

Human rights group documents Honduran ruling class' ties to murders of activists

By Andrea Lobo
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The Honduran government and business elite has responded with furor and threats to the findings of the London-based human rights group, Global Witness (GW). Its recent report “Honduras: The Deadliest Place to Defend the Planet,” published on January 31, provides evidence linking international finance, top figures of the ruling class and the military apparatus to corruption cases and the murders of environmental and indigenous activists.

The explosive growth of inequality, poverty, social opposition and militarization in Honduras since the 2009 military coup backed by the Obama administration, along with dwindling investments and global profitability, set the context for the report’s findings and the uproar it provoked.

Global Witness documents 123 murders of land and environmental activists opposing dams, mining, and other extractive projects in Honduras since 2010, the highest number in the world, while countless others have been attacked or faced trumped-up legal charges.

The government has done virtually nothing to protect activists, instead leading a “race to the bottom on rights and standards” to attract investments. The study notes that out of the 49 rights defenders that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) requested protection for, 13 have been murdered.

In March 2016, the indigenous rights activist, Berta Cáceres, was murdered as she gained international recognition for her role in the struggle against the Agua Zarca dam. “A very dangerous network of wealthy people in this country were consistently after her. Berta received at least 33 death threats,” stated her brother in May. Four of the seven men arrested so far for her murder were military or special forces veterans; one of them was the former head of security for the company building the dam, DESA.

The GW investigation sheds new light on the mix of military, political, corporate and international forces behind the killing of Cáceres and dozens of other activists. The executive board of DESA is a stark representation of this collusion of reactionary forces. According to GW, the company’s president worked for military intelligence and

has a record of corrupt sales to the military, while the secretary is an ex-minister of Justice. Three of the board members are close relatives of the well-connected Atala Family—one is the president of a local bank, while the other is the president of the US-Honduras Chamber of Commerce and ex-director of the Central American Development Bank, which has invested in the dam.

They are also relatives of the billionaire owner of Ficohsa bank and ex-minister Camilo Atala, who according to Bloomberg , in April 2015 hosted Guatemalan and Honduran presidents and US State Department officials in a resort to initiate discussions over an annual \$1 billion package to halt child migration into the US.

Several other networks like these are exposed, involving numerous top officials and sponsors of the ruling National Party (PN). Most notably, the head of the PN and vice-president of the Honduran Congress, Gladis Aurora López, allegedly staged prior community consultations and ordered incursions against protesters over the Los Encinos dam, owned by her husband.

Global Witness writes that 82 of the 123 murders it documented are of small farmers and activists protesting land theft for the Bajo Aguán palm oil plantation in northern Honduras, owned by late billionaire Miguel Facussé until his death in 2015. The report mentions that a US-funded task force investigating the plantation found at least 148 killings of campesinos.

The publication of the report on Honduras was immediately met with furious responses and attempts to discredit its documented findings. The secretary of Natural Resources, José Galdámez, called for the GW campaigners who presented the report in Honduras to be detained. The government’s chief coordinator signaled that the 123 murders are “not substantiated anywhere” in the document and that the NGO is discrediting itself by acting “ideologically or politically.” The head of the ruling National Party (PN), who was mentioned repeatedly in the report, threatened to file a lawsuit with the Public Ministry.

The GW representatives met with Attorney General Óscar

Chinchilla, a figure close to the US embassy, but cancelled meetings with opposition politicians due to safety concerns. “Yes, we felt threatened,” said Global Witness in an official statement criticizing the “smear campaign.” They called upon the government to “demonstrate its absolute commitment” to implement the measures they suggest in the report.

Several regional rights organizations also denounced the government’s attacks against the British NGO, while calling for the same policies outlined in the GW report. Last week, organizations meeting at the ProDerechos Forum in Costa Rica expressed their concern over the government’s reaction and called on the Honduran attorney general’s office and MACCIH to investigate the cases presented in the GW report.

Another umbrella group stated that the government should uphold the requirement of defending activists in order to receive \$125 million from Washington as part of the Alliance for Prosperity.

GW writes, “What is driving the attacks? Corruption, a lack of consultation and a failure to protect activists,” and calls on president Juan Orlando Hernández to “urgently address these root causes.” In terms of corruption, it calls on the US-financed judicial body MACCIH to “investigate *at least one* high profile case of corruption in the natural resource sector.” (emphasis added) As this purely symbolic proposal suggests, MACCIH is an “anti-impunity” tool being used by the US Embassy to gain greater control of its client state by pressuring the Honduran ruling class with corruption investigations, while also seeking to deal with the crisis of legitimacy and opposition in Honduras that has deepened since the 2009 coup.

In terms of “consultation and protection of activists,” GW couches its recommendations in terms of the profit interests of Honduran and foreign capital: “Defenders’ local expertise is essential in helping investors to identify, prevent, and mitigate human rights abuses and therefore also minimize related adverse business impacts...”

The bulk of the funding for Global Witness comes from the same financial oligarchies and international cooperation money that fund the dams and mines in Honduras and fills the corrupt pockets of its ruling class. GW lists the UK and other European governments, along with the CIA-linked Ford Foundation and US billionaire George Soros’ Open Society Foundation, as some of their main contributors.

The NGO warns that the country’s reputation will be “too lawless and risky for respectable companies.” This is ludicrous. The international development banks, where the US financial aristocracy holds sway, like the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation, have recently invested hundreds of

millions in energy and extractive projects in Honduras, concerns over their “respectability” notwithstanding.

A 2016 UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean report found that Honduras has the third highest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) profitability of the region, while most of new FDI into Honduras is going into banking and renewable energy projects like dams and solar power. For the financial aristocracy, naked reaction and the “race to the bottom” in regulations and democratic rights have been the norm of the global movement of capital, but increasingly so since the 2008 financial crisis. The record highs on Wall Street on the basis of Trump’s anti-regulatory, reactionary, and militaristic program clearly reflect this process.

The ominous attitude of the Trump administration toward the region is reflected by its attacks against immigrants. Moreover, in October 2015, retired general John Kelly—then the head of the Southern Command and currently the secretary of Homeland Security—commented on the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador): “So over time, the court systems have collapsed. The Attorney Generals are ineffective. The police are all bribed. The only functioning institutions that exist today are the militaries.”

The reality is that the killings in Honduras are generated both by the thuggish drive for profit by the local oligarchy and increasing pressure from US and European capital on the Honduran ruling class to create ever-more profitable conditions for investment.

In the end, under the guise of human rights, the demands made by GW and local rights organizations to the criminal Honduran coup regime are aimed at advancing the efforts of the imperialist powers to suppress social opposition and gain greater control over the Honduran political establishment.

Workers need to draw their own conclusions from the GW findings. Activists, indigenous communities, peasants, workers and youth cannot rely on the government for protection from persecution and death of its own repressive forces. Workers and peasants need to fight for a revolutionary socialist program under the workers’ leadership of the International Committee and its efforts to unite workers across the region, the US, Europe and the world to confront the imperialist powers and their semi-colonial client regimes.

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