



Carefree life in Philadelphia masks bloodthirsty Liberian warlord's past, suit says

Interviews with survivors and former soldiers identified Moses Thomas as commander of the Liberian government's feared anti-terrorist unit

Richard Luscombe

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To patrons of Klade's Liberian restaurant in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Moses Thomas is the popular server who rings them up at the till and chats jovially after bringing their palm butter soup and spicy potato greens. At weekends, the health-conscious 64-year-old plays soccer with friends in a nearby park.

But according to legal papers filed in a federal court on Monday, Thomas's carefree lifestyle masks his true identity as a bloodthirsty warlord behind some of the worst atrocities of Liberia's civil war, including the Lutheran Church massacre of July 1990 in which 600 men, women and children were shot and hacked to death with machetes.

The civil lawsuit served on Thomas at the restaurant on Monday afternoon follows a four-year investigation by a coalition of human rights organisations.

From interviews with survivors and former soldiers, they identified Thomas as commander of the Liberian government's feared special anti-terrorist unit, loyal to dictator Samuel Doe during the final days of his presidency.

The brutal attack at St Peter's Lutheran Church came as 2,000 terrified Monrovia residents crammed into the designated Red Cross shelter while troops of rebel leader Charles Taylor closed in on the capital.

According to the lawsuit, filed in the US district court for the eastern district of Pennsylvania, Thomas and his men fired indiscriminately on sleeping refugees and then moved methodically between the pews hacking at the injured with machetes.



Colonel Michael Tilly, right, leader of the "Death Squad," a faction of President Samuel Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia, with his troops in Monrovia. Photograph: Patrick Robert - Corbis/Sygma via Getty Images

A Guardian correspondent who visited the church almost two months later described a scene of carnage, with maggot-infested corpses left to rot in piles, and others still hanging from the windows from which they had tried to escape.

Although the lawsuit does not specifically accuse Thomas of killing anybody, it argues he bears responsibility for the murders by directing the attack, after addressing those at the church and "promising that he would guard them and ensure their safety."

"Thomas was the head of the military unit that committed the massacre, he was present on the front courtyard throughout the attack. He was also the one who issued the ceasefire order that ended the attack, so he was in complete command throughout the massacre," said Nushin Sarkarati, senior staff attorney with the California-based Centre for Justice and Accountability (CJA) that investigates and prosecutes global human rights abuses.

Thomas was named as a suspected war crimes perpetrator in 2008 by the largely impotent Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, but was never called to answer the allegations.

The lawsuit was filed by the CJA and its Liberian partner the Global Justice and Research Project on behalf of four survivors, one of whom lost two brothers, his wife and their five-year-old daughter in the attack.

It states Thomas was admitted to the US in 2000 under an immigration status intended to assist war crime victims.

"For the diaspora in the US, refugees who came here to flee civil war violence, to have to live in the same community as the perpetrators is very traumatising for them," Sarkarati said

According to the CJA, Thomas lives with his Liberian long-term girlfriend in the southern outskirts of Philadelphia. Their modest three-bedroom house and restaurant are both registered solely in her name.

The lawsuit was filed under the alien tort statute and torture victim protection act, federal laws which allow civil relief in US courts for victims of human rights abuses committed overseas.



Young rebels posing and ECOMOG soldiers in Monrovia during the Liberian civil war. Photograph: Patrick Robert - Corbis/Sygma via Getty Images

The case might also attract the attention of the US government. In 2012, the department of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement deported former rebel leader George Boley for human rights abuses during the Liberian civil war, including the use of child soldiers. Boley faced no punishment on his return to Monrovia and is now an elected congressman.

Thomas did not respond to a request for comment by the Guardian, but speaking to the BBC, he called the allegations against him “nonsense”.

“I don’t want to give any credence to the allegation,” he said. “No-one in my unit had anything to do with the attack on the church.”

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