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## Extractive Model: the dispossession of territories and the criminalization of protest in Central America

### **A war declared on peoples' right to decide and to live**

Six months ago, in March of 2016, the news spread like lightning and the world shook: Murderous bullets had ended the life of indigenous Lenca leader and human rights defender Berta Cáceres, who had recently been awarded the prestigious 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize. Together with the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Copinh), of which she was coordinator, the activist had been carrying on a tireless struggle against the implementation and deepening of the extractive model in Honduras; in particular against the proliferation of hydroelectric and mining projects and the expansion of monocultures for agro-export.

In an interview I conducted for a German magazine about seven months before her assassination, Cáceres warned that in Honduras and throughout Central America, indigenous peoples were facing a “hegemonic project promoted by large national and transnational capital,” with its interests in the energy, mining and agribusiness sectors. “The proponents of this strategy have imposed a profoundly neoliberal model based on the invasion and militarization of territories, and the looting and privatization of resources. They are advancing with the trans-nationalization of our lands, within the framework of a broader project of regional domination,” Cáceres said (1).

With data in hand, the Honduran indigenous leader showed how after the coup of 2009, some 300 hydroelectric projects and no less than 870 mining projects were approved; meanwhile, the way was cleared to implement the Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEED) or “model cities” (2), and thousands of square kilometers of continental shelf were handed over to the British Gas Group for oil exploration. Tourism mega-projects were also promoted, as well as the uncontrolled expansion of large-scale monoculture, particularly sugar cane and African oil palm. Today, social and popular Honduran organizations claim that 35% of the country has been handed over in concession to national and transnational corporations, and they claim that at no time was the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent respected, as provided by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) for Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.

“Honduras is a totally militarized country awash in institutionalized corruption. What remains of its institutions serves only to guarantee the interests of national oligarchic groups and large transnational groups, i.e. those sectors that orchestrated the coup of 2009,” noted Cáceres in the interview. These are complicit states that not only implement and deepen the neoliberal model through placing forests, rivers, valleys and land for sale, but also by criminalizing, persecuting and even killing those who oppose this exploitative project. The passage of laws limiting the right to assemble and protest in almost all Central American countries, as well as the toughening of social control policies, is proof of this.

“I have no doubt that it is State policy to criminalize and repress those who are committed to this struggle and to life. Indigenous peoples, black people and peasants who live this repression in our

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flesh—we know that there is a whole organized structure, planned and financed to pursue, repress and kill environmental defenders,” denounced Cáceres a few months before her assassination.

Their constant criticism of and determined struggle against the extractive model and the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project—promoted by national firm Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) with funds from European banks and multilateral agencies—cost Cáceres and four other Copinh members their lives. Last July, nature commons defender and activist Lesbia Yaneth Urquía, a close collaborator of Copinh, was also brutally murdered.

A trail of blood and death spreads throughout Central America.

## **Sights on Central America**

A recent study by the Central American Institute of Fiscal Studies (ICEFI, for its Spanish acronym) noted that there were 107 mining concessions for metals already granted in Guatemala and 359 new applications (3). If we add the non-metallic extractive projects, such as quartz, marble, sand and gravel, gypsum, among others, the total reaches the overwhelming number of 973 projects. Guatemalan popular and social movements warned that in 2014, the total area under mining concession surpassed 32 thousand square kilometers, or almost 30% of the Guatemalan territory. One must add to this the huge amount of land in concession for other kinds of mega-projects and for the expansion of monocultures for agro-export.

In Nicaragua the situation is similar. In the report “Current state of the mining sector and its socio-environmental impacts in Nicaragua 2012-2013” (4), the environmental organization, Centro Humboldt, revealed that the total area under concession was nearly 18 thousand square kilometers, or 13.5% of national territory, with a total of 446 mining projects. The possible development of the Grand Interoceanic Canal, —which would be three times larger than the Panama canal at 278 kilometers long (105 km of which would pass underneath Lake Cocibolca), between 230 and 520 meters wide and 30 meters deep—other hydroelectric and mining projects, and the expansion of sugarcane and African oil palm monoculture in the west and south-east, have increased that percentage.

While Costa Rica is known both within and beyond its borders as “the greenest and happiest country in the world,” environmental and land conflicts have left a toll of terror and death. In his article “Of Jairo Mora and terrorism in Costa Rica” (*De Jairo Mora y el terrorismo in Costa Rica*), Mauricio Álvarez, president of the Costa Rican Federation for Environmental Conservation (Fecon) notes that several environmental defenders have been killed in recent decades (5). “In this small country, the State has perpetrated terrorism again and again. Sowing fear and using force to repress has ended up in the murder of people. This clear and concrete reality has nothing to do with the idyllic image on tourist postcards. Saying this is not comfortable, and is even dangerous,” he notes.

In his other article, “Berta Cáceres and 50 more murders” (*Berta Cáceres y 50 asesinatos más*), the Costa Rican professor and ecologist asks whether hydroelectric energy can be “clean,” if generating it produces the “collateral damage” of criminalization; persecution and even death of environmental activists and defenders; and the repression of indigenous and peasant communities throughout Central America (6). According to his research, 17 Guatemalan and 15 Honduran activists have been murdered in recent years, all of them committed to the fight against hydroelectric exploitation and energy privatization. Other murders related to mining and hydroelectric exploitation occurred in El Salvador and Panama.

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“It is no coincidence that the social actors most affected by this kind of terrorism are environmentalists, farmers and indigenous people. The problem is structural. Conflicts over land—having it or defending it—and environmental conflicts have been part of a cycle of violence that keeps us far from any myth of peace and respect for human rights,” Álvarez explains in his analysis.

One of the most emblematic cases of repression against groups organizing to resist the onslaught of the extractive and agribusiness model comes from the Aguán Valley in northeastern Honduras. According to national and international organizations who thoroughly monitored the region's human rights situation between 2010 and 2013, no less than 60 peasant farmers have been killed over the agrarian conflict—caused by the expansion of African oil palm monoculture and thousands of farming families' lack of access to land (7).

“These deaths are just the 'tip of the iceberg' of a system of impunity and terror that pervades each community that lives in violent repression. Stigmatization, prosecution, harassment, torture, disappearances and other practices have been established to prevent communities from asserting their rights to access, and to make decisions about, natural resources; and above all, to carry out their resistance and opposition,” Álvarez says forcefully. “These are the real costs of the brutal logic of death in the name of 'development,' imposed on indigenous and peasant communities in the region. Can the energy from these projects be clean with so much bloodshed?” the Fecon president asks the reader rhetorically.

### **An upheaval of resistance and regional outrage**

It is a model, then, that plunders nature, corners or expels people and entire villages from their lands, criminalizes and represses protest, and murders with total impunity.

In its report “How many more?” the organization Global Witness documents that in 2014, 116 environmental and land activists were killed, an average of two a week (8). Three quarters of these murders took place in Central and South America. Honduras was the most dangerous country for environmental and land activists per capita, with 101 murders between 2010 and 2014. 40% of these victims were indigenous, and the main causes of death were the hydroelectric, mining and agribusiness industries. “Disputes over ownership, control and use of land were an underlying factor in almost all killings...The true orchestrators of these crimes mostly escape investigation, but available information suggests that large landowners, business interests, political actors and agents of organized crime are often behind the violence,” says Global Witness.

In 2015 it was worse. The new report “On dangerous ground” indicates that a total of 185 environmental and land defenders were killed, 66% of them in Latin America (9). More than three people a week were murdered for defending their land, forests and rivers against destructive industries. This is the highest recorded figure to date, with an increase of almost 60% compared to 2014.

Global Witness warns that land grabbing displaces indigenous peoples and peasant communities, causing serious clashes. “The environment has become a new battleground for human rights. With the ongoing demand for products such as timber, minerals and oil palm, governments, companies and criminal gangs exploit the land, disregarding the people who live on it,” informs the latest report.

Despite repression, the resistance grows and calls for global solidarity. “Social and political unrest and indignation are growing, which is also the product of a renewed capacity for dialogue and coordination among groups in Honduras and Central America. A time bomb is building. It is important

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that organizations in solidarity from Europe and other regions of the world join and support this struggle, and put pressure on their governments and companies involved in these exploitative processes,” Berta Cáceres concluded.

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(1) Revista Presente, Iniciativa Cristiana Romero, pages 10-11, [http://www.ci-romero.de/de/presente\\_3\\_2015/](http://www.ci-romero.de/de/presente_3_2015/)

(2) A mechanism by which part of national territory is ceded to foreign investors, who set up productive activities in regions with an elevated level of political, economic, administrative and judicial autonomy and security.

(3) [http://icefi.org/sites/default/files/la\\_mineria\\_en\\_guatemala\\_-\\_2da\\_edicion.pdf](http://icefi.org/sites/default/files/la_mineria_en_guatemala_-_2da_edicion.pdf)

(4)

<http://www.movimientom4.org/2014/04/estudio-estado-actual-del-sector-minero-y-sus-impactos-socio-ambientales-en-nicaragua/>

(5) <http://informa-tico.com/7-06-2016/jairo-mora-terrorismo-costa-rica>

(6) [http://www.feconcr.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2565&Itemid=73](http://www.feconcr.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2565&Itemid=73)

(7) [http://www6.rel-uita.org/agricultura/palma\\_africana/index.htm](http://www6.rel-uita.org/agricultura/palma_africana/index.htm)

(8) [https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/17895/Cuantos\\_mas\\_informe\\_mFhXD1.pdf](https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/17895/Cuantos_mas_informe_mFhXD1.pdf)

(9) [https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18483/En\\_Terreno\\_Peligroso.pdf](https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18483/En_Terreno_Peligroso.pdf)