

# An Open Letter to Secretary of State John Kerry regarding the Murder of Honduran Indigenous and Environmental Activist Berta Cáceres

March 10, 2016

Dear Secretary of State Kerry,

We write in shock and deep sorrow regarding the murder of Honduran human rights and environmental defender Berta Cáceres, founder and general secretary of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). We urge a response from the State Department that is not business as usual but a profound change of direction towards improving the abysmal situation of human rights in Honduras.

Berta Cáceres, winner of the prestigious 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, was a visionary indigenous and environmental rights leader. She championed efforts to protect indigenous peoples from large-scale development projects that are being advanced in Honduras without consultation of communities and without concern for the environment. She organized communities in Honduras and across the world against the unconsented extraction of natural resources and in defense of the Gualcarque River, a sacred site of the Lenca people and an essential water source, against the construction of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam. Berta Cáceres was a much-loved leader of the diverse social movements in her country. Members of Honduran civil society are united in sorrow and anger about her death—as are so many in the international community.

Berta Cáceres was killed on March 3, 2016 by armed men who broke into her home in La Esperanza, department of Intibucá, Honduras. Mexican environmentalist and journalist Gustavo Castro Soto of Otros Mundos Chiapas/Friends of the Earth Mexico and the Mesoamerican Movement against the Extractive Mining Movement was also wounded in the attack. We urge that Mr. Castro immediately be permitted to return safely to his country.

In the course of her work, Berta Cáceres suffered constant death threats against herself and her family, threats of sexual violence and assault, attacks and harassment. She was also the subject of continual legal harassment by judicial authorities and intimidation by security forces and local government officials for her work. In the six months before her murder, according to COPINH, the threats against her escalated and included shots fired at her car and verbal threats and messages, by members of the military, police, local authorities and representatives of the hydroelectric company.

Ms. Cáceres had [precautionary measures](#) from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) since 2009 but never received the full protection she needed. We are outraged by statements from Security Minister Julián Pacheco that in effect blame Cáceres for the failure of the Honduran government to comply with its obligation to protect her. She is one of 15 human rights defenders who have been killed in Honduras while beneficiaries of IACHR precautionary measures, as reported by the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH). On March 5, 2016, the IACHR granted precautionary measures for COPINH, Berta Cáceres' family and Gustavo Castro Soto, given the risk to their safety.

**Berta Cáceres' death confirms what a 2015 [report](#) by Global Witness has shown: Honduras is one of the world's most dangerous countries for environmental activists.** At least [109 environmental activists](#) were murdered between 2010 and 2015. Since the 2009 coup, Honduras has become one of the world's most dangerous places to be a human rights defender of any kind. Indigenous and Garifuna leaders, LGBTI activists, union leaders, women's rights activists, human rights activists, justice operators, and journalists reporting on

human rights and corruption issues are among those who, like environmental activists, are at risk. The murder of Berta Cáceres sends a devastating message to all Hondurans trying to exercise their rights.

**We urge you:**

- To support an independent international investigation led by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights into Ms. Cáceres' murder and to urge that the Honduran government invite and fully cooperate with such an investigation. Such an independent investigation is essential given the lack of confidence in the judicial system; reigning impunity, including for cases involving human rights defenders; and the emblematic nature of this case.
- To insist that Honduran judicial authorities carry out their duties to effectively and promptly investigate Cáceres' murder, in cooperation with the international investigation, and following lines of inquiry that take into account the context of Cáceres' work and situation of risk and pursue the intellectual as well as material authors, guaranteeing due process and access to justice.
- To press the Honduran government to comply with the precautionary measures granted by the IACHR on March 5 and provide immediate, effective, and carefully consulted protection to members of COPINH, members of Ms. Cáceres' family, Mr. Castro and all witnesses in the case.

With this tragic loss, we join together to call for more systemic change. We ask that the State Department make clear to the Honduran government that future partnership and funding depends on demonstrating the political will to investigate and prosecute this crime and all crimes against human rights defenders. The Honduran government must make the mechanism for protection of human rights defenders, journalists, media workers and justice operators fully operational and adequately funded, with protection measures consulted with beneficiaries. It must guarantee freedom of expression, including by ending harsh, constant repression of social protests, ensuring an immediate end to intimidating public statements by government officials and members of the military and police that place human rights defenders and journalists in danger, and ending specious prosecution of human rights defenders.

It is crucial that the Honduran government meet, as the IACHR has said, its "obligation of carrying out the prior, free, and informed consultation of indigenous people regarding projects underway on their land and territories and that affect their natural resources." **We support Senator Patrick Leahy's call to abandon the Agua Zarca dam project and to protect the territory that Berta devoted her life to defending.** The Honduran government should recognize that the pace and process by which it is facilitating the extraction and trade of natural resources by national and international investors is contributing to social conflict and human rights violations.

**We ask the U.S. government to:**

- urge the Honduran government to meet its obligation to ensure prior, free, and informed consent of indigenous communities and to greatly improve transparency regarding existing and proposed concessions of natural resources. This should include making public project information regarding the nearly 50 hydropower concessions granted since the start of 2010.
- ensure that no U.S. assistance and support for multilateral bank projects promote or permit development projects without meeting the obligation for ensuring prior, free and informed consent of

indigenous communities, nor without ensuring meaningful consultation of all affected communities and that strong human rights, labor rights and environmental safeguards are in place.

**Finally, we urge the State Department to suspend all assistance and training to Honduran security forces, with the exception of investigatory and forensic assistance to the police, so long as the murders of Berta Cáceres and scores of other Honduran activists remain in impunity.** In addition, we urge the State Department to implement transparently and fully the conditions in the FY2016 State, Foreign Operations bill which link 50 percent of aid to the central government of Honduras to progress on addressing human rights abuses and corruption.

The U.S. government must stand with those who are putting their lives on the line for the protection of human rights and the environment in Honduras.

Signed by:

Accountability Counsel  
ActionAid USA  
Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise  
Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ACIJ)  
Alianza Americas  
Alliance Against Mining - Philippines (Alyansa Tigil Mina)  
Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ)  
Alliance for Justice  
Amazon Watch  
AMERICA PARA TODOS  
American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)  
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)  
American Jewish World Service (AJWS)  
Amigos de la Tierra España  
ART NOT WAR  
Azul  
Baurkot & Baurkot  
Beautiful Trouble  
Beautiful Rising  
Beyond Extreme Energy  
Brooklyn For Peace  
Casa de Maryland  
Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good  
Center for Biological Diversity  
Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary  
Center for Human Rights and Environment  
Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL)  
Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA)  
Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL)  
Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University  
Center of Concern  
Center on Conscience & War, Washington DC  
Central American Resource Center (CRECEN)

Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), Washington DC, Los Angeles, and San Francisco  
Centro de Documentación en Derechos Humanos "Segundo Montes Mozo S.J." (CSMM)  
Centro de Estudios para la Justicia Social TIERRA DIGNA, Colombia  
Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Refugee and Immigration Ministries  
Church World Service  
Climate Parents  
Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU)  
CODEPINK  
Colombia Support Network  
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach  
Columbia Divest for Climate Justice  
Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)  
Committee for Human Rights in Latin America (CDHAL), Montreal, Canada  
Committee on U.S.-Latin American Relations, Cornell University  
Communications Workers of America (CWA)  
Community Alliance for Global Justice (CAGJ)  
Community Justice Project, Inc. of Miami, FL  
Conference of Major Superiors of Men  
Corporate Accountability International  
The Cross Border Network for Justice & Solidarity, Kansas City, Missouri  
Denver Justice & Peace Committee  
Disciples Justice Action Network  
Divest Middlebury  
Dominican Friars, Irving, TEXAS  
Donella Meadows Institute  
Due Process of Law Foundation  
EcoEquity  
EarthAction International  
Earth Day Network  
Earthjustice  
Environmental Defender Law Center (EDLC)  
Environmental Defenders Project, USA  
Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)  
Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)  
Faith in Public Life  
Family Farm Defenders  
Farmworker Association of Florida  
The Fellowship of Reconciliation  
FERN  
Florida Immigrant Coalition  
France Amérique Latine/Francia América Latina  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Friends of the Earth-United States  
Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees  
Food First

Food Voices  
Fund for Democratic Communities, Greensboro, NC  
Georgia Detention Watch  
Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature  
Global Campaign for Peace Education  
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ  
Global Witness  
Goldman Environmental Foundation  
Grassroots Global Justice Alliance  
Grassroots International  
Green America  
Green Cross International  
GreenLatinos  
Greenpeace USA  
GreenWood  
Grupo Belga 'Solidair met Guatemala'  
Guatemala Human Rights Commission (GHRC)  
The Guatemalan-Maya Center  
Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy  
Honduran Conservation Coalition  
Honduras Accompaniment Project  
Hondurasdelegation, Germany  
Honor the Earth  
Hope Community Center  
IBIS  
Ignatian Solidarity Network  
Indigenous Environmental Network  
The Ingrid Washinawatok Flying Eagle Woman Fund for Peace, Justice and Sovereignty  
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy  
Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti  
Institute for Policy Studies, Climate Policy Program, Global Economy Project and New Economy Maryland Project  
Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA)  
Interfaith Coalition on Immigration, MN  
Interfaith Power & Light  
International Federation of Settlements  
International Forum on Globalization  
International Institute on Peace Education  
International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF)  
International Platform against Impunity  
International Rivers  
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)  
International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW)  
JA!FOE Moçambique  
JASS (Just Associates)  
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States  
Jesuit Social Research Institute/Loyola University New Orleans  
Just Foreign Policy

KyotoUSA

La Asamblea Veracruzana de Iniciativas y Defensa Ambiental (LAVIDA), Mexico

Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, AFL-CIO (LCLAA)

Latin America Solidarity Committee-Milwaukee

Latin America Task Force of Interfaith Council for Peace & Justice - Ann Arbor, Michigan

Latin America Working Group (LAWG)

Leadership Conference of Women Religious

LEPOCO Peace Center, Bethlehem, PA

Liberty Tree Foundation for the Democratic Revolution

Medical Mission Sisters

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate-U.S Province (OMI)

Movement Generation: Justice and Ecology Project

Movimiento Mesoamericano contra el Modelo extractivo Minero -M4

MN350

Mundo Maya Foundation

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Family Farm Coalition

National Immigration Law Center

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Nicaragua Network

Nicaragua-US Friendship Office of the Americas

NOAH Friends of the Earth-Denmark

Nonviolence International

Nuclear Information and Resource Service

The Oakland Institute

Oil Change International

Other Worlds

Oxfam America

Pax Christi International

Pax Christi USA

Peace Action

Peace Action Montgomery

Peace Brigades International (PBI)

Peace Development Fund, Amherst, MA and San Francisco, CA

Peace Education Initiative, The University of Toledo

Pesticide Action Network North America

Plataforma Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo (PIDHDD Regional)

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Progressive Congress

Project South

Public Citizen

Public Services International

Radios Populares, Chicago IL

Rainforest Action Network

Red Europea de Comites Oscar Romero

Red Mexicana de Lideres y Organizaciones Migrantes

Rights Action (USA)  
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights  
RootsAction.org  
The Rural Coalition  
Sansristi India  
The Second Chance Foundation  
SEIU Florida Public Services Union  
Servicios Internacionales Cristianos de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de America Latina -- Oscar Romero (SICSAL)  
Sierra Club  
Sister Parish, Inc.  
Sisters of Mercy, Institute Justice Team  
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur Justice and Peace Office  
Sojourners  
The Solidarity Center  
SomeOfUs  
SOMO (Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations), Netherlands  
Soulardarity  
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network (SEIRN)  
South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice  
Student Power Networks  
SustainUS  
Syracuse Peace Council  
Tamales y Bicicletas  
Task Force on the Americas  
Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA)  
Tri-Valley CAREs (Communities Against a Radioactive Environment)  
Trócaire  
Unión de Afectados por Texaco, Ecuador (UDAPT)  
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)  
United Auto Workers Union (UAW)  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society  
UPROSE  
Voces de la Frontera  
Washington Defender Association Immigration Project (WDAIP), Seattle, WA  
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)  
WE ACT  
Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)  
Women's Environment and Development Organization  
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)  
Zo Indigenous Forum, Mizoram, India  
1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East – Florida  
2020 Action  
350.org

Desmond D'Sa, Goldman Environmental Prize Winner 2014, Africa