

# El río llora con dolor por la muerte de Berta Cáceres

March 4, 1973 - March 3, 2016

The river cries with pain for the death of Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores. On the morning of March 3rd in 2016, unidentified gunmen entered the home of Berta Cáceres and shot her dead. News quickly spread through the unreliable Honduran media of an attempted robbery, but Mexican environmental activist Gustavo Castro Soto saw what happened. As he played dead in front of the hitmen, he knew that his work in Honduras had only begun.

Days after the assassination, more stories continued to pile up: allegations of a tampered crime scene by the Honduran government, discovery of past threats weeks before the incident, as well as countless articles of indignation and protest from Hondurans and the rest of the world. The life of Berta and the lives of the Lenca in the departamento de Intibucá has come to the forefront.

The Honduran community first started hearing about Berta Cáceres in the early 1990s when she along with other Lenca leaders such as Tomás García, Tomás Gómez Membreño and Aureliano Molina began the Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH). In 2013, the Honduran military assassinated García in broad daylight as the military broke up a peaceful protest against the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam, owned by Honduran company Desarrollo Energético Sociedad Anónima (DESA) and the multinational Chinese corporation SINOHYDRO. García and Cáceres had joined the resistance against the DESA dam through their work with COPINH in an effort to support the Lenca community in protecting the Río Gualcarque. This same struggle continued after García's death and ultimately led to the assassination of Cáceres and the continued aggressions towards the Lenca people of Río Blanco and northern Intibucá.

For Berta, the struggle against companies such as DESA and SINOHYDRO represented more than just a struggle against privatization and removal. Berta along with the Lenca people saw their natural resources especially the rivers as part of themselves. When Berta won the prestigious Goldman environmental prize in 2015, she reminded us of this connection:

***“In our cosmovisions, we are beings who come from the Earth, the waters, and the corn. The Lenca people are ancestral guardians of the rivers, protected in turn by the spirits of young girls who teach us that through giving our lives in various ways in defense of the rivers, we give our lives for the well-being of humanity and of this planet.”***

Berta may no longer walk among us as a physical being, but her spirit pushes us to continue this fight. For the Lenca, the fight happens every day, but for many of us sitting comfortably at home, this fight takes on a different meaning. We fight to keep the spirit of Berta and Tomás alive. We fight to support the Lenca people through time, attention, and funds. We fight by confronting our non-indigenous privilege.

Despite not knowing you Berta, I admire and respect your role and contributions to the struggles happening each day in Honduras. As a Honduran living outside the country, I struggle to find ways to help, but I know that by keeping your memory alive I can at least help protect the light you helped create.

—Itza Carbajal, Hondureña, and former staffmember of Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. Currently, she is a graduate student at UT-Austin.

For more on what you can do go to: <http://bit.ly/RioLlora>



Photo: Berta Cáceres speaks to the Lenca and Garifuna community

***“I’m saying goodbye to her for the last time, but the truth is that Berta hasn’t died. Berta lives on in our hearts. They haven’t actually killed Berta; they haven’t killed her. Berta is a seed that we’ve been left with. For us, that seed will germinate day after day, and we, as women, will continue the fight. We are not scared.”***

—Lesley Flores



and Belize. The people of Afro-Arawak descendents known as Garifuna live in the country of Honduras in smaller number in Guatemala, and Nicaragua. For years, the local and national government have dedicated efforts to belittle, ignore, or erase their existence. As the war on drugs continues to plague our country and more private corporations seek to exploit this land, the Garifuna along with other indigenous communities face some of the most harmful results.

The history of the Garifuna people represents the interaction of people from two continents: the Arawak of South America who migrated to the Caribbean islands and intermarried with caribs. Later, in 1635 two Spanish ships carrying West Africans wrecked near St Vicente, an island near Venezuela. The Africans escaped and swam to shore and were welcomed and protected by the Caribbean Indians. They remained on those two islands until 1797 when the British took control of the island and exiled 4,338 people to Roatan, one of Honduras's Bay Islands. Around the early 1800s the majority of the Garifunas left the island and sailed to the mainlands seeking better fertile grounds.

Since their arrival in Honduras, the Garifunas have embedded themselves into the community, but many have faced countless struggles that continue today. The following incidents are some of the many that the Garifuna have suffered. In September 24, 2008 the fisherman Guillermo Morales was assassinated by Honduras Army members. On May 23, 2014, in Trujilla, the north coast of Honduras, a march was dispersed with tear gases, sending 6 children to the hospital. On July, 2014, Miriam Miranda, coordinator of the Honduras Black Fraternal Organization (OFRANEH) was kidnapped with about 20 more Garifunas because they denounced the rebuilding of a secret runway by organized crime. On 2015, along the Atlantic coast of Honduras, Garifunas were forced out from their land to create mega-tourism projects such as Indura Beach and Golf Resort. These projects funded by the United States government, aim to privately develop the beaches and richly soiled lands of Honduras into playgrounds for the rich and elite while pushing out the people who have long inhabited the land. This year, along with the constant aggression of placing militarized police under the guise of combating drug crime, the Garifuna people faced yet another loss to their livelihood, this time in the death of two youth.

Typically, the holiday festivities in the Garifuna regions of Honduras usually consist of ferias and festivus with plentiful food such as casabe and caracol and the non stop dancing of Punta, a traditional native dance. Instead, in the last days of December

## The Garifunas of Honduras Endure

By Itza Carbajal and Mario Carbajal

of 2015, a group of Honduran military officers fired countless shots at a group of individuals with a car stranded in the edges of one of the beaches of Iriona, a town in the northern department of Colón in Honduras, killing one young male Garifuna and injuring another another—who passed away shortly after arriving at the hospital.

Contradictory accounts by military officers and media outlets ensued after the incident with at least two instances of retracted statements from the officers as to how the event unfolded. The initial story claimed that the military officers confused the group with a drug ring exchange despite the fact the region lacks evidence of being a drug exchange point. Other accounts from locals included the fact that the military officers had been watching the incident for a period of time, giving them multiple opportunities to deduce the situation. Despite the confusing nature of the incident, the murders of these two young men remains true and the probability of impunity towards the officers remains high.

For years, the Garifuna people, as a part of their spiritual beliefs, have resisted peacefully to discrimination, harassment and disrespect—but their peaceful resistance faces countless acts of violence so tensions continue to rise. Over the last years, the black Honduran community had sought ways to build connections with the Black Lives Matter movement in U.S. These sorts of alliances hope to stop the violence not only against the Black Honduran community, but the rest of the population including workers, farmers, lawyers, journalists and the indigenous people including the Lenca who also face neoliberal projects aimed at robbing them of their ancestral lands and waters. It is imperative and urgent to continue to foster alliances with communities in the interior of this country and international organizations and countries. Neoliberal politics can be defeated through transnational coalitions in order to build a more democratic society with opportunities for everyone.



Photo: Garifuna women pay tribute to Berta Cáceres, another murder they suffered.



Photo: The Garifuna protested killings and the presence of armed forces sent to quell protests.