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March 8, 2016

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We write to express our outrage about the murder of internationally recognized environmentalist and human rights defender Berta Cáceres of COPINH in Honduras. We urge you to press the Honduran government to facilitate an immediate, full, and impartial investigation of the case; take action to protect her family, colleagues and witnesses to the crime; and address the systematic lack of protection for human rights defenders in Honduras.

We understand that Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández has stated publicly his government's commitment to investigating this case. This show of political support is a welcome change from the Honduran government's lack of concern in past cases of aggressions against human rights defenders. But unless this rhetoric translates into a credible investigation that brings to justice both the material and intellectual authors of the crime, it will be meaningless. In addition, there are serious concerns about the Honduran government's ability to successfully investigate and prosecute this case, as well as its commitment to doing so. As such, we ask you to urge the Honduran government to:

- take the necessary steps to bring the perpetrators to justice, including allowing the international community to assist with and independently oversee the investigation;
- ensure protection for any witnesses; and
- follow the case wherever it may lead, regardless of its political implications.

Tragically, Ms. Cáceres' murder was not altogether unanticipated. It is the unnecessary culmination of numerous death, rape, and kidnapping threats directed at her, her family, and her colleagues. We note that these threats were never effectively investigated or prosecuted in spite of their grave and constant nature. A recent report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights noted that in addition to receiving various threats, Ms. Cáceres had also been detained by authorities on trumped-up charges related to gun possession and "inciting violence" in an attempt to impede her activities.

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As her death makes painfully clear, the protection given to her was insufficient. Although Ms. Cáceres was granted precautionary measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2009, the Honduran government failed to implement them effectively. In fact, the day of Ms. Cáceres' murder, Secretary of Public Security Julián Pacheco made several disturbing comments regarding her security situation, stating that "Initially, we assigned police to protect her, but she asked us to withdraw this service because it bothered her…" and that "the residence where she lost her life had not been reported to the authorities." The insinuation that Ms. Cáceres bears responsibility for her own death, however indirectly, demonstrates a troubling callousness on the part of a government that did not seek a meaningful and effective solution to her security situation.

Ms. Cáceres' murder was not an isolated incident; the lack of security in which COPINH carries out its work, and the harassment it experiences at the hands of Government authorities, is experienced by countless other human rights defenders, labor unionists, environmental activists, and political actors in Honduras. In fact, one of Ms. Cáceres' colleagues, Tomás García, was killed in 2013 during a peaceful protest; no one has been brought to justice for his murder.

We ask you to communicate to the government of Honduras that any effective response to Berta's murder will not only investigate and bring to justice the material and intellectual authors of the crime, but also address the systematic lack of protection for human rights defenders in Honduras. This would include:

- developing mechanisms that effectively protect human rights defenders and are based on direct consultation with individuals at risk; and
- prioritizing investigations of threats against human rights defenders.

Finally, as you know, 50 percent of U.S. assistance to Honduras is subject to a number of conditions related to human rights, overcoming corruption, and rule of law. The investigation of this case will provide a test of the Honduran government's commitment to good governance. We will be monitoring this case closely and carefully considering its possible implications for the future of U.S. assistance to Honduras.

Sincerely,

SAM FARR
Member of Congress

JAMES P. MCGOVERN
Member of Congress

JAN SCHAKOWSKY
Member of Congress

NORMA J. TORRES
Member of Congress

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