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Honduras

Berta Cáceres and her fight against all impunity

- Features -

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At the end of 2019, seven men were convicted for the murder of Berta Cáceres Flores, the well-known left-wing environmental activist and leader of the indigenous Lenca community in Honduras. [1] Two of the killers were previously trained by the US military. The court believes that they all acted at the behest of executives of the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S. A. (DESA). On 6 July 2021, David Castillo Mejía, U.S. trained ex-military officer, former president of DESA and supervisor of a dam project opposed by Berta and her comrades, was indeed found guilty of masterminding the murder of Berta Cáceres. [2] That, however, cannot be the end of the matter. [3]

Robbery?

On the night of 2 to 3 March 2016 – a day before her 43rd birthday – Berta Cáceres was shot dead in her home in western Honduras. [4]

According to the police, it was a robbery homicide. Berta's family disagreed and called for an independent, international commission of enquiry. [5] That call led to global action. [6] Under this active pressure, the authorities admitted that Berta was killed because of her struggle as an environmental activist and not by a crime of 'common law'.

Agua Zarca Hydro Project

Berta Cáceres was indeed also an environmental activist. She knew that under international law indigenous peoples must be accessed before decisions can be made that will have a major impact on their traditional way of life. [7]

She and her supporters could see that capitalist corporations do not respect international law. This was demonstrated, for example, when in 2012 a transnational joint venture (of which DESA was a part) wanted to build four hydroelectric dams on the Gualcarque River - the Agua Zarca Hydro Project. [8] The indigenous people were not accessed, nor were their objections taken into account. The Lenca community feared that this project would make their access to water, food and materials for (traditional) medicine impossible, making their specific way of life unsustainable. For a year in 2013, activists prevented access to the construction site. This led to military action, during which activists were injured and even killed. This kind of violence took place all over Honduras. In 2014, at least 116 environmental activists were killed by police officers or hired assassins. [9]

In 2015, Berta filed no fewer than 35 complaints of harassment, persecution and attacks on her and her staff. [10] The activists were nevertheless successful. The Chinese and World Bank-affiliated shareholders in the Agua Zarca Hydro Project withdrew their cooperation. Berta also received the most prestigious environmental award, the Goldman Prize, also know as the informal Environmental Nobel Prize. These successes were the direct cause of Berta's murder. Yet she was not killed for that reason only. To understand, we must look at the broader context.

COPINH

In the early 1990s, the self-awareness of Latin America's indigenous peoples grew. In 1993, while studying at university, Berta and others founded a local committee that would grow into the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). [11] COPINH organized actions against illegal logging, against plantation owners and against military presence in the territories of indigenous peoples. Gradually, broader issues were incorporated, often with a feminist content, including advocacy for the rights of LGBT people, as well as for general social and indigenous emancipation. [12] This radicalisation was part of a general rise in awareness and self-organization among the subjugated.

Strategy and tactics

Berta did not become a leader of popular movements overnight. Her life was shaped by strategic discussions that cut across the left in Latin America. First, the debate over the approach to guerrilla warfare, which she faced through her participation (with her partner Salvador Zúñiga), at the age of 17, in the Salvadoran civil war. In essence, guerrilla is just a military tactic, part of a more global, strategic-political approach, aimed at weakening the opponent through a multitude of pinpricks (military, but also social and political). The guerrillero's enormous personal sacrifices, however, tends to make this tactic 'rise' to strategy in his or her eyes, as a choice for a radical, alternative way of life outside established society. A choice that leads to 'militarisation', often with extremely tragic consequences.

The organization that Berta's partner Salvador was part of, *Resistencia National - RN*, was born out of such a tragedy. [13] Another strategic discussion is that of mass mobilization versus electoral approach – also a tactical issue. Behind it lies the much more important question of which strategic alliance is necessary: that of the oppressed in all their shades *with* each other and *against* the established powers, or an alliance with supposed allies *within* those established powers. Berta had to deal with both discussions. The first debate shaped her into a principled anti militarist; in the second, she clearly defended mass mobilization, as opposed to mere electoral campaigning.

Five families

Honduras has traditionally been dominated by the proverbial "five families". At the same time, this conglomerate was never as dominant as it thinks it is. For most of the 20th century, the center of gravity of the Honduran economy was the export of bananas. The local "comprador bourgeoisie" played a subordinate role. It was the United Fruit Company which dominated the country. The functions of the state were largely limited to the police and the army as "gangs of armed men". [14] After World War II, workers on the banana plantations went on strike (known as the Heroic General Strike of 1954), [15] laying the foundation for fairly strong trade unions.

In the neighbouring countries El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, civil wars developed between the ruling classes and leftist guerrillas. This was accompanied by far-reaching interference from the United States. The armed core of Honduran state power was seen by the US as an extension of its imperialist policy. This was reflected in the notorious <u>Escuela de las Américas</u> (School of the Americas), where "[h]undreds of Hondurans were trained (...) to (...) learn how to kill, torture and maim more efficiently." [16]

Articles chiseled in stone

After the end of the civil wars in neighbouring countries, the Honduran "five families" really started to make money, not only in agriculture and forestry, but also in tourism, trade and industry. The interests of the ruling class were

anchored in the constitution by "class="spip_out" rel="external"> "articles chiselled in stone", which cannot be changed, not even in constitutional revisions through parliamentary process. For example, Article 374 states:

In no case whatsoever shall the preceding article [concerning the revision procedure itself], the present article, the constitutional articles relating to the form of government, the national territory, the presidential period, the prohibition on serving as president of the Republic again, the citizen who has acted under a title that prevents her/him from being president of the Republic, be reformed in the ensuing period. [17]

Coup

At the beginning of the 21st century, Latin America began to turn to the left. The US-promoted, Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas (Free Trade Area of the Americas) directed against left-wing Cuba, failed. In opposition to this imperialist free trade agreement, leftist governments established the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America).

This ALBA-alliance was aimed:

against the external imperial hegemony [of the US] and internally at attempts to re-establish the state, by strengthening the public versus the private sphere, by breaking with neoliberal political projects and by creating new forms of popular power. [18]

Honduras joined this ALBA, spurred on by the elected president <u>Manuel 'Mel' Zelaya Rosales</u>. Cuban doctors, free (!) access for students to training in Cuba, cheap Venezuelan petroleum and generous loans for the purchase of tractors were introduced. Zelaya thus tried to limit the impact of the international financial crisis on Honduras.

The "five families" did not understand the behaviour of "their" president, who was after all a member of the Liberal Party! In an attempt to find another power base, Zelaya addressed the population through television. It soon became clear that the constitutional rules were too restrictive. The call for a Constituyente – a participatory constituent assembly – was growing. The actions of the Bolivian President Morales also played a role in this. The latter "waged a 'war of position' in the Gramscian sense: a concentrated struggle around a new constitution, a struggle that ended with the victory of the left-wing government in a referendum in 2009." [19]

Inspired by this, Zelaya in 2009 organized an indicative referendum, to show that there was broad support for a radical revision of the constitution. This step was indigestible, for the 'five families', but especially for the army. It culminated in a coup d'état, during which Zelaya was deported to Costa Rica. According to Berta, the coup took place because its supporters worried:

that the Honduran people could decide what to do with strategic resources like water, the forests, the land, our sovereignty, with our labour rights, the minimum wage, women's rights, constitutional rights, the self determination of the Indigenous and Black people (...), the possibility of having an inclusive, democratic, equitable state and society with direct participation of the people. [20]

New elite

With their (sometimes veiled) support for the coup, the "five families" may have thought they could safeguard their position of power. This was only partly the case. Since then, the ruling class in Honduras is no longer solely dominated by them. According to Berta's daughter Olivia, the *coup d'état* played a major role in the reasons for her mother's murder. [21]

The irregular, illegitimate government that followed the coup d'état opened the door to a flood of illegal land and other concessions, creating openings for the rise of a new and dangerous group in the Honduran ruling class. [22] Because the property rights of the "five families" are constitutionally unassailable, the new predatory group had to lay its claw on the remaining territories – held by indigenous communities since the 1960-70s – in order to implement the capitalist logic of ruthless and all-consuming extraction. This is the true explanation for the chain of events, which leads from violations of indigenous peoples' rights, through the coup, to the murder of Berta Cáceres and many others.

Resistance

At the same time, resistance to the coup grew, organized in the <u>Frente Nacional de la Résistencia Popular contra el Golpe de Estado (FNRP)</u>. COPINH, with Berta as spokesperson, was also part of this Frente.

Despite opposition from the army, police, media and the US, the FNRP succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Hondurans, which was accompanied by a growing political awareness, as evidenced by the role played by not only democratic, social, anti-capitalist and anti-racist, but also feminist efforts within the resistance movement, culminating in intersectional resistance to the established disorder. [23]

In Berta's words, "We must awaken our conscience to the predatory capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only ensure our own self-destruction." [24]

Constituyente

Propelled by the mobilizations and the growing awareness, the call for a *Constituyente* really became massive. The contrast between coup plotters and their sympathisers versus mass popular resistance increasingly paralysed the country. Fidel Castro declared that "a revolutionary situation is developing in Honduras". [25] In addition to several national demonstrations and marches, on 12 April 2011 the FNRP organized a so-called paro civico (a citizens' strike), which led to the shutdown of the four major airports, several power plants, bus and taxi companies, large parts of the government apparatus, hospitals and schools. [26] The US State Department – led by Hillary Clinton – saw the gathering storm and began to push for a negotiated solution.

Legitimization through elections

The aim was to combine the return of the deported President Zelaya with the legitimisation of the coup plotters through elections. Berta vehemently opposed this:

Hillary Clinton has said (...) what will happen in Honduras. This shows the bad legacy of North American influence in our country. The return of Mel Zelaya to the presidency (...) was made an afterthought. There would be elections. We warned that this would be very dangerous. The elections were held under intense militarism and with enormous electoral fraud. [27]

Three currents

The resistance movement asked itself what choice to make facing these elections. There were three currents within the FNRP. First, the *Liberales en Resistenciá*, consisting of disgraced former members of the ruling class, including Zelaya. These liberals wanted to participate in the elections through a "list of one's own", first in the form of the *Frente Amplío de Resistencia Popular* (FARP), later transformed into *Libre (Libertad y Refundación)*, which afterwards merged with other left-wing forces to form *Alianza Opositora*. They argued that they would be able to break through the century-old "*bipartidismo*" between the bourgeois Liberal and National Parties. They believed that they could thus shift the balance of power towards what they vaguely described as "prosocialist liberalism".

Secondly, there was *Espacio Refundación*, "an eclectic amalgamation of grassroots movements, workers, peasants, indigenous peoples, feminists, LGBT activists, Marxist and autonomous political groups, and all kinds of radical youth organizations." [28] The largest organizations in this current were COPINH and the Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH) – an organization of so-called Garífunas, descendants of black slaves who escaped in the 17th century and indigenous Carib and Arawak nations in northern Honduras. The last current was the wavering third, influenced by "old" dreams of a "people's front" with parts of the so-called "anti-imperialist" bourgeoisie. This third current would eventually join the first.

Defeat

Through COPINH Berta belonged to Espacio Refundación, the current that:

stood for building a people's movement from the bottom up, based on anti-capitalist and anti-repressionist policies. Their main demand was and remained a re-founding, self-organized Constituent Assembly. At the same time, they argued that any recognition of the post-coup regime would be tantamount to betraying the movement, [since] the conditions for a truly democratic process are not in place, the power structures of the coup remain intact and dominate the entire institutional apparatus. [29]

In February 2011 (when Zelaya could not yet return), this current was the dominant one within the FNRP, which at that time had a very participatory internal debate culture, with measures in favour of women's right to speak. Four months later, on June 26, 2011, the situation was completely reversed. The now returned Zelaya pleaded – somewhat after the fashion of a *caudillo* – for the choice of the electoral path, in which he was supported by a barrage of male speakers. Many of these speakers were part of the more or less institutionalized leaderships of various social movements and political currents, among whom prominent trade-union leaders, as well as activists of the influential political organization *Los Necios* (which stood for a compromise position, in advocating the union of the FNRP's struggle in the streets, together with the electoral efforts of the *Frente Amplio*). [30]

Take for example Juan Barahona, president of SINTRAINA, the union organized in the National Agrarian Institute and also president of the overarching FUT (*Federación Unitario de Trabajadores*). Barahono was a member of the Honduran Communist Party, until that party dissolved after the fall of the Berlin wall. Before the meeting of the FNRP of June 26, 2011, Barahona was a very visible leader of the resistance movement, frequently appearing together with Carlos H. Reyes, leader of STYBIS, the militant beverage workers' union and as such a legendary trade union leader, who was also a member of the national leadership of the FNRP. Given his militancy, Barahona's stance in favour of the formation of an electoral *Frente Amplio* might surprise many, yet in fact it was the logical thing to do for a longtime supporter of the so-called "people's front strategy" defended for years by the former Communist Party (as

opposed to the more intransigent "united front strategy" defended by left-wing critics of the CP).

Interestingly, one of the prominent opponents of the electoral path was precisely Carlos H. Reyes. [31] He expressed his doubts about creating a political arm of the Resistance, comparing the situation with the previous elections, "in which the worker voted for the capitalist candidate and the peasant for the landowner." [32]

Reyes argued that first of all a constitutional assembly should be called, before a real democratic situation could be established. However, his words fell on deaf ears. After barely three hours of discussion, the decision was made by an overwhelming majority to establish a 'party of one's own' and participate in the elections. [33] Through this process, Berta's current suffered defeat: the struggle in the streets was transformed into a so-called "electoral revolt". As the activist writer Tomas Andino Mencia commented:

The consequence was that for three years the regime was given a free hand to do whatever it wanted in terms of destroying our economic, social and political conquests. [34]

Contrasurgencia

All this indeed led to the consolidation of a militarised regime. The coup government, under pressure from Washington, passed terror laws that criminalised political protest. Berta called it *contrasurgencia*, carried out at the behest of international capital – mainly commodity traders – terrorizing the population, murdering political activists by the hundreds: "Every day people are murdered." [35] In addition to this terror, the "legitimized" coup government was also responsible for an increasingly brutal economic policy in favour of (international) capital. It had already created a large labour reserve army, [36] through the earlier privatisation of collective land. Many expropriated peasants were deployed in "free zones" or *maquillas*. There, 135,000 workers (60% women) in semi-slavery produced for export clothing and electrical wiring for cars. [37] In 2010, *ciudades modelo* (model cities) were added, with none or very low taxes, open to capital and immigration. [38] In 2016, not only *maquillas* and "model cities", but even entire regions of Honduras were withdrawn from national law.

ZEDEs

These ZEDEs – "zones for employment and economic development" – are areas entirely under the control of private companies, in which Honduran law is absent. Approximately 35% of Honduran territory would be available to the special ZEDE-regime. [39] A lot of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations live in these areas, mostly on collectively owned land. Companies in these ZEDEs pay no taxes, no social contributions and are not bound by minimum wages. Trade unions are banned; customs services non-existent; public services privatised. In 'their' zones, these companies can do whatever they like. While the Honduran people are denied the right to a constitutional referendum, the companies of the new elite and their international overlords completely escape any law. In a report, the National Council for the Fight against Corruption (CNA) speaks openly of a "sale of sovereignty" and even of "treason." [40] For its part, the Patriotic Coalition for Solidarity states that these ZEDEs will "lead to the fiscal suicide of the State of Honduras." [41] It is no coincidence that legal exemptions like these play right into the hands of criminal narco-capitalists, so that today 80% of the cocaine traffic from South to North America passes through Honduras. [42] Corruption, coercion, violence and murder are also on the increase. In addition to state violence:

| the pathology of violence () of displaced peasants, who have been turned into lumpen-proletarians and are denied access to the formal urban economy, is also growing. [43] |
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Almost half (43.6%) of the working population today works full time for wages below the minimum. [44] This hopeless reality, together with organized lawlessness and violence, is at the root of the flight of hundreds of thousands of Hondurans, out of their own country. [45]

Decision

Berta knew that, like all revolutionaries, she was "a dead woman on leave". [46] Yet she remained unyielding: "The government is trying to link the killings of environmentalists to ordinary violence, but there is enough evidence to show that there is a planned and financed policy to criminalise the struggle of social movements. I hope I am wrong, but I believe that the persecution of militants will not decrease, but rather increase." [47] Prophetic words, because "the Agua Zarca dam is still being built. Those who resist are still being killed without mercy." [48] The next step in the ongoing juridical process should be to take on the owners of the DESA company, that is to say the Atala Zablah family, part of Honduras' oligarchy. [49] Welcome as that might be, even that will not be enough. For all the instigators must be brought to justice. These instigators are the old and new oligarchs of Honduras, together with their military servants and imperialist overlords. Their impunity must be broken. Only then the Honduran people will we be able to live truly free and stay joyful. In the mean time, as Berta's youngest daughter Laura Zúñiga Cáceres is fond of saying, "Berta was not killed, she multiplied!" [50]

¡Adelante, adelante, la lucha es constante! ¡Berta Vive!

PS:

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- [1] Unlike in many other societies, women occupy a leading position with the Lenca.
- [2] Contra Corriente, 6 July 2021 "Some justice for Berta Caceres: guilty verdict for David Castillo implicates a powerful Honduran clan".
- [3] From 2001 till 2007 Ellen Verryts lived and worked in Honduras with human rights organizations such as COFADEH (Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras) and CPTRT (Centre for the Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of victims of Torture and their families). From 2007 to 2017 she was responsible for Central America in the Belgian NGO World Solidarity. From 18 to 24 July 2009, she took part in the first International Post-Coup Mission for Human Rights in Honduras, supported by numerous Belgian and international organizations. As a human rights activist and member of the Fourth International, she was invited by the Frente Nacional de la Resistencia Popular to participate in meetings and protest actions such as the march meant to receive deposed President Zelaya at the border with Nicaragua at the end of July, 2009. In 2010, 2016 and 2018 she organized and supported numerous international delegations from Honduras to Belgium and Europe, including those from COFADEH with Bertha Oliva, general coordinator, and from COPINH, with Bertha Zúñiga, general coordinator and daughter of Berta Cáceres. Ellen maintains contact with the popular resistance (La Resistenciá) in Honduras and visits them regularly. Currently she is working at Doctors of the World.

Peter Veltmans has taken part in various activities of solidarity in Belgium with the Honduran resistance movement. In 2009, he helped organize a speaking tour of one of the leaders of the Frente Nacional de la Resistencia Popular, <u>Erasto Reyes.</u> Many in the ranks of the Belgian socialist trade-union ABVV were thus duly informed of the atrocities happening in Honduras.

[4] See Wikinews "Gunmen murder Honduran indigenous leader Berta Cáceres".

- [5] El Heraldo, 8 March 2016 "Hijos de Berta Cáceres exigen que comisión internacional investigue el crimen".
- [6] See "Solidarity Action 'Justice for Berta Cáceres".
- [7] International Labor Organization "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989 (No 169)".
- [8] The difference in height between high and lowland makes the development of hydro power attractive. See "Renewable energy in Honduras".
- [9] Global Witness, "How Many More?".
- [10] Oral statement by Berta's mother Doña Austra Bertha Flores Lopez to Ellen Verryt, July 2017.
- [11] In Spanish: Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras In English see Wikipedia "Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras".
- [12] See Wikipedia "Berta Cáceres".
- [13] It concerned the <u>Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional</u>] RN split from the <u>Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP Revolutionary People's Army)</u> after an internal debate was settled with the physical liquidation of a group of ERP leaders, including Salvadoran poet <u>Roque Dalton</u>.
- [14] After the famous words by Friedrich Engels.
- [15] See Wikipedia "General strike of 1954".
- [16] Remarks by Nancy Pelosi and Joseph Kennedy II, quoted in Wikipedia. Referenced to CLOSE THE ARMY SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS; Congressional Record, Vol. 142, No. 138 (Extensions of Remarks September 30, 1996).
- [17] See "Republic of Honduras Political Constitution of 1982 through 2005 reforms".
- [18] LÖWY, Michael, Continental Laboratory, review of SADER, Emir, A Nova Toupeira: Os caminhos da esquerda latinoamericana, São Paolo, 2009, in *New Left Review*, Volume 68, March-April 2011.
- [19] LÖWY, Continental Laboratory, op. cit
- [20] See KOROL, Claudia, Buenos Aires, 2018, "Las revoluciones de Berta".
- [21] Oral statement by Berta's daughter Olivia Zúñiga Cáceres to Ellen Verryt, juli 2017
- [22] The Economist, "Blood and money Oligarchs no match for demagogues and drug lords", 3 April 2021. Published online as "The influence of Central American dynasties is ebbing".
- [23] LaRed21, 7 August 2009, "Marcha nacional contra golpe de Estado".
- [24] The Platform, 15 March 2016 "Berta Cáceres: How Hillary Clinton Set the Scene for the Death of a Hero in Honduras".
- [25] Links, 24 September 2009 "Fidel Castro on Honduras: A revolution in the making".
- [26] COSAL, 13 April 2011 "HONDURAS: PARO CÍVICO NACIONAL".

- [27] The Nation, 10 March 2016 "Before Her Murder, Berta Cáceres Singled Out Hillary Clinton for Criticism".
- [28] GORDON, Todd, WEBBER, Jeffery R., Post-Coup Honduras: Latin America's Corridor of Reaction, in *Historical Materialism*, Volume 21, Issue 3, 2013, p. 46
- [29] GORDON, Todd, WEBBER, Jeffery R., Post-Coup Honduras, p. 46-48
- [30] See Los Necios web archivehere.
- [31] Since the fateful decision to choose the electoral path, Barahona has never again appeared side by side with Carlos H. Reyes.
- [32] Lista informativa Nicaragua y mas, 27 June 2011 "Nace en Honduras un nuevo brazo político de la Resistencia".
- [33] GORDON, Todd, WEBBER, Jeffery R., Post-Coup Honduras, p. 48.
- [34] ANDINO, Tomas Mencia, in *Inprecor*, n° 601-602, February 2014, "Chronique d'un fiasco annoncé. « Quand nous prendrons le pouvoir » (2011) ... « Ils nous ont volé la victoire » (novembre 2013)".
- [35] GRANDIN, Greg, in The Nation, 10 March 2016, "Before Her Murder, Berta Cáceres Singled Out Hillary Clinton for Criticism".
- [36] See in Inprecor Honduras
- [37] G.T. in Inprecor, n° 553-554, September-October 2009, "L'oligarchie avait vendu le Honduras depuis longtemps".
- [38] Inprecor "Honduras"
- [39] TRICONTINENTAL, Dossier n° 39, 12 April 2021, "Pity the Nation: Honduras Is Being Eaten from within and without".
- [40] criterio.hn, 29 June 2021 "Las ZEDE son un mal parto impulsado por Juan Hernández: CNA".
- [41] criterio.hn, 25 June 2021 "Las ZEDE propiciarán un suicidio tributario al Estado de Honduras".
- [42] Inprecor "Honduras".
- [43] GORDON, Todd, WEBBER, Jeffery R., Post-Coup Honduras, p. 31-32.
- [44] JOHNSTON, Jake and LEFEBVRE, Stephan, Center for Economic and Political Research, November 2013, "Honduras Since the Coup".
- [45] Criterio.hn, 28 June 2021 "Las ZEDE provocarán la mayor migración ciudadana dentro y fuera de Honduras: CNA".
- [46] Paraphrase of the statement by the German revolutionary Eugene Léviné, who was shot in 1919: "Wir sind alle töte Manner mit Urlaub!" (We are all dead men on leave).
- [47] TRUCCHI, Giorgio, Rebelión, 7 March 2016, "Asesinaron a un alma indomable".
- [48] See Los Necios.
- [49] MACKEY, Danielle, EISNER, Chiara, The Intercept, 21 December 2019 "Inside the Plot to Murder Honduran Activist Berta Cáceres".
- [50] REEL Monte, Bloomberg, 14 September 2020 "A Murder in Honduras Reveals the Dark Side of Clean Energy".