

# ENCA



Environmental Network *for* Central America

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## Land Disputes

Fighting for land rights in Costa Rica

## Berta Cáceres

Review of new book by Nina Lakhani

## COVID-19

A round-up of the latest impacts of coronavirus



# FEMICIDE

## CENTRAL AMERICA'S OTHER PANDEMIC



ENCA aims to work directly with people in communities who are seeking to arrest environmental degradation and who are often struggling against the repression and violence of armies and police forces acting under the command of wealthy individuals, transnational corporations and corrupt politicians. We campaign with them to place environmental rights within national constitutions and to ensure that the exploitation of natural resources benefits the many and not just the few and is carried out within sustainable and renewable bounds.

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# COVID UPDATES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

*Compiled by ENCA member Martin Mowforth*

## Regional

In September, Rights Action (a US and Canadian organisation that supports land, human rights and environmental defence struggles in Guatemala and Honduras) produced a newsletter headed 'Inequality is the pandemic'. They explained: "These are tough times ... caused by the 'normal pandemics' of poverty and exploitation, racism and discrimination, violence and dispossession, corruption and impunity, and the unequal nation-state system – all now worsened by Covid-19."

In early October, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL by its Spanish initials) produced a report predicting that El Salvador would suffer the greatest fall in GDP (gross domestic product) of all the Central American countries and that this would put back poverty levels by about 30 years. It also predicted that recovery from the pandemic would be slow.

In mid-October, El Economista reported that the Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres declared that the coronavirus pandemic "has intensified food insecurity to levels not seen in decades." In a global context he also warned that "Some 130 million people run the risk of falling into hunger by the end of this year."

In late October, La Prensa Gráfica (a Salvadoran newspaper) cited the CEPAL as warning that 8 out of every 10 people in the Central American region will live with lower income than pre-pandemic and that the recovery will require social and political pacts to be formed, not simply economic measures.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 184 countries of the world had joined the COVAX initiative promoted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and first promoted by the Costa Rican

government. The COVAX initiative will allow participating countries to vaccinate at least 20% of their population. The UK has joined the COVAX initiative, but the USA refuses to do so.

The following notes relating to separate countries within Central America should be taken within the regional context outlined above.

## Panamá

In September, Panamá suspended some of the restrictions on various activities as the number of infections declined. This led to bus operators opening up between 50% and 80% of services. Airports also opened on 28<sup>th</sup> September for national flights and on 12<sup>th</sup> October for international flights, this latter signalling an attempt to rebuild the tourism industry. International visitors have to present Covid-19 negative test results 48 hours before their arrival, although if they do not have such a certificate they can undergo a rapid test in the airport's health facilities.

Despite these measures, however, on 21<sup>st</sup> October it was reported that the reactivation of the Panamanian economy was being held back by low internal consumption and global uncertainty. >>



## Costa Rica

Costa Rica opened its airports to flights from Europe, Canada and the United States on 1<sup>st</sup> August, and as in Panamá, tourists have to present a negative Covid-19 test result within 48 hours before they make their journey. Private flights from the US were allowed on 1<sup>st</sup> September. In early October, however, the country passed the 90,000 mark of confirmed Covid-19 cases, with 1,124 deaths attributed to the virus, and on 21<sup>st</sup> October more than 1,500 new cases were recorded. A number of cantons were put on orange alert due to the rising number of virus cases. Despite the rise in new cases, the country was planning to open all its airports to visitors of all countries in the world. Furthermore on 26<sup>th</sup> October the need for foreign tourists to present a negative Covid-19 test result was scrapped.

## Nicaragua

Nicaragua's infections and deaths caused by Covid-19 are somewhat lower than those of the other Central American countries. Those in opposition to the Nicaraguan government believe that this is entirely due to deliberate under-reporting by the Sandinista government. Using a supposedly independent Citizen's Observatory, opposition representatives have cited infection and death statistics

between 10 and 20 times the official figure. The official figures, however, are accepted by the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) which is widely credited with the most reliable statistics on the spread of the virus. The Nicaraguan approach to Covid-19 has had more in common with the Swedish approach: advice has been strong and assertive, but a lockdown has not been imposed. It is also worth noting that, whilst being far from perfect, the Nicaraguan public health service is somewhat superior to the public health services of the other Central American nations all of which are ideologically and deliberately under-funded.

## El Salvador

Up to the beginning of September, 18% of Covid-19 deaths in El Salvador were health workers. On the 19<sup>th</sup> September Salvadoran airports were opened to international passenger flights and were opened to all types of flights in October. In mid-September epidemiologists and statisticians declared that the sudden fall in Covid-19 cases reported by the government amounted to an impossible claim and lacked all credibility. In mid-October, however, the country's Tourism Ministry reported that the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC) had granted El Salvador the condition of safe tourism destination.

## Honduras

Having opened its airports in mid-August, at the end of September El Economista journal claimed that Honduras would experience an historic fall in GDP and that around 70% of Hondurans would fall into poverty with an extreme poverty rate of around 50%. It also claimed that the economic fall was due to bad management of the pandemic on the part of the government. Another report suggested that informal economic activity would increase. Despite these problems it was reported that in the first six months of the year Honduras received record levels of foreign direct investment, and it is believed that the maquila and textile sectors received most of this.

## Guatemala

At the end of September, President Giammattei's government permitted the opening of restaurants, commercial centres, public transport and churches and allowed the opening of its frontiers including the main international airport. The new regulations, however, continued the 9 pm – 4 am curfew which has been in force since 22<sup>nd</sup> March. Cinemas, gymnasias, public parks, bars and amateur and professional sports venues were also allowed to open at the start of October, after six months of closure. The country has a colour system of alerts. 165 of the 340 municipalities are on the maximum level of alert (colour red); 101 others are on high alert (orange); and 74 are on moderate alert (yellow).

## Belize

Until 13<sup>th</sup> August there had been only two Covid-related deaths in Belize, but thereafter the rate of deaths began to rise rapidly. The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention recommends travellers to avoid all non-essential international travel to Belize and has assigned it a high risk category. Belize seems to be suffering the second wave of the virus without having gone through the same first wave experienced by other countries in the region.

**Central American Covid-19 numbers and rates**

Country	Total cases	Total cases per 1 mill pop <sup>n</sup>	Total deaths	Total deaths per 1 mill pop <sup>n</sup>
Belize	4,230	10,570	71	177
Costa Rica	118,566	23,199	1,502	294
El Salvador	35,145	5,409	1,020	157
Guatemala	112,129	6,218	3,832	212
Honduras	100,573	10,097	2,765	278
Nicaragua	5,591	840	157	24
Panamá	140,331	32,342	2,808	647
United Kingdom	1,233,775	18,140	49,770	732

Source: [worldometers.info/coronavirus/](https://worldometers.info/coronavirus/) as at 10th November 2020. UK data added for comparative purposes, although given the appalling mismanagement of the virus in the UK by the government and its underhand efforts to privatise the health service on the back of the pandemic, perhaps it does not offer an ideal comparison.

*All sources can be cited and provided if required on contacting ENCA.*



# Is the Panama Canal Drying Up?

*In the last year a number of articles have appeared in the international press expressing concern about the recently expanded Panama Canal. ENCA member **Lucy Goodman** translated and summarised them in the following article. We are grateful to Lucy for her time and effort on behalf of the ENCA Newsletter.*

The Panama Canal is one of the great engineering achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This watery bridge between the world's two largest oceans facilitates around 6 per cent of world trade and permits the passage of more than 12,000 ships a year.

First opened in 1914, the Canal recently re-opened in 2016 after a US\$5.5 billion expansion to accommodate modern cargo ships that outgrew the original infrastructure. The massive excavation project doubled the Canal's carrying capacity by creating a second, larger traffic lane and constructing the 'NeoPanamax' locks at both Atlantic and Pacific ends, 70 feet wider and 18 feet deeper than their predecessors.

The government agency charged with managing, operating, and maintaining the infrastructure (Panama Canal Authority or ACP), called the expansion a "marvel and a game changer." Recently, however, the Canal has experienced severe water shortages which have jeopardised its functionality.

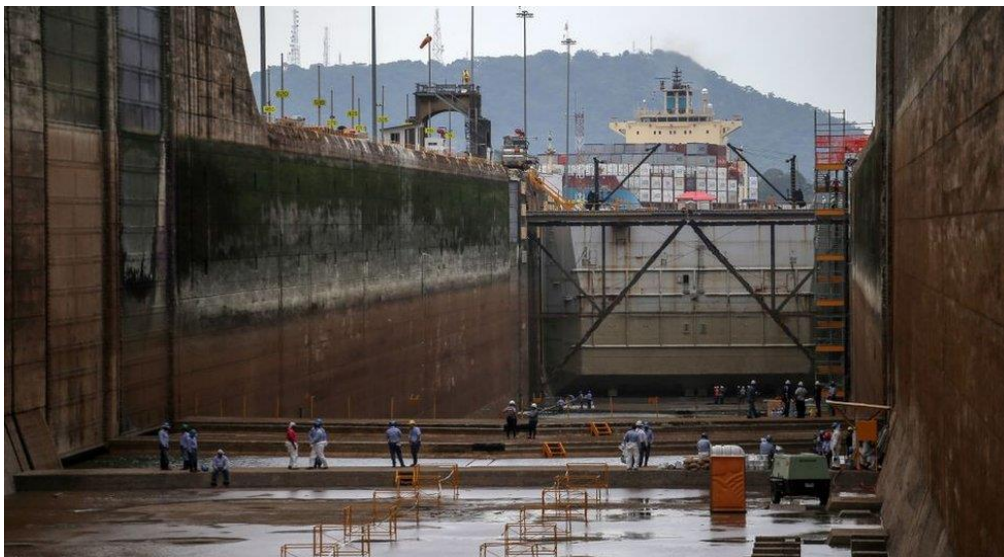
The question is: how can a canal connected to two oceans be without water?

The answer is in the extraordinary expenditure of freshwater during the passage of each ship through the locks. The locks rely on an injection of water from artificial lakes. The main reservoir, El Gatún, covers more than 430 km<sup>2</sup> and

provides precious drinking water to the densely populated surrounding area. Before the expansion, an average of 50 million gallons of water was spent (75 Olympic swimming pools) on each passing ship, at a rate of 35 ships a day. Despite the installation of the NeoPanamax locks and their water saving tanks, around 20 million gallons of freshwater is still used on every passing ship. The ACP pay close attention to lake levels and has been on high alert since El Gatún was "well below average" in 2019.

The historically low levels of late have largely been attributed to the global climate crisis. Panamanian hydrologist Cárdenas Castillero said 2019 was





among the driest years Panama has seen, with a strong El Niño, and an increase in temperatures and rainfall variability. The Canal's watershed recorded a 20 per cent rainfall reduction compared to historic averages, equating to the fifth driest year in seven decades. According to the ACP, the temperature in the watershed rose by 0.5 to 1.5°C which caused a 10 per cent increase in evaporation potential from Lakes Gatún and Alhajuela (another reservoir constructed in 1953 to supply the locks).

Carlos A. Vargas, Vice President of the ACP, stated "we've had an extraordinarily dry year and have implemented various methods to safeguard the water resource."

In February 2020 the ACP reduced the daily quota of ships traversing the Canal and limited their draught, to reduce water consumption and ensure successful passage. A fixed tariff charge of up to US\$10,000 was introduced to shipping companies for the freshwater they consumed en route across Panama. Another variable charge was introduced which considers the lake levels on the day of the ship's crossing; the lower the level the higher the fee. As the rain deficits progressed, hydroelectric generation, via the Gatún dam, and hydraulic aid, which assists ships into the lock chambers, were both eliminated.

Panamanian meteorologists could not agree whether the drought would get

better or worse at the start of this year's rainy season, but by the beginning of May 2020 the ACP confirmed that water saving initiatives were having an effect and lake levels could permit larger draught vessels than had been tentatively planned for. The Canal authority states that the water consumption fees will remain in place until the ACP's fiscal gains recover.

In early September 2020, the Canal Authority officially opened the multi-million-dollar tender to redesign the Canal's water management system. The publication of the specification is a big step forward in securing the Canal's water supply for the next 50 years amidst increasing climate variability and future uncertainty. Applicants are expected to submit a portfolio of projects to strengthen and optimize water management. Proposals and valuations should be presented in the final trimester of 2021 and the Canal Authority hope to identify the winning candidate by the end of next year.

Finally, in late September 2020, the result of recent rainfall and successful water management measures allowed vessels with a maximum draught of 50-foot to pass through the Canal, for the first time in 20 months.

Lack of rainfall in 2019 meant the maximum draught had been only 46-feet, until June this year when the Canal's capacity progressively

augmented. Each additional foot of water depth affords around 330 extra containers carried per ship. This favourably impacts the economy of scale and offers an all-round more profitable route.

At the end of the 2019 financial year, a record 450 million tons of cargo had passed between the two oceans and annual revenue reached US\$3,365 million, the highest since 1914. The ACP now faces the substantial challenge of keeping the Canal operational whilst preventing contagion of COVID-19. Data from the last two months indicate that the number of ships crossing the Canal has only decreased by from 35 to 34 ships per day, and that the queue of ships waiting to transit remains at pre-coronavirus levels.

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# Land disputes in southern Costa Rica

*In ENCA Newsletter No 79 we included an article on the Jehry Rivera murder trial which placed the murder in the context of land disputes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Costa Ricans. Jiri Spendlingwimmer, who wrote the ENCA 79 article, has sent us an update on the trial and on the tense situation in China Kichá, one of the Indigenous territories experiencing the conflicts. Again, Jiri's account was translated by ENCA member Liz Richmond who added more details about the situation.*

## The case against the Indigenous people of China Kichá

**Jiri writes:** An eviction is pending against the Indigenous people of China Kicha (20 minutes from Cooperative Longo Mai). For the moment it is suspended due to the pressure of solidarity groups organised throughout Costa Rica – see below.

### Update on a visit to China Kichá by Jiri Spendlingwimmer (27 Sep 2020)

This week a small delegation from the Movimiento Ríos Vivos (Living Rivers Movement) went to visit and show solidarity with the Indigenous land defenders at the Kono Ju farm, in China Kichá. For me it was my first visit to the territory.

We were surprised at how the police control access to the area; there is a permanent police post around 1 km before the farm; and the police check each vehicle and person who enters, recording every car registration and personal identity numbers. They determine who enters, and possibly investigate them.

The land defenders are very brave; they are resisting this very difficult fight whilst under constant threat. In summer their crops were burnt, along with their water supply hoses. In total there are 38 people, including families with children. They have some necessities such as first aid kits, torches, batteries and face masks.

An eviction date was scheduled for the Konu Ju families for 29 September 2020, however due to the support and solidarity of individuals and groups nationally, there has been a temporary suspension of eviction, declared 25 September 2020. Albeit temporary it is important, as this legal action will allow for more time.

The government's reaction was reflected in a statement from the Vice Minister of the Presidency in Citizen Dialogue, Randall Otárola, in which he positioned himself for the temporary suspension of eviction. However, he did not propose a concrete alternative solution, or speak in favour of granting the Indigenous land defenders their legitimate territory.

On the contrary, Deputy José María Villalta of the Frente Amplio suggests, among other solutions, that the executive power could disobey the orders of the judge, as these are contrary to the International Treaties applicable in Costa Rica regarding the autonomy and rights of Indigenous peoples, which are above national legislation.

At the same time, the Public Ministry dismissed and recommended the closing of the case regarding the cause of homicide of Sergio Rojas, land defender assassinated in March 2019 in the Indigenous territory of Salitre. This sets a dangerous precedent, as it grants impunity for the murder of Sergio Rojas, and the same could therefore occur with the case of Jehry Rivera. This gives the green light to racism, violence and deaths towards Indigenous people in the process of recovering their territories, which has recently extended from the Southern regions of Costa Rica to the North, in the Indigenous territory of Maleku.

### The case of Sergio Rojas

*Sergio Rojas was assassinated in March 2019. Rojas was President of the Association for the Development of the Indigenous Territory of Salitre and coordinator of the National Front of Indigenous Peoples (FRENAP) in Costa Rica. He was a staunch defender of the Bribri of Salitre Indigenous people who have been fighting for years to regain their rights to over 12,000 hectares of land in southern Costa Rica pledged to them by a 1938 government agreement.*

**Jiri writes:** The biggest scandal is that the courts decided to close and file away the case of Sergio Rojas with no further action. They claim that they cannot determine which of the three suspects is responsible for his murder.



China Kichá residents

## Roland Spendlingwimmer receives prestigious award from Government of El Salvador: 'Order of the Liberator of Slaves of José Simeon Cañas'

*The community of Longo Mai in southern Costa Rica has been well-known to ENCA for over three decades, and previous newsletters have included various reports on developments in and around the community. One of the leaders of and founders of the community of mainly Salvadoran refugees from the 1980s war in their country was Roland Spendlingwimmer. We are pleased to report here on an award made to Roland by the Government of El Salvador.*

The Salvadoran Government recognizes Roland Spendlingwimmer, founding member of Cooperative Longo Mai in Costa Rica, for 40 years of exemplary support and leadership to the largest Salvadoran community in the country.

Longo Mai, Costa Rica was founded in 1979, by the European Cooperatives of Longo Mai, with the support of the United Nations and the then President of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Carazo, to assist refugees fleeing civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as poor landless campesinos, or farmers, from Costa Rica.

Longo Mai, situated in the mid-southern region of Costa Rica, comprises 2,200 acres, half of which is protected rainforest, The 'Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Longo Mai'. Today Longo Mai has around 700 residents, the majority are Costa Rican citizens, including many with indigenous Cabecar, Bribri, and other backgrounds. Longo Mai functions as a 'green lung', due to the surrounding vast monoculture pineapple plantations of Pinedo S.A., a subsidiary of Del Monte. The plantations are considered to be a social and ecological catastrophe due in particular to massive soil erosion, very intensive application of herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and fertilizers as well as deadly water contamination.

Other issues affecting the area include expansion of monocultivation without proper planning or control causing drastic changes in climate and ecology along with abandonment of family farming and very negative impacts for landscape, environment, health, social issues, human rights and self-reliance of the local population. (These have been highlighted in previous ENCA newsletters.)

Roland was awarded the prestigious 'Order of the Liberator of Slaves of José Simeon Cañas' in May 2019, which coincided with Longo Mai's 40th anniversary. The Order was established in 1966, and named after

José Simeon Cañas who advocated for the abolition of slavery in Central America, which became enacted in 1824. It is granted to Heads of State, Salvadoran citizens or others for outstanding humanitarian, social, scientific, educational or philanthropic work helping to uphold and safeguard humanity.



The Order recognises Roland's support over the last 40 years to around 500 Salvadoran war refugees who arrived from very poor and difficult conditions, promoting their self-sufficiency by distributing agricultural land to families, and helping to develop independent economic activities, building their own homes, as well as fostering educational and health needs. Longo Mai successfully combines agriculture with environmental protection and eco-tourism through various committees, including opposition to hydro-electric projects in their community and the surrounding areas, as featured in previous ENCA newsletters.

This gives important stability to the community, striving for an independent future. People achieve around 75% of their food security growing subsistence crops including corn, beans, rice, yucca (cassava), bananas, plátanos (plantains), meat, milk, eggs, fruit, etc. They also produce coffee and sugarcane as cash crops. For its development of a healthy eco-tourism based on cultural exchange, where visitors stay with families, Longo Mai won the 'To-do' award for responsible and sustainable tourism in 2004 from the German Study Group for Tourism and Development. Longo Mai offers Scholarships for community members' personal advancement through

schools, colleges and access to various adult courses and apprenticeships. Roland says that this shows families are thinking about their future, and take responsibility for their own development. Along with a high level of self-sufficiency this is also an important way to protect the community, considering current national and global economic difficulties.

Longo Mai also hosts Festival Madremonte (Mother Mountain) with Guadalupe Urbina, resident multi-disciplinary artist, and founder of 'Casa Madremonte'; a cultural centre including gardens with edible, medicinal and aromatic plants, combining Art, Agroecology and Spirituality. All activities support social change and food sovereignty, taking inspiration from the surrounding rainforest. The Festival and its local and foreign artists are supported by the Ministry of Culture. Longo Mai's women's group 'Las Amazonas' work in its organisation, and at this year's festival 15 families sold home-made products, food and drink, generating their own income. That is part of their livelihood – combined with agriculture and home-stay tourism - all part of the continuing development in Longo Mai.

Roland Spendlingwimmer is happy and fulfilled with what the people have achieved, and is convinced that the best type of support is giving the opportunity for self-sufficiency, self-determination and food sovereignty.

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# Ecologismo - Communities save the Río San Rafael

By Jiri Spendlingwimmer, Longo Maï, Costa Rica. Translated by ENCA member Liz Richmond with extra material added by Liz. 01/07/2020 Jiri Spendlingwimmer is an anthropologist and represents the Movimiento Ríos Vivos de Costa Rica.

The fight to save the San Rafael River from the building of a private hydroelectric project in the Southern Zone of Costa Rica between 2013 to 2015 was the longest battle of the fifteen proposed hydroelectric projects. On 18 June 2020, the National Technical Environmental Secretariat (SETENA - Secretaria Técnica Nacional Ambiental) notified the company H. Solís of the expiration of the environmental license and the archiving of the administrative file.

Thanks to the community organisations, which formed The Rescue Commission for River San Rafael, (Comisión Pro Rescate del Río San Rafael) supported by various environmental, social, political, regional and national groups, the San Rafael hydroelectric project failed to obtain the necessary permits to construct the plant.

After over seven years of collective action, the River San Rafael is now preserved for human life and the

ecosystems of the basin, saving it from the plundering of business interests.

Environmental impacts that would have occurred due to the project include food insecurity (through crop damage), soil erosion, deforestation and loss of vegetation cover, large-scale disturbance of hydrological and geological systems, loss of landscape/aesthetic degradation, surface water pollution, decrease in water supply and water quality, groundwater pollution and/or depletion, and reduced ecological / hydrological connectivity. Other risks included a loss of water availability downstream due to changes in flow affecting local livestock use and recreation, which would also have affected endangered species that inhabit the area, such as otters.

Below we provide a list of organisations that have opposed the Río San Rafael Hydroelectric Project:

- Movimiento Ríos Vivos (<https://www.facebook.com/riosviv osmovimiento>)
- Kioscos Socioambientales para la Organización Comunitaria (<http://kioscosambientales.ucr.ac.c r/>)
- Comisión Pro Rescate del Río San Rafael,
- Federación Conservacionista de Costa Rica (Fecon) (<http://feconcr.org>)
- Asociación de Turismo Rural del Cerro Ena (Aturena),
- Escuela de la Tierra (<http://escueladelatierra.org>)
- Unión de Amigos por la Protección del Ambiente (UNAPROA)
- Comisión Defensora de los Ríos Convento y Sonador

*Ed. It's nice to be able to report on a positive result of such struggles for a change.*

## Storm ETA devastates Central America

As this issue of the ENCA newsletter went to press Storm ETA was making landfall in central America. Reports of destruction and loss of life were still emerging as we write, but it is clear that devastation caused by ETA is going to be long lasting and significant.

In Guatemala an estimated 150 people are dead and missing. Mudslides have taken the lives of at least 13 people in Honduras, including two boys ages 8 and 11. In Nicaragua 30,000 people have been evacuated from their homes.

ETA brought winds of up to 150mph to the region, along with between 15-25 inches of rain. While the slow-moving storm has edged away from the region the effects and risks will last for many months with relief efforts hampered by the tail end of the storm and the danger of further landslides will be ever present.

Most concerning perhaps is that this is the 28<sup>th</sup> Atlantic Storm, and 12<sup>th</sup> hurricane, to hit the region. More than double the yearly average. As climate change accelerates, those in Central America will surely take the brunt first.





# Planes, trains and transport issues

By ENCA member Martin Mowforth

## Is rail making a comeback in Central America?

In ENCA Newsletter No 78 we reported on transport initiatives in Costa Rica which included the reactivation of rail transport. In this edition of the newsletter we briefly report on four other rail initiatives, one in Panamá, one in Nicaragua, one in El Salvador and one in Honduras.

**In Panamá** at the beginning of this year a new line was planned for Panamá's modern metro system to pass by tunnel under the Panamá Canal instead of by a bridge next to the Bridge of the Americas which was originally foreseen for this link.

In February the HPH Joint Venture Consortium of Hyundai Engineering & Construction and Posco E&C were awarded a \$US 2.057bn contract for the design, construction and financing of Metro Line 3.

The line is to run between the west of Panamá City and the heart of the city which is east of the canal zone. The tunnel will be divided into two segments for the

sake of evacuation in the event of emergencies.

**In Nicaragua** the Central American Bank of Economic Integration (BCIE by its Spanish initials) is considering part-financing the construction of a rail project linking the country's main airport on the outskirts of Managua, Managua itself, Masaya and Granada. One branch would allow travellers to journey from the airport to the city of Granada without having to pass through Managua.

In discussing the project, the BCIE President Dante Mossi drew attention to the fact that Nicaragua has the best project execution in Central America, highlighting that "the Ministry of Finance has a good planning system, allowing us to make an orderly allocation of all the resources. ... We have not had corruption problems in Nicaragua. ... It is a country that makes the most correct use of BCIE funds."

**In El Salvador** the Office of the Presidential Commission for Strategic Projects and the Autonomous Port Executive Commission (CEPA by its Spanish initials) are currently designing

the terms of reference for the bidding for the conduct of pre-feasibility studies and feasibility studies for the construction of a rail line to be known as the Pacific Train.

The aim of this plan is to create efficient rail operations in El Salvador, allowing for both passenger and freight transport.

**In Honduras** the BCIE is to provide financial support for a feasibility study into the implementation of a freight train project to connect the Isla de Amapala in the department of Valle (in the south of the country) with Puerto Castilla and Puerto Cortés on the Atlantica coast.

## An airport in eastern El Salvador?

At the beginning of 2020, El Salvador's Autonomous Port Executive Commission (CEPA by its Spanish initials) sought firms to conduct a feasibility study into the construction of an airport in the east of the country close to the port of La Unión, to be known as the Pacific Airport. Eleven firms were given 300 days to produce their studies and the results of these should be presented in November this year. The decision on which study to accept will be made public in September 2021.

The aim of the plan is to provide air transport connection to the east of the country and for this development to become a pole of economic development for this region of the country.

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# El Salvador and Guatemala: a pandemic of femicides

*In Central America it is rare for development strategies to be effective without the involvement of women. They are generally responsible for the rearing of children and for the earning of a family income. In societies characterised by machismo the crucial importance and position of women can be seen as a threat to male dominance. Femicide is not simply the murder of females but rather the killing of females by males because they are female. It is a form of terrorism that functions to define gender lines, enact and bolster male dominance, and to render women chronically and profoundly unsafe.*

## El Salvador

In the first eleven days of August, ten femicides were reported in El Salvador. El Salvador has the highest rate of femicide in Latin America.

Silvia Juárez, a representative of the Organisation of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA), warned others to be alert to the dangers of violence against them: "In May we had ten cases of violent deaths throughout the whole month, but in these first days of August we already have the same number. It's extremely dangerous as some of these women were assassinated in their houses."

ORMUSA gave a total of 65 women assassinated from the beginning of the year to the 5<sup>th</sup> August, although the Salvadoran Attorney General said that 47 of these were femicides. The Attorney General lamented the deaths and urged the authorities to take a more active role in increasing the personal security of women and to eradicate the acts of hatred that cause this aggression against women.

## Guatemala

On Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October Guatemala's women's organisations held a protest in several cities of the country, to reject violence against women, which has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dozens of women gathered outside the municipal building in the city of Quetzaltenango, head of the department of the same name, to pay tribute and demand justice for the women who have been raped, murdered, and disappeared in the last 20 years.

"We speak for the 4 women who disappear every day. We speak for all the 77,847 girls and adolescents between the

ages of 10 and 19 who are already mothers," the organisers stated.

"We speak for all the 12,188 women murdered in the last 20 years in the country. We speak for all the 55 women who call every day to denounce their aggressor. We speak for all the lives stolen, silenced, and extinguished of every girl, teenager, and woman in Guatemala," the organisers explained.

Similar mobilizations took place in the capital, Guatemala City, Escuintla, Cobán, Teculután, among others, where there were songs, marches, and candles in memory of the murdered women.

More than 200 women were killed in the first eight months of this year in Guatemala and more than 3,000 women and girls have been killed since 2015, according to human rights groups tracking government statistics. The overwhelming majority of these cases remain unresolved.

The protests were sparked by the murder of social work student Litzy Amelia Córdón, 20, whose body was found in the municipality of Teculután where primary

schoolteacher Laura Daniela Hernández had been murdered the week before.

The women also demanded the State's commitment to guarantee women's security and freedom, and "to strengthen the processes of reparative justice for girls and women victims of violence and femicide. The State must take more action. Women are getting killed in this patriarchal and misogynist system," they said.

### Sources:

United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, or CEPAL by its Spanish initials): [oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/femicide-or-feminicide](https://oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/femicide-or-feminicide)

Andrea Rivas and Javier Urbina, 13 August 2020, 'Reportan 10 asesinatos de mujeres durante agosto', *La Prensa Gráfica*, San Salvador.

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## Hondurans Reject Handing Over Land to Private Capital

*As all readers of ENCA Newsletters will be aware, Honduran farmworkers and campesinos suffer enough difficulties without having their land taken from them. Telesur recently reported on yet another regressive force in Honduran society – agrarian reform for the benefit of international capital and the wealthy.*

Representatives from several Honduran Campesino organisations announced that they would carry out protest actions against the approval of decree PCM 030-2020. This norm, called the 'Banana Law' by rural activists, would give land plots to national and international private capital.

Farmworkers claim that the measure could take away the livelihood of some 450,000 rural families. According to the campesinos, this decree is a retreat from the agrarian conquests obtained in recent years. It motivates the transfer of land (which is cultivated by small farmers) to the hands of the highest bidder.

As part of the initiative's actions, the Campesino movement presented an appeal of unconstitutionality against decree PCM 030-2020 before the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ).

The leader of the National Rural Workers Union (CNTC), Franklin Almendares, said that the appeal is the first action to defeat the initiative, which has been the unified demand of several peasant organisations since the beginning. "This appeal goes against the life of small farmers, is a step backward from the agrarian reform, and would increase criminalization in the countryside," stated Almendares.

The CNTC warned that there are already agreements to hand over land to business people in the Colón department under this decree's protection. The situation is causing alarm among the peasantry and leading them to continue planning protest actions. For this reason, they do not rule out that in the coming days, the protest actions may be through roadblocks, sit-ins, and public

denunciations to put on the table the total repeal of what they call the Banana Law.

"We will carry out permanent actions at the national level, takeovers, sit-ins, and protests. We know that they are going to criminalize us, but we assure you that we will continue to fight," Almendares concluded.

## Killings of Guatemalan Defenders Increase Sharply

*ENCA Newsletters have used reports and data from the Guatemala Human Rights Commission (GHRC) on numerous occasions in the past; and we are grateful again for their permission to reproduce their summary of killings and attacks on Guatemalan defenders of land, environment and human rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. The original report is available at: [www.ghrc-usa.org](http://www.ghrc-usa.org) and is summarised in their communication below.*

Restrictions put in place to contain COVID-19 over the past several months, including constraints to free movement and assembly, did nothing to stop attacks on human rights defenders. In fact, such attacks increased as government and private actors appear to have taken advantage of the relative isolation of defenders and their restricted access to human rights monitoring bodies and the courts.

At least eight land and territory defenders were killed between June and August. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in September issued a statement of concern about the escalation in killings, urging the Guatemalan government to protect defenders and investigate these murders thoroughly, considering as the motive the victims' work in the defence of land and territory.

On June 6, indigenous Q'eqchi leader Domingo Choc Che was burned alive in San Luis, Petén, after being accused of witchcraft. Two days later, Alberto Cucul Cho, an environmental defender in Alta

Verapaz, was murdered as he travelled to the Laguna Lachuá National Park where he worked as a park ranger. On June 15, Medardo Alonzo Lucero, a defender of indigenous rights and territory and a member of the Ch'orti' community La Cumbre, in Olopa, Chiquimula, was murdered. On June 23, Fidel López, a member of the Campesino Development Committee (CODECA), was killed in Morales, Izabal.

On July 20 Abel Raymundo, a land and territory defender in Lelá Chancó de Jocotán, Chiquimula, was murdered. On August 10, French citizen Benoît Maria, who had dedicated many years to the defense of Guatemala's indigenous peoples, was murdered. On August 11, Misael López Catalán, a community leader and CODECA member in Jalapa, was murdered, making him the eighteenth CODECA member killed in the last two years. Five days later, Maya Q'eqchi indigenous leader Carlos Mucú Pop was assassinated in the community of Santa Rosa, Sayaxché, Petén. In addition, community leader and pastor Carlos Enrique Coy has been missing since August 3rd. To date this year, fourteen human rights defenders have been murdered, at least one woman defender among them.

Extractive industries affect indigenous women especially. Violence in the area of large-scale development projects increases, including sexual violence. Poverty often increases as well. For example, in the area surrounding the Guatemalan Nickel Company's Fenix mine – one of the largest in Central America – which is illegally operating in Izabal, poverty has risen, not diminished. "People who work for these companies believe the tale of development," Isabel points out in the interview. "It doesn't exist. It's just a form of entering to rob."

"We have to rise up and defend ourselves and denounce any group, including banks, that finance these corrupt groups. We have asked the World Bank not to continue financing extractive industries. They are killing indigenous peoples. A way to recover our power as peoples," as Isabel explains, "is to defend what we have and recover what has been taken."

# Who Killed Berta Cáceres? – Book review

Berta Cáceres was murdered on the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2016. A formidable activist, and winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize, her death sent shockwaves around the world, and brought to light the dangers faced by environmentalists, indigenous people, and campaigners in Honduras and the wider region. While it is widely recognized that Berta was assassinated because of her work in opposing the Agua Zarca dam, and indeed there have been numerous arrests of her killers, many questions remain over the events that led to her death, and the intellectual authors of her assassination.

Nina Lakhani sets out to answer these questions in her new book, *Who Killed Berta Cáceres? Dams, Death Squads and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet*. However, while Berta's story is the key driver to the text, those expecting a straightforward 'who done it' will be disappointed. Lakhani instead uses this book to demonstrate, and share, her understanding of the historical complexity of events leading up to the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> March. Showing that these are embedded not just within the fight against one dam, but that they can be traced back to the Cold War, NAFTA, and the wider neoliberal experiment.

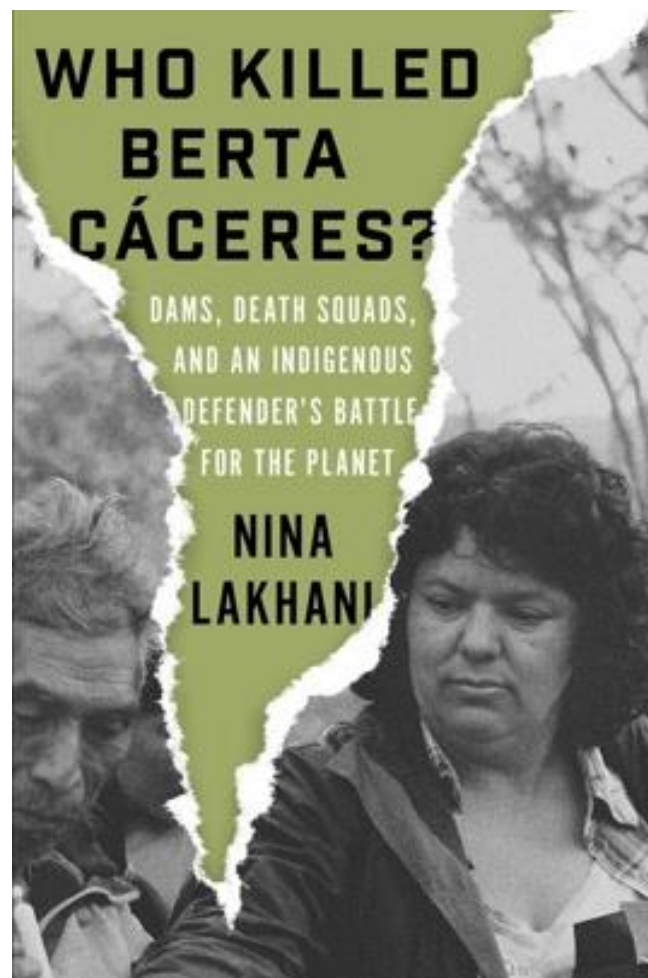
This is not to suggest though that the text is inaccessible, nor that it requires the reader to have their own deep knowledge of the region and its history. Instead Lakhani weaves the personal narratives of Berta and her closest friends and family alongside the long historical injustices, and the fallout of the 2009 coup that led us to this point. To this end the book is more akin to a political thriller than a murder mystery – one though that is all too real.

Lakhani knew Berta personally from her time reporting in the region, and they

have met many times. These personal connections are raw and apparent in the book, but they enhance rather than detract from the narrative. This connection, blended with the historical narrative, allows us to go beyond a biographical account, and moves the volume towards being a stark, foreboding portrait of Honduras, where the reader is left with a deep sense that too much was already in motion to make Berta's death anything other than inevitable.

This crushing realisation though is the book's strength. Through the eyes of Berta the horrors of neoliberalism, US interventionism, corruption, and corporate greed are brought to the fore. Lakhani has in many ways helped to continue Berta's work, and indeed bring it to an even wider audience through this account. This is important, as the book also offers the reader a counter to media narratives that surround not only the assassination, but also the push for growth at all costs.

Honduras remains one of the deadliest countries in the world, and regularly tops the list of the most dangerous places to be an environmental defender. Those of us who knew Berta or read of her work know that she understood this, but she also knew that the consequences of not acting were far graver. Shortly after Berta's death, I wrote an article for ENCA entitled 'A shining light', in which I noted how she has shone a powerful light on the needs of the Lenca people, and the environment as a whole, along with the



structural issues and violence that create them. Berta's light still shines, and Lakhani's volume is helping to keep it that way.

This book is not a biography, it is not a murder mystery, and it is not a history – it is rather all of these, but moreover it is a pushback against neoliberalism, it is a call to arms to support and defend human, and environmental rights defenders, and above all else, it is essential reading.

Doug Specht  
ENCA Chair

*'Who Killed Berta Cáceres' by Nina Lakhani is available from Verso Books*

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## Meeting Dates 2021

**February 21<sup>st</sup> | June 20<sup>th</sup> | October 24<sup>th</sup>**

ENCA meetings are usually held at the NSC's office at the Durham Road Centre, London, N7 7DT. Meetings are held on Sundays from 12:30 pm to 5 pm and we start with lunch which is made up of whatever people attending choose to bring to share.

*In light of COVID-19 meetings may have to be held online*