"Cop City is for the corporations that fund it"

Lawyers for family of environmentalist killed by Atlanta police say the victim was shot at least 12 times

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At a press conference on Monday, February 6, lawyers for the family of Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, a 26-year-old environmental activist shot and killed by Atlanta, Georgia police on January 18, said that preliminary results from an independent autopsy revealed that the activist, who went by the name Tortuguita/Tort (Little Turtle), had been shot at least "12-13 times" by "multiple police officers."

On the morning of January 18, Tortuguita was one of at least eight "forest defenders" camped in the South River forest, just outside Atlanta, Georgia, protesting the construction of a $90 million 85-acre police training facility commonly referred to as "Cop City." Police claim that during a police "clearing operation" of the forest, Tortuguita shot a Georgia state trooper once with a pistol, prompting police to return fire and kill Tortuguita.

Speaking on Monday, Brian Spears, a civil rights attorney for the family, said, "Manuel was shot over 12 times, by several different firearms from multiple officers."

The lawyer added that even before the preliminary autopsy, completed last Tuesday, showed that Tortuguita was "riddled with bullets," lawyers had requested audio, video and drone information concerning the shooting from "all of the agencies" involved in the police action.

Gerry Weber, senior counsel for the Southern Center for Human Rights, told the press conference that so far, the family's attorneys had yet to receive a response.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), which is overseeing the cover-up of Tortuguita's killing by police, confirmed in a January 18 public statement that the "task force" assembled the morning Tortuguita was shot included police agents from the Atlanta Police Department, the Georgia State Patrol, the Department of Natural Resources, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Georgia Emergency Management Agency and the DeKalb County Police Department.

Despite the presence of dozens of police officers from several agencies, two of which—the Atlanta and DeKalb County police departments—are required by Georgia state law to wear body cameras, police and the GBI claim that no body camera footage exists of the actual shooting, only its "aftermath."

Gerry Weber called into question police claims that no footage of the shooting existed. "Somehow, with officers wearing body cameras now more than ever, we have seen zero footage of the shooting death of Mr. Terán" he said.

In a statement released ahead of Monday's press conference, Jeff Filipovits, lead attorney for the family, said that the GBI had so far "selectively released information about Manny's death."

"They claim Manny failed to follow orders," the statement read. "What orders? The GBI has not talked about the fact that Manny faced a firing squad, when those shots were fired, or who fired them."

On Wednesday night, the first body camera footage from the Atlanta Police Department was released. While the footage does not show the incident itself, in a short clip, four gunshots are heard, followed by dozens more shots over roughly a 10-second period.

The volume of gunfire prompted one of the police to ask, "[I]s this target practice?"

In the last year, at least 14 "forest defenders" have been charged by the US government on trumped-up "domestic terrorism" charges for engaging in acts of civil disobedience against the construction of Cop City. This includes non-violent acts such as blocking construction vehicles or pitching

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hammocks in trees slated for clearing.

Speaking of the proposed police training center, Weber said Monday that the "militarized center" would be the "third largest police training center in the nation."

"Cop city is not a benign training center," Weber added. "They want to shut down any movement in this country against police violence."

Pointing to the refusal of the police to release any information regarding the circumstances that led to the shooting, Weber said, "We are seeing zero on transparency." Commenting on claims from politicians and police that "domestic terrorism" charges were warranted against the protesters because they were not from DeKalb County, and were therefore "outside agitators," Weber recounted that these were the same arguments used by Southern segregationists and Democratic politicians during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

"Law enforcement is claiming that anyone who came from out of state to the protests is more likely to be a domestic terrorist. That sure sounds like something you might have heard in 1965 on Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge," Weber remarked.

At Monday's press conference, Daniel Paez, Tort's brother and a US Navy veteran, accused the police of engaging in a cover-up. "We have been lied to. That is the truth," he said.

Rejecting claims that police feared for their life, Paez recounted that in 2022, police killed at least 1,176 people, mostly working class and poor, while only 64 cops were killed on the job.

"Meanwhile," Paez added, "the police are a danger to themselves." He noted that according to policechiefmagazine.org, in 2016 there were "239 police suicides."

Pointing to the class character of police violence and that fact that the proposed $90 million police training facility has the backing of major corporations such as Delta Air Lines, Equifax, Home Depot, United Parcel Service and Wells Fargo, Paez said, "Cop City is creating a police officer for its buyers, the corporations."

"Do you think homeless people want militarized cops?" Paez asked rhetorically. "Cop city ... is for the corporations that fund it."

The parents of Tortuguita spoke lovingly of their child. Belkis Terán said her son was born on April 23, 1996 in Venezuela and graduated from Florida State University with a degree in sociology.

"Manuel was a defender of the forest," she said. "Manuel had a heart full of love for people, animals and the tress. Manuel has a great interest in helping the disenfranchised, the voiceless, those unable to defend themselves."

"It does not make sense killing someone who was sleeping in the forest," Belkis said. "We are living a horror."

Tort's father, Joel Paez, said, "We are heartbroken," and that while he was praying for "the full recovery of the officer who was shot that morning," he was also praying for "all the individuals who were unjustly accused of domestic terrorism, who, like my child, want to preserve and protect a piece of forest…"

He added, "Manuel was profoundly worried for all of humanity." He said his son "sadly ... was a fierce environmentalist, who gave his life for his ideas in the United States of America."

At the same time the press conference was being held, the police agencies that engaged in the January 18 "clearing operation" that ended with Tortuguita's death conducted another massive police operation in the Atlanta-area forest. The *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* reported that "SWAT teams from the Atlanta and DeKalb County police departments, as well as Georgia State Patrol troopers and representatives from other agencies, were seen at the site in southwest DeKalb County."

Local East Atlanta resident Margaret Mason Tate told the newspaper, "I don't know a neighbor of mine who is excited about this project. And I know I am not."

She added, "I want to invest my tax dollars into the city of Atlanta and not Cop City. There is absolutely no way I can adequately express how distressing it is to feel like I live in a war zone..."

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