Berta Did Not Die, She Multiplied

Angelika Albaladejo, Program Associate

Berta Cáceres, the beloved and renowned Honduran environmental and indigenous rights activist and winner of the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, was murdered in her home on March 3, 2016.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, there has been an undeniable wave of solidarity around the world and a refusal to give up the fight that Berta believed in so strongly. “Berta no murió, se multiplicó! Berta didn’t die, she multiplied!” has been a rallying cry at protests and vigils from Tegucigalpa to Washington, D.C.

The Latin America Working Group immediately set to work organizing a letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry calling for “a response from the State Department that is not business as usual but a profound change of direction towards improving the abysmal situation of human rights in Honduras.” The letter was signed by more than 250 environmental, indigenous, women’s, labor, and human rights organizations from around the world, sending a unified message of support for an independent investigation by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and systemic changes in response to this tragic loss. Read the full letter at: lawg.org/OpenLetteronBerta

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In Mexico, “More Migrants Are Coming, and They’re Arriving More Hurt”

Emma Buckhout, Program Associate | Read the full blog at lawg.org/TalesFromMXCity

In January, I had the opportunity to visit two migrant shelters in Mexico City. While cosmopolitan Mexico City draws immigrants and expats from all over the world, it has not traditionally been a prime destination, or even a way station, for Central American migrants. Traditional migrant routes north took them outside the city. Yet both shelters I visited reported a dramatic increase in the number of migrants, primarily from the Northern Triangle, arriving in the last two years. Corresponding with increases in violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America and increased migration enforcement operations in Mexico, the cases in these shelters show how Mexico City is receiving a growing number of migrants, including children, women, and family units who are increasingly hurt and in need of protection.

Sister Magda, one of the founders of CAFEMIN, reflected that while migration from Central America used to be for economic reasons, now it’s forced by violence. She shared the case of a mother and her 17-year-old son who had come to CAFEMIN earlier that year after their family had been directly targeted by gangs in El Salvador. Thanks to the help of CAFEMIN, they were granted refugee status in Mexico. However, fearing the gang knew where they were in Mexico after a press interview, they continued the journey to the United States, where they were apprehended by Border Patrol, detained, and later denied asylum and ordered deported.

Cases of family units seeking asylum in Mexico are all too common given the current context in the Northern Triangle. In 2015, El Salvador surpassed Honduras as the country with the highest homicide rate not at war, though Honduras and Guatemala follow closely behind. Violence and extortion from gangs and organized crime, as well as corruption and abuse by security forces, leave people without any safe havens and few options but to flee north.

Few asylum seekers from Central America have access to legal counsel to help them obtain refugee status in Mexico or even know that they can seek protection. The Mexican refugee agency, Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR), remains understaffed and with only three offices it lacks presence in the majority of the country. While the number of refugee applications is steadily increasing in Mexico, it is still estimated to fall far short of the number of migrants who could potentially qualify. Many of the open cases are abandoned by migrants who have been discouraged by authorities, or don’t wish to wait out a several month process in Mexico, especially if they are in a government detention center instead of a shelter.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 7]
Obama’s Trip to Cuba: A New Era of U.S.-Cuba Relations (And a New Campaign Name!)

Caroline Moot, LAWG Cuba Intern | Read the full blog at lawg.org/ObamaCubaTrip

On March 21st, 2016, President Barack Obama became the first sitting president in 88 years, since the term of Calvin Coolidge in 1928, to visit the island of Cuba. His visit sent powerful reverberations through both countries that echoed throughout Latin America, realizing the opportunities for change that LAWG and our dedicated supporters like you have fought for over the last two decades.

President Obama’s trip, while short, accomplished many diplomatic milestones, from the amiable baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban National Team to the more serious joint news conference given by both presidents. During his three-day trip, President Obama also visited the new American embassy, toured Old Havana, honored Cuban revolutionary hero José Martí, learned to play dominoes with a Cuban comic, spent two hours talking to dissidents, and delivered his keynote speech in Havana’s Gran Teatro to be broadcast live on Cuban state television.

In his speech in Havana, President Obama appealed to the same spirit of change that transformed the segregated America to which his father arrived in 1959 into the America that had elected a black man to be president. While he criticized the Cuban government’s crackdown on dissidents and other forms of repression, he affirmed the Cuban right to sovereignty and the power of the Cuban people to decide their own fate. President Obama convinced President Castro to hold a joint news conference after their talks, something unheard of for the Cuban leader, during which an American reporter asked President Castro directly about the existence of political prisoners in Cuba.

The reactions to President Obama’s visit and speech were tremendous, both within the island nation and beyond. While the visit did lead to some backlash from the Cuban government, as seen in Fidel’s letter “El hermano Obama,” and certain elements of American politics, many Cuban people seemed excited about the normalization of relations.

As LAWG has advocated for years, the administration seems set on ensuring that the path to normalization is irreversible. The regulations on travel have been loosened, as have the regulations on financial transactions and trade. Direct mail service has resumed and embassies have been reopened. But the full normalization cannot be reached without the lifting of the embargo, which still requires an act of U.S. Congress. Although it might seem impossible to get anything passed through Congress in the current political environment, Cuba seems to be one of the few issues that can garner support from both sides of the aisle. While no bill yet exists to lift the embargo completely, there are multiple bills with bipartisan support that have already been introduced that would chip away at the embargo in pieces. Take action at lawg.org/CubaAction2016.

LAWG celebrated the incredible progress we’ve made in U.S.-Cuba relations this year by officially changing our campaign name from “End the Travel Ban on Cuba” to “End the Embargo on Cuba,” which has long been our goal. We remain committed to reinforcing the actions taken to normalize relations, and we will count on the support of dedicated advocates like you as we urge Congress to do its part and end the U.S. embargo on Cuba once and for all.
El Salvador’s Violence: No Easy Way Out

Lisa Haugaard and Angelika Albaladejo of the Latin America Working Group Education Fund traveled to El Salvador with the Center for International Policy in late 2015 to interview a wide range of security, human rights, displacement, and migration experts to get a glimpse of the different sources and dynamics of violence in the country that’s replaced Honduras as the murder capital of the world.

What we found was evidence of a grim, multi-sided conflict with no clear end in sight: Gangs are now present in each of the country’s 14 regional departments, controlling entire neighborhoods and imposing untold violence and fear on the population. Evidence is emerging that some members of the military and police, now engaged in a war against the gangs, are involved in extrajudicial killings. This violence, paired with a lack of opportunity, has caused Salvadorans, including growing numbers of women and children, to be displaced from their homes and to flee the country in droves. While the Salvadoran government has a well-regarded comprehensive plan to address violence, only the hard side of the strategy is being fully rolled out so far.

The full ten-part series, El Salvador’s Violence: No Easy Way Out, is available at lawg.org/NoEasyWayOut. The series delves into issues of gang violence, arms trafficking, internal displacement, human rights violations by security forces, violence against women and LGBTI Salvadorans, and recommendations for how U.S. policies and aid to El Salvador should be developed to help, not hurt. Despite all obstacles, a comprehensive, rights-respecting way out of violence must be sought.

As seen in the following excerpt from the series, the skyrocketing levels of violence in El Salvador are affecting its citizens in different ways based on factors like their gender, their age, the neighborhood they live in, and the job they have.

How Violence Affects Women in El Salvador | Angelika Albaladejo | Read the full article at lawg.org/ElSalvadorVAW

The violence gripping El Salvador affects women in a different way than men. Within the current security crisis, gang and security force violence has exacerbated a broader, long-standing acceptance of violence against women. More than half of all Salvadoran women say they have suffered some form of violence in their lives. Over a quarter of these women were victims of sexual or physical violence.

While men are far more likely to be murdered, women are significantly more likely to experience intrafamilial, sexual, or economic violence. To make matters worse, women receive little to no guarantees of protection from the state. Due to ineffective governmental institutions, corruption, and social acceptance, impunity reigns in nearly all cases of violence against women. Women often face the highest levels of violence in their own homes. In the first nine months of 2015, the Attorney General’s Special Attention Unit for Women attended to 1,283 cases of intrafamilial violence against women, an average of almost five reports each day. The true number is almost certainly higher as many cases of domestic violence go unreported.

The prevalence of sexual violence against women in El Salvador is also staggering. Between January and August 2015, the National Civilian Police (PNC) registered an average of nearly five cases per day of sexual violence against women, including rape and sexual assault. And victims are often the most vulnerable—more than half of these assaults were carried out against girls, adolescents, and the disabled.

On top of the everyday violence already faced by women, ongoing gang conflict has led to an increase in some of the most heinous acts of violence against women. In the past, sexual violence was primarily committed in the home by a family member. Now however, rape and sexual assault are increasingly committed by gangs and security forces. Gangs rape and violently murder young girls, or claim them as “novias de las pandillas” – “girlfriends” of the gangs. “Women’s bodies were treated like territory during the civil war and continue to be today by the gangs,” says Jeanette Urquilla, the director of the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA). In many gang-controlled neighborhoods, young girls expect they will be raped,
abducted, and/or murdered by the gangs. Urquilla says this has led some families to pressure young women to become pregnant with their boyfriends, rather than be claimed by a gang member.

Police officers and soldiers stationed in “barrios calientes” —high-violence or gang-controlled neighborhoods—have also been linked to cases of sexual violence. In one case, a 13-year-old girl with Down syndrome was raped by soldiers stationed in her community, according to eyewitness reports from members of a human rights group. In another case, a soldier was arrested in February 2016 on charges of abducting, raping, and threatening the life of a young woman.

The targeted killing of women based on their gender, known as femicide, is also on the rise. An estimated 2,521 women have been murdered in El Salvador since 2009; this represents an average of 420 femicides each year. And according to the Observatory of Violence Against Women, the numbers are escalating. In the first ten months of 2015, 475 women were murdered - an average of one femicide every 16 hours.

For many reasons, women often don’t report violence. Vanda Pignato, El Salvador’s Secretary of Social Inclusion, told La Prensa Gráfica that women stay silent because of “fear, shame, terror, and above all, because they do not trust the judicial system. The judicial system in El Salvador leaves much to be desired on this issue. There is widespread impunity for aggressors and that isn’t a good message for young people and the female victims of violence.”

As security conditions in El Salvador worsen, violence against women continues to increase in severity. To address these issues, the Salvadoran government will need to implement existing legislation, expand institutional capacity, increase protection for victims of violence, and perhaps most importantly, work with Salvadoran civil society groups to begin to shift the cultural, social, and economic dynamics currently reinforcing impunity and acceptance of violence against women.

Grassroots activists like you have accompanied this effort every step of the way as we’ve honored Berta’s life and work, fought for justice in her case, and advocated for an end to impunity in Honduras.

In the time since Berta’s death, together we’ve stood in solidarity with Berta’s family in a D.C. vigil and urged our Representatives in the House to sign several letters in support of stopping human rights violations in Honduras and ensuring an independent, international investigation of Berta’s murder as has been requested by the Cáceres family and her colleagues at the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). And there have been some results: Honduran authorities have arrested five suspects, including one employee of the DESA company involved in the Agua Zarca dam project and both a current and a retired army officer. But, there is so much more that must be done.

Berta’s story is all too common in Honduras. At least 109 activists were killed in Honduras between 2010 and 2015 for their work in defense of the environment and their communities against destructive dam, mining, logging, and agriculture projects. Honduras is now the “deadliest country in the world to be a land and environmental defender,” according to Global Witness’ 2015 report.

In spite of the risks, Honduran defenders continue to press onward, including Berta’s own daughters Laura and Bertita Zuñiga Cáceres and her nephew Silvio Castillo, who have taken strong advocacy roles internationally to seek justice for Berta and all Hondurans being murdered for their work defending the rights of their communities. The fight for justice and real change in Honduras will be long and difficult. But, through continuing solidarity and advocacy we find hope in Berta’s legacy.

Visit bertacaceres.org and lawg.org/BertaCaceres for more on the actions you can take to fight for justice for Berta.
**Voces from Colombia: “If the voices of the victims are not heard, we will not have a solid peace process”**

*James Mesiti, LAWG Colombia Intern*

In February 2016, LAWG helped organize a visit by a delegation of Colombian human rights defenders as they shared their stories and experiences with congressional staff, members of the State Department, and the greater Washington D.C. community. The visitors — Luz Elena Galeano Laverde, Francia Elena Márquez Mina, Fabián Laverde, and William Rivas — were all winners of the 2015 National Prize for the Defense of Human Rights in Colombia awarded by the Swedish development and humanitarian organization, Diakonia.

**Luz Elena Galeano Laverde** represents the Women Walking for Truth (*Las Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad*) which won the prize for Collective Process of the Year. Women Walking for Truth emerged after Operation Orion in 2002, during which civilians from Comuna 13 in Medellín were disappeared, allegedly by Colombian security forces and paramilitary groups. The members of the Women Walking for Truth, including Luz Elena whose husband was disappeared in 2008, joined together to find their missing loved ones. These women fight for the establishment of truth, justice, and reparations for victims and have proposed mechanisms for restorative justice as a way to seek peace. Read our full feature of Luz Elena at [lawg.org/LuzElena](http://lawg.org/LuzElena)

**Francia Elena Márquez Mina** was named Defender of the Year. Francia is an Afro-Colombian leader and human rights defender in Yolombó village in the northern Cauca region of Colombia. Francia defends the ethnic, environmental, and territorial rights of Afro-Colombian communities and has represented the community of La Toma in the Suárez municipality. Francia was among a group of victims invited to Havana to participate in the peace process, though Francia says she does not see herself as a victim, nor does she see herself as an individual, but rather as part of her community. Francia is the spokeswoman for the Mobilization of Women for Care for Life and Ancestral Territories. Francia was recently attacked by ESMAD police officers while leading a peaceful protest in Cauca and has been receiving escalating death threats allegedly from “BACRIM” or paramilitary-style groups. Read our full feature of Francia at [lawg.org/Francia](http://lawg.org/Francia)

During a public discussion co-hosted by LAWGEF on February 18, 2016 at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Luz Elena and Francia spoke about the challenges they and fellow advocates face, the impacts of the conflict on their communities, and the role of human rights defenders in building sustainable peace in Colombia. These excerpts of their powerful remarks reveal the strong commitment of Colombian civil society and victims groups to constructing a peace agreement that includes the proposals of the communities most affected by the conflict, as well as implementing peace with attention to victims, truth, and justice:

“**I believe if the voices of the victims are not heard we will not have a solid peace process—mainly because of the importance of clarifying or finding the truth.** If we cannot learn what happened, by whom, and why, we would be in the dark. I do not think it would be fair because it was the government who acted against us...We do not need half of the truth. We need the whole truth about what happened in our neighborhood and in our city.” - Luz Elena Laverde

“We are raising our voices to say that we are defenders of life, of our territories, and defenders of the environment. And we as women, in a very specific way, have come into this life, have brought our children into this life, and we will continue to struggle to bring peace and liberty for our people. We do not want to continue [to live] in a world of violence and of blood [which is what] historically we have lived in... We know what war means. We know what it means to have helicopters bombing our lands where we can’t sleep all night with the fear that perhaps one of those bombs will fall on one of our homes. We want a peace process but we do not want a peace process that is just a development model. We want one that is for Colombian society and that is for the world...**We want the reality to be that we have a lasting world peace. That our children in the future will not have to flee like we have had to flee in our lives.”** - Francia Elena Márquez Mina
As more asylum seekers arrive in Mexico from Central America, Mexican migration enforcement has been strengthened with U.S. support, putting already vulnerable migrants at even greater risk. The day before I visited CAFEMIN, Edwin, a twenty-one-year-old from Honduras, his twin sister, and her two-year-old child had been violently attacked while riding the train in Mexico. Edwin was badly beaten and left tied to a pole. Fortunately, he was rescued by the Red Cross of Mexico who brought him to CAFEMIN instead of allowing him to be taken to a migrant detention center by authorities from the Mexican immigration agency (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM). Sister Magda helped him get medical attention, but he was still traumatized with no idea where his sister and her baby were.

In 2014, Mexico’s President Enrique Peña Nieto announced a new Southern Border Plan, which was supposed to “implement actions for the respect of human rights and the safe transit of migrant flows.” However, shelters and migrant rights advocates in Mexico report it has done anything but. Before, migrants passed through Mexico City on the train known as “La Bestia” without stopping. Now, that train route has become more dangerous, with migrants violently attacked at greater rates. The perpetrators of these crimes frequently remain in impunity and many suspect law enforcement agents are involved, acting in collusion with organized crime and private security forces. Migrants are finding more dangerous routes, walking farther to avoid attacks on the train.

Were it not for the shelters and brave volunteers like Sister Magda, these migrants would not have access to the services and support they so desperately need on their journey to seek protection and safety. As our conversation spiraled farther into the horrific challenges forcing migrants from their homes in the Northern Triangle, and those awaiting them in Mexico, Sister Magda echoed my thoughts by asking, “How do you give them hope?” Yet the images of a young woman from Honduras joking with others in the kitchen, neighbors bringing food donations, and young men, including Edwin, bidding me farewell with smiles on their tired faces confirmed that she and so many other migrant rights defenders are providing glimmers of hope for the migrants that arrive at their doors.

**Operation Streamline: “A Monster that is Still With Us” | Sofia Vargas, LAWG Mexico & Migration Intern**

In March 2016, ten fellow Georgetown students and I embarked on a week-long Alternative Spring Break trip to the U.S. southern border in Arizona. During our trip, we attended an Operation Streamline hearing at the Ninth Circuit Court of Tucson where, in under an hour, we witnessed over 60 people being sentenced to jail time for having illegally entered the United States. Operation Streamline began in 2005 as an initiative of the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice under which undocumented migrants face criminal prosecution and prison time, as well as deportation, as a consequence of illegal entry or re-entry into the United States. Operation Streamline has been heavily criticized and is a process that many advocates, lawyers, and even judges resent having to work through.

The men and women we saw being prosecuted were all in handcuffs and shackles during the entirety of the hearing, and they were called up in groups of about seven people at a time to plead their cases. Most of the attorneys present were defending multiple people at once. According to Judge Jacqueline Rateau who presided at the hearing that day, attorneys only get about half an hour in the morning to explain the cases to their clients before pleading the cases in the afternoon. Coupled with the fact that detainees have little to no working knowledge of the American legal system, and many do not speak English, an overwhelming majority of detainees are left with little choice but to plead guilty and spend time in detention. Judge Rateau described Operation Streamline as “a monster that is still with us,” despite the years of backlash it has received. Amanda Sakuma of MSNBC explains immigration proceedings under Operation Streamline as “[running] more like a conveyor belt than a courtroom.”

The mere nature of these proceedings calls into question whether or not migrants are getting the due process they deserve under the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution. But unfortunately, immigration courts are so constrained with resources and backlogged with cases that improving the legal process for immigrants is a long-term task. LAWG and partners continue to advocate for due process and access to legal representation for all adult and child migrants. As we seek to address the root causes of migration, our own immigration system needs to be reformed to be able to treat those who arrive out our border justly and with dignity.

To read more about Sofia’s immersion trip to the U.S.-Mexico border, see her full-length blog at lawg.org/StoriesFromTheBorder

[CONTINUED FROM IN MEXICO, “MORE MIGRANTS ARE COMING, AND THEY’RE ARRIVING MORE HURT,” PAGE 2]
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