

Washington, D.C.  
March 5, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State  
United States Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

CC:

Chargé d’Affaires Colleen A. Hoey  
Political Officer Nathaniel Rettenmayer  
United State Embassy in Honduras  
Avenida La Paz, Tegucigalpa M.D.C., Honduras

***Re: Ongoing action to ensure justice in the case of the murder of indigenous human rights and environmental defender Berta Cáceres***

Dear Secretary of State Blinken,

The undersigned civil society and academic organizations and defenders urgently implore the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Honduras to continue to press for accountability in the case of the murder of indigenous and environmental defender Berta Cáceres. We appreciate the ongoing efforts of the U.S. Embassy in Honduras to closely monitor the criminal investigations and proceedings related to this crime and to push for accountability. We ask that those efforts continue with regards to the forthcoming trial of David Castillo, and that the U.S. government increases its efforts to urge accountability for all of those who ordered and financed Berta’s murder.

This past Tuesday marked five years since the brutal murder of Berta Cáceres on March 2, 2016. Five years that Berta’s children have been deprived of their mother. Five years that the movement she co-founded—the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH)—has been deprived of a brave and adept leader.

Yesterday would have been Berta’s birthday. A winner of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, Berta Cáceres was a renowned indigenous leader with years of experience working with communities in favor of human rights and the environment. At the time of her death, Berta Cáceres was working to support Lenca indigenous communities in the Río Blanco that were opposing the Agua Zarca dam. The Agua Zarca dam project was approved under a shroud of corruption, violating the fundamental rights of the indigenous communities that live along the Gualcarque River, which they consider to be sacred. Not only did the company fail to consult with the communities, but it went so far as to forge meeting minutes of consultations that did not happen.

In November 2018, seven individuals were found guilty of Berta's murder. In 2019, the men were sentenced to 30-to-50-year jail terms. This group included two former DESA officials and one former Honduran army major, who had helped to orchestrate and execute the crime. While this is an important step towards justice, it is not sufficient to only hold accountable the trigger men. To ensure justice and non-repetition, it is essential to also hold accountable the masterminds and financiers of the murder.

Sadly, Berta's brutal murder is not the exception in Honduras, but the norm. Honduras continues to be one of the most dangerous places in the world for environmental and land defenders. Year after year, Honduras has one of the highest per capita murder rates of environmental and land rights defenders in the world. Environmental and land rights defenders are frequently criminalized, stigmatized, and threatened. In the Bajo Aguán region, for example, land rights defenders are being harassed and murdered at alarming rates; more than 140 defenders have been murdered in just over 10 years, and defenders live under constant threat, surveillance, and criminalization.

In 2017, the International Advisory Group of Experts (GAIPE) issued a report analyzing digital information including telephone records, text messages, phone calls, emails, and GPS tracking from the individuals accused of Berta's murder. These records and subsequent investigations have shown that DESA's former executive president, David Castillo, was directly involved in planning the crime. David Castillo has now been charged with murder in Honduras and his case is proceeding towards trial. Meanwhile, David Castillo's agents have actively undertaken a stigmatization campaign against COPINH and against Berta's family members, while lobbying the U.S. and European governments in order to reduce international pressure on the Honduran government.

Further investigations by COPINH, journalists, and human rights investigators have indicated that the members of the Atala family, which was involved in both the oversight and the financing of DESA, were also involved in the conspiracy to murder Berta Cáceres. The legal team representing Berta Cáceres' family has called for the Atala brothers to be summoned as witnesses at David Castillo's trial.

**We urge the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Honduras place sustained pressure on the Honduran government to ensure that the masterminds, and not only the gunmen, are held accountable for the murder of Berta Cáceres. We also ask the U.S. Embassy in Honduras to continue monitoring David Castillo's trial in April 2021 in order to ensure that the trial is in accordance with the rule of law and the rights of the victims. Additionally, we ask that the Embassy impress upon the Honduran government the importance that the criminal investigations do not stop with David Castillo's trial, but rather continue until *all* of those who ordered, facilitated, and financed the assassination be investigated and held accountable.**

**Finally, in honor of Berta's memory, we urge the U.S. State Department and U.S. Embassy in Honduras to press for investigations and accountability for all crimes against human rights defenders in Honduras, including the unsolved murders of more than 140 land rights defenders in the Bajo Aguán region and the ongoing disappearances of Garífuna community members from Triunfo de la Cruz.**

Berta Cáceres reminded us all, “We have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action.” Today, and every day, we honor Berta’s legacy. The determination, bravery, wisdom, and commitment of human rights defenders like Berta Cáceres is essential to ensuring the future and wellbeing of our communities and our planet, especially as we face a growing climate crisis. Accordingly, we urge the Biden Administration to consider the protection of human rights defenders as a central part of its critically important climate change strategy. The murder of human rights defenders not only impacts that individual and their family and loved ones, but also their movements, their communities, and the wellbeing of the earth. Tragically, it is too late to protect Berta. But it is not too late to ensure that there is justice for Berta, for her family, for COPINH, and for the River Gualcarque.

Human rights defenders—especially those working on environmental, land, and Indigenous rights issuers—continue to be at high risk across Honduras. Berta’s case is in many ways a bellwether that will indicate whether or not the systematic murder of human rights defenders will continue to be tolerated. As the Biden Administration establishes itself on the international stage, redoubling efforts to secure justice in the case of Berta Cáceres could signal its commitment to protecting those people who are on the frontlines of environmental justice and social change.

*Signed:*

Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH)

Confederación General del Trabajo

EarthRights International

Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación

Freedom House

Institute for Policy Studies – Global Economy Program

International Rivers

IRA Advocates

Latin America Working Group (LAWG)

Peace Brigades International – USA

Protection International

Recourse

Trócaire

University Network for Human Rights