

ENVIRONMENTALIST MURDERED IN HONDURAS



TEGUCIGALPA: A man holds up a cutout portrait of slain Honduran indigenous leader and environmentalist Berta Caceres outside the coroner's office on Thursday. — AP

TEGUCIGALPA: Honduran indigenous activist Berta Caceres, an award-winning environmentalist, was shot and killed in her home Thursday, her family said, labeling her death an assassination. Caceres won the 2015 Goldman Prize, considered the world's top award for grassroots environmental activism, for leading the indigenous Lenca people in a struggle against a hydroelectric dam project that would flood large areas of native lands and cut off water supplies to hundreds.

Caceres's mother, Berta Flores, said police had indicated her daughter was killed in a robbery, "but we all know it was because of her struggle." Caceres, a 43-year-old mother of four who had received death threats for her activism, was shot dead in the early hours of Thursday at her home in the western town of La Esperanza, Flores told TV network Globo.

In awarding her the prize, the Goldman organization commended her for carrying on her campaign despite the threats, writing: "Her murder would not surprise her colleagues, who keep a eulogy-but hope to never have to use it. Despite these risks, she maintains a public presence in order to continue her work."

President Juan Orlando Hernandez called the

killing "a crime against Honduras" and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice, while the secretary general of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, condemned the crime as "horrific". As Caceres' body lay in a hall at a union headquarters in the Honduran capital late Thursday, supporters outside shouted, "Berta is alive, the fight goes on." Some 3,000 students blocked a road elsewhere in Tegucigalpa before police dispersed them with teargas.

Honduras, which has seen an explosion of gang violence in recent years, has one of the highest murder rates in the world. Security Minister Julian Pacheco said police arrested two people, a security guard at the complex where Caceres lived and another suspect who was wounded, but he did not give further details on the investigation. He said police had measures in place to protect Caceres, who recently won a ruling by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granting her special security measures. Police formerly provided her an around-the-clock guard, but switched to an occasional security detail at the activist's own request, he added. — AFP

BRAZIL EX-PRESIDENT LULA HELD IN CORRUPTION PROBE

INVESTIGATION HAS ENSNARED POWERFUL PEOPLE

SAO PAULO: Police searched the home of Brazil's powerful ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and detained him for questioning yesterday in a probe into a huge corruption scheme. Agents searched his house in Sao Paulo, the offices of the Lula Institute, and houses of family members and associates, said Jose Chrispiniano, a spokesman for Lula and his institute.

Prosecutors said Lula was being targeted

seizure and 11 for detention for questioning," prosecutors said in a statement. The operations in Rio de Janeiro, Bahia and Sao Paulo states involved probes into "corruption and money laundering, among other crimes practiced by various people in the context of the Petrobras criminal scheme."

Lula, who was president from 2003-2010, remains one of Brazil's most influential figures and his fate is closely linked to that of

and a site in Atibaia (as well as) luxury furniture," prosecutors said in their statement. Lula denies ownership of the apartment and any involvement in the Petrobras scheme.

Prosecutors, however, said that beyond the immediate issue of the properties, they were examining Lula's wider role in the alleged Petrobras-related web of corruption enveloping the Workers' Party, the Lula Institute and also campaign finances. "Former president Lula, beyond being party leader, was ultimately responsible for who would be the directors at Petrobras and was one of the main beneficiaries of the crimes," the statement said.

Acknowledging the extraordinary nature of a once hugely popular president being detained, prosecutors said: "It is not a value judgment about who he is ... but an investigative judgment based on facts and certain acts which are under suspicion." "In a republic, even famous and powerful people must come under judicial scrutiny when there is a well-founded suspicion of criminal activity."

The news came a day after a bombshell claim by a Brazilian magazine that a former close ally of Lula and Rousseff - a senior Workers' Party senator who has already been charged in the Car Wash probe - was preparing to testify against them. Senator Delcicio do Amaral, who was arrested last November, was reportedly negotiating a plea bargain deal with prosecutors in which he would testify that Rousseff obstructed the Petrobras probe and that Lula had also been involved in the scheme.

The report, although unconfirmed, sparked a furious reaction from Rousseff's government and the president said in a speech that fighting corruption was her "first priority". Both Lula and Rousseff are also facing political heat after the arrest of their former campaign manager, Joao Santana, who allegedly took money originally embezzled from Petrobras. No allegations have been made officially against Rousseff in the Petrobras scandal. But she faces a growing number of other problems that could see her removed from office. — AFP



SAO PAULO: A supporter of former Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva who gathered with others outside his residence is restrained by militarized police officers in Sao Bernardo do Campo yesterday. Police searched the home of Lula (inset) and detained him for questioning yesterday. — AFP

as part of the Operation Car Wash probe into an embezzlement and bribery conspiracy centered on state oil company Petrobras. The corruption scandal, which has already seen a Who's Who of Brazilian politicians and businessmen face charges, is believed to be the biggest ever in Brazil.

Officials said that a major sweep including detentions and searches of properties had taken place in three states. "About 200 federal police and 30 auditors served 44 warrants, including 33 warrants for search and

his successor, President Dilma Rousseff, and the future of the ruling Workers' Party. Chrispiniano called the search, in which agents were backed by armed officers, "arbitrary, illegal and unjustified."

The allegations against Lula center on a luxury seaside apartment and country house that authorities say were given to the ex-president as bribes. "There is evidence that former President Lula received assets arising from the Petrobras scheme through the allocation and renovation of a triplex apartment



SANTO DOMINGO: Frenchman Christophe Naudin is escorted upon arriving in the Dominican Republic yesterday. — AFP

'AIR COCAINE' FRENCHMAN EXTRADITED

SANTO DOMINGO: Frenchman Christophe Naudin arrived early yesterday in the Dominican Republic after being extradited by Egypt over his alleged involvement in the escape of two pilots jailed in a drugs case dubbed "Air Cocaine". Naudin, a 53-year-old criminologist and aviation security expert who was arrested in Cairo on February 4, is wanted in the Caribbean nation on suspicion of helping pilots Pascal Fauret and Bruno Odos flee to France in October after they had been sentenced to 20 years in prison for drug trafficking.

The pair, who maintain their innocence, were arrested in March 2013 as they were about to depart from Punta Cana in a private jet found to be carrying 680 kg of cocaine. Convicted of drug trafficking in August, they were released pending appeal but barred from leaving the Caribbean nation. They somehow managed to flee and return to France - an escape that Dominican prosecutors allege Naudin facilitated. Prosecutor Francisco Dominguez said Naudin would be charged with conspiracy and the trafficking of migrants.

Naudin arrived in Santo Domingo shortly after midnight, said Tessa Sanchez, a spokeswoman for the attorney general's office. Naudin will make an initial court appearance within 48 hours of arrival, the prosecutor told journalists. Fauret and Odos fled back to France vowing to clear their names, but were rearrested in November near the French city of Lyon. On Feb 11, an appeals court in the Dominican Republic upheld the 20-year prison sentences for the two pilots. Paris has ruled out extraditing them. — AFP