



Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions

**Submitted by
RFK Human Rights, University of Dayton Human Rights Center, Southern Center for Human Rights, and Reverend Keyanna Jones**

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We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the report by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions on challenges faced by families of police brutality victims in the United States. This submission describes how the United States perpetuates harms against surviving family members by failing to provide adequate information about investigations into killings by police and purposely maligning the victim's reputation.

In 2023, U.S. law enforcement [killed 1,329 people](#), making it the deadliest year on record for killings by police. The grief experienced by families who lose loved ones to police violence is twofold—they must contend with the loss itself in addition to navigating a legal system designed to shield the officers responsible for the murders.

Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, affectionately known as “Tortuguita,” is the first environmental human rights defender in history to be killed by law enforcement in the United States. On January 18, 2023, Manuel was killed by Georgia state police while sitting cross-legged, engaged in peaceful protest of plans by state officials to raze an urban forest for construction of a militarized police training facility known as Cop City. Alongside community members and civil society activists, Manuel sought to raise awareness of the harms caused by environmental destruction and racially discriminatory policing in the city of Atlanta, Georgia.

Belkis Terán, Manuel's mother, and her family have suffered profound grief, confusion, and hopelessness since Manuel's death. State authorities have refused the family's multiple requests for information, body camera footage, and other evidence that would reveal the truth of what happened on the day Manuel was killed. On multiple occasions following her child's death, Belkis petitioned Georgia authorities for information that would help her learn the truth of how her child was killed, including police body camera footage and investigatory findings. Authorities have

refused to answer her. In October 2023, Georgia authorities announced their intention to abandon any further investigation into Manuel's death and their refusal to prosecute any of the officers responsible. The United States refuses Belkis Terán's call to fully investigate the circumstances of Manuel's killing, denying her recourse for serious violations of her child's human rights and causing her grave emotional harm.

Georgia authorities have outright refused accountability for Manuel's death. After killing Manuel, police confiscated and publicly released the activist's diaries as part of a public misinformation campaign to falsely portray Manuel as a violent criminal. On December 15, 2022, Cop City protesters [were arrested and charged with "domestic terrorism."](#) Following the January 18, 2023 raid in which Manuel was killed, additional protesters were charged. Later, in June 2023, an [additional 23](#) people were similarly arrested and accused by law enforcement. In total, 42 people have been arrested and accused of domestic terrorism for acts that range from [sleeping in hammocks to throwing fireworks](#).

On September 5, 2023, Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr announced the [prosecution of 61 people](#) in an indictment under Georgia's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (commonly referred to as "RICO"). This indictment, in unprecedented fashion, alleges that the belief systems of those opposed to the construction of Cop City constitute a criminal enterprise.

On November 15, 2023, the State entered Manuel's personal diaries into the official record as evidence against the 61 people charged under Georgia's RICO statutes. Though it was sealed from public view by the judge a week later, private thoughts from the diary were introduced [in an attempt to influence public opinion of the RICO cases](#), despite the fact that Manuel is not on trial.

On May 24, 2023, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security ("DHS") referred to Atlanta activists as "domestic violent extremists" in its [public terrorism bulletin](#). DHS is an agency in the executive branch of the United States federal government responsible for public security, with functions including anti-terrorism operations, immigration and customs enforcement, border security, and cybersecurity. The state of Georgia cited DHS's characterization of Atlanta activists as terrorists as additional justification for prosecuting protesters.

In April 2024, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, the Southern Center for Human Rights, and the University of Dayton Human Rights Center filed a petition on behalf of Manuel and Belkis Terán to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The petition declares, in part, that the United States violated Manuel's rights to life and personal security and Belkis's rights to mental and moral integrity and the truth of what happened to her son.

The struggle for transparency, truth, and justice faced by the Terán family are commonplace in the United States. In light of the government's harms perpetuated against families of police brutality victims, we encourage the Special Rapporteur to publicly condemn this abuse and meaningfully implement the Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions.

Respectfully submitted,

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