

Remarks of Senator Patrick Leahy On Remembering Berta Caceres

I want to convey my deepest sympathy and condolences to Berta Caceres' family, her friends, her organization COPINH, and her community who feel most directly the great sadness of losing her.

Berta was a champion of the rights of indigenous people and of the natural environment. She risked her life for those causes, braving the threats and the fear, knowing that any day could be her last. For her courage and commitment she was admired around the world, including in the Congress of the United States, and she will be forever remembered for it.

But we know that Berta's life was about much more than that. Berta represented a larger struggle for justice for all the people of Honduras, and her death can and should be a turning point in that struggle.

For decades I, like many others, have observed the human cost. Indigenous people, landless people, people demanding a healthy life for their children and relief from hunger, poverty, injustice, corruption, greed, and the destructive exploitation of the environment. Instead of respect and support, they have too often been threatened and killed with impunity.

For decades, government officials have contributed to the conditions that enabled this to occur. Neglect of people's basic needs. Denial of their basic rights. Abuses by the armed forces and police, and by private enterprises that subvert the rule of law, have been tolerated and even encouraged.

Some of the same people who ignored or disparaged activists like Berta and her organization, who treated them like criminals, have condemned her assassination – as they should. It is a tragic irony.

As we remember Berta we should ask how those condemnations can be turned into meaningful, positive action, and how Berta's sacrifice can be most appropriately honored, for today and for future generations. I can suggest three ways:

First, the investigation of this crime must be independent and comprehensive, including the participation of international experts. Those responsible for ordering and carrying it out must be brought to justice.

Second, the Rio Blanco and the territory that Berta devoted her life to defend, should be protected. The Agua Zarca dam project should be abandoned.

And third, all Hondurans, and most importantly its leaders, should publicly dedicate themselves to defending the legitimate role of activists like Berta, of civil society organizations like COPINH, of independent journalists, and others who peacefully exercise their rights to expose the truth and to demand a more just society. It is the responsibility of government to protect them, not to treat them as legitimate targets of intimidation and arrest.

Today is a day to remember Berta and the important causes she stood for. All Hondurans should be grateful for her sacrifice. Future generations will remember her for it. But her life will have the greatest meaning if those of us who pay tribute to her today carry on her legacy as she would have wanted.