

# Another Attack on Honduran Rights Activist

Defending indigenous and environmental rights in Central America can be a very dangerous undertaking, with an account of a new attack on the daughter of slain Honduran activist Berta Cáceres, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Bertha Zuñiga, daughter of slain indigenous and environmental rights campaigner Berta Cáceres, has survived an attack by three men armed with machetes who then tried to force Zuñiga and two co-workers off the road twice before the activists escaped serious harm.

Zuñiga had only recently been named leader of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, or COPINH, the indigenous rights organization co-founded and led by her mother. The elder Cáceres was murdered in her home a little over a year ago, only a week after she was threatened for opposing a major hydroelectric project in Honduras. The elder Cáceres was the recipient of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her grassroots environmental work in Honduras.

I spoke on July 5 with Silvio Carrillo, nephew of Berta Cáceres, about the recent attack on his first cousin, Bertha Zuñiga. Carrillo runs the website [BertaCaceres.org](http://BertaCaceres.org).

Dennis Bernstein: This is not a happy occasion. I know you've been on the phone, you've been e-mailing around. Maybe you can tell us, as best as you can, what you know about what happened in terms of the assassination attempt on Bertha Zuñiga.

Silvio Carrillo: It was three women from the organization COPINH, that my aunt founded, Bertha's mother. And they were leaving and they were confronted by these men wielding machetes. And they quickly got into the car, and they took off. They had a driver. The driver was savvy enough to get away from them quickly, and then they tried again to run them down, and run them off the road.

[...] I saw it on Twitter, that's where I heard about it. And it was hours [after the attempt] that I heard about it. And I immediately alerted the NGOs that work with us here in the U.S. that my aunt used to work with. And we started getting in touch with the embassy to find out what they were doing about it. And, to my surprise, when I reached the embassy the next day, they told me they knew nothing about it.

DB: They hadn't heard about this at all? Very high profile.

SC: Right. I mean it was already on Twitter. So, if I'm catching it, you know, 3,000 – 4,000 miles away, one night when I'm in bed, and it was hours after it had happened, they had no clue. Now, they told me, what they said was, "We apologize for the late response, that it's a holiday weekend." It was July 4th weekend.

So, anyway, I heard back from him just now, actually, to check in to see if they had—this is the embassy that I reached out to, again—to see if they had an update. And they said, "Well, it looks like the police spoke to the man that was driving the car. But, it's turned into a he-said, she-said. Where he says that that's not actually what happened. It was a misunderstanding." And so, the police are just like ... shrugging their shoulders. I mean, this isn't a surprise, right?

DB: A "misunderstanding."

SC: Right.

DB: But the embassy is engaged now?

SC: That's the extent of... all they can do is ask, and say "Hey, attorney general ... can you find out about this? Tell us what the police are saying." And so, that's how it goes. And this is how I find out any information about what's happening in Honduras, like believable information, is I have to go to the U.S. embassy and say, "Hey, look, you know the government is not providing us with information, they are not doing this, they are not doing that." And the embassy sends them an e-mail or gives them a call to the attorney general, and says "Why aren't you doing this?"

DB: This he-said, she-said, in the context of who it is that we're talking about here, makes it really unbelievable. Now [Zuñiga] has only been head of the organization about three weeks?

SC: A few weeks, yeah. She was just elected, named by the organization, they had elections, internal elections.

DB: And what was she doing, before she was attacked?

SC: They were in a community meeting. They were talking to organizers in this small town that are having an issue with their water. They're not getting the water that they used to get because a dam has been built that has rerouted the water for the dam. And so this village isn't getting water, and they want help from COPINH to help them fight against the government, so that they can get some water back in their town.

DB: And, of course, fighting against the dam and the dams, those were the things that got your aunt killed. Because she was very effective.

SC: Yeah. Now ... she had managed to get ... what happened in the dam, Agua Zarca, that my aunt was fighting against, the builders pulled out. This was the largest dam builder in the world, a company called Sinohydro, a Chinese company. They pulled out... but they only pulled out after the military, the Honduran military, shot point blank at one of the protestors. So this is the price we've been paying, Hondurans have been paying. They're paying with their lives. Clearly, it's continuing, nothing's changed even though Berta was killed 16, 17 months ago.

DB: That's amazing. And we are talking about an attack on Berta's... we believe that there was an attack on Bertha, she's 26 years old. She is the daughter of Berta Cáceres. And apparently these folks are unrelenting. What will be the strategy? Obviously, just like your aunt kept going, I imagine your cousin is going to keep going because this is what you all are doing.

SC: That's right. We're not going to let this happen again. We are doing everything we can from here. And we're gaining more and more tools, more and more allies because we've been working... doing a lot of work on the ground, on social media, making sure people know what's happening. We've got the Berta Cáceres Act which was introduced on March 2<sup>nd</sup> by Representative Hank Johnson from Georgia. And we've got about 60 co-signers.

DB: Remind people what that is.

SC: So, the Berta Cáceres Act is HR1299. And this act will prohibit security funding to the Honduran government which is using \$18 million, it's only \$18 million, but it's a message. And they're using this money to militarize their police force. And so they're arming them to the teeth. But they don't have the training, they don't have the wherewithal, they don't have the decency to not be corrupt. And every one of these government agencies is extremely corrupt. And so they shouldn't be arming them to the teeth.

They're essentially private police forces. And they were protecting the dam that my aunt was fighting against. I mean, how can that be? They were told by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to protect my aunt. The police were supposed to have been protecting my aunt. Instead they were protecting the dam. What kind of world is this where these things are allowed to happen?

And so the strategy going forth is to put an end to ... our tax dollars being used to pay for the Honduran military to get armed to the teeth, and police to get armed to the teeth. And so, that's where we're headed, and we've been making

some great headway. We've got a lot of great response from California Congress people and we still need to get many, many more, especially here in the Bay Area. We don't have every Democrat signed on, but we're fighting to do so.

DB: Now, there's every reason to question the role, or how active the United States embassy and U.S. officials are going to be in this context because they're compromised. Part of the resistance has to do with the amount of military presence that the United States has on the ground in Honduras. Right? [...]

SC: Every time I fly in [to Honduras], I always see Americans that look like they are military personnel going in. I go in at random times, random flights, and every single time, they are there. This country is full of military from the U.S. And there's more and more of that because this is such a strategic place, in Latin America.

It's a good perch to watch the rest of Latin America. And so, ideally, what you would be doing is, if you're going to perch yourself there, you would want to, instead of helping to militarize this country even more, you would probably want to help the country gain some control in their corruption. Because this is a problem.

The reason the U.S. has to be there, or thinks it has to be there, is because of the drug trafficking coming into the U.S. Well, a lot of that is done by the people, the functionaries in the government, and the military, and the police.

DB: That's sort of a narco-dictatorship.

SC: Yeah, it absolutely is.

DB: ...posing as a democracy.

SC: Right. That is right. It's a kleptocracy, a narco-democracy. There's a study that was done by a researcher named Sara Chase for the Council on Foreign Relations. [Chase] did a study on the Honduran government and it's essentially a kleptocracy. And they are heavily involved in drug trafficking here to the U.S.

So, the U.S. is really exacerbating the problem, and not helping the situation, not helping Hondurans ... come to a place where they have at least somewhat of a corruption-free government. And where heroes like Berta Cáceres, and Bertha Cáceres are cultivated. Where people believe and look at heroes, like little girls and little boys can see, look up to people like Berta or Bertha, and say, "Gosh, I want to be like her. I want to make my country great." You know like, apparently that's what Donald Trump is doing here. We should have that same ability to do that in Honduras, and we don't.

DB: How would you describe the role of the government, sort of government police, in the context of it being sort of the death squad capitol of the region? What's the role of the government? How does that work?

SC: Well, it's hard to describe, because the government really does things in very... in unofficial ways. There's laws, there's secrecy laws, there's all kinds of police actions that take place, there's raids, but all under this veil of secrecy. So you never know what's going to happen at any moment.

DB: Would you say that all community activists are in jeopardy in Honduras, now? Those who are being somewhat effective whether they're working within the school system, or wherever they're working?

SC: Absolutely. And there's a lot of homophobia. There's a lot of people that are in jeopardy, because... whether they're organizing, or they're protesting, or they're signing petitions. They're finding out the names of people. And they're coming after them. And the government has also passed laws criminalizing protests.

DB: Really?

SC: I mean, yeah, this is unbelievable. It's a dictatorship essentially, already.

DB: And the idea, or what it appears to be, the idea of U.S. involvement besides the military, it's sort of their free trade zone. That's the vision of the United States government, is Honduras becomes a free trade zone. So the people who can't even travel the way they used to, on certain roads, in certain ways, because of what's happened.

SC: Right, they're selling off... they're not just selling off the water rights, which they have, the Honduran government. They've sold roads and put in tolls. Tolls! ... In the second poorest country in Latin America. People are incredibly impoverished people, and they are being charged tolls by the government because the government privatized some major arteries.

So they are making money hand over fist. Meanwhile people now, in addition to being poorly educated, having poor government resources, they are now being taxed, and killed indiscriminately. Under 5% of the murder cases in Honduras ever get solved. How can the U.S. government support that, and say everything is okay in Honduras? I mean that's really what you have to ask your congressman.

DB: And what is your cousin doing now? Are they trying to think of ways to be more secure? I imagine there's an international outpouring? We just have a minute.

SC: There's been a lot of support, certainly here from the U.S. and the organizations we work with. She is actually getting ready to come to the U.S., to New York, next week, to make some appearances, and to speak to people and tell them what's been happening in Honduras, like the reality, and not what the government of Honduras is peddling here in the U.S. They've got groups lobbying for them, P.R. firms lobbying for them. We don't have any of that money that they are using, that power.

And so, we have to do this on our dime. Bertha is coming on NGO dime money and doing what she needs to do ... so that her mother's death isn't in vain. We're not going to let up. We're not going to be intimidated by this. Of course, we fear for our Bertha's life, as we did with Berta's life. But what's the alternative? As Berta used to say to me, "What is our alternative? Do we just sit down and take it? Of course not."

DB: You do have a web site. What's the best way for people if they want to follow this, if they want to get more information?

SC: There's a Facebook site called [facebook.com/justiceforBerta](https://www.facebook.com/justiceforBerta). There's also a Twitter @justiceforBerta and there's a website [bertacasares.org](http://bertacasares.org).

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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