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## Did Delco man order massacre of 600 Liberians hiding in a church? He says it's 'all lies'

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📷 (MARK HUBAND / AP)

On July 29, 1990, St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia became the site of one of the first civilian massacres in the Liberian Civil Wars. Six hundred civilians were killed by soldiers loyal to then-President Samuel Doe. The bodies were left to rot in the church for two months until volunteers entered the building to reclaim the bodies in October 1990, when this photo was taken. (MARK HUBAND / AP)

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It was the first mass murder of civilians in the Liberian Civil Wars – a gruesome foreshadowing of the atrocities to come in [a conflict that ravaged the West African nation](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/at-federal-trial-delco-man-forced-to-face-alleged-past-as-liberian-war-criminal-20171001.html) (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/at-federal-trial-delco-man-forced-to-face-alleged-past-as-liberian-war-criminal-20171001.html>) for more than 14 years and left hundreds of thousands of civilians dead.

In July 1990, government soldiers loyal to President Samuel Doe burst into St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia and opened fire on 2,000 civilians seeking sanctuary from the violence in the capital.

Mothers saw their children gunned down in pews. Men watched in horror as their brothers were hacked to death by machete-wielding soldiers. Six hundred people died – their bodies left to rot until volunteers buried the corpses two months later.

No one was held accountable (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/held-to-account-past-attempts-to-hold-leaders-accountable-for-liberian-civil-war-atrocities-20170929.html>).

But nearly three decades later, an international human rights organization believes it has found the man who led that attack living in Delaware County and claiming political asylum under the same laws that many of his alleged victims used to flee to the United States.

On Monday, the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability (<http://cja.org/>) sued Moses W. Thomas, 64, of Sharon Hill, on behalf of four survivors of the Lutheran Church Massacre, seeking to recover damages for torture, inhumane treatment, and crimes against humanity.

“Given the significance of this attack, it’s important that someone be held to account,” said Nushin Sarkarati, one of the lawyers representing the plaintiffs. “A lot of people are still thoroughly destroyed by what they experienced that night.”

Thomas – speaking by phone from Klade’s, a West African restaurant in Elmwood where his girlfriend works – insisted that his accusers have the wrong man.

“It’s all lies,” he said. “The stuff they’re talking about is nonsense. You can call anyone in the Republic of Liberia and give them my name, and they will tell you that this is nonsense.”

Thomas is the fourth Liberian national living in the Philadelphia suburbs to face accusations within the last four years of committing atrocities in a war they believed they had left behind when they arrived in the United States.

A federal jury convicted Mohammed Jabateh (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/delco-man-guilty-of-immigration-fraud-in-jungle-jabbah-war-crimes-case-20171018.html>), 51, of East Lansdowne, in October of lying to U.S. authorities about war crimes he committed under the nom de guerre “Jungle Jabbah.” Isaac Kannah (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdny/pr/liberian-national-arrested-perjury-and-obstruction-justice>), 52, of Philadelphia, pleaded guilty to perjury charges in December for concealing his own wartime actions while serving as a character witness in a case in New York.

And this month, Tom Woewiyu ([http://www.philly.com/philly/news/breaking/20140514\\_Former\\_Liberian\\_defense\\_minister\\_arrested\\_in\\_Philadelphia.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/breaking/20140514_Former_Liberian_defense_minister_arrested_in_Philadelphia.html)), 72, of Collingdale – the former spokesman for the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, the political party of Doe’s successor, Charles Taylor – is scheduled to face trial in Philadelphia for alleged lies he told on U.S. immigration forms.

Each case has taken on outsize importance among Liberians here and in Africa, where no one has ever been held criminally responsible for the documented atrocities committed in the back-to-back civil wars that upended the country between 1989 and 2003. In fact, many of those who have been accused hold positions of power in the nation’s government.

The suit filed against Thomas on Monday (<http://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Moses-Thomas-PR-.pdf>) in federal court in Philadelphia is unusual in several respects. Unlike the other defendants, he was not criminally charged. Instead, the lawsuit seeks to extract damages under a little-used law – the Torture Victim Protection Act – that allows foreigners to pursue civil claims for torture and extrajudicial killings against people living in the U.S.

Still, Sarkarati sees the efforts of federal prosecutors, international investigators who have pursued similar allegations, and organizations like hers as of a piece.

“The goal would always be to see criminal cases brought for war crimes and atrocities,” she said. “But when that’s not possible, there is an opportunity for justice in civil suits. The victims still get their day in court and a chance to hold these individuals accountable.”

The plaintiffs she represents filed their case under pseudonyms, claiming fear of retaliation in Liberia, where the ethnic resentments that fueled the wars still run deep and continue to drive politics.

Each survived the massacre by hiding under piles of dead bodies and feigning death as soldiers stabbed at corpses with machetes and bayonets to ensure their victims had been killed, the lawsuit says.

The suit does not specifically accuse Thomas of killing anyone. But it alleges that in 1990, he served as the commander of the Liberian army’s Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SATU), the elite special forces team established by Doe to serve as the personal guard to the president.

And by the summer of 1990, suspicion within Monrovia ran high. The city was surrounded by forces loyal to Taylor, Doe’s eventual successor. Doe believed that the local population of ethnic Mano and Gio people was more loyal to the invading army than to his own.

Hoping to root out spies and potential rebels, the SATU pulled Manos and Gios from their homes, hauling them off to detention centers in military barracks or worse – shooting and decapitating them in the streets. Several families fled to shelters like St. Peter’s Lutheran, fearing retribution.

Thomas, the lawsuit alleges, stopped by the church compound in the days before the attack to pledge he would protect those hiding inside. Yet on the night of July 29, his accusers now say, he ordered 45 government soldiers to kill everyone in the building.

“Men, women, and children were gunned down as they attempted to flee to safety,” the suit describes. “Many who survived the initial rounds of shooting were soon hacked to death with machetes as soldiers passed through the church and an adjacent school building, ensuring the slaughter was complete.”

Asked about those allegations Monday, Thomas scoffed at the lawsuit’s description of his role. Although he admits he was a SATU commander and received specialized military training in Israel in the 1980s, he insists he never left the presidential palace on the day of the massacre.

“Nobody would have instructed me to do such a thing,” he said. “I was trained to protect rather than destroy lives.”

In fact, he maintains, he and his unit provided protection for the survivors after the massacre. He, too, later became a victim of persecution, he said, after Doe was publicly beheaded in the streets of Monrovia in 1990 and Taylor was elected president seven years later.

Thomas fled to the United States in 2000, seeking political asylum, and has lived in Delaware County ever since. Yet even before Monday's lawsuit was filed, he had begun to fear that his time in the U.S. was coming to an end.

About two years ago, Thomas said, U.S. immigration authorities informed him that they would not renew his immigration visa after his name showed up on a report on war crimes authored by the [Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission](http://www.pul.org.lr/doc/trc-of-liberia-final-report-volume-ii.pdf) (<http://www.pul.org.lr/doc/trc-of-liberia-final-report-volume-ii.pdf>) in 2010.

Unable to find work legally since then, he has relied upon financial support from his children – both here and in Liberia – and spends his days watching his girlfriend work at the restaurant.

Despite those grim prospects, Thomas said Monday, he is committed to staying in Pennsylvania to fight the allegations filed against him in court. After that, he said, who knows?

“What I’m hoping for is for people to get the true story,” he said. “When that is done, I’ll just go back home. I can’t sit here and face this here, when I know I have a perfect record and a perfect reputation back home.”

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Oct 18 - 7:30 PM

(<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/man-guilty-of-immigration-fraud-in-jungle-jabbah-war-crimes-case-20171018.html>).

### **'Anybody that refuse to eat a heart, they gonna die.' Testimony in Jungle Jabbah federal trial begins**

Oct 4 - 8:32 PM

(<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/crime/at-jungle-jabbah-trial-women-describe-harrowing-life-in-wartorn-liberia-20171004.html>).

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