

## ***Todos somos Berta (We are all Berta): a photo journal of my 12 days in Honduras.***

*"They can cut all the flowers but they cannot stop the spring from coming" – Pablo Neruda*

By Cara-Lee Malange

### **Here walks Berta!**

*"Alerta, alerta, aqui se camina Berta!"* / "Alert, alert, here walks Berta!" is a slogan I shout along with a group of Honduran feminists as we and approximately 200 members of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) take part in a 4 km march from the National Autonomous University of Honduras to the Presidential Palace in the capital of Tegucigalpa. It is just one of dozens of peaceful demonstrations held on June 15, 2016 at Honduran embassies and other government buildings all over the world, whereby thousands of activists demand an independent international investigation of the assassination of the great indigenous, environmental and human rights activist, Berta Cáceres.

Before she was brutally assassinated in her bed late on March 2, 2016, I was faintly familiar with Cáceres, the 2015 winner of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. However, here I am, just over three months later accompanying her family and colleagues as an international observer in hopes that an international presence will help deter the Honduran state from a violent backlash amidst their peaceful protest. Since learning of Cáceres' murder, a common discourse coming from the grassroots has been "Berta has not died, she has multiplied." "How true," I muse, as a few months ago I knew little of Berta and within less than four months, here I am standing beside her remarkable, intelligent, courageous and beautiful daughters in a protest march – one of many held around the world - against one of the most ruthless and corrupt regimes in the world. I cannot help but wonder, "Has she really multiplied? Is Berta now in all of us?"



I have never thought of myself as especially brave nor a great risk taker. I hate snakes and I am also scared of heights. I don't even like to talk that much, let alone shout "Assassins!" at some 100 heavily armed police and military in riot gear. So what would bring a white, middle-class, Canadian woman to a proverbial showdown with one of the most violent and repressive regimes on the planet? What could possibly motivate me to do this?



Well, my perception of our world and my country changed in 2014 as I participated in a delegation to Guatemala with the Canadian and American NGO *Rights Action* to witness firsthand the devastating impact of Canadian mining on mostly rural, indigenous peasants in various parts of the country. I was sickened to witness how mining companies from my own country were directly involved in the killing, maiming, raping and poisoning of mostly poor and indigenous Guatemalan people. Even worse, what kind of government do we have in Canada that would allow our companies to literally pillage our fellow human beings and our planet in the most violent and destructive ways possible?

It was the Guatemalan experience that led me to partner with Grahame Russell of *Rights Action* through my own work with the Mir Centre for Peace at Selkirk College located in Castlegar, British Columbia. I coordinate community education programs around the themes of peace and justice so it seemed that offering a delegation similar to the one I participated in two years earlier would be a fantastic educational opportunity for our students and our community. This time, however, the focus would be on Honduras as the transnational companies' exploitation of the people and Mother Earth there was as bad or worse as in Guatemala, only in Honduras the state is arguably even more brutal, corrupt and violent than its Guatemalan counterpart. This is indeed a tough act to follow given that the Guatemalan state has a history of unleashing genocide on its own people.

In preparation for our June 4-12, 2016 educational tour, the Mir Centre for Peace held a community education seminar, a "Peace Cafe", led by Selkirk College instructor and Honduran native, Pablo Pastor. Pastor critically examined the history of US-led colonialism in Honduras, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 whereby the US and Canada offered to supply "aid" to the devastated country in exchange for concessions for US and Canadian corporations, particularly within the resource extraction, tourism, and garment manufacturing

sectors. Furthermore, the "open for business" promotion for Honduras expanded even further in the events surrounding that 2009 coup that ousted the democratically elected government of Manuel Zelaya and replaced it with the oligarchic regime of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo.

Zelaya was no radical, as he himself came from the Honduran aristocracy, however, he was a populist who tried to impose modest reforms that would benefit the Honduran majority. Included in those reforms was a suspension of all new mining licenses to foreign companies, even though the suspension did not affect existing mining operations within the country.

While the rest of the world refused to recognize the illegal government of Lobo (as a coup, by definition, is illegal), the United States, under the leadership of then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, helped usher in the new government to help grant it legitimacy on the world stage. Furthermore, Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper was the first head of state to enter Honduran soil after the coup to welcome the new (illegal) regime. In exchange, the Lobo government would pay back its powerful neighbours to the north with even greater natural resource and business concessions for US and Canadian companies and would see to it that its military would do everything in its power to support these foreign corporate interests.

### **Theatre of the absurd: protecting Canadian mining interests in the most undemocratic ways imaginable**

While evidence of the current Honduran state operating at all costs to support Canadian and US corporate interests in the wake of the coup is well-documented, to see it happen in front of my own eyes was something else altogether.

It was June 7, 2016 and our delegation was invited by the community of Azacualpa to be observers in their meeting with the Canadian mining company, Aura Minerals, its Honduran subsidiary, Minerals of the West Mining Company (MINOSA), and with the highest levels of the Honduran state. The meeting took place in the town of Santa Rosa de Copan in the department of Copan in western Honduras, approximately one hour from Aura Minerals' San Andres mine site in Azacualpa.

The issue at hand was that Aura Minerals/ MINOSA wanted to expand its open pit gold mining operations at the San Andres mine which would destroy and displace a 200 year-old cemetery that houses the ancestral remains of some 400 Azacualpa families. Members of the Azacualpa community had blockaded the site for months to fend off the company from occupying their traditional lands. However, in spite of violent attempts from the Honduran military to remove community members from their land as well as attempts to criminalize several

community members for "illegal" occupation of the mine's land, the community did not retreat. However, they were quickly running out of options.

It so happened that the day we arrived in Santa Rosa de Copan the conflict was at a climax as Aura Minerals/MIMOSA called in the highest levels of the Honduran regime to help "negotiate" an agreement with the Azacualpa community. The meeting took place at a large private school whose grounds were fenced off from the outside; to enter required a check-in with campus security located at its tall front gates.

Shortly after our delegation unloaded from our van, we quickly noticed that we were being filmed by a *gringo* of large stature who we would later learn was the General Manager of the San Andres mine, Monty Reed.

Upon our arrival we were surrounded by several heavily armed military, and shortly afterwards a military helicopter flew overhead and descended on the school grounds some 150 meters from where we were standing. The Honduran Minister of the Interior, Human Rights, Justice and Decentralization, Hector Leonel Ayala - one of the most powerful politicians in the country - disembarked from the helicopter along with ten or so heavily armed military personnel. The government posse, along with Monty Reed and other mining executives, passed by our delegation and entered the school room where the meeting would take place.

It was here that they would spend the next several hours "negotiating" an agreement with leaders of the Azacualpa community. In spite of widespread community objection, the company claimed that it could remove and relocate the remains from the cemetery to a different location that would respect the integrity of the ancestral remains. As an anthropologist myself, I am not sure how this would be possible given that the site itself would be considered sacred to the community which is why they would choose to bury their loved ones there in the first place.

The events of the negotiation/charade played out predictably. The Azacualpa community members did not want to sign the "agreement" but as the hours passed, the tension mounted and the government began to draw its line in the sand. The Governor of Copan, Abel Contreras and Hector Ayala were visibly upset, shouting at the Azacualpa community members, raising their fists, and demanding that they sign the "agreement." Eventually the community leaders signed the agreement but with obvious trepidation as the psychological



pressure was too much for them to endure. It was clear that the might of the highest levels of the Honduran state was no match for this relatively small group of *campesinos*, at least not on this day.

Smug from his win, Monty Reed eventually left the meeting, winked at our delegation and stated, "So long folks - be careful." Given that the Honduran state displayed itself that afternoon as the obvious lackey of this Canadian mining company, Reed's cautionary words came as a veiled threat because it was clear that Aura Minerals was a major power broker in the country and could call upon the highest levels of the Honduran state to do its dirty work.

To witness this live case study of our global economic model in practice, a model which ordains large transnational corporations as the most powerful entities on our planet at the cost of everything else, was like watching a real-life theatre of the absurd; it was astonishing, outraging and did not make any rational sense, although it was eerily believable. Unfortunately, the rest of our tour maintained the common themes of this absurd drama which included US and Canadian imperialism, globalization, neoliberalism, exploitation and repression.

### **Canadian sweatshops and porn kings**

The next day we stopped in the city of Choloma, located in the department of Cortes in northwestern Honduras. Here we spoke with leaders from the *Cooperativa de Mujeres Hondureñas/* Cooperative of Honduran Women or CODEMUH who advocated on behalf of *maquila* (garment factory) workers to help improve working conditions and wages, and also to act as a watchdog of the local *maquila* industry.

We found out that Canada's Gilden Activewear had one of the worst track records; it consistently broke Honduran labour law with no resistance from the Honduran state. On the contrary, CODEMUH stated that these foreign companies would frequently work with local officials to come up with "agreements" that conveniently bypassed the country's labour laws to the benefit of the companies. In some cases, women were forced to work 11.5 hours/day, doing the same repetitive tasks for the duration of their shift. In order to make a minimum salary of approximately \$300 USD/month, their teams needed to meet a minimum quota of 6000 pieces of clothing per day. Accordingly, many suffered from severe muscular skeletal injuries and deformities, rendering them unable to work and, therefore, unable to find new work.

To make life worse, the town of Choloma is one of the most violent in the country with gang violence and killings a regular occurrence. In some cases, women's shifts end late at night or very early in the morning which makes

bus travel to and from work extremely dangerous. As a result, reports of sexual assault and violent crime against *maquila* workers are also common place.

The following day we arrived in the town of Sambo Creek near the city of La Ceiba on the north coast. Here we spoke with the great Garifuna leader, Miriam Miranda of the Organization of Black and Garifuna People of Honduras (OFRANEH). Miranda is well-known in the country and internationally for her activism, much like her dear friend, Berta Cáceres. Like Cáceres, Miranda frequently receives death threats due to her organization's opposition to the so-called "development" projects that involve foreign companies illegally occupying the traditional lands of the Garifuna people.

Miranda tells us of the takeover of traditional Garifuna lands along the north coast by foreign tourism investors. In particular, since the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the north coast region has been the target of foreign-led "development" within the tourism sector. Most significantly, the Garifuna community of Trujillo has been involved in lawsuits against Canadian "Porn King" Randy Jorgensen for the illegal occupation of their traditional lands. Jorgensen, who has made his fortune in the Canadian porn industry, has been accused of illegally occupying community-owned lands for the development of large tourism operations, including a cruise ship port surrounded by boutique hotels, shops and restaurants whereby tourists can enjoy "traditional" Garifuna culture.

We would later find out upon our visit to Trujillo that Jorgensen's "paradise rich in Garifuna culture" is fenced off from the rest of the town. It is within the fenced area that Jorgensen's team warns travellers not to go to the designated "red zone" outside of its boundaries as they claim the rest of the town is unsafe for tourists. The result of this scheme is that any tourist dollars that could potentially help support the local economy is concentrated back into the businesses of Jorgensen.

To emphasize the relationship between large foreign investors and the Honduran State, Miriam Miranda points out that Jorgensen is known for having close connections with the Honduran congress, and is an alleged business



partner of Ramon Lobo, brother to former president Pepe Lobo. Ramon Lobo has been under federal investigation for connections to organized crime and to narco-trafficking. It is with these close connections to



the most powerful sectors of the country that Jorgensen enjoys virtual impunity in the multiple charges against him for illegal land occupation.

We are later told by our hosts in Trujillo that Jorgensen has failed to show up for court twice and has at least two capture orders against him. However, with an ineffective rule of law coupled by a corrupt regime, Jorgensen continues to go about his business, expanding his (illegal) tourism operations with time-share and exotic vacation home developments marketed towards middle-class North Americans.

**Creating a space for peace: why an independent international investigation into the murder of Berta Cáceres is so critical for us all.**

During our week in Honduras, one of the highlights was our opportunity to meet with the family of Berta Cáceres and with the organization she co-founded, COPINH. We were met warmly by her mother, "Mama Berta," her daughters Olivia and Laura, her brother, Gustavo and her ex-husband, Salvador.

We had the privilege of being invited into Mama Berta's home where we settled in the main room which is now devoted to the memory of their dear daughter, mother, sister and former partner. Cáceres, the great Lenca woman with a broad and razor-sharp analysis of the suffering of her people; suffering tied to our global economic model, to severe racism and to patriarchal oppression.<sup>1</sup> The woman who had an incredible capacity to organize others, to create international alliances, and to courageously resist and struggle against a brutal and repressive state. Cáceres was also a key organizer in the Lenca people's successful fight against the world's largest dam builder, China's Sinohydro, and its funder the World Bank's International Finance Corporation, which caused them to pull out of a large hydroelectric dam project in the Gualcarque River.

For this incredible grassroots effort, Berta would win the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize; her trophy was poised as the centrepiece of the room along with a large banner and photos of her.

Surrounded by these mementos, the family asserted that the true authors of Berta's murder can only be determined through an independent international investigation as they believed that her assassination was orchestrated at the highest levels of the Honduran state. Accordingly, in the two and half weeks since our visit with the Cáceres



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<sup>1</sup> The Lenca are an indigenous people of southwestern Honduras and eastern El Salvador.

family, the international media has reported that Cáceres' name was indeed on a military hit list, as disclosed by a recent deserter of FUSINA, the Honduran army's US-trained death squad.

In an interview with the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, the former soldier asserts, "I am 100% certain that Berta Cáceres was murdered by the army." The political significance of this disclosure is effectively summarized by Bertita Zúñiga, Cáceres' 25 year-old daughter: "This shows us that death squads are operating in the armed forces, which are being used to get rid of people opposing government plans. It shows us that human rights violations are state policy in Honduras" (Nina Lakhani, *The Guardian*, June 21, 2016).

Cáceres' family members have also received several death threats since her murder as have many members of COPINH. Since the 2009 coup, hundreds of community and environmental defenders, including members of COPINH, have been killed in their opposition and resistance to domestic and foreign resource extraction projects ("projects of death") that illegally occupy their traditional lands and destroy their traditional ways of life.

But the key message that we received from the Cáceres' family, from COPINH, from CODEMUH and from OFRANEH was consistent throughout our tour: that international solidarity and presence is absolutely critical in their struggle. Mama Berta stresses this fundamental point: "Every time there is some international action, no matter how small it is, it helps create a space in this country."

With these poignant words I reflect upon my time in Honduras, at the June 15 demonstration, and my small but not insignificant role as an actor in this struggle. At the demonstration, I counted the presence of approximately seven foreigners, including myself and two members of Peace Brigades International.



That day I was told by a trusted source that they had heard there was going to be some repression at the end of the demonstration and that I may want to stand back. Fortunately, the violence never happened.

It is impossible to know for sure if our foreign presence helped prevent a violent backlash by the Honduran State, but it is very likely that it helped. However, what more likely halted any repression was the international movement which demanded a transparent investigation into the murder of Berta Cáceres at Honduran embassies all over the world. Across the globe, the Honduran state was under the microscope and any level of



repression that day would have most likely ignited even more pressure from the international community in the call for justice. Even the mighty Honduran state and its powerful international and corporate allies know that they can only resist so much international pressure before the tide starts to turn. They know that our collective capacity as the "99%" is ultimately far more powerful than their abusive regimes and economic systems that are creating crisis for people all over the world.

Most importantly, what my tours to Guatemala and Honduras have taught me is that in the case of demanding justice for Berta Cáceres, it is not solely about Berta Cáceres; indeed, it is about something much, much bigger. It is about you and me and our human family envisioning and fighting for a just global society that cares for the planet and its people above all else. It is about having a global economic system that not only provides the necessities of life for all, but embraces a worldview that highlights and enhances our spiritual connection to Mother Earth and to one another.

It is about our collective capacity as Guatemalans, Hondurans, Canadians, Americans, and our entire human family to make changes in some big ways but also in many small ways. Every time we demand accountability and justice for our human family, and every time we promote alternatives to development that focus on our collective well-being, we chip away at the dominant economic discourse and create the foundation for well-being economics that allow us all to *Buen Vivir* (to live well) on this planet.<sup>2</sup>

The spirituality that is imbedded in this vision of *Buen Vivir* cannot be overstated. Indeed, it is well-documented that indigenous people from around the world have made their spiritual connection to the land and to each other as the foundation of this alternative economic vision.

This deep spirituality was also central to our demonstration on June 15 as we were led by three Garifuna leaders who walked well ahead of the group and used incense, cigars and drums to ward off any potential threats. Prior to the march, one of the Garifuna leaders took swigs of alcohol and sprayed it over his *compañeros* as, presumably, a form of protection and strength. When we met up with the police blockade in their riot gear, the

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<sup>2</sup> In my work at the Mir Centre for Peace I had the fortune of hosting prominent Canadian social activist, Naomi Klein, as a part of our annual lecture series. I had the opportunity to ask Klein about her reference to the notion of *Buen Vivir*, which she notes in her latest book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Versus the Climate* (2014). *Buen Vivir* is an alternative development discourse that has emerged from South America which focuses on socio-economic development that puts human security (in its broadest sense) at its centre. As she steps out of my car into the airport parking lot, I ask Klein how *Buen Vivir* might become a reality? Confidently and optimistically she responds: "Someone just needs to figure out how to put it into policy... but they will."

Garifuna leaders walked back and forth in front of the police line, swinging their incense a few feet from the agents of the formidable state.

The week before, we were told by Miriam Miranda that the use of ceremony when confronting the state is not only considered a form of spiritual protection and strength, it also tends to catch the police and military off guard as these ceremonies provide a foreboding presence that tends to confuse and confound the police and military. Accordingly, COPINH also created a shrine for Berta in front of the police line-up, using pine needles in the shape of a large cross, as well as candles and flower petals to accentuate Berta's presence.



Berta's dear friend, Honduran feminist and singer/songwriter, Karla Lara had composed several beautiful and moving songs in honour of Berta which she sang with heartfelt emotion in the blazing sun in front of the large police and military walls. Indeed, it was a site of incredible contrast whereby the darkness of a heavily armed state was met with the forces of light, love, ceremony, and beauty. As a result, peace was indeed the winner that day: Berta Cáceres - 1; the Honduran state - 0.



After having the privilege of being part of this incredible experience, I have absolutely no doubt that this great Lencan woman was within us all that day. Her spirit was not only evident in her incredible daughters, Bertita (25) and Laura (23) who were key organizers of this international event, her presence was there with the women, men and children of COPINH, the Garifuna people, the student activists, and the foreigners who stood in solidarity with them. Her presence was there within the thousands who protested at the dozens of Honduran embassies in many countries all over the world. Who even knows what was going through the minds of the 100 or so police and military blockading the Honduran presidential palace, but there was no violence on June 15 and it is very likely that came as a relief to many of them given that soldiers are also often members of a state's disenfranchised majority. Maybe Berta Cáceres' spirit had even seeped into some of them as well?

Indeed, the final poignant and triumphant words of the day, confirming Cáceres' overwhelming presence in everyone who participated in this phenomenal international event, came from her youngest daughter, Laura Zuñiga:

She, Mom, the Doña, the commander, my Mommy, Berta Cáceres was rebellious over the oppression of her people to her death, and has gotten inside the heart of a village that has no borders. Berta has increased and there is no assassin who can kill it. The multiplied Berta, Berta the seed, the sown Berta, the eternal Berta, the immense Berta, my infinite Mom. The river has already told us that we are going to succeed.

As I wipe back a tear, I think how proud her mother would be and how grateful and privileged I am to be part of Berta Cáceres' powerful river - flowing, crashing and giving life all over the world.

