

'Time was running out': Honduran activist's last days marked by threats

Berta Cáceres, the environmental advocate shot dead in her home in March, told friends of a hitman boasting about his plans as she 'worked frantically'

Nina Lakhani in La Esperanza

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In her final days, Berta Cáceres was bombarded with texts and calls warning her to give up the fight against the Agua Zarca dam, or else.

The Honduran indigenous leader told trusted friends and colleagues that some of the death threats were from a suspected *sicario* - or hitman - who was terrorizing community members near the dam and openly boasting of his intention to kill her.

Cáceres started making arrangements to move from her isolated bungalow on the outskirts of the city of La Esperanza to a bustling lodging house run by her organisation, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), where she wouldn't be alone.

The day before she was murdered, Cáceres took her youngest daughter to the airport. As they hugged goodbye, she whispered a final piece of advice. "She told me: 'If something happens to me, don't be scared,'" Laura Cáceres, 23, told the Guardian.

Around lunchtime the following day, Cáceres stopped to sign some cheques at COPINH's women's centre, where she told Lilian Esperanza, a longtime friend and the group's financial coordinator, to plan for her not being around. "She wanted to change the rules so someone else could sign checks. She was worried about being murdered or imprisoned," said Esperanza. "I keep reporting the threats, but no one pays attention," she told me."

Less than 12 hours later, Cáceres was shot dead in her home. Her friend Gustavo Castro, coordinator of Friends of the Earth Mexico, was injured in the attack but survived by playing dead.

Despite the evidence that she had been targeted because of her campaign against the dam, police treated three of her closest colleagues - Castro and two members of COPINH - as the prime suspects.

"My daughter was systematically persecuted for years, but still, I didn't believe they would actually kill her," said Berta Flores, 83, sitting next to the candlelit altar adorned with fresh flowers and photographs.

"She worked frantically in the days before she was killed. It's as if she knew time was

running out.”

Cáceres was buried on 4 March on what would have been her 45th birthday.

The murder of the celebrated activist shocked the world, despite Honduras' inglorious ranking as the deadliest country for environmental campaigners.

Cáceres, who last year won the Goldman environmental prize for her work, had reported 33 death threats linked to the campaign. Just days before her death, she accused the Honduran company behind the dam, Desarrollos Energéticos SA (Desa), of using local thugs to terrorize her and COPINH as they tried to mobilize opposition to its revised plan to dam their sacred river, the Gualcarque.

The Honduran state was complicit in this intimidation, she alleged.

Since her murder, the violence and threats against COPINH members have continued. Earlier this month, several were injured after a peaceful march including international observers was attacked by people armed with rocks and machetes. Witnesses said that the aggressors chanted “we killed the fly, only the plebs are left” as police and army officers looked on.

Among the attackers was the alleged hitman Cáceres had warned her colleagues of.

Despite international pressure on Honduras to capture the assassins - and the people who sent them - fears are mounting that COPINH members could be framed in an attempt to crush opposition to the dam and deter other communities from derailing similar projects.

“Blaming people close to Berta is part of the crime,” said Víctor Fernández, COPINH's lawyer. “Leaders are murdered to terrorize communities, contaminate organisations and squash resistance movements. This is the pattern.”

The current wave of repression against social and political activists in Honduras has its roots in the 2009 military-backed coup d'état. The rightwing government that replaced President Manuel Zelaya licensed hundreds of environmentally destructive mega-projects, including mines, hydroelectric dams and model cities, ignoring its obligation to seek consent from indigenous communities.

As protests mounted, violence spread: between 2010 and 2015, 109 environmental activists were murdered, reported Global Witness.

Meanwhile, concessions were granted for 50 projects, mostly dams, on Lenca territory.

The Gualcarque river is considered sacred by Cáceres's Lenca people; it also provides them food and drinking water. Although relatively small, the proposed dam would desiccate the river and render life impossible for the Rio Blanco community.

Cáceres filed complaints, lodged appeals and organised protests in an attempt to force a proper consultation, but the project forged ahead.

In April 2013, Cáceres orchestrated a community roadblock preventing Desa from

accessing the dam site. The threats against her and other community leaders started immediately.

They were followed; shot at; harassed by police, soldiers and Desa's private security officers; and threatened with kidnap and death, according to a detailed log kept by international observers. Cáceres and her close colleagues Tomas Gómez and Aureliano Molina were forced into hiding for months until false charges of usurpation, coercion and criminal damage were dismissed.

For about two years, construction stalled. Then, late last summer, community members noticed construction was under way on the other side of the river, which is not Lenca territory. Desa had started work on a revised Agua Zarca project which would redirect the river before it reached the Rio Blanco community.

In October 2015, the community set up camp on the river bank. Over the coming weeks, they were attacked with boulders and rocks by civilians flanked by armed private security and police officers.

Around this time, the suspected hitman - who was often seen with Desa security guards - starting bragging that he would murder Cáceres and other COPINH leaders, multiple sources have told the Guardian.

The man was arrested in December for illegal possession of weapons, but freed the following day after the charge was downgraded, according to Fernández, COPINH's lawyer. In 2015, the man was accused of murder until a key witness changed his testimony.

Justino Paz, 64, lived in the same community - upstream from Rio Blanco - where Desa has won support by promising jobs, electricity, and a school. He said that the same man had threatened him.

"I opposed the dam because the river gives us life. He put a pistol to my head and told me to leave or die, and then burned down my house. I lost everything," said Paz.

A Desa spokesman denied any links with the suspect, saying: "He is not our employee and has no relationship with us."

Two further incidents spooked Cáceres.

On 30 November 2015, she was threatened in public by local politicians and people armed with stones, machetes and handguns. The police refused to intervene.

Then, on 20 February 2016, a COPINH group was blocked en route to the river and their vehicles vandalized. Several witnesses said they had heard Cáceres threatened by Desa employees and a local politician. Cáceres reported the incident to authorities.

Cáceres was no stranger to threats, but she was now afraid. "She wouldn't let me stay alone, and she didn't want to be alone," said her daughter Laura.

On 2 March, the day she was murdered, Cáceres and Castro, the Mexican activist, arrived home around 7.30pm. The bright green bungalow where she'd moved two months

earlier is in a secluded gated community on the southern edge of town along an unpaved, unlit road. Each of the 30 or so houses is enclosed by a wire fence; the dusty complex is flanked by pine-covered mountains.

Cáceres's house is approximately 150 metres from the guarded entrance where two assassins entered around 11.30pm. Cáceres was shot four times and died almost instantly.

The first person on the scene was COPINH member Tomás Gómez, who arrived at around 2am and drove Castro to safety. Chaos ensued as investigators, COPINH members, and Cáceres' family arrived on the scene.

Auriliano Molina, with whom Cáceres had had a romantic relationship which ended last summer, arrived around 4.30am, after driving 40 miles from his home.

Over the following days, Castro, Gómez and Molina were questioned for hours.

"Berta was murdered and they're trying to criminalize me and Auriliano - the same three they tried to jail in 2013. They want COPINH to disappear," Gómez said.

Cáceres had many enemies. She had campaigned against destructive projects across the country and had been accused of obstructing development by irked politicians. But the principal source of threats against her life was linked to Agua Zarca. Yet the police pushed other theories.

The first hypothesis mooted by police was robbery. The second was a crime of passion, with Castro and Molina suggested as possible culprits. The third was an internal conflict within COPINH.

Castro - the only witness to the murder - was prevented from leaving Honduras for a month. Molina remains a prime suspect, according to a source close to the investigation not authorized to comment officially. The Honduran public ministry did not respond several requests for comment.

It was 11 days before investigators went to Desa's offices. Fernández says he told authorities about the alleged *sicario* the day after the murder.

A Desa spokesman said none of its employees or contractors had ever threatened Cáceres or anyone from COPINH, but they could not be held responsible for third parties. The company provides only food for local people who support the dam and protest against COPINH, the spokesman added.

The clamour surrounding the official investigation continues to grow amid concerns the authorities are neither willing to solve nor capable of solving a crime so emblematic of the country's rampant repression and impunity.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has offered to send a team of independent experts to investigate the murders of Cáceres and other high-profile activists. The government has declined.

Cáceres was threatened so often, for so long, that she almost grew used to it, according

to her daughter. But the threats were real.

“She won the Goldman prize, she met the pope, I thought recognition would protect her,” said Laura Cáceres. “Whoever was behind her murder wanted to send a message that no one is safe, that they can kill anyone. We can’t accept impunity.”

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