta Cáceres?: Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet," is [available now](#) with Verso Books.

Role of Canada

Missing from this excellent interview is a statement about the role played by the Canadian government side by side with the U.S. government and military, in support of the 2009 military coup that ousted Honduras' last democratic government, and endorsing 3 sets of utterly corrupt, violent "elections" (2009, 2013, 2017) since then.



The U.S. is the big elephant in the room propping up the completely corrupt and repressive 'open-for-global-business' regime in power. Canada –since 2009- is equally responsible and culpable. The on-going nightmare in Honduras for a majority of the population and the environment, are U.S. and Canadian policy at work.

- **Below:** How to donate to Rights Action's "Covid19 Response Fund", including support for family members of Berta Cáceres

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'Who Killed Berta Cáceres?' – New Book Probes High-Profile Honduras Murder

by Parker Asmann, June 2, 2020, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/bertha-caceres-book-honduras/>



Journalist Nina Lakhani says Berta Cáceres would describe herself as a social warrior

When journalist Nina Lakhani first met Berta Cáceres in 2013 on the eve of the general elections in Honduras, the indigenous land defender knew she couldn't give up the struggle despite constant threats against her. "When they want to kill me, they will do it," she said.

On March 2, 2016, armed gunmen stormed Cáceres' home, [shot her dead](#) and wounded Mexican activist Gustavo Castro. It was the final phase of a [plot](#) by a network of senior business executives and Honduran officials to kill her and silence her opposition to Desarrollos Energéticos SA's (DESA) construction of the Agua Zarca dam.

In her debut book published June 2 by [Verso Books](#), "Who Killed Berta Cáceres?: Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet," Lakhani provides an exhaustive look at the history of indigenous resistance in Honduras. She also delves into Cáceres' upbringing and role in the fight that ultimately lead to her brutal murder, and the many questions and investigative holes that still remain more than four years later.

InSight Crime spoke with Lakhani about her book on Cáceres' life and death, the nexus between elites and organized crime in Honduras and the ongoing fight for justice in her murder case.*

InSight Crime (IC): People often define Berta Cáceres as simply an environmentalist but who was she beyond that?

Nina Lakhani (NL): She would have identified herself as a "luchadora social," or a social warrior and defender of human and indigenous rights. Her organization, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras — COPINH), which was founded in 1993, was a movement and organization to fight for indigenous rights. The environment was an important thing but as one of her friends said, Berta was no tree hugger. She protected natural resources as part of self-determination for indigenous people. That was her battle, for people to have a real say in determining what happens on their territories and in their lives.

She was also a very smart political analyst. She was one of those rare beasts that could understand and analyze local struggles in a global context. No matter who she was talking to, she could explain, argue and debate these different struggles. She was an absolute pioneer, certainly in indigenous movements in Latin America, as someone who fought for LGBTQ equality. For Berta, every injustice was her injustice.

IC: What was unique about Berta that made DESA executives and political and military elites in Honduras feel so threatened?

NL: She grew up in the “Dirty War” years. That was very much part of her formation. She was around socially progressive thinkers and fighters from across Central America as a child growing up. She was involved in all of that and participated with the guerrillas in El Salvador’s civil war.

Once they formed COPINH, she was the international front of that organization, traveling to Canada, the United States, countries in Africa and Asia, absorbing and learning from local and indigenous struggles for the right to self determination, land and dignity. At the same time, she was learning about free trade deals, the Washington consensus, the impact of neoliberalism and capitalism, and the role they played not just in her corner of the world but in all of these struggles. She understood these big issues and small local struggles and had an incredible ability to explain them.

She was one of the very few people in Honduras, even in Central America, that had the capacity to unite different movements, urban and rural, teachers and campesinos, indigenous groups and mestizos and that is dangerous. She was smart and tenacious. She wasn’t fearless. She was scared but she was brave. She continued doing what she did in spite of being fearful of the threats and the terror campaign that was launched against her.

No matter what this network of elites did to make her go away or to silence her, it didn’t work. That’s why this plot to kill her was formulated and executed.

IC: What does Berta’s life and murder say about the nexus between organized crime, political and business elites, and militarization in Honduras?

NL: I see these powerbrokers as being part of a network of elites and power structures that run Honduras and have run Honduras for a very long time. The ones running the show are the economic elites. That’s not changed. The military and other security forces have been used to quell social uprisings across the region. When people organize to try and fight or demand some access to land, better working conditions or increased wages, repression was orchestrated at the behest of the economic elites of the day. That really hasn’t changed.

Agua Zarca was one of many environmentally destructive mega-projects that were sanctioned in the wake of the 2009 US-backed coup, all of them without proper consultation. The total

militarization of Honduras since the coup allowed for the conversion of Honduras into an absolute criminal state.

Meanwhile, you've had [senior political figures](#) and their relatives alleged to be — and some of them [have been convicted](#) — running major international drug trafficking operations at the time that the country is completely militarized.

IC: How would you describe the scale of corruption in Honduras and how it factored into the Agua Zarca dam project that Berta resisted?

NL: This isn't a question of bad apples, it's how the system was designed to operate. The political system is operating incredibly well. It was designed to serve the interests of a few. While these actors have changed and evolved over time, new criminal elements and powerbrokers have appeared. That hasn't changed. The political state as it is set up has always been there.

This is why before the coup, Berta was standing as a vice-presidential candidate on an independent ticket pushing for a plebiscite on a rewriting of the constitution, so for the first time in the country's history, there would be a true and just social contract between the people and the state.

At the moment, the constitution represents the interests of a few and that's how it's set up.

In the case of Agua Zarca, and you could say this about any of the mega-projects that have been sanctioned in the last decade, there isn't a single one that was sanctioned after a proper and legally required consultation, that was properly scrutinized by lawmakers before being licensed, or that was given mining licenses or water and construction permits after a proper analysis and environmental impact assessment of other factors you need to consider.

IC: What did writing this book uncover about the consequences of US support for a political system that is frequently associated with corruption, drug trafficking and militarization?

NL: In the days after the brother of President Juan Orlando Hernández is convicted of being a major drug and arms trafficker in a case where President Hernández and his predecessor, Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, were named by prosecutors as being co-conspirators, the acting US ambassador to Honduras makes a public appearance with President Hernández. You just think to yourself, what do they have to do for the United States to withdraw its support?

Back in 2017, President Hernández stood for election after changing the constitution to allow for it, in what was a clear abuse of power and manipulation of the court system. Then he [lost but won](#) by committing fraud. The only government to come out and say the election was free and fair was the United States.

The fact is that there have been no consequences for the Honduran state about the coup and the ousting of a democratically elected president, which unleashed this wave of violence, this absolute nightmare that continues. Why do we have corruption and violence? It's always about impunity, and there has been complete impunity.

The post-coup regimes have been propped up by United States and other governments. At the same time, Honduras' military apparatus has been used as a repressive arm at great costs, and drug trafficking has continued apace. Backed and trained by the United States, the military is used to quell, repress and terrorize communities all across the country. There's no way the United States can legitimately deny that. It's incredible how much the United States has propped up and enabled this nightmare to keep unfolding in Honduras.

IC: What has helped make Honduras one of the most dangerous places in the world for indigenous and environmental defenders — especially women like Berta?

NL: After the coup, you have this massive increase in generalized violence across the board. Within that, you have significant increases in targeted violence. It becomes the most dangerous place to be a lawyer, one of the most dangerous places to be a woman or girl, and to be a land and environmental defender, which is where Berta fits in.

One of the clear objectives of the coup was to direct capitalism through extractive industries and a massive natural resource selloff.

In many places, people organized and started to oppose these projects in different ways. In the Bajo Aguán, you had this massive mobilization of the campesino movement against the palm oil plantation owners. They would retake land taken from them fraudulently over the years.

On a smaller scale in communities like Rio Blanco where Berta was from, it started off as very simple roadblocks. As communities mobilize and organize, you saw a massive deployment always at the behest of these companies.

You had the whole state coming after any social struggle that showed any sign of strength. But in cases where these struggles continued and movements fortified, they faced an increased campaign of repression and terror. When I analyzed other struggles, it was important to put this into the context of the counterinsurgency war. They're very similar in terms of the tactics that were used, always with the same goal: the ends justify the means, and the goal is to eliminate the opposition in whichever way you need to.

Trumped up charges and criminalization have really taken over now in Honduras as the main repressive tool being used against community leaders. You still have violence and threats but you don't have community leaders and land defenders being killed in the same way like before Berta was killed. Legal terror is used against people, and to do that, you need prosecutors, judges and all of these other state actors.

IC: Did the international attention and outcry Berta's murder garnered help change the on-the-ground realities activists like her face?

NL: It's changed the reality but it didn't stop the bloodshed, we have to be absolutely clear about that. People have continued to be killed in a targeted way but the same number of people have not been killed. There's multiple reasons for that. You've seen criminalization and legal terror being used more widely in Honduras. People are still being killed but really the main weapon being used currently is criminalization.

I can't overstate how damaging that is. It takes up so much time and energy. There's so much fear involved, and it can really break up and silence a movement. All of a sudden you might be jailed and all of your energy and resources go to trying to stay out of prison. It's a very effective weapon.

The threats and harassment continue, including in Rio Blanco. It was only because of international pressure that there was a trial for Berta's murder, and that seven people were convicted. There was widespread outrage about the blatant murder of the most well-known defender and activist in the Americas at the time.

But I have seen absolutely no evidence that the trial and prosecution played a positive role in evolving the justice system in Honduras.

IC: Why has there seemingly been so little interest on the part of authorities to hold the intellectual authors of Berta's murder responsible?

NL: It comes back to the fact that it's the economic elites that control the judiciary, that have direct numbers into the Public Security Ministry and probably the president's office. We saw from phone evidence uncovered in the murder trial, when the first four people are arrested in May 2016, that the president of DESA, David Castillo, who is the only one [facing charges as a mastermind](#) of the crime, he rings up one of the board executives who is from the Atala Zablah family, one of the most powerful family clans in Honduras.

The board member's response is, who should we call, do you still have contacts in the Attorney General's Office, do you know where the minister of security is? They were immediately looking for a way to sort this problem out.

In the trial, when it got to [that point in the conversation](#) between Castillo and the Atala Zablah executive where he's asking about who he should call to sort this out, the expert witness says, do you want me to play the second part of this call or not? The judge asks if it is pertinent or personal. There's an agreement between all sides that that part of the call is personal and not relevant to the case, so it's not played as evidence, which we know from the court transcripts.

The only reason you don't play that is because you don't want it to be out there. There's no way you can say that it's not pertinent to the case. We're talking about the potential influence

of a criminal investigation, naming senior political officials who we may try and contact to deal with the problem of one of your company's managers being arrested for the murder of Berta Cáceres.

These are symbiotic relationships. In the trial, Daniel Atala, the son of one of the three Atala Zablach brothers who was a finance manager on the board of DESA, so much evidence implicating him was put out that it seemed like an arrest was inevitable. All of this evidence about his role in paying informants who were used to monitor and track Berta, including the moment when she's coming back into La Esperanza when the murder is carried out, who uses this horrible racist language against indigenous Lenca people, the one paying for lawyers to defend the alleged murderer who was terrorizing Berta in Rio Blanco.

He was implicated in so many ways in this campaign of terror, and even he hasn't been questioned by prosecutors. I don't think there's any interest because they run the country.

IC: Is achieving complete justice in Berta's murder case possible?

NL: I think the struggle for justice is a long struggle. The political and economic systems in Honduras are designed to protect the powerbrokers. A change in government in the United States later this year could make a positive difference. A fall in the current regime in Honduras, which will happen sooner or later, will make a difference. It's going to take a long time to rebuild institutions that have been purposefully weakened under these corruption pacts that have been made between all sorts of elites and lawmakers.

There was a clear decision by the state prosecutors, and I'm sure that order came from well above them, to make this prosecution as narrow as possible, to focus on the murder as a one-off event. No consideration was made to the campaign of criminal terror that was unleashed against Berta and the community. The crime was never framed as political murder, as gender-based violence or a hate crime against indigenous people despite the vitriolic and racist language that was used by people like Daniel Atala in phone chats to talk about the Lenca people.

There was a decision to make sure that anybody political, and the military and police as institutions, would be completely left out.

You can only conclude that there was a political decision by the powerbrokers running Honduras for that to happen. If you had followed the evidence, even the limited evidence that I've seen, and there's much more that has purposefully not been uncovered, you have to draw the conclusion that decisions were made to keep the prosecution and investigation as narrow as possible to satisfy calls for justice coming from inside and outside the country. The expectation was that this would go away after this one murder trial but they were very mistaken in that.

IC: What do you hope people take away from the book?

NL: I tried to use the story of her life and death to tell the bigger story of Honduras, to help people understand why hundreds of thousands of people have fled that Central American country for a hostile country in the United States that doesn't want them. There's this toxic mix of inequality, lack of opportunity, poverty, corruption, impunity, violence and state-sponsored repression that has made Honduras an intolerable place for so many Hondurans.

Part of Berta's motivation was that she saw the potential that Honduras had, a country with so much natural wealth that could be a place where people don't have to leave. It could be a country where everyone could thrive. She just saw so much potential in Honduras and Hondurans. Her legacy as an indigenous defender, as a leader, as a brave, smart woman, is felt and will be felt for generations well outside the borders of Honduras.

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*We are not "all in this together"
There should be no "going back to normal"*

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Rights Action's COVID-19 Response Fund

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/rights-action-covid19-response-fund-update>

Rights Action is prioritizing getting emergency funds to partner group in Guatemala and Honduras. Their Covid19 response work is about saving lives. The funds we are sending are drops in a bucket, and they are important. Our work is also to contribute to debate and help empower activism premised on the basic notion that: We are not "all in this together" / There should be no "getting back to normal".

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