



Lemkin Institute Statement on the Police Assassination of Manuel Esteban Paez Terá (“Tortuguita”)

Released 23 January 2023

The Lemkin Institute protests the apparent assassination of environmental activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terá, a 26-year old protester in the state of Georgia who went by the name “Tortuguita,” or “Little Turtle.” Terá was shot by US police on January 18 as the police launched a raid on a protest encampment set up to protect the public South River Forest from a \$90 million taxpayer-funded police training facility that opponents call “Cop City.” Officers representing at least five different agencies were involved in the raid, including the Atlanta police, the Dekalb county police, the Georgia state patrol, the Georgia bureau of investigation, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). This raid is a recent example of strong-arm techniques being used by the American security apparatus to destroy all efforts to reign in the growing police state and to imagine more transformative futures in the country.

While the police officers involved claim that Terá fired first, this story is disputed by other members of the protest camp and police have offered no evidence to corroborate their story.

Terá, who went by they/them pronouns, has been described as “a radiant, joyful, beloved community member.” They split their time between Atlanta, where they engaged in mutual aid for the forest defenders, and Florida, where they were helping to build housing in low income communities devastated by the recent hurricane. They were also a trained medic.

Terá told the reporter David Peisner in December, “We get a lot of support from people who live here, and that’s important because we win through nonviolence. We’re not going to beat them at violence. But we can beat them in public opinion, in the courts even....This is my home now. We’ve built a nice community here. It’s about reclaiming the parks and public space.”

Forest defenders have been opposing the construction of the police training facility for over a year. The facility is unpopular with a majority of Atlantans and will be located on public forest land, an area also called the Weelaunee People’s Park, which neighbors a community of working class people of color. Construction of the police training facility would require the removal of 100 acres of forest in order to make room for explosives testing, over 12 firing ranges, a Black

Hawk helicopter landing pad, a training center to practice crowd control, and a training space for foreign police forces, including the Israeli police. Activists believe this will be the largest such training facility in the country.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention asks the United States government why it needs a \$90 million training facility for militarized training of domestic and foreign police officers. In a country beset by many internal crises, most of them due to the ever-worsening economic outlook for the vast majority of Americans, the US government should focus its resources and attention on creating a society that works for ordinary people. Rather than murdering good-hearted, self-sacrificing young people like Tortuguita, it should be encouraging them to imagine better and more sustainable futures for us all.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention stands with the forest defenders in Atlanta and calls for an independent, international investigation into the events that led to the killing of Manuel Esteban Paez Terá. We condemn the ridiculous charges of “domestic terrorism” leveled by law enforcement against other forest protectors. And we add our voices to those expressing horror at the US government's unfettered use of police powers against ordinary people, especially those who are seeking a more peaceful and sustainable future for humanity.