

Grand Rapids police officer killed Congolese refugee Patrick Lyoya, 26

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On Saturday April 9, hundreds of Grand Rapids, Michigan residents participated in a march demanding local authorities release the video of the police shooting of 26-year-old Patrick Lyoya. A refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lyoya was killed by a Grand Rapids police officer in the morning of Monday, April 4.

The marchers paused once to stage a reenactment of how the family says Lyoya was killed. The reenactment showed a person on the ground with his hands behind his back and another person kneeling on top of him, holding his finger to the back of his head to represent the officer's gun. At the end of the march, participants held a vigil for Patrick Lyoya at the Grand Rapids Center for Community Transformation.

According to the police account, the Grand Rapids officer pulled over Lyoya, who was traveling with a passenger, at 8:10 a.m. that morning. Although the exact reason for the stop remains unclear, the police allege there was an issue related to the license plate on the vehicle Lyoya was driving.

Police maintain that Lyoya got out of his vehicle to speak with the officer and, when the officer told him that he was going to be arrested, the young man attempted to flee. According to Eric Winstrom, chief of the Grand Rapids Police Department (GRPD), the officer attempted to detain Lyoya and a struggle ensued which lasted between a minute and a half and two minutes. By the end of the struggle, the chief said, the officer had drawn his pistol and shot Lyoya in the back of the head, killing him.

However, according to Israel Siku, interpreter for the Lyoya family, who speaks Swahili, the Michigan State Police (MSP) gave a much different account. In a meeting with Siku and Peter Lyoya, the victim's father, the MSP showed them the video after the father

insisted.

In an interview with News 8, Siku said that, from the video, the officer pulled up as Lyoya was already out of his car, checking something. Siku further related that the argument did not start with the officer threatening to arrest him, but rather when the officer ordered Lyoya to get into his vehicle.

Siku explained how Peter Lyoya broke down when he saw the video. As a father himself, Siku said, he was unable to sleep that night. Siku went on to describe Patrick's killing as "an execution," saying that Patrick Lyoya was facedown on the ground when he was shot in the back of the head.

When reporters asked Chief Winstrom if this was an accurate description, he refused to answer the question. The name of the officer who killed Lyoya has not been released. The department has confirmed that the officer is white and has worked for GRPD since 2015. After the killing, the officer was placed on administrative leave and the Michigan State Police were called in to handle the investigation.

The Lyoya family came to the United States from the Congo as refugees, fleeing violence in their homeland. While his father, Peter Lyoya, lives in Lansing, Patrick was living in Grand Rapids with his girlfriend and their two daughters.

Police records indicate that Lyoya had been arrested three times in relation to stolen vehicles and pleaded guilty to misdemeanors in these cases. His father told News 8 about his son, saying, "He was a good kid, a smart kid. He was a hard worker." His father continued, "He was a sharing person. He helped his family. If he had money, he would share with them."

The police have so far refused to allow the Lyoya family to see Patrick's body. Kent County Commissioner Robert Womack accompanied Peter

Lyoya to the medical examiner's office to ask to see his son's body. In a post on Facebook, Womack stated that they refused to show the body "because of the investigation and the policies." In an apparent contradiction of these same claims, the medical examiner's office also told Peter Lyoya that they could release the body to a funeral home.

Peter Lyoya, speaking through an interpreter, told News 8, "When we try to do investigation to find out where Patrick is, they cannot allow me to go see my son's body." When Womack asked Chief Winstrom for the coroner's preliminary report, Winstrom gave the family the number of the Michigan State Police, to ask them for it.

The police have so far refused to release the officer's bodycam and dashcam footage, though Chief Winstrom has stated footage will be released by April 15. Peter Lyoya also maintains that the passenger in Patrick's car took a video on his cell phone, which the police seized. As quoted by MLive, Winstrom gave a typical police public relations comment, saying that he is "committed to providing information as transparently and quickly as the investigation allows."

In response to the shooting, the president of the Grand Rapids NAACP, Cle Jackson, demanded the immediate release of the video, saying on April 6, "The public deserves to have the footage released immediately."

On April 7, Christopher Becker of the Kent County Prosecutor's Office took responsibility for the refusal to release the video. Becker said, "To maintain the integrity of this investigation, I have requested that involved police agencies do not release any evidence until the investigation is complete." Although Becker did not explain how the investigation could be compromised by releasing the video to the public, he said, "As is the policy with any ongoing investigation, we do not release any material for public consumption."

While Commissioner Womack does not state it outright, he implied in an April 6 statement on his Facebook page that he may have seen the video. In his post, he says, "This was an execution. ... This man was murdered in a way I cannot accept." Further on in this statement, Womack said that "a few police and many politicians" have threatened his career because of his public comments.

City Manager Mark Washington also weighed in on the request for release of the video. "We want to respect the process, and we heard from the prosecutor today, and the police chief is going to be meeting with prosecutor Becker, talking about his preferences, requests, and making sure that we can both protect the integrity of the investigate process, but also do so in a way that continues to promote accountability and transparency to our community," he said.

The killing of Lyoya followed by several days another instance of police violence in Grand Rapids. Video of a GRPD traffic stop conducted on Friday, April 1 went viral when it showed a police chase of a man into a vacant lot, where he left his vehicle and went to his house. The police officers pulled their guns on the man and his wife when they came out of their house.

Peter Lyoya spoke about the broader issues which face immigrants and asylum seekers in the United States: "I want to say for those people who are seeking asylum here, refuge, I don't want you to think this is a safe place. I thought it was a safe place, but it seems like we are in danger even when we come here."



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