



## REPORT & FINDINGS

# U.S. Human Rights Delegation to Honduras

**June 27 – July 6, 2016**

*Delegation Denounces Repression and Impunity;  
Calls for End to U.S. Military and Police Funding*

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## Executive Summary / Press Release

*A delegation of U.S. human rights observers and activists visited Honduras from June 27 to July 6. The delegation, organized by the Alliance for Global Justice and Honduras Solidarity Network, included participants from CODEPINK, the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas, the Marquette University Center for Peacemaking, the San Jose Peace and Justice Center, SEIU Local 521, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.*

The delegation:

- met with Vitalino Álvarez, a representative from MUCA (the United Farmers Movement of the Aguán Valley);
- met with CODEMUH, a women's collective that supports workers in factories that produce apparel for well-known U.S. brands;
- visited a Tolupan community in San Francisco de Locomapa;
- attended in a San Manuel, Cortes toll road protest outside El Progreso;
- visited the student occupation at the UNAH-VS campus at San Pedro Sula;
- went to the DPI (investigative police) offices in San Pedro Sula to follow up on the arrest of a coffee co-op member charged with murder as part of the recent Operation "Cacique" and spoke to public prosecutors;
- traveled to Azacualpa to examine the conflict surrounding the Canadian-owned San Andrés mine in La Unión, Copán and spoke with the mayor of La Unión;
- visited La Esperanza to meet with COPINH (the Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations of Honduras) and the family of Berta Cáceres, and joined them at a vigil marking the fourth month since Berta's murder;
- traveled to Rio Blanco, where communities are fighting the Agua Zarca dam;
- met with U.S. military representatives of Joint Task Force Bravo at the Palmerola Air Base;
- had a meeting at the U.S. Embassy with Ambassador James Nealon and other embassy representatives; and
- held a press conference with members of the media.

The delegation was struck by the ongoing, negative consequences of the 2009 coup, which the U.S. government supported by refusing to cut off U.S. military and development assistance and by refusing to insist on the return of democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya. The coup opened the way for the granting of hundreds of concessions for mines, dams, energy-generation and other infrastructure projects that have taken land and resources from local communities. It has also led to the privatization of Honduran highways, public institutions, and natural

resources. These actions have been strongly condemned by large sections of the Honduran public.

The delegation's major concerns include:

- ongoing human rights abuses against indigenous activists, campesinos (small farmers), members of the LGBTQ community, maquila (factory) workers, students, and journalists;
- high levels of impunity and corruption in state judicial and security institutions;
- strong U.S. involvement in military and police institutions known for ongoing human rights violations;
- abusive conditions in apparel factories making goods for export to the U.S.;
- the inadequate investigation into the murder of Honduran indigenous activist Berta Cáceres, including refusal by the authorities to release the case file to her family as required by Honduran law and the government's refusal to comply with the demand for an independent, international investigation;
- the criminalization of university students defending their right to public education;
- the noncompliance of the Honduran government in providing protective measures ("medidas cautelares") granted to activists at risk by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; and
- the threatened forced displacement of the Azacualpa community, including the destruction of their 200-year-old ancestral cemetery.

We support:

- Honduran students in their call for no fee hikes, elected student representatives on the Governing Board, and dialogue with University Rector Julieta Castellanos;
- indigenous communities in their fight to defend their land, water, and forests, and their right to free, prior, and informed consent as granted under the International Labor Organization Convention Number 169;
- the right of campesinos to organize without fear of harassment, threats, or bodily harm;
- the cancellation of the dam concession and financing for building the Agua Zarca dam; and
- the immediate closure of the San Andrés mine in Copán as well as the suspension of mining and energy concessions that local communities have not consented to.

We are concerned that in 2015, the U.S. Congress approved \$750 million in development and police/military aid to Honduras under the Alliance for Prosperity when gross human rights abuses and impunity were well documented and reported. We feel this money has further exacerbated the crisis.

President Obama's funding request for fiscal year 2017 calls for an increase in security funding for Honduras, surpassing the approximately \$18,000,000 allocated to the Honduran police and military in 2016. This money, which is meant to reduce human rights violations, is

instead giving the Honduran government more resources with which to suppress its own citizens.

We therefore call on the U.S. government to cut all military and police funding to Honduras as stipulated in the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act, H.R.5474, which is now before Congress.



## Take Action:

[Sign the petition demanding an independent investigation into the murder of Berta Cáceres!](#)

[Sign the petition demanding an end to U.S. military aid to the oppressive Honduran government!](#)

[Ten ways to get involved with Honduras solidarity work.](#)

## Meeting with Vitalino Álvarez on the Campesino Struggle in the Bajo Aguán

*Monday, June 27*

*Plaza Victoria Hotel, El Progreso, Yoro*

The delegation's first meeting took place at the Plaza Victoria Hotel in El Progreso. We met with Vitalino Álvarez who works with the United Peasant Movement of Aguán (MUCA) in Bajo Aguán. Over 100 campesinos (peasant farmers and farm workers) have been murdered in land struggles in this region alone. [The Guardian reports](#) that Álvarez is currently on the same military "hit list" as Berta Cáceres was. Cáceres was number 1 on the list; Álvarez says he was number 2, which now makes him number 1. He is living on the run, moving from one place to another. He

told us many harrowing stories about threats against him. On one occasion, five armed men were waiting outside his house to murder him but luckily, someone warned him not to go home and he was able to reach his two children and flee the area. He told us that he would like his children to get asylum in another country, but that he wants to stay and work in Honduras. He said the U.S. embassy calls him a terrorist because he opposes U.S. imperial policies in Honduras.

Álvarez told us that he grew up in the middle of this decades-long struggle in the Aguán Valley over its fertile, agricultural land. As he explained, this struggle started years before he was born. The mid-1940's creation of the World Bank and subsequent end of World War II led to an influx of international funds to help rebuilding and developing countries. For Álvarez, this marked the infancy of a new form of government: government imposed by transnational corporations.

In 1954, landless campesinos and banana workers throughout Central America organized strikes and created unions to demand land and labor rights. The U.S., however, viewed this within the context of the Cold War and, as a result, the successful strikes and subsequent land reform programs were seen as socialist-leaning and sparked fears of communism. This led to a military coup in 1963. U.S. influence in Honduras continued to grow in the years following the coup and the land reform measures in the 1970's were backed by the U.S. These reforms resulted in the displacement of Salvadoran and Guatemalan squatters as Honduran campesinos were organized into cooperatives and given collective land titles. The campesinos were not allowed to



*Delegation participants with campesino activist Vitalino Álvarez (bottom center in red shirt) on the bus. Photo: Karen Spring*

plant and harvest what they wanted. Instead, they were forced to grow monocultures of export crops (primarily African Palm).

In the mid-1980's African Palm exports experienced a huge economic boom. This, combined with the rapid emergence of a global marketplace after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, led to increasing private interest in the campesino land. Álvarez recounted that the collapse of the Berlin Wall served as an impetus for land grabbing. In 1992, Honduras passed an Agricultural Modernization Law which changed 17 articles of the agrarian reform including permitting the purchase of land designated to the agrarian reform to be sold on the private market. This only served to enable more land grabbing by the multinational corporations as individuals and private companies could now purchase what used to be land designated by the Honduran government, only for landless farmers. As Álvarez described this, campesinos were coerced into selling their land to powerful landlords through intimidation and manipulation, from bribes to threats to outright violence.

The most prominent of these powerful, large landowners is the widely denounced (and now deceased) businessman Miguel Facussé and his Corporación Dinant. Corporación Dinant has become one of the largest producers of African palm oil in Honduras and is one of the greatest threats to campesinos. Private security hired by Corporación Dinant in collusion with Honduran state security forces have been tied to numerous killings of campesinos. Álvarez said he has officially lost over 150 comrades in this struggle, and that the actual number of deaths is much higher.

In 2001 the campesinos formed MUCA as an organizing body to reclaim their land. One of the tactics they employ in this struggle is called land occupation, in which they occupy, live on, and work the lands that were taken from them. They face constant threats of violence and death from the private security, police, and military for these and other actions they take. One of their more successful actions was a land occupation involving around 5,000 people. Then President Mel Zelaya heard their demands and promised that this land, which was mostly owned by Facussé/Dinant, would be returned to the campesinos. Fifteen days after he made this promise, Zelaya was overthrown in a military coup on June 28, 2009.

Álvarez told us that attacks against leaders and campesinos by paramilitary forces and death squads have escalated after the 2009 coup. He has been kidnapped twice and survived four assassination attempts. Other campesinos who are defending their land also face severe repression. Álvarez explained that big landowners and Honduran and multinational corporations have all profited immensely from the last seven years of concessions for land, mining, and hydroelectric power.

There have also been campaigns to criminalize the campesinos by claiming all of the killings are infighting between campesino groups. The campesinos say that this is a tactic used by the authorities and private interests—to infiltrate the campesino movements so it looks like the landowners and multinationals aren't involved. Álvarez said that they need support to be able to investigate those who infiltrate and frame the campesino movements.



Álvarez also would like more attention to be drawn to the fact that Corporación Dinant private security guards have been involved in dozens of human rights abuses in the Aguán Valley and are now being tied to using their large landholdings to hide drug trafficking transit sites. Despite all of these actions, Corporación Dinant receives millions of dollars in loans from the private lending arm of the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation (IFC). Álvarez asked us, “Why is the World Bank supporting Dinant and not the campesinos?”

The delegation also learned that the U.S. government trains, funds, and sends special forces to assist Honduran military units in the Aguán Valley—units that are suspected of human rights violations.



## Meeting with CODEMUH on Women's and Labor Rights in Maquila Towns

*Tuesday, June 28*

*CODEMUH Offices, Choloma, Cortés*

We traveled to the northern city of Choloma to meet with CODEMUH, Colectivo de Mujeres de Honduras (Honduras Women's Collective). CODEMUH is a grassroots, feminist organization and solidarity group that organizes women working in sweatshops to demand labor and occupational health rights.

CODEMUH's office is located in Choloma on the road between the major industrial city of San Pedro Sula and Puerto Cortés, the largest deep water port in Central America. Choloma is also part of a free trade zone and has the lowest minimum wage of all the economic zones in Honduras. These two factors have resulted in Choloma becoming a major sweatshop city where many American and Canadian companies have set up maquilas, or factories, to produce clothing for brands such as Hanes, Russell, Gildan, Delta, Anvil, and Fruit of the Loom.

We met Maria Luisa Regalado, the executive director of CODEMUH, who has been with the group for 27 years, since its inception in 1989. CODEMUH began by fighting for women's rights in general, but then decided to focus on the problems of women working under slave-like conditions in sweatshops. In the beginning it was difficult because of the absolute power of the sweatshop owners and managers—women were afraid of losing their jobs if they complained and some managers beat women if they made a mistake. Compounding this issue, while jealous husbands and partners would allow women to participate in meetings about their rights as workers, they often got angry when women started speaking up about their rights outside the workplace (i.e. at home and in the community).

At first the women were afraid to speak publicly but little by little they became stronger, joining demonstrations, talking to the media, meeting with government officials, even forming a network of Central American workers. "We realized that we could sit with anyone, even the president, and make our demands known," said Regalado.

The group did research to show that their injuries, like pains in their hands, backs, and shoulders, were indeed work related. They have helped over 110 women receive official diagnoses of work-related injuries and get lifetime disability compensation equal to the wages they were



*CODEMUH members pose in front of the organization's offices in Choloma. Photo: Medea Benjamin*

earning prior to developing their injuries, and healthcare coverage. These payments are small but critical.

Other issues that CODEMUH is currently working on demonstrate the extensive mistreatment of the maquila workers. They work to address corruption in unions; to decrease the prevalence of 12-hour shifts and unrealistically high production goals; to protect workers from repetitive motion injuries; to eliminate humiliating job interviews in which potential employees are illegally stripped down to their underwear and prodded to see if they are injured or pregnant; and to ensure workers receive adequate health care and treatment while they are at work. CODEMUH's achievements are helping women find their voices and take these issues to the national level to demand better labor laws.

International solidarity has been very important in CODEMUH's mission. For example, in 2013, a woman named Lilian Castillo got tendonitis and was fired from Gildan. CODEMUH



*CODEMUH Executive Director Maria Luisa Regalado (left) with CODEMUH members Rosa Elena Garcia (center) and Leslie Rodriguez (right). Photo: Chris Jeske*

fought her legal case all the way up to the Supreme Court and won, but the company still refused to reinstate her, so CODEMUH put out a call for international solidarity. So many letters were sent in from around the world that Gildan reinstated her immediately. Once back on the job, however, she was mistreated, so they put out another call for solidarity. The next day, the manager of the factory made Castillo an assistant and paid her back pay for the time since she was fired, as per the court's resolution. Letters from international groups are important to these companies because international groups represent their customers.

We also met with three workers:

*Rosa Elena Garcia, who has worked for Gildan Activewear for 11 years:*

"I am 36 years old. I thought this job would help me give my children a better life, but I got repetitive motion injuries in my hands, my shoulder, and my spine after working there, which affected my everyday life. I had permanent, sharp pains and my output was reduced.

"When we started, we had to make 400-500 dozen pieces a day during 12 hour shifts; now we do less. We have teams of 18 people; each person does one piece of the shirt, so we still do the same motion over and over. There are day and night shifts and these are often changed. When women get the night shift, they take pills or energy drinks, and now suffer the consequences of that, including high blood pressure."

*Leslie Rodriguez, who has worked for Gildan Activewear for 11 years:*

“I have hernias in my spine and have been discriminated against at work because of that. The work injuries also affect our ability to take care of our families. I had so many injuries when I first came to CODEMUH that I just cried and cried. CODEMUH has given me moral and psychological support.”

*Aida Margarita Rivas, who has worked for Gildan Activewear for 17 years:*

“I can’t clean my house properly; I can’t lift things or mop the floor. But thanks to CODEMUH, I can now stand up for myself. When I returned from shoulder surgery, they put me right back on the machine, but now I can tell the managers that I need a special chair or ask for other things I need. Because of this, I, along with other injured women, have been moved to the storage room, where we are isolated and earn much less than before. We don’t even make minimum wage; which is \$293. We get 660 lempiras (\$253).”

## Meeting with Fito on Life in the Banana Camps and Working for Chiquita Banana

*Tuesday, June 28*

*The Home of Elsa and Fito, La Lima, Cortés*

We then embarked on a short drive to the municipality of La Lima. One of many things La Lima is known for is having been the base of operations for the United Fruit Company, also known as the Chiquita banana company, for many years.

We had lunch in the home of Elsa and Fito, and listened to Fito talk about his experiences with Chiquita. Fito has lived in La Lima his whole life and worked for Chiquita for many years. Fito's father also worked for Chiquita his whole life.

In 1954 the campesinos organized a strike that had 30 demands, including access to hospitals, being paid in cash (instead of coupons), vacation time, and education for their children. Several of the benefits gained during the strike of '54 remained in place until recently.

Around 2015 Chiquita was sold to Brazilian ownership (Safra Group and Cutrale Group). Since then the Brazilian ownership has taken advantage of the Temporary Labor Law passed after the 2009 coup. Now all workers are hired as contractors for a two month "probationary" period and then fired for one week. After the week has passed, they are hired for another two month "probationary" period before being fired again. Enabled by the Temporary Labor Law passed after the 2009 coup, this "contracting" model deprives the campesinos of any legal claim to benefits such as health care and education.

In addition to losing their benefits, work conditions and pay for campesinos have deteriorated over time. Fito used to make 400 lempiras (roughly \$17.50) a day cutting 600 branches. More recently he would cut 1,000 to 2,000 branches and make only 150 lempiras (roughly \$6.50) a day. This coincided with a policy change at Chiquita in which all workers make the same wage regardless of how many branches they cut in a day.

Another factor that significantly impacted working conditions was Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Hurricane Mitch destroyed as much as 80% of the banana production and many of the machines used in harvesting. Almost 18 years later, many of these machines still have not been replaced



*Fito picks bananas from a tree in his backyard. Photo: Chris Jeske*

and the work is less mechanized and more labor intensive now than it was decades ago. Additionally the campesinos used to work in teams of six with two people assigned to each job, but now they work in teams of three with one person assigned to each job. This makes the work more labor intensive and less safe.

Because of all of these changes and the fact that Chiquita controls the union, Fito decided to stop working for Chiquita and become a day laborer. Now, even as a day laborer he rarely bothers to work because of the gangs. For those who are employed, the gangs come to their homes to extort from them an “impuesto de guerra” or war tax. Fito says it’s better not to work than to be forced to pay money to these gangs.



## March to Commemorate the 7<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Resistance against the Coup

*Tuesday, June 28*

*San Pedro Sula, Cortés*

In the afternoon we joined the march in San Pedro Sula to commemorate the 7th anniversary of the resistance against the June 28, 2009 military coup in Honduras that toppled President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya. It was a small but spirited march. The protesters took over the street and did a lot of graffiti spray painting along the way (with the police doing nothing about it). The graffiti and chants were about opposition to the government of JOH (President Juan Orlando Hernandez). It ended with a rally at the town square. Police presence was very light.



*Activists gather at a rally in San Pedro Sula after marching on the 7th anniversary of the coup that overthrew Manuel Zelaya's popular government. Photos: Chris Jeske*

# Meeting with San Francisco de Locomapa Tolupan Tribe on Their Land Struggle

*Wednesday, June 29*

*Local Schoolhouse, San Francisco de Locomapa, Yoro*

We drove several hours to visit the San Francisco de Locomapa tribe in the rural mountains of northern Yoro. The San Francisco de Locomapa are an indigenous Tolupan (Xicaque) tribe of 19 villages and 996 families. Some members of the delegation remarked that the circumstances of the struggle in this community are the most complex of the areas we visited.

There are five main parties in this conflict: ladinos (non-indigenous squatters) who claim ownership of the land, private businesses (mainly extractive industries such as mining and logging), government authorities who operate in collusion with the businesses and ladinos, corrupt tribal authorities who have taken money from the companies to allow extraction, and indigenous community members who are working to protect their land and stop the extraction projects.

The conflict is widely presented as an internal dispute within the San Francisco de Locomapa tribe, but that is overly simplistic as the conflict only exists because of the meddling of ladinos, government authorities, and private interests. Furthermore, the violence and killings of 104 Tolupan community members since 1986 are enabled and exacerbated by these same outside interests. Six of these deaths occurred between 2013 and 2016 as a result of the conflict in San Francisco de Locomapa.

The members of the San Francisco de Locomapa tribe trace their title to the land back at least 500 years to when they were the first people to settle in this area. They say that this title is held in the minds of their elders. Then in 1864, Father Manuel de Jesús Subirana, a Spanish missionary, assisted the tribe in securing legal, documented title to the land. This official title is still valid and is stored in a local government archive.

Around the 1980's many ladinos encroached on Tolupan lands. Over time these illegal land seizures became an issue of increasing consequence. In the early 1980's the indigenous people of San Francisco de Locomapa were part of various efforts to organize around reclaiming their land from the ladinos, but each of these efforts collapsed over time. The most notorious of the ladinos



*Some of the 38 members of the San Francisco de Locomapa tribe who have been granted precautionary measures by the IACHR. Photo: Chris Jeske*



is Filader Armijo Uclés, a former Army General, who in 1983 used his power to illegally claim around 50% of the land in San Francisco de Locomapa.

Using the Agrarian reform programs established in the 1960's, the Honduran government through the National Agrarian Institute (INA) assigned "unused" land from the Tolupan traditional land title to the Agrarian reform. This land reform program, which intended to help campesinos in other parts of the country gain title to land, proved to benefit the ladinos in San Francisco de Locomapa at the expense of the indigenous population. In 1986, the INA began to give land titles to non-Tolupan individuals, on top of the official Tolupan land title. This was, in essence, a systematic attempt to transfer ownership of Tolupan lands into the hands of private interests.

Those who have benefited most from this are logging and mining businesses. The illegal logging is being done by a company called Empresa Madadera Locomapa which is linked to two businessmen: Kenton Landa and William Dominguez. The name of the mining company is unknown as they are operating illegally and clandestinely to extract antimony. The mine is linked to two businessmen: Amilcar Cruz and Armando Urbina, the mayor of Yoro. Urbina has also been linked to and was arrested for drug trafficking last year.

Another of the community's governmental opponents in this struggle has been the Institute of Forestry and Conservation (IFC). Acting in collusion with the ladinos and extractive industries, the IFC has been complicit in illegally giving permission for logging and mining projects on the tribal lands. All of this has been done without the consent of the indigenous community. The state also intervened in 1998 when they arrived to remeasure the land. Over the objection of the community, they enforced a new method of measuring which underrepresented the tribal lands by not using traditional measures such as mountains and rivers.

Corruption among tribal authorities has also been an issue. In the 1990's the Tolupan tribes decided to change the structure of their tribal authorities by creating a Directive Council of representatives elected by general assembly in each tribe. Over time, though, the Directive Council in San Francisco de Locomapa has become corrupt by accepting money from the companies to allow extraction of natural resources on their lands.

This corruption became clear between 2007 and 2008 when the Directive Council sold, in three instances, large tracts of land to the companies without consulting the rest of the community. In response to this, members of the San Francisco de Locomapa resistance blocked access to the land for 26 or 27 days. They faced consequences from the Federation and tribal authorities for their actions: eighteen people were subsequently suspended from the tribe.

This example is in many ways a microcosm of the struggle in San Francisco de Locomapa: outside interests claiming rights to the land, corrupt tribal authorities acting against the interests of their community, and a resistance repressed by both tribal and outside authorities. But even in the face of violence, the resistance is not deterred.

As collusion, corruption, and extraction reign, members of the San Francisco de Locomapa tribe have organized a multi-faceted resistance to protect and liberate their land. Some of their direct action tactics include land occupations, roadblocks, and hunger strikes. Specifically in the

case of addressing corruption on the Directive Council, the community of San Francisco de Locomapa created an alternative council of tribal authorities, called the Preventative Council, which operates parallel to the Directive Council and denounces extracting natural resources from the land.

With the assistance of The Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice (MADJ) and Team of Reflection, Investigation, and Communication (ERIC), two Honduran human rights and legal service organizations, they have made numerous legal appeals. Resistance members described this approach as only partially successful because when investigations happen they find that the land does, in fact, belong to the tribe and not the ladinos and companies. However, due to impunity, the final ruling always sides with the companies and private interests. Resistance efforts have also become stronger by building alliances with other communities and organizations such as COPINH and OFRANEH, the two largest indigenous rights organizations in the country.

The authorities, however, have little interest in acknowledging the legitimacy of the resistance. Resistance members shared many accounts of abuse of power: threats by authorities to kill them and throw them into the river, the prosecutor leading an effort to criminalize them, and police not responding to their calls. Beyond the threats and harassment, there have been kidnappings, killings, and forced exile of those who are defending human rights. In these instances, police and authorities do not prosecute, but instead *protect* the perpetrators of the crimes. This is a textbook example of impunity.

Given these circumstances, the resistance has appealed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). In San Francisco de Locomapa alone, 38 people have been granted “precautionary measures” for protection by the IACHR, though the Honduran government has failed to comply with this international decree by making no effort to protect these people. Likewise, those who have applied for the precautionary measures recognize that asking for protection from those who are trying to kill them is risky, but they also see it as a necessary way to pressure the government and bring international attention to their struggle.

Just as the authorities in Honduras have failed to comply with IACHR mandates to protect activists, they have also failed to comply with an internationally recognized protection of indigenous lands. In 1995, Honduras signed on to International Labor Organization Convention 169 (ILO 169), which requires the prior, free, and informed consent of the indigenous community before any project can be started on their land. The Honduran state and IFC authorities have failed to comply with this protection as extraction projects continue against the



*Jose Maria Pineda speaks with a community member at the schoolhouse. He has been in exile for three years.*

Photo: Chris Jeske

demands of the indigenous community. One notable victory, though, is a ruling from the Supreme Court in December 2013 recognizing that the Honduran state has violated ILO 169 in San Francisco de Locomapa. MADJ is actively working with other indigenous communities to make them aware of the Supreme Court ruling and how it can be used to protect indigenous land and rights.



*San Francisco de Locomapa community members spoke with members of the delegation in the local schoolhouse. Photos: Alliance for Global Justice*

While progress in this struggle has been slow, MADJ is actively working with the community to resolve this conflict. Justo Pastor Reyes, who works for MADJ, is taking the first step of getting the two factions of the tribe talking to each other again. In fact, our delegation was used to bring members of the two groups into the same room to dialogue.

When we arrived in San Francisco de Locomapa we went to the local schoolhouse for a meeting with community members. Justo started the meeting and asked those in attendance to share how the conflict has affected them and to voice their grievances. Their remarks recounted much of the history and situation outlined above.

The instances most talked about, however, occurred in August 2013. Around this time, the resistance started blocking roads and entrances to oppose a new extraction project. Concerned that they were being harassed by armed individuals, they contacted the prosecutor in hope that he would mediate the dispute. But he refused to intervene and later a car with gunmen arrived and opened fire on those blocking the road. Three

community members were killed in this attack. We were told this massacre was carried out by corrupt members of the tribe whose identities are well known. The killers have been named and identified to the authorities, but the prosecutor and government have done nothing to bring them to justice.

The day after the massacre, seven leaders were forced to leave the community for six months. Jose Maria Pineda, one of these seven, still hasn't been allowed to move back to the community after three years. Our presence, though, allowed Jose Maria to join us for the meeting and to return to his village, even if only for a few hours. Referencing his situation, he cautioned, "Justice doesn't exist for the poor, only for those who have money."

In addition to this event, other topics of concern in the community include:

- the tribe's language (Tol) is becoming extinct and they are losing knowledge of natural medicines and oral history;
- teaching jobs are given out by a government that isn't interested in preserving their indigenous heritage;
- women described the need for more rights and a more prominent role in society;
- the community doesn't have a doctor, just a nurse for 30,000 people; and
- the government only cares about them every four years during the election when they offer bags of food in exchange for their signatures and votes.

Indeed, when we arrived at the schoolhouse someone passed us on the road who was offering bags of food in exchange for signatures on a piece of paper with no heading. MADJ representatives explained to us that after the sheet is filled with signatures, a title will be likely be added exclaiming that all the signatures are in support of modifying the constitution so current President Juan Orlando Hernandez (and his corrupt government) can serve a second term.

The second half of the meeting was used to propose or share ideas that could help address many of the concerns discussed. A group of women shared that they are interested in two projects: a bakery and a chicken coop. These projects would help them assert their status in the tribe as well as provide a necessary service. They also noted that it costs money to start both of them and they don't have that money right now. There was also a proposal developed to create a wood company that would be run by the tribe for the common benefit of the tribe. They could use the profits from the wood company to create a community-owned farm and to fund some of the other projects mentioned.

Moving forward with these proposals will take time as not everyone was on board with them. Justo reiterated that they will need to work with both councils for the proposals to move forward and that all the dealings should happen in front of everyone and not behind anyone's back. The delegation supports the tribe and MADJ in continuing dialogue and working together on projects that benefit the common interests of the tribe. We also call for a permanent end to the violence and an immediate suspension of all contested extraction projects.

**Update:** On July 13, two weeks after our meeting, the MADJ offices were burglarized. Their computers and hard drives were stolen while other valuable equipment and money was left behind. It was most likely a targeted robbery to gather sensitive information about cases they are working on. MADJ believes it is related to their work defending human rights which includes an investigation of Berta Caceres' assassination, the struggle in San Francisco de Locomapa, and many others. The security cameras in the building show that it was all done by one guy that looked like a serious professional.

# Meeting with Peaje (Toll Road) Protesters on Public-Private Partnerships and Corruption

*Wednesday, June 29*

*San Manuel Toll, San Manuel, Cortés*

At the invitation of some Honduran activists, part of the delegation went to accompany the ongoing protests against the construction of a new toll road on the highway between San Pedro Sula and Progreso. Recent protests have been repressed violently with tear gas, and some protesters who set tires on fire to help block the road have been detained.

We arrived to a group of around 100 protesters who managed to block access to portions of the highway and faced off against at least 50 armed National Police and Cobra riot police without any violence. Organizations supporting the protests include the National Confederation of Peasant Organizations (CNTC) – El Progreso Chapter, Jesuit Team of Reflection, Research, and Communication (ERIC-SJ), teacher activists, members of the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE), student groups and poor people's organizations working together in the Mesas de Indignación. The Chamber of Commerce of Progreso is also joining in the protests now because small businesses are adversely affected by the toll road.

Since taking power in January 2014, President Juan Orlando Hernandez has intensified the campaign of privatization of public goods and the cutting of services to the people. One of these campaigns is for the privatization of the major highways through the construction of toll roads with private/public partnerships. But they cause immense hardship for the population; the cost of a toll is around \$1 for a regular private car and approximately \$10 for a large truck. At the same time the alternative roads are being blocked with drainage ditches and other construction. Toll roads have been completed on the highways in and out of Tegucigalpa and between San Pedro Sula and Choloma, and more are planned on the highways in and out of Progreso. There have been many protests blocking the road and people refusing to pay the tolls but now people have decided to protest to prevent the construction of new toll booths.

At this protest, the group impeded traffic for over an hour. There was a heavy police presence, with a water gun truck and tear gas guns (along with their M15s) but they stayed in the background.

Our group went out in the highway with the big banner “There is no road to solidarity, solidarity is the road,” which the folks loved. The slogan seemed particularly pertinent for a protest against a toll road.



*Protesters block traffic at the San Manuel Toll.*

Photo: Chris Jeske



## Meeting with University Students on the University Takeover and Public Education

*Thursday, June 30*

*National Autonomous University of Honduras – Sula Valley Campus,  
San Pedro Sula, Cortés*

We started the day Thursday by visiting student activists at the local, public university. At the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH-SV) Sula Valley campus, students were holding all the entrances to the campus in an occupation that had lasted about 30 days. This action marks the third occupation this academic year. They had been sleeping in tents and on mattresses and covered the surrounding entrance fences with banners that read, “Pardon the inconvenience, we are fighting for a *public* UNAH,” and “Protesting is a right. Repression is a crime.” The Honduran flag was hung on a surrounding fence, the defining mark that signifies an occupation among many land movements in Honduras. Students spoke to us but did not want us to photograph their faces, fearing retaliation from the university authorities.

Students throughout the country are engaged in a fierce struggle with the Rector of the National Autonomous University system Julieta Castellanos. Students and student groups on all of the main UNAH campuses—including La Ceiba, Danli, San Pedro Sula, Choluteca, Comayagua, Santa Rosa de Copán, Valle del Aguán, Olanchito, and Tegucigalpa—have organized under a coalition referred to as the University Student Movement (MEU). Hundreds of students are involved in the strike in which they have been occupying their campuses to protest proposed reforms and calling on the university rector to participate in a dialogue with them. Instead, Julieta Castellanos, recipient of the First Lady Michelle Obama International Courage Award in 2013, has failed to show for arranged meetings with the students and has subjected the students to military and police repression, including tear gas, beatings, and arrest warrants.

Castellanos is accused of being a supporter of the current right-wing president Juan Orlando Hernandez, who is referred to among his critics by his initials JOH pronounced “*ho*.” Calls for the firing of *JOH*lieta Castellanos can be heard during student marches and can be seen in local graffiti.



*Delegation participants with university students in San Pedro Sula. (Student faces hidden to protect their identity)*  
Photo: Karen Spring

At any given time—day and night—there are between 50-100 students occupying the Sula Valley campus. The students' main concern is they see the public university system moving toward privatization, which they fear will shut poor students out of the university system. Specifically, they are opposing a new package of reforms that include new fines and extra student fees. For example, students will now be charged a fine for dropping or changing a class where before the change was made at no cost. Additionally, new academic requirements raise what constitutes a passing grade and would mean the forced repetition of classes for some students, which would burden them with additional tuition. For poorer rural students who must relocate to larger cities where the university campuses exist, the additional costs would render higher education prohibitive.

According to the university's own policies, new regulations must be approved by a board that includes students. But the protesting students say the student board positions are appointed by university officials rather than being elected by the students themselves. The students are also demanding more transparency about how the institution is spending money on educational services. Likewise, they are demanding an end to the criminalization of the movement and respect for their right to protest (various students from different regional universities have arrest orders and there are several cases of legal charges against student leaders).

The students shared that two weeks before our visit, on a Friday, they were evicted. About 350 police officers arrived with an eviction order from a judge to remove the students from the campus. The students, however, were able to resume the occupation by returning very early in the morning on the following Monday to reclaim the campus. Four days later the authorities cut off water and electricity to the campus, but a local human rights group pressured the fire department into delivering large jugs of water to the campus for the students.

The students said that while they have received support from many people and groups, their parents are generally not supportive of their involvement. Some of the parents are very conservative and very against the strike, but most parents support the stance the students are taking, but are afraid of the consequences students face for taking part in it. The students shared that they face constant threats, and shortly before we arrived four heavily armed and non-uniformed police officers showed up to harass them.

The students have responded to the threats with composure. All of the students participating in the occupation agree to follow some basic rules and guidelines set by the MEU and the Committee of the Strike. Following these rules, they say, helps to ensure that the authorities can't make the students look bad. The students organized themselves into logistical teams to help secure the campus and care for the grounds.

**Update:** The day after our meeting, heavily armed riot police invaded the Tegucigalpa campus, dislodging the occupation and arresting 25 students. The students in San Pedro Sula were also forced to leave.



# Response to Urgent Action Alert on the Arrest of Jose Nelson Tejada Juarez

*Thursday, June 30*

*Police Investigative Unit (DPI) Building, San Pedro Sula, Cortés*

While meeting with the university students we received an urgent action alert informing us that Jose Nelson Tejada Juarez, a man who is on the board of a coffee co-op and member of the Libre party, had been arrested along with 12 others that morning in the so called “Operacion Cacique” carried out by the elite police unit Intelligence Troop and Special Security Response Groups (TIGRES) and the Police Investigative Unit (DPI). The accusation is that he had been involved in three assassinations since 2013. Because he holds the critical job of registering voters for the Libre Party in his town, there was speculation that his arrest was politically motivated and the charges a complete fabrication.

One of the interesting things we noted while at the DPI was the presence of what appeared to be American police trainers; we saw two of them who, when they saw us, ducked back into rooms upstairs. Finally, one of them walked briskly down the stairs, head down and wearing a hat and sunglasses, trying to avoid contact with us. They were likely part of the U.S. team training and directing the TIGRES and Honduran police.

A few members of the delegation were able to speak with Nelson (including an examination by the doctor on our trip). He had not been given any food or water and had not been able to contact a lawyer. We were able to contact his lawyer and see that he and the others being held got food and water. We also spoke with the prosecutor for the case to get a better understanding of the accusations and charges against him.

With a long drive to the department of Copan in western Honduras ahead of us, we departed from the DPI with a promise to monitor Jose Nelson’s situation.

In the evening, we arrived at Santa Rosa de Copán. Unlike most Honduran cities, Santa Rosa de Copán is known for being safe to walk the streets. Some of us took advantage by exploring the city, realizing how sad it was that simply walking without fear is a luxury for many people in this country.



*Jose Nelson eats a sandwich while waiting to be processed at the DPI offices. Photo: Chris Jeske*

# Meeting with Azacualpa on the San Andrés Mine and Struggle to Protect their Cemetery

*Friday, July 1*

*Azacualpa, Cemetery Mountain, and San Andrés Mine, Copán*

On Friday morning we embarked on a drive to the Azacualpa community in the municipality of La Unión. The delegation was not originally scheduled to visit Azacualpa, but reports of imminent threats to this community and their 200-year old cemetery brought us to accompany them in their struggle.

After arriving in the community, we met with leaders of the Azacualpa Environmental Committee and community members. Delegation co-coordinator Karen Spring also shared background information on this struggle as earlier in the week she published a 25-page report entitled [\*Mining in a State of Impunity\*](#).

Since 1998, the San Andrés open-pit gold mine has brought destruction and the constant threat of displacement to the surrounding communities. While Karen's report covers the full context of this struggle, our delegation focused specifically on the Azacualpa community's contention with Aura Minerals, the Canadian mining company that is currently operating the San Andrés mine. Aura Minerals has failed to comply with prior agreements made with the Azacualpa community and has further infringed on the rights and freedoms of community members.

Orlando Rodriguez, president of the Azacualpa Environmental Committee, explained that the pace of mining has recently accelerated and Aura Minerals is rapidly encroaching on the perimeters of a 200-year old community cemetery and two other mountains that support the base of the Azacualpa community. The delegation is very concerned with Aura Minerals' proceedings and their intention to relocate the cemetery and forcibly displace the Azacualpa community.

In 2012, municipal authorities and Aura Minerals engaged in conversations with the Azacualpa community that led to an agreement outlining conditions that would need to be met for the community to approve the cemetery relocation. The crux of this agreement was that Aura Minerals would build and donate 396 houses and other public buildings and infrastructure to the community in exchange for relocating the cemetery.



*A young boy looks at tombs in the cemetery that Aura Minerals want to relocate so they can mine for gold.*

Photo: Chris Jeske

During the time that these conversations were taking place, Honduran institutions, including the Ministry of Public Health, attempted to declare the cemetery unfit. They cited it as dangerous, susceptible to landslides, unsanitary, and unfit to meet public health standards. All of these claims are refuted by the six local communities who bury their dead here. The Ministry of Public Health's sudden interest in the conditions of the cemetery directly coincided with Aura Minerals' interest in expanding the San Andrés mine.

In 2014 the Azacualpa community came to two important realizations: first, the mine expansion was rapidly encroaching on the cemetery, and second, Aura Minerals had no intention of fulfilling the conditions of the 2012 agreement. Only 120 houses had been built and even these failed to meet the size and material specifications outlined in the agreement. The large, upscale houses constructed with "first class" materials that were showcased in a flashy visual presentation back in 2012 instead turned out to be a congested plot of tiny, concrete houses. Indeed, by late 2015 when all of the conditions listed in the agreement were to be completed, Aura Minerals had only fulfilled 5% of their promises to Azacualpa.

Tired of Aura Minerals' broken promises and failure to fulfill their agreements, the community of Azacualpa quickly organized to protect their cemetery and town by stopping the expansion of the mine. Their first action was in 2014 when community members blocked a public road outside one of the entrances to the San Andrés mine. The authorities responded by criminalizing and discrediting the protesters: they were violently evicted by military and police and charges were pressed against 19 community members.

Another tactic pursued was to assert their rights as citizens of the municipality of La Unión within the framework of municipal laws. In 2015, residents of Azacualpa held a *cabildo abierto* or community consultation in coordination with the mayor's office. In this meeting, Azacualpa declared that they were against the closure and relocation of their cemetery and demanded that Aura Minerals respect their wishes. Despite repeated instances of following the appropriate legal statutes to assert their rights, the mayor has refused to recognize or legitimize these proceedings.

Aura Minerals then began offering cash payment for permission to excavate family members' remains and relocate them to a new graveyard. So far only 15 have agreed to this and even then, the company's tactics have been morally questionable. First off, they claim to only need one member of the family to sign the agreement and that person doesn't have to be the next of kin. This has led to fighting within some families because in some cases an individual signed the agreement and took the money either without consulting the family or knowingly did so against



*A plot of 120 houses built by Aura Minerals for the Azacualpa community. These houses do not meet the standards set in the 2012 agreement.* Photo: Chris Jeske

the rest of the family's wishes. In one case they even followed an alcoholic to a bar and got him to sign the agreement after he had been drinking that night. Additionally, a few people from Azacualpa work at the mine and these people face extraordinary pressure to comply with the company's demands or they could lose their jobs.

On June 7, 2016 members of the Honduran government, military, and police, along with representatives of Aura Minerals used psychological pressure to force a new "agreement" on the Azacualpa community. This so called "Act of Conciliation" set a date for the cemetery to be relocated and intended to remove the last obstacle for the cemetery to be mined and permanently destroyed. The date mentioned in the "agreement" was July 1, the same day of our visit.

We also had the opportunity to hear from Warwick Fry who was participating in another delegation that accompanied the Azacualpa Environmental Committee to the June 7 "negotiation." He shared with us his account of the immense psychological pressure and unusual circumstances that defined the meeting: First, it was unprecedented and coercive to have the Ministry of the Interior, the Governor, a Military Commander, and the National Police Commander lead the "negotiations" between a private company and a local community. Second, the community of Azacualpa was not consulted in the drafting of the "agreement" or allowed to read any statements during the course of "negotiations." Third, the Minister attempted to hide these proceedings behind a veil of authority by insisting that media leave and only be allowed to



*Orlando Rodriguez, president of the Azacualpa Environmental Committee, speaks to the delegation.*

Photo: Chris Jeske

take photos of people signing the "agreement." Lastly, both the Governor of Copán and the lawyer of Aura Minerals "warned" Warwick's delegation that it is best for them not to interfere with the interests of Honduras. All of this happened amidst them being forced to leave the meeting multiple times because the authorities didn't want the international human rights observers to witness the meeting.

Orlando Rodriguez remarked that the world should know how authorities are violating and abusing the rights of the Azacualpa community. As we heard from other members of the community, the June 7 "negotiations" are only

the latest in an ever-growing list of coercive and corrupt tactics that government authorities and mining companies have turned to.

One such example is the recent mining legislation. In May 2009, President Zelaya's government, with significant pressure from Honduran communities affected by mining and environmental organizations, had completed the draft of a new mining law that would have increased taxes on mining companies, prohibited open-pit mining, banned the use of chemicals such as cyanide and mercury in mining operations, and required community consultation and approval of mining projects. This may have been one of many factors that led to the June 2009



military coup. This popularly-supported reform was efficiently nixed in the series of neoliberal reforms following the coup. Then in 2013, the Honduran Congress passed and ratified a new mining law without consulting mining-affected communities and environmental and human rights groups. Since the coup, the government of Honduras has time and again taken actions that prove their priority is to serve the interests of transnational corporations rather than the people of Honduras. This is clear in the case of the San Andrés mine.

According to community members, the San Andrés mine has brought more harm than good to Azacualpa. The mine threatens to ruin the geological foundation of the community, it has dried out 13 different water holes in the area, and an incident in 2009-2010 killed a significant amount of vegetation in the river and poisoned several people with arsenic, lead, and mercury. All of this has happened to a growing community in which the large majority of people would not be negatively affected if the mine were to close completely. In fact, Aura Minerals' unyielding expansion of the mine has put the entire community at risk, all for the sake of corporate profits.

As we neared the end of this initial conversation with the community, the sound of a nearby blast of dynamite reverberated through the mountains and a cloud of smoke and dust rose, marking the location of the mine and the adjacent cemetery. Shortly thereafter we walked with several families to the cemetery and then to the edge of the mine. One police truck with two officers arrived shortly after we did but they didn't bother us.

Standing at the edge of the mine revealed the striking contrast between the natural beauty of the wooded mountains stretching on and on into the horizon and the precipitous drop into a mess of orange-hued rocks and clay which had been violently torn from earth with the use of mechanized earthmovers. We were told that when looked at from afar, the Azacualpa describe the mine as "a wound in the earth."

Another community member told us that when the mine managers heard a group of international observers were coming to see the mine, they sent in over 100 workers to block the public access road and keep us from entering the community. Lucky for us, their information was wrong and they blocked the road the day before, not the day of, our arrival. We learned that other delegations have been stopped by Aura Minerals blocking the public access road in the past. The irony in this is two-fold: first, that the private company receives police support when they create a roadblock but the protesters are often times arrested for creating similar roadblocks; second, that Aura Minerals is trying so hard to hide what they are doing from international observers while simultaneously using one of the most visibly destructive forms of mining that exists.



*The delegation gathers with community members to learn about the history of the cemetery. Photo: Chris Jeske*

With no respect for community consultations, local discontent, or the sanctity of an ancestral cemetery, Aura Minerals is exploiting the land, the local communities, and the climate of impunity that exists in Honduras.



*The San Andrés open pit gold mine operated by Aura Minerals rapidly encroaches on the cemetery and the mountain the Azacualpa community live on. The extraction process uses cyanide leaching and has destroyed the environment.*  
Photos: Chris Jeske



*Views of the 200 year old ancestral cemetery used by six local communities including the Azacualpa. Aura Minerals wants to destroy the mountain and cemetery to mine for gold.* Photos: Chris Jeske



## Meeting with Mayor of La Unión, Copán to Support the Azacualpa Community's Demands

*Friday, July 1*

*Mayor's House, La Unión, Copán*

One of the authorities who has been complicit in the climate of corruption and impunity is the mayor of La Unión. When his office declined a meeting request because he was not in the office that day, the delegation decided—with the encouragement of the community—to go to his house and try to meet with him there. Several members of the Azacualpa Environmental Committee joined us, some of them who had just returned from Tegucigalpa where they held a press conference earlier in the day calling for closing the mine. No one answered the bell when we first arrived, but after waiting a few minutes, a car with the mayor and his wife pulled into the driveway and he invited us to meet with him on his patio.

The delegation asked a few questions—mostly along the lines of encouraging him to support the demands of the people he represents—and let the community members voice some of their demands while we made it clear we supported them. The mayor agreed that Aura Minerals had not fulfilled their agreement, but he thought his job was to push them to do better, not to stop work on the mine. Additionally, in one of his responses, he corroborated what many people suspected—that Aura Minerals' intention in building new houses for people located outside of Azacualpa was done for the purpose of relocating the entire town to be able to mine the mountain they currently live on. The fact that the mayor called the location of the new houses “Nueva Azacualpa” made that intention clear.



*The delegation meets with the mayor of La Unión (center in purple shirt) on his patio. Photo: Chris Jeske*



## Background on Berta Cáceres and Timeline of Events Surrounding Her Death

*Saturday, July 2*

*Bus ride to La Esperanza, Intibucá*

On Saturday we drove to the city of La Esperanza in the department of Intibucá. La Esperanza is where Berta Cáceres was born and raised, as well as where the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) is based. On the bus ride, delegation co-coordinator Karen Spring provided background on Berta and a timeline of the events surrounding her death.

Berta Cáceres was a Lenca indigenous woman, co-founder and coordinator of COPINH, and internationally known environmental activist. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had granted Berta “precautionary measures” of protection as a result of the constant threats she received for her activism.

These were not idle threats: she was killed in her home on March 2, 2016. Her death immediately sparked international outrage. In fact, many from our group cited her assassination as the reason they decided to participate in the delegation.

In the six years prior to her death, Berta worked with the Rio Blanco community to protect the sacred Gualcarque River and stop the illegal construction of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam. Berta received the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015 for the leadership she provided in this struggle.

Berta had been receiving death threats for years while protesting the Agua Zarca dam. On February 20, 2016, twelve days before she was killed, employees of the dam company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) along with the police and TIGRES, an elite police unit that is funded, trained, and vetted by the U.S., confronted Berta and 300 community members as they walked along the Gualcarque River. In this confrontation the threats became a lot more intense and the lead engineer for DESA directed verbal death threats at Berta.

Less than two weeks later, on the day of her death, Berta was busy preparing for a COPINH-organized alternative energy forum. Gustavo Castro Soto, a Mexican environmental activist and friend of Berta’s, was in town to help prepare for the forum, and he was staying at the house Berta moved into about two months earlier. She bought this house using some of the money that came



*Karen Spring shows the delegation a timeline of the events surrounding Berta's death. Photo: Barry Reeves*

with receiving the Goldman Prize. It was in this house that she was killed between 11:30 p.m. and 11:45 pm on March 2, 2016.

Around 11:30 p.m. Gustavo heard a sizzling sound similar to radio static outside. This was followed by a loud boom. Berta shouted out from her room, “Who’s there.” There was another loud boom followed by gunshots. One of the unmasked gunmen entered Gustavo’s room and stood two or three feet from him. Gustavo later remarked that the assassin seemed surprised to see him, surprised that Berta wasn’t alone in the house. The assassin then fired a bullet at Gustavo that grazed his hand and ear as he attempted to dodge it. Wounded, he fell to the ground and played dead.

After waiting for the gunmen to leave, he ran into Berta’s room. She was lying on the floor covered in blood, but still alive. She told Gustavo to grab her phone off the table and she gave him her passcode. She told him to call Tomás Gomez, a COPINH coordinator. While waiting for Tomás to answer, he pleaded with Berta, “Don’t die. Don’t die.” But the wounds proved to be fatal and Berta took her last breaths sometime between 11:30 p.m. and 11:45 pm March 2, 2016.

Unable to connect with Tomás, not knowing whom else to call in Honduras, and fearing that the police were complicit in the assassination, Gustavo reached out to some of his contacts in Mexico. They were able to contact individuals in Honduras, who then successfully reached Tomás and others that could send help. Tomás immediately drove out to Berta’s house to get Gustavo. There is a gate to the community where Berta lived and when Tomás arrived, the guard was very slow to open the gate. Finally past the gate, Tomás parked in front of Berta’s house and got Gustavo out just as the police arrived. They tried to bring Tomás in for questioning a few hours later, but he refused.

The investigation into Berta’s death ensued. With many people going through the house, there was mass contamination of the crime scene. And before any investigation could happen, the police made news of her death public and insinuated that it was a crime of passion. For the first two days of the investigation the DPI’s only focus was on criminalizing COPINH.

Six of the seven COPINH coordinators were brought in for questioning. They were told that there was a “protected witness” who said he saw Tomás Gomez and Aureliano Molina (a COPINH coordinator and COPINH member) enter before Berta was killed. Some of them were held in questioning for hours on end. In fact, as thousands of people from across Honduras and around the world flooded the streets of La Esperanza to attend Berta’s funeral, Tomás was prevented from joining them as he was held for questioning all day.



*The assassins likely bent the fence when climbing over it and proceeded to forcibly enter the house. The door has since been removed for forensic testing. Photo: Chris Jeske*

Gustavo, the only witness, was subjected to constant questioning for multiple days. For much of the questioning he was not allowed to change out of his clothes, which were coated with dried blood from both him and Berta. At one point they brought in a sketch artist to draw the face of the gunman Gustavo saw in the house. The sketch artist proceeded to draw a face that looked like one of the COPINH leaders, ignoring Gustavo's description. In another abuse of power, a judge revoked the law license of Gustavo's lawyer for a period of 15 days. Despite all of this, Gustavo remained steady in his testimony.

Forty-eight hours after testifying that he saw Tomás and Aureliano enter before Berta was killed, the "protected witness," who turned out to be the gate guard in the community that Berta lived in, completely rewrote his testimony. To provide the full context, this follows a spate of cases being influenced by "protected witnesses" whose identities are withheld and aren't allowed to be cross-examined. The delegation learned that many of these "protected witnesses" receive either \$5,000 or a U.S. Visa in exchange for their unchallenged and confidential "testimony."

There was a clear plan in place to blame COPINH for Berta's murder, but they didn't expect Gustavo to be there. Several people believe that if Gustavo wasn't there, the plan to frame COPINH might have worked.

All of this happened despite Berta having been granted "precautionary measures" for protection by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Because of this status she should have had a police guard. While the government claims that the police guard wasn't present because they didn't know about her new house, Berta's death is yet another instance of the Honduran government refusing to comply with an IACHR protection mandate.

The refusal of the Honduran government to protect Berta, the botched attempt to frame COPINH, and the incompetence demonstrated in the investigation further intensified the outcry of international dismay. This all happened despite the presence of two U.S. advisors who were assigned to the investigation.

The first arrests in the case occurred in early May, more than two months after the assassination. Five people were arrested. This included Sergio Rodríguez, the DESA engineer who verbally threatened Berta in the February 20th confrontation; Douglas Bustillo, DESA's head of security and a former Honduran Armed Forces lieutenant and military intelligence specialist; Major Mariano Diaz, a Special Forces veteran who recruited the gunmen; and brothers Edilson and Emerson Duarte, the gunmen. Not included among the arrests, however, are the intellectual authors of the plot who are suspected to rank in the highest levels of the government.

When the arrests happened, Berta's family wasn't even informed—they found out from the media. This is part of a concerning trend in which Berta's family, their lawyer, and COPINH have been denied access to the case files despite Honduran law clearly stating that her family should have access to these. This has also led to speculation that even if there is an independent, international investigation that the government would refuse to turn over the case files to them as well.

All this continues to unfold as calls persist for an independent, international investigation into Berta's death. COPINH and the Cáceres family believe the Honduran government was the

intellectual author, making a calculated decision to remove the symbolic leader of the entire Honduran social struggle, and don't trust the government's investigation. Continued international pressure is needed to ensure there is an independent investigation into Berta's death and that the intellectual authors of the plot are identified and held accountable for their actions. Berta's family is among those leading this call for an investigation by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.



*Thousands of Hondurans accompany Berta's pink casket (center of photo between two blue signs) during her funeral procession on March 5, 2016. Photo: Raúl Valdivia*



## Meeting with Berta Cáceres' Family on an Independent Investigation and Berta's Legacy

*Saturday, July 2*

*Cáceres Family Home, La Esperanza, Intibucá*

In the late afternoon, four months to the day that Berta was killed, we met with her mother, Doña Berta, her three daughters (Bertita, Laura, and Olivia), and two of her brothers (Roberto and Gustavo) at their home.

Doña Berta welcomed us and shared how her political career influenced Berta. Doña Berta came to know the struggles of indigenous mothers by entering their homes as a midwife—she assisted the births of about 4,500 children in the region. These interactions encouraged her to go into politics to help the poor. During her political career she had many triumphs: she was mayor, governor, and a congresswoman. She shared that Berta became inspired by helping her in all these efforts.

Doña Berta said that so far they have only caught five people involved in Berta's death, but with enough international support will catch those who organized it.

Gustavo shared that this was a political killing planned high in the government and demanded an independent, international investigation because the Honduran system is corrupt. Roberto said that while he is still deeply hurt and in mourning, it is important to press forward because those who are responsible are high in the government and don't want the independent investigation. He said that the president bends the law to do whatever he wants and he needs to know that he can't do this.

Laura told us that she doesn't feel comfortable with the investigation so far and that the government is responsible for several reasons: first, they didn't take care of Berta despite the precautionary measures ordered by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; second,



*Doña Berta shares how her career as a midwife and politician inspired Berta. Photo: Chris Jeske*



*The delegation meets with the Cáceres family in their home in La Esperanza. Photo: Chris Jeske*

they charged her and put her in jail on trumped-up charges several times; third, they attempted to slander her; fourth, they allow a violent system of fear and militarization that violates the rights of indigenous people. She concluded by stating that “we aim to set a precedent of justice,” and “to find justice for my mother will help us find justice for everyone.”



*Olivia Cáceres, Berta's oldest daughter, encourages the delegation to persist in calling for an independent investigation of her mother's death. Photo: Chris Jeske*

Olivia shared that she is encouraged that there is still international attention calling for the independent investigation because the media has a short memory. She also wants to keep attention on the struggle that her mother gave her life for. She emphasized that it is important to stop the Agua Zarca dam, that companies using tactics of terror should not be allowed to operate anywhere in the world, and the Gualcarque River should be declared a sanctuary of humanity. Olivia noted that one of the most important parts of her mother's legacy that must be kept alive is to follow her example of being an internationalist.

As the family made clear, they are not satisfied with the investigation and are firm in their

demand that the high-ranking members of government who authored this act be brought to justice. Berta's assassination was an attack on activists all across the country—if the death squads could kill Berta, who was so well known both in Honduras and around the world, they could kill anyone.

## COPINH Vigil on the Four Month Anniversary of Berta's Death

*Saturday, July 2*

*Public Ministry Building, La Esperanza, Intibucá*

The family invited us to join a COPINH gathering at the La Esperanza office of the Public Ministry, the Honduran organization responsible for the investigation. We gathered with around 100 COPINH members for a candlelight vigil marking the four month anniversary of Berta's assassination. Bertita and Laura arranged candles to spell "justicia" and many people held banners calling for "Justice for Berta" or an independent investigation. COPINH coordinators, along with some of Berta's brothers and daughters, spoke and led chants. Instead of a minute of silence, they did a minute of clapping in appreciation and remembrance of Berta's life.

The participants blocked the road during the vigil, which lasted for a few hours. One police vehicle, transporting a masked and camouflaged gunman, left the area after delegation members began taking photos. The vigil concluded with the participants briefly taking over the Public Ministry courtyard and chanting "Berta didn't die, she multiplied" until the police dispersed the crowd.



*Bertita (upper left) lights a candle. Tomás Gomez (lower left) speaks at the vigil. Group photo with candles lit (right).*  
Photos: Chris Jeske



## Meeting with the Rio Blanco Community on the Struggle to Protect the Gualcarque River

*Sunday, July 3*

*Rio Blanco Community Meeting Space, Rio Blanco, Intibucá*

The next day we visited the Rio Blanco community to learn about the struggle to defend the sacred Gualcarque River. Bertita Cáceres and Jose Gaspar Sanchez, a COPINH leader, shared a brief history of this struggle and we heard from several community members.

The Rio Blanco people are an indigenous Lenca community and the Gualcarque River is considered a sacred part of their territory. After the 2009 coup, over 300 concessions were given to companies for extraction and power generation projects that exploit indigenous lands and natural resources. At least 50 of these concessions, we were told, were given for companies to exploit

Lenca territories. Included among these concessions was one enabling the construction of a series of four dams on the Gualcarque River. The Gualcarque River dam concession was granted to the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) which was working with the Chinese company Sinohydro and had international funding from the World Bank and the Central American Bank of Economic Integration. Bertita told us that the concessions are “illegal, illegitimate, and were part of the purposes of the coup.”

The people of Rio Blanco first became aware that something was underway in 2010 when trucks and machinery belonging to DESA and Sinohydro started to appear in the area. The community began asking questions and the mayor responded by hosting an open assembly to inform them about the project. Hundreds of community members attended the assembly in which they were first informed about the project, well after it was underway. In this meeting only seven of the community members agreed to the project. However, the authorities responded by submitting the attendance sheet, which everyone at the meeting signed, as a declaration that the entire community consented to the project.

This was an attempt to get around International Labor Organization Convention 169 (ILO 169), to which Honduras is a signatory. ILO 169 states that any project to be undertaken on indigenous land must meet the standard of free, prior, and informed consent of the indigenous community. Following this, the initial organizing efforts with COPINH focused on disseminating



*The delegation meets with the Rio Blanco community at their community gathering space and the site of their successful roadblock. Photo: Barry Reeves*

declarations from the Rio Blanco community that DESA and Sinohydro did not have permission to pursue the dam project. Despite several community assemblies, the mayor refused to recognize the community's conclusions and demands.

Obstinate and intransigent, DESA and Sinohydro began illegally constructing the Agua Zarca dam in 2012. A coordinated plan of destruction, especially of the farmland along the fertile banks of the Gualcarque River followed. With their way of life under threat, the people of Rio Blanco met with Berta and COPINH to strategize ways to stop the construction. They decided to create a roadblock that would deny DESA and Sinohydro access to the river.

The community of Rio Blanco began the roadblock on April 1, 2013. DESA and Sinohydro responded by sending armed private security and police to militarize the area. Sanchez said, "The security forces here are not meant to protect the citizens. Instead, they serve the interests of the private and transnational companies." As the roadblock persisted for days and weeks, company representatives and government representatives showed up to try to convince the community to let the workers and equipment through. The community remained firm in asserting that they would not allow a dam on the Gualcarque River.

On July 15, 2013, Tomás García, a community leader and strong opponent of the dam, was killed unprovoked and in cold blood at a large gathering by DESA's armed guards. This incident brought international attention to the struggle and coincided with attempts to criminalize COPINH leaders (Berta and Tomás Gómez were arrested on trumped up charges).

Sinohydro and the World Bank pulled out of the project by the end of 2013 due to the apparent and pervasive human rights violations. This effectively halted the construction and forced DESA to search for new investors. DESA responded by hiring a PR firm to make the project look more attractive to investors. This resulted in a campaign of outright lies that, on one hand puffed up DESA's image, and on the other discredited Berta, COPINH, and the Rio Blanco community.

Community members recapped many of DESA's lies for us. One lie was that the Gualcarque River does not belong to the people of Rio Blanco because it is not in Lenca territory. Another lie was that the dam will affect the Rio Blanco people the least. DESA even went as far as to create a fake COPINH Facebook page to make it look like Berta supported the dam. Beyond DESA, the former Minister of Natural Resources and the Environment (who granted DESA the dam concession) claimed that Rio Blanco is not an indigenous community so ILO 169 isn't relevant to this project. Sanchez emphasized that none of these are true. Rosalina Dominguez Madrid, one of the leaders in Rio Blanco, was more pointed in her analysis. She said, "This Company is full of lies, deception, and empty words."

In the midst of all these lies, Berta understood that this struggle was being fought on an international battlefield and that the only chance to permanently stop construction of the dam was by removing the funding. When COPINH learned of two new investors in the dam—FMO Bank (Holland) and Finnfund (Finland)—Berta began to contact them, notifying them that the project was in violation of ILO 169 and did not have consent of the Rio Blanco people. Her petitions were ignored.

When DESA realized they could not overcome the community's resistance, they pulled out of Rio Blanco. But with new funding, they simply moved construction to the other side of the river where the community does not identify as indigenous. This is merely a tactic to circumvent ILO 169 and the legal demands of the Rio Blanco community. But it doesn't change the fact that the Gualcarque River is still a part of Lenca territory and it doesn't change the fact that the dam has brought destruction, not development, to Rio Blanco. Additionally, the delegation learned that many people on the other side of the river also oppose the project but fear they will be killed if they speak out against it.

Recognizing that this marked a new chapter in the struggle, Berta convened a meeting with the Rio Blanco community to discuss whether or not they wanted to continue the struggle, even after everything they had been through. The community delivered a resounding response. They were not deterred despite having lost five comrades, despite being subjected to beatings, arrests, and constant death threats, and despite realizing it may only get more dangerous. They said they would go to whatever extent necessary to stop construction of the dam. Upon hearing this, Berta affirmed their decision by making a pact to continue accompanying them in this struggle.

On February 20, 2016, Berta, other COPINH leaders, and 300 members from several Lenca communities, including many children, gathered to participate in a territorial control exercise. For COPINH, the exercise involves walking the territorial limits of the community's land as a way of educating youth about the land defended historically by their ancestors, reaffirming the natural boundaries (rivers, mountains, etc.) of their land titles, and communally understanding what territory they are defending and why they are defending it. The exercise is also a demonstration of their knowledge of their rights and reaffirms their commitment to protect their land and resources. The exercise took about six hours and they were stopped at the river by DESA employees, police, and TIGRES (the elite police unit funded, trained, and vetted by the U.S.). This confrontation represented a clear escalation in the authorities' response to the community and several threats were directed at Berta. After the confrontation, the mayor went on television saying that Berta had no business being there and made several disparaging remarks about her. As the aggressors in this confrontation, DESA, the mayor, the police, and TIGRES should all be considered complicit in Berta's assassination. In fact, DESA's lead engineer, who directed death threats at Berta in this confrontation, has since been arrested for putting out the order to kill her.

In Rio Blanco, community members expressed that they are outraged, though not surprised that Berta was killed. Madrid remarked that they know DESA is a murderous company as DESA has killed five of her comrades since 2010, and now Berta. She also shared that the community viewed Berta as a mother to them—caring for them, leading the struggle, and encouraging them to maintain their Lenca identity—and it feels like DESA killed their mother. But they have remained strong in their struggle.

In the days after news of Berta's assassination broke, FMO Bank and Finnfund issued a temporary suspension on their funding for the Agua Zarca dam. Community members remarked that it wasn't until later, about a month after Berta's death, that construction stopped again.



COPINH is calling for these temporary suspensions of funding and construction to become permanent suspensions. They are also still pressuring the Central American Bank of Economic Integration to withdraw its funding for the dam.

Despite this progress, the situation on the ground in Rio Blanco remains perilous: DESA continues to maintain an active presence in the area with their armed private security, community members share that their lives and land are under constant threat, and U.S. intervention continues to promote destabilization. Before Berta's death, USAID was working with one of DESA's contractors on the other side of the river and was involved in handing out backpacks with the DESA logo on them. USAID stopped funding the project only after it was exposed. Furthermore, one of the major concerns voiced in Rio Blanco is the money and training that the U.S. provides to security and police forces, including the TIGRES. Their greatest demand is for the U.S. to withdraw all security funding to Honduras and to suspend all involvement with the Honduran government that has established a policy of killing those who defend human rights and the environment.

After our meeting with the community concluded, several participants in the delegation, accompanied with COPINH members, hiked down to the Gualcarque River where we swam and thought about Berta and the others who had given their lives for this water to keep its natural flow.



*Some members of the delegation hiked down to the Gualcarque River. Photos: Chris Jeske*

## Tour of COPINH Sites, Berta's House, and Berta's Grave

*Monday, July 4*

*La Esperanza, Intibucá*

Before leaving La Esperanza for a long drive to Tegucigalpa, we visited various COPINH locations and paid our respects to Berta. We started at the Casa de Sanación, a shelter for indigenous women who face violence in their household, community, or workplace. The story behind the Casa de Sanación is that COPINH really wanted to start a shelter for this purpose so they took to the streets in Tegucigalpa (the capital) to demand it from the government. They mobilized people to block roads around government buildings and some of the protesters slept outside for days until the government agreed to the project. COPINH now owns the building and it is not funded by international aid, which is significant because they don't have to report on their activities to anyone. Some of the projects that have emerged out of the Casa de Sanación include women's leadership and literacy programs, as well as an anti-patriarchy class that is open to both women and men.



*A classroom at COPINH's Utopia training center. Photo: Chris Jeske*

Next, we visited Utopia, COPINH's main training center. Similar to how they mobilized people to get the Casa de Sanación, the money for Utopia came from President Zelaya's government. Utopia was explained to us as a training center where COPINH members come to learn about and get trained in grassroots struggle. They often host people from around the



country for workshops here and have 100 beds for those who travel to attend the workshops. Sometimes those who are in exile or have fled their homes because of death threats will stay at Utopia for a longer durations and tend to the adjacent farmland.

We also visited Sede COPINH, COPINH's headquarters. The coordinators were busy in a planning meeting when we arrived so we spoke with Selvin Milla, part of COPINH's coordinating body and a member of COPINH's communication team. COPINH broadcasts programs and announcements to many parts of the country. He explained that the government has damaged their equipment many times and regularly threatens to broadcast over their signal. This just goes to show how important the radio programs are in helping COPINH mobilize and spread their messages. While at Sede, we also briefly stopped in Berta's office, which has been turned into a shrine and has had a candle lit in it 24/7 since she was killed.



*A candle and photos adorn Berta's desk. Photo: Chris Jeske*

There were still two more sites to visit before we left: the house where Berta was killed and her gravesite. We arrived at Berta's new house in a quaint community outside of downtown La Esperanza. The houses were vibrant and well-constructed, with generously-sized yards to keep the area from feeling too crowded. The view was spectacular as well: an expanse of green grass spread to the base of wooded mountains that reached toward a striking, blue sky. It was easy to see why Berta chose to buy this house.

There were military and police outside guarding the property, though they didn't bother us as we walked around the perimeter of the fenced-off yard. We saw the bend in the corner of the fence where it is likely the assassins jumped the fence. There was a blanket and crime scene tape covering the doorway the assassins entered through. We learned that Berta's family still hasn't



*View of the mountain from Berta's house (left) and the house Berta was killed in (right). Photos: Chris Jeske*

been allowed to go into the house or to retrieve her personal items such as her computer and papers—things that she would never have wanted to end up in the government’s hands.

As we left Berta’s house, an additional truck of police arrived, presumably because of our presence. The police seem to be much more invested in guarding the crime scene and Berta’s personal items now that she is dead than they were interested in protecting her life when she was alive.

The last stop in La Esperanza was Berta’s grave. Her family’s plot is located in the back of the cemetery, about a five minute walk from the entrance. We added some flowers to those already at her grave and took time to pay our respects to her. In Honduras caskets are placed in a concrete enclosure rather than buried deep underneath the soil. Families then decorate the tomb with tiles. We learned that Berta’s family wants to decorate her tomb with a design that symbolizes the Gualcarque River.



*The delegation at Berta’s grave (upper left). Photo: Manzar Foroohar  
Close up of Berta’s temporary grave maker (lower left). Claudine Mulard places flowers on Berta’s grave (right). Photos: Chris Jeske*



## Meeting with Capt. Liapis on the Role and Presence of the U.S. Military in Honduras

*Monday, July 4*

*Palmerola Air Base, Comayagua*

On the way to Tegucigalpa we stopped at the Palmerola Air Base, a Honduran military base and the home of Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-Bravo), one of two forward operating task forces under the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). We spoke with Captain David Liapis, the director of Public Affairs for JTF-Bravo.

Capt. Liapis explained that JTF-Bravo is not permanent, though it is the longest-established unit in Honduras (since 1983). There are 600 U.S. soldiers at the base and it is the main U.S. presence in Central America. From here they run operations through the entire region. We were told their focus is to assist with humanitarian aid, disaster relief, and community building. Other operations include anti-trafficking (of drugs, metals, and humans), anti-terrorism, and medical missions. We pressed for more information on each of these topics.

We were given standard PR responses. We asked what terrorist threats they have dealt with or averted and he explained that while he wasn't aware of any specific threats in the region, groups like ISIS are always looking for ways to get operatives into the U.S. When asked what type of community building projects they are engaged in, he explained that they deliver food to communities, build facilities, and visit orphanages, especially in the Gracias a Dios region. It seemed odd to our delegation that highly trained, and sometimes armed, Marines would do this type of work, but this was clearly part of a propaganda effort to show Hondurans the positive side of the U.S. military presence.

We also asked several questions about U.S. training of the Honduran police, military, and military police. He claimed not to know much about the TIGRES and believed they received training from the U.S. but wasn't sure. He described that most training covers basic tactics including a section on human rights. He also said that they only work with vetted Honduran units because of the Leahy Law and that the State Department does the vetting.

During the course of our conversation at least three DynCorp buses went in and out of the base and we asked him about DynCorp's role. Capt. Liapis told us that they are a contractor that drives the employee shuttle. He added that a lot of Honduran nationals work with them. It was



*The delegation with protest signs at the Palmerola Air Base. Photo: Alliance for Global Justice*

concerning to our delegation to see DynCorp's presence here as they have been tied to human rights abuses in other countries.

Also not lost on the delegation was the emphasis on disaster relief. The presence of JTF-Bravo uniquely positions the U.S. (and its economic allies) not just to respond, but to capitalize on any natural or man-made disasters in the region. Time and again on this trip, we heard from indigenous and campesino communities who face tremendous violence and tie these threats to U.S. military training and funding, as well as to the neoliberal reforms passed after the U.S. endorsed the 2009 military coup. It appears that disaster capitalism is alive and well in Honduras.



## Meeting with Ambassador and Embassy Officers on U.S. Involvement in Honduras

*Tuesday, July 5*

*U.S. Embassy Building, Tegucigalpa, Francisco Morazán*

We arrived at the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa in the early afternoon for our meeting to share our concerns and observations from the delegation with U.S. officials. Ambassador James Nealon joined us shortly after the meeting started. Those also present at the meeting included Stewart Tuttle, political counselor and acting deputy of mission; Jason Smith, human rights and labor issues official; Anya Glenn, USAID; Sim Ripley, economics official; Jarahyn Hillsman, deputy political counselor; Jessica Hernandez, political section; and a representative of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement.

We had prepared four main topics to discuss: the status of the Berta Cáceres investigation, the role of the U.S. military and security aid, the presence of DynCorp at Palmerola Air Base, and workers' rights and labor conditions.

We started with the Berta Cáceres investigation. Stewart Tuttle said that he has never seen an embassy so engaged with a case like they are with Berta's. Jason Smith has gone to La Esperanza three times to meet with the family. They requested that we hold other questions on the investigation until the ambassador arrived. After the ambassador arrived, we returned to this topic and he indicated that the morning Berta was killed the U.S. offered resources to assist with the investigation, though he denied that the U.S. has been "running" the investigation as they do not have the authority to do that in a sovereign nation. The U.S. provided a subject matter expert, forensic analyst, and forensic crime lab equipment to help with the investigation. The ambassador said he is satisfied with the investigation and that those arrested look to him like a clear chain of intellectual authorship. The embassy officials were very non-committal about calling for an independent, international investigation, instead stating that that is up to the Honduran government, not them.

When asked about the hit list that Berta was on, the ambassador replied that he has yet to see the hit list and he can't do anything until there is proof that the list exists. He said that if anyone has a copy of the hit list they have a moral obligation to come forward. He reiterated that he can't do anything without hard evidence. On a related note, we asked what they are doing to protect people who have been granted "precautionary measures" by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Again, he replied that Honduras is a sovereign nation with weak institutions, implying that the U.S. has little influence in this.

Our next group of questions focused on the role of the U.S. in training, funding, and vetting the military and police. Stewart Tuttle replied that there are some units that are funded and trained by the U.S. and some that aren't. Those who do work with the U.S. have to complete

human rights training and pass the vetting process required by the Leahy Law. They gave two examples of units that had their support suspended: A Honduran Army unit assigned to guard a gold mine that had caved in was caught on video waterboarding two kids who tried to go back into the mine. After the video was posted to YouTube, their support was pulled. Another unit, the 9th Infantry Battalion, had their support suspended after allegations of torture and death surfaced.

We asked how the United States is involved with FUSINA, the Inter-Institutional National Security Force that was named in the Guardian article that refers to the hit lists mentioned above. Ambassador Nealon responded that the U.S. does not equip or train FUSINA and that FUSINA is a security body that can bring in multiple agencies to carry out operations. Delegation members then asked if the U.S. funds, trains or equips agencies that work with FUSINA. Without providing a clear response, Ambassador Nealon reiterated that the U.S. must, at a minimum, abide by the guidelines of the Leahy Law.

We then disclosed that we visited Palmerola Air Base and noticed the DynCorp buses going in and out of the base while we spoke with Capt. Liapis. We explained that DynCorp has been linked to many human rights violations (including running a human trafficking ring in Bosnia and having ties to organized crime) and asked for a clear and transparent report on all of DynCorp's activities. The embassy staff did not seem to be aware of DynCorp and suggested that DynCorp would work under the base commander who reports to SOUTHCOM. We insisted that this is not beyond the scope of their purview as in many cases it has been State Department whistleblowers who have uncovered abuses by military contractors such as DynCorp and Blackwater. We also stressed it is more important to stop these types of incidents before they happen rather than to let them develop and take pride in stopping them later.

The last of our prepared questions addressed the labor conditions throughout the country and specifically in Choloma where we met with CODEMUH. Jason Smith explained that Honduras is part of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and that the U.S. is working with Honduras to protect labor rights. There are many challenges in this area as noted in a report by the U.S. Department of Labor. The ambassador added that there are some good laws in place but the "weak institutions" don't adequately enforce the laws. We were disappointed to learn that they were not aware of CODEMUH, the largest and most effective Honduran organization advocating for better working conditions in the maquilas.

With time for a few more questions, we inquired into how USAID programs are implemented in Honduras. Anya Glenn explained that they manage about \$120 million in funds and focus on citizen security. They work with over 20 implementing partners on each of the projects. Each of these partners must pass a rigorous due diligence process. Two of the current partners include Creative Associates on a violence prevention program and Finntrack on a Feed the Future initiative.

With the delegation's clear concerns regarding the human rights situation in Honduras and the embassy staff stating that they are concerned about many of the same human rights issues, we asked how we can best work to advance human rights in Honduras. Stewart Tuttle responded

that the most important thing to them is information—that they are only able to take action on what they know about. The ambassador added that he is proud that we care about Honduras, but the Honduran people need to take responsibility for fixing their own problems. While he was probably well-intentioned in saying this, it was jarring to hear this given the effort that all of the organizations and communities we met with through the course of the delegation have put into advocating for themselves, organizing to address the injustices they are subjected to, and even being willing to die to advance their struggles.

Throughout the meeting Ambassador Nealon constantly called Honduras a “sovereign nation” and insinuated that the U.S. has little influence over Honduran affairs. This comes despite a widely recognized position by those inside and outside of Honduras that the 2009 coup was successful because of the U.S. government’s influence. In the aftermath of the coup, they did not suspend military and humanitarian aid (as is required by law) and then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, along with President Obama, publicly legitimized the coup government. The U.S.’s endorsement of the coup government came despite popular and widespread calls from inside Honduras and internationally for democratically-elected president Manuel Zelaya to be allowed to return to office.

The U.S. still has an extraordinary amount of influence over Honduran affairs and continues to pour more funds into the corrupt police and military. The most direct action we can take to influence this is to support H.R.5474: the Berta Caceres Human Rights in Honduras Act that would cut off funding to the security forces while human rights abuses continue.

## Press Conference to Announce the Delegation's Findings

*Tuesday, July 5*

*U.S. Embassy Building, Tegucigalpa, Francisco Morazán*

After the embassy meeting the delegation gathered on a street corner outside the embassy building to hold a press conference with local media. Several mainstream news programs and independent journalists covered the press conference. Our statement (the executive summary provided on page three of this document) explained who we were, where we visited, what we learned, and a list of the actions we support. Featured prominently among the actions we support is the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act to suspend U.S. security assistance to Honduras. Our statement was well received by the media and was also shared widely on social media.



*The delegation holds a press conference in front of the U.S. Embassy building.*

Photo: Karen Spring



## Conclusion

Accompaniment is widely practiced in Honduras. Local community members and organizations utilize individuals or groups (like us) to demonstrate that there is international interest and support for issues and problems inside Honduras. It's a kind of protection to say, "The world is watching." Obviously, this is no total protection, as Berta Cáceres had tremendous international support and was still murdered. But everywhere we went, the groups we met with told us that knowing that people outside care about their issues gives them inspiration and makes them feel they are not alone.

Those we visited also carefully distinguished that they are fighting the neoliberal policies of governments and corporations. They recognize that the American public is not the enemy in this struggle. Instead, they recognize that it will take the support and pressure of the American public to end many of the policies that bring death and destruction to their communities. Just as they asked us to join them in solidarity, we invite you into this struggle also. You can learn more about the Honduran social struggle. You can work to educate others on these struggles. You can advocate congress to stop enacting destructive policies.

We humbly extend our deepest gratitude and appreciation to all of the communities, organizations, and individuals who took the time to meet with us and for sharing how they are engaged in struggles to build a more peaceful and just world.

La lucha sigue!

## Interested in joining a delegation?

The member organizations of the Honduras Solidarity Network organize 5-6 delegations to Honduras per year. Individuals that are interested in joining a delegation can contact the Honduras-based Coordinator, Karen Spring ([spring.kj@gmail.com](mailto:spring.kj@gmail.com)) who organizes the in-country logistics and translation for almost all delegations coordinated by the HSN. Individuals that want to get involved with a HSN member organization in their communities or states can visit the HSN's website ([www.hondurassolidarity.org](http://www.hondurassolidarity.org)) for contact information.

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