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<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/honduras-human-rights-defenders-under-threat-2013-11-22>

'Defending human rights in Honduras is a crime'



Bertha Isabel Cáceres Flores, human rights defender from the Honduran NGO COPINH.

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There's hardly a moment when Honduran human rights defender Bertha Cáceres is not worrying about what may happen to her for defending the rights of her community, the Lenca Indigenous People. The risk is so high that she's been forced into hiding.

"They want to terrorize us," she told Amnesty International.

"I cannot live my life like before. I cannot go to the office, take part in our campaign, or leave the country to denounce our situation in international forums. I can't even go swimming in the Río Blanco, which is very important to me because it is sacred to our people," she said.

Bertha is being intimidated and threatened because of her work as general coordinator of the [Civic Council of the Indigenous and Popular Organizations of Honduras \(COPINH\)](#). The organization has been fighting for over 20 years for better standards of living of her community in Río Blanco, north-western Honduras. Since 2011, COPINH has been campaigning for their right to free, prior and informed consent in relation to a proposal for a hydroelectric plant that might force them out of their ancestral lands.

A campaign of terror

As if the never ending abusive, anonymous phone calls and "wanted" posters depicting her face were not enough, spurious and what appear to be fabricated charges have been filed against her.

In May 2013, Bertha was accused of carrying an unlicensed gun in her car. She claims it was planted by the military officers at a checkpoint. The trial on these charges is still ongoing.

Some weeks after she was charged, the Honduran army killed one of her colleagues, indigenous leader Tomás García, and seriously injured his teenage son. All this happened on 15 July when they were protesting against the hydroelectric project. A soldier is currently facing criminal proceedings in relation to the killing.

In August, another criminal proceeding was filed against Bertha Cáceres, and two other COPINH leaders, Tomás Gómez and Aureliano Molina. They were accused of inciting others to commit the crimes of usurpation, coercion and continued damages against the company behind the hydro-electric project in Río Blanco. In fact, according to information received by Amnesty International, what they did was to express their opposition to the project at a meeting.

“The situation has deteriorated. It’s very worrying, there’s more cruelty and the repression is increasing,” she said.

Stories of attacks and harassment against activists like Bertha are common in Honduras and authorities rarely investigate them.

“We have nowhere to go and feel helpless and vulnerable, because we have no trust in the judicial system in Honduras,” Bertha explained.

“Defending human rights in Honduras is a crime. They are criminalizing the right to our identity and sense of self.”

No-go zone for human rights activists

Amnesty International and other human rights organization have recently reported an escalation in threats and abuses against human rights defenders like Bertha.

They say anyone seen to be speaking out for marginalized communities is usually intimidated or even directly attacked.

As [presidential elections approach](#) in the Central American country, [Amnesty International has written to candidates](#) to ask for an explicit commitment to prioritize the protection of human rights and those who defend them.

“I want the authorities to understand that when we make demands we are not asking for charity. We are asking for justice, for our human rights. They are obliged to guarantee them, to respect them and abide by them,” Bertha said.