

# Gustavo Castro Soto and the Rigged Investigation into Berta Cáceres's Assassination

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*The Government of Honduras is intent on framing the only witness to the murder of Berta Cáceres as the one guilty of the crime, writes Beverly Bell. Gustavo Castro Soto, an eco-defender from Mexico, is now in effective detention in his country's embassy in Tegucigalpa in fear of his life, having himself been injured in the attack and seen the real assassin. The US Government must break its resounding silence.*

The ones responsible for her assassination are the business groups in collaboration with the national government, the municipal government and the repressive institutions of the State, who are behind the extractive projects developing in the region.

The sole eyewitness to Honduran social movement leader Berta Cáceres' assassination on March 3, 2016 has gone from being wounded victim to, effectively, political prisoner.

Now Gustavo Castro Soto may also be framed as the murderer of his long-time friend.

Both the Mexican Ambassador, Dolores Jiménez, and Castro himself are worried that he will be charged by the government for the killing, they [told the National Commission of Human Rights of Honduras](#) on March 16.

A writer and organizer for environmental and economic justice, Castro has been forbidden by local authorities from leaving the country to return to his native Mexico until April 6, at least. Since being released from several days in Honduran government custody, he has been forced to take refuge in the Mexican Embassy in Tegucigalpa.

The protection of the Mexican Embassy "*does not mean that my life is no longer in danger*", Castro wrote to some friends and colleagues on March 4. As long as he is on Honduran soil, he remains in peril. Ambassador Jiménez called the [risk](#) he is running "*an objective fact.*"

Castro - who is able to identify Cáceres' killer - is an impediment to the plan that the Honduran government is clearly advancing, which is to pin the murder on members of the group which Cáceres founded and ran, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations ([COPINH](#)). It could help the strategy of the [fraudulently](#) elected regime to dispense with Castro by charging and arresting him.

The government may also charge COPINH members with the killing of their leader, in the hopes of eliminating them from the body politic. Authorities tried to incriminate three of them just after the murder.

- Prominent COPINH organizer Aureliano Molina was imprisoned for two days on

suspicion of a 'crime of passion' though he was two hours away from La Esperanza on the night of March 3.

- Two other COPINH leaders, Tomas Gómez and Sotero Echeverria, were interrogated for days, during which time the government denied their request for accompaniment by their lawyers. On March 15, Echeverria was threatened with arrest.

## **The real assassins**

Cáceres was a tireless organizer for accountable government, participatory democracy, indigenous peoples and their territories, human rights, and women's and LGBTQ rights. For many years, she was subject to threats, attempted violent attacks, legal prosecution for being a "*continual danger to the nation*", and other persecution.

Just during the three-month period prior to Cáceres' murder, human rights accompaniers [tracked](#) eleven threats and attempted assaults by national and local government officials, police, soldiers, employees of the Agua Zarca dam project which Cáceres and others were fighting, and unidentified men.

In addition to that litany within 10 days before Cáceres' death, Agua Zarca released two incendiary public email announcements. Their message lines read "*THE VIOLENT ACTS*" and "*FALSEHOODS OF BERTA CACERES - COPINH*".

Those who have witnessed the price Cáceres has paid for her decades of advocacy have no doubt who is culpable in her murder. Her four grown children and mother [stated publicly](#) on March 5,

We hold the company DESA responsible for the persecution, the criminalization, the stigma, and the constant death threats made against her and our people of COPINH. We also hold the financial and international entities that support the project such as, the Dutch development bank FMO, Finn Fund, BCIE, Ficohsa, and the committed companies CASTOR, and business group ATALA, responsible for her death.

We hold the Honduran State responsible for having largely impeded the protection of our Bertha and for having favored her persecution, criminalization and assassination by having opted for protecting the company's interests above the decisions and mandates of the community ...

The ones responsible for her assassination are the business groups in collaboration with the national government, the municipal government and the repressive institutions of the State, who are behind the extractive project that is developing in the region. The funders of these extractive death projects are also responsible for the death of our Bertha and of countless people who struggle against the exploitation of our territories.

## **Castro's ordeal**

Many elements of the government's so-called collection of evidence from Castro have been irregular at best, and illegal at worst.

Beyond being inconvenient for knowing too much, the eyewitness falls into the repressive

government's category of public enemy. Like Cáceres, Castro has been a vocal opponent of dam construction on indigenous rivers, as well as of the broad powers given transnational corporations and the local elite to plunder democracy and the riches of nature.

Castro is coordinator of the group Otros Mundos / Friends of the Earth Mexico. He has cofounded, and sits on the governing body of, many anti-mining and anti-damming networks, as well as the US-based organization Other Worlds. In his interrogation, the public prosecutor has asked Castro about his environmental organizing and history of activism.

Following the killing in Cáceres' home in the town of La Esperanza, Castro was detained for days in the local public prosecutor's office for interrogation. On March 5, having been told the questioning was complete, he was transported by the Mexican ambassador and consul to the airport in Tegucigalpa so that he could return to his homeland.

As he approached the migration checkpoint, Castro was set upon by multiple Honduran police, who attempted to grab him. The Mexican ambassador stopped them.

The government has since forbidden Castro from leaving Honduras for 30 days, or until April 6. When Castro appealed the order, the judge in the case ruled against it, even while admitting that there is no legal provision for a 30-day restraint for witnesses or victims.

The judge also suspended the license of Castro's lawyer, Ivania Galeano, for 15 days. The stated reason was that Galeano had requested a copy of Castro's file which, according to Honduran law, was her right.

Even in the Mexican Embassy, almost three weeks after the killing, Castro continues to be interrogated by the Honduran prosecutor.

### **Hearing no protest from the US, Honduran Government ramps up repression**

The US State Department put out a brief, generic [statement of condolence](#) the day after Cáceres was assassinated. At the same time, according to email communications, the State Department confirmed that it is cooperating with the Honduran government in the investigation, with various US agencies actively participating in it.

The Obama Administration has failed to raise questions about the Honduran government's role in the murder, given its persistent, well-documented targeting of Cáceres over the years, and its transparent attempts at a cover-up by fingering Cáceres' close colleagues. US military [assistance to the Honduran government](#) continues to flow.

On March 17, 62 US Congressional representatives sent a [letter to Secretary of State John Kerry](#), calling for an independent investigation of the assassination and urging the Secretary to immediately stop US security funding pending a review. Rep. Hank Johnson, co-sponsor of the letter along with Rep. Keith Ellison, said,

It's time for our government to leverage security assistance and multilateral loans so as to put real and lasting pressure on the Honduran government to protect its activists and pursue those responsible for these hideous crimes.

Meanwhile, the silence from the administration has given the Honduran government a green light for repression.

That repression was aggressively launched on March 15. On that single day, Honduran soldiers and police coordinated assaults against ten activists from four geographic regions and three separate organizations.

- Nelson García, a COPINH leader, was assassinated during a violent government eviction of the community of Rio Chiquito.
- As stated above, police threatened Sotero Echeverria, member of the COPINH coordinating committee, with arrest.
- In the capitol, three hit men shot and wounded Christian Mauricio Alegría, who works with the global peasant movement La Via Campesina. His uncle, Rafael Alegría, is a deputy in the national parliament from the opposition Libre Party, and is former secretary general of La Via Campesina.
- José Flores, head of the United Movement of the Peasants of the Aguan (MUCA), was temporarily arrested along with family members in the town of Tocoa.

The message was clear to all. No matter where one is or with whom one works, activists are not safe in Honduras.

From the Mexican Embassy on 15th March, Castro sent out a note of condolence and support to the Honduran people. He closed the missive this way: *“Soon there will be justice.”*

**Take action [here](#)** to call for safety for Gustavo Castro and members of COPINH, as well as for a fair, internationally led investigation into Berta Cáceres’ killing.

***Beverly Bell** is founder of Other Worlds and more than a dozen international organizations and networks, Beverly is also an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies. Beverly has worked for more than three decades as an organizer, advocate, and writer in collaboration with social movements in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the US. Her focus areas are just economies; democratic participation; and rights for women, indigenous peoples, and other excluded peoples.*

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