

New autopsy reveals 26-year old environmental activist was sitting cross-legged with hands raised when killed by Georgia state troopers

Kranti Kumara

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According to a second autopsy performed on the body of the 26-year-old environmental activist who was shot dead in a hail of bullets unleashed by a large contingent of Georgia state troopers and police in January, Manuel Esteban Paez “Tortuguita” Terán was sitting cross-legged with hands raised while being killed.

Terán was killed a little after 9 a.m. on January 18 while encamped in the South River Forest, just outside the southeast city limits of Atlanta, Georgia. Terán, along with other environmental activists, was camped out in the forest to protest against the massive militarized police training center the Atlanta city government wants to build to train its police in urban warfare. This forested area has been recognized by the city as crucial to the environmental well-being of the region, and its destruction will have a long-term negative impact upon Atlanta’s air quality.

The police training facility, dubbed “Cop City” by activists opposed to this 85-acre project, has attracted international attention because of the brutal violence unleashed by both the Georgia state and Atlanta city governments against activists who have mounted a continuous series of protests since it was first approved by the city in September 2021.

Terán was hit by around 13 bullets from both shotguns and handguns used by a heavily armed contingent of Atlanta police and Georgia state troopers during a “clearing operation” involving “multiple-agencies,” according to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), to forcibly evict the group of peaceful protesters encamped in the forest.

The new second autopsy confirms that the activist was indeed killed brutally, with the fatal bullet entering Terán’s brain through the right eye. It was performed by retired GBI medical examiner and forensic pathologist Kris Sperry at the request of the Belkis Terán and Joel Terán, Manuel’s mother and father.

The first official autopsy was performed by the De Kalb County Medical Examiner, and contains far more comprehensive evidence about how Terán was killed, including bullet fragments and other such details. The GBI has adamantly refused to release this information from the autopsy, while peddling the claim that Terán, an avowed pacifist, was shot dead because he first shot at the state troopers.

The attorneys representing the family in their battle with city and state authorities to obtain information about their child’s killing—which is being adamantly denied to them despite the government’s obligation to release such information to the family—held a press conference Monday morning March 13 about the second autopsy’s results and conclusions. The attorneys on behalf of the family have filed a lawsuit this week under the Georgia Open Records Act against the Atlanta City government.

Jeff Filipovits, one of two attorneys of the law firm Spears and Filipovits representing the Terán family, explained the context within which Terán was killed. He said that the police had mounted an unprecedented crackdown upon peaceful protesters on January 18.

The “police went into the forest that morning planning for violence which you can see in the city of Atlanta videos” said Filipovits. He further noted that

no one had until then attacked any police officer during the months-long protests.

He asked why 22 of the 23 protesters arrested in a subsequent raid on March 5 are languishing in jail on trumped-up “domestic terrorism” charges despite the fact that the police have not alleged any wrongdoing by any of these individuals. He said that local, city, county, state and even the federal government are in lockstep to use the massive power at their disposal to squash any and all opposition to the militarized police training center.

The family and the attorneys have repeatedly demanded that the GBI release all of the details of its investigation. While selectively releasing tidbits of information which fit with its narrative that Terán shot at the trooper first, the GBI is actively blocking the release of any information by any city or state agency.

For example, the GBI released a photo of what looks like a heavily scratched and somewhat rusted 9 mm Smith and Wesson handgun on the earth in the midst of pine needles and cigarette butts. According to the GBI, the gun was bought by Terán in September 2020 and used to shoot at the trooper. However, they have provided no forensic evidence of the wounds sustained by the injured trooper, nor the serial number of the purchased gun and the one in the photo they released.

The Atlanta Police Department and the city initially released videos to the family regarding this killing. When body camera footage released by the Atlanta police showed that a trooper who sustained a gunshot wound was more than likely shot by a fellow cop, the GBI actively stepped in and put a halt to the any further release of information by any agency of the City of Atlanta.

Activists have called for an independent investigation, noting that the GBI is an active participant in Terán’s death.

The observations and conclusions from the second autopsy strongly buttress the insistent claim by Terán’s mother and many other activists that he was “assassinated in cold blood.”

The autopsy report states that “At the time he was shot, the missile entrance and locations, and the missile trajectories through the body, indicate that the decedent was most probably in a seated position, cross-legged, with the left leg partially over the right leg.”

It further stated that, “Several of the individual bullet

wounds passed into his body, travelling downwards, and from front to back; *these trajectories are also consistent with the decedent being in a sitting position, on the ground*, with the incoming fire having originated from armed individuals who were standing towards the front of the decedent, and relatively close to the decedent.” [Emphasis added]

There is hardly any doubt that the GBI is trying to whitewash the killing of Terán, who was the victim of the violent tactics the police have used in their effort to squash the opposition to Cop City. The state’s reactionary Republican governor Brian Kemp has termed these activists “terrorists,” and he mobilized at least 1000 heavily armed National Guard troops when protests erupted following Manuel Terán’s killing.

So determined are both the state, led by the authoritarian Republican governor Brian Kemp, and the city of Atlanta, led by Democratic mayor Andre Dickens, to proceed with Cop City that Unicorn Riot reported that “Community organizations involved in the ongoing campaign to defend the South River Forest outside Atlanta, Georgia and ‘Stop Cop City’ say state prosecutors are planning on releasing indictments in the coming weeks charging them as a ‘criminal organization’ under RICO statutes.”



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