IN MEMORIAM: BERTA ISABEL CÁCERES FLORES (4 MARCH 1973 – 3 MARCH 2016)

By Herman Greene

Berta Cáceres was a Honduran environmental activist and leader of the Lenca people. She organized a grassroots campaign to prevent the building of dams on the Gualcarque River. The Lenca engaged in the dangerous fight against the project because of the harm it would cause to the environment, their access to water, food and medicine, and their way of life. She was assassinated by armed intruders after years of threats. She understood the risks she was taking and courageously continued her work.

The Lenca are the largest indigenous group in Honduras with an estimated population of 100,000. The Lenca people in El Salvador number around 37,000. Ms. Cáceres was the co-founder and coordinator of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). She won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015. The Goldman Environmental Prize is the world’s largest award honoring grassroots environmental activists, and is sometimes called the “Green Nobel.” The award includes a $175,000 no-strings-attached cash prize.

This March 3, 2016 blog post on the Goldman Foundation website gives this tribute:

Berta Cáceres, an indigenous Lenca woman who won the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize for her fearless work to defend the Gualcarque River, its surrounding environment and people from the Agua Zarca Dam, was killed by gunmen last night in her home in La Esperanza, Honduras.

“On behalf of my siblings Doug Goldman and Susie Gelman, Prize jury, and staff, I’d like to express my deepest condolences to her family, friends, and colleagues at COPINH and around the world,” said John Goldman, President of the Goldman Environmental Foundation. “She was a fearless environmental hero. She understood the risks that came with her work, but continued to lead her community with amazing strength and conviction.”

Several Goldman Environmental Prize winners are reeling from the loss of a fellow grassroots activists:

- “No one should die trying to do the right thing.” (Maria Gunnoe, USA);
- “My soul weeps for Berta and the planet.” (Craig Williams, USA);
- “We draw strength from her life and her death to continue her work here.” (Atherton Martin, Dominica)

Goldman Prize winners are planning to issue a joint statement in reaction to her death.
As detailed in a 2015 report from Global Witness, Honduras is the most dangerous country in the world for environmental activists. Prize staff is working with Global Witness and other partners to demand that the Honduran government conduct a full investigation into the killing, take immediate measures to ensure the safety of the Cáceres family, and grant protection for activists in Honduras.

“We mourn the loss of an inspirational leader, and will honor her life’s work by continuing to highlight the courageous work of Goldman Prize winners like Berta,” said Goldman. “She built an incredible community of grassroots activists in Honduras, who will carry on the campaign she fought and died for.”

Ms. Cáceres shows the high cost of commitment. She gave her life that all may live.