

Protester Killed in Firefight at Site of New Atlanta Police Center

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The authorities say the protester fired on a state trooper as the authorities worked to clear demonstrators who have occupied a wooded area being developed into a police training center.



A vigil was held in Atlanta after a protester was killed in a wooded area outside the city where activists have been trying to stop the development of a police training center. Credit...Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

ATLANTA — Longstanding tensions over a planned Atlanta police training center boiled over on Wednesday when a protester was killed and a Georgia state trooper was wounded during a confrontation in the wooded area just outside the city where the center is to be built, the authorities said.

The shootings happened as the police worked to clear protesters out of the woods, according to law enforcement officials and activists who oppose the center. At least four people were also detained in the sweep, the authorities said.

The plans for the training center call for it to be built on 85 acres of forested land, and include an area for police trainees to learn vehicle skills and even a mock village, with space for facsimiles of a nightclub, a convenience store and homes to practice different tactics in an array of settings.

But the proposal has been assailed from the outset by critics of the Atlanta Police Department who have described the \$90 million development — derisively nicknamed

“Cop City” — as a dangerous investment in militarizing law enforcement. Activists have moved into the forest, and their efforts to block construction have escalated in recent months into violent confrontations with law enforcement officers.

The circumstances surrounding the fatal shooting remained unclear on Wednesday, with investigators disclosing few details of what happened and activists challenging the official description of events.



At least four people were detained during a “planned clearing operation” by law enforcement agencies in the forest. Credit...Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

“No one can bring our friend back to us,” the activists said in a statement published by the Atlanta Community Press Collective, a digital outlet aligned with the protesters. “An innocent life has been taken and the machines continue.”

But the authorities have sought to portray the actions of those involved with the “Defend the Atlanta Forest” effort as perpetrating something more sinister.

“These individuals and groups have attempted to disguise their activities as being protests,” Michael Register, the director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, told reporters on Wednesday, adding that “law enforcement and portions of our community have experienced growing criminal behavior and terroristic acts.”

He said the activists had been accused of arson and setting traps in the woods capable of causing serious physical harm. Last month, prosecutors took the unusual

step of charging six people connected to the Defend the Atlanta Forest effort with domestic terrorism. Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia has vowed to maintain the aggressive approach. “The only response we will give to intimidation and violence is swift and exact justice,” he said in a recent statement.

Mr. Register said there was an exchange of gunfire on Wednesday morning during a “planned clearing operation” by law enforcement agencies in the forest, located in an unincorporated area of DeKalb County, just outside of Atlanta.

Mr. Register said that a person shot “without warning,” hitting the trooper, and officers returned fire. The person who was killed has not been identified by the authorities or the activists.



State troopers blocked the entrance to the forest after a protester was killed in the sweep. Credit...Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

Activists with the Defend the Atlanta Forest effort have challenged the official account and argued that no activists fired upon officers. The Atlanta Solidarity Fund, an organization providing legal support to activists, said it was planning to pursue “a vigorous legal strategy” to examine the circumstances surrounding the protester’s death. “We are committed to finding out what actually happened,” said Marlon Kautz, an organizer with the Solidarity Fund.

The trooper was hit in the lower abdomen and was hospitalized and required surgery, but his condition had stabilized, officials said. “His vitals are good,” Col. Chris Wright,

the commissioner of the Georgia Department of Public Safety, said in a news conference on Wednesday. “He certainly has a long road to recovery.”

In a statement on Wednesday, Mr. Kemp said, “As our thoughts remain with him and his family, our resolve also remains steadfast and strong to see criminals brought to justice.”

Mayor Andre Dickens of Atlanta said that the city and the Police Department were “providing full support to our state and county partners as they secure the site in DeKalb County and investigate the incident.”

The fight over the training center has come as Atlanta has been roiled in recent years by a swirl of tensions over crime and policing.

Protests erupted in Atlanta, as in many other cities across the country, in 2020 after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers. And tensions exploded soon after when Rayshard Brooks, a 27-year-old Black man, was fatally shot by the Atlanta police in the drive-through of a fast-food restaurant.



The plans for the training center call for it to be built on 85 acres of forested land. Credit...Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

After the shooting, the Wendy's restaurant where it happened was burned down by protesters. On July 4, 2020, an 8-year-old girl, Secoria Turner, was fatally shot while riding in an SUV being driven near the site.

The shooting of Mr. Brooks led to the resignation of the city police chief, Erika Shields, and the officer responsible for firing the fatal shots was fired and charged with murder. Ultimately, that officer was reinstated to the police force and the criminal charges were dropped. But the situation was blamed for plummeting morale within the Atlanta Police Department and for officers leaving the agency.

The training center, which was approved by city officials in 2021, was billed as an opportunity to better prepare the police force to tackle crime, as well as lift morale and draw officers to join the department. The site is an old prison farm, with hundreds of acres that have largely been reforested.

Critics said the project would disturb an expanse of green space and disrupt the community around it. "People don't want gunfire and bomb detonations to be the soundtrack of their neighborhood," Bentley Hudgins, a local organizer who lives nearby, said while attending a vigil for the protester on Wednesday.

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