

Liberian Man Faces Legal Charges For St. Peters Lutheran Massacre



Philadelphia, PA - Four victims of the 1990 Lutheran Church Massacre have filed a lawsuit in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania against Moses Thomas, a Liberian restaurateur living in South West Philadelphia.

The case alleges that Thomas, then Colonel and commander of the elite Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SATU) within the Armed Forces of Liberia under President Samuel Doe, directed an attack on the St. Peter's Lutheran Church compound in Monrovia.

The church compound was being used as a Red Cross aid shelter for 2,000 unarmed men, women, and children seeking refuge from fighting in Monrovia.

"Over the course of several hours, 600 people, primarily from the Mano and Gio tribes, were shot and hacked to death," according to the suit filed by the four victims – all Liberian citizens, living in Liberia.

News and pictures from the massacre shocked the world and brought international pressure onto all parties to the conflict.

Then United Nations Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, described the carnage with "horror and dismay" and appealed for protection of civilians caught up in Liberia's civil war. Twenty seven years later no one has faced charges for the bloodshed.

The victims' lawyer served the summons to a surprised Thomas working at his restaurant shortly after 2:pm Monday. Stopped by a Front Page reporter at his restaurant later that day Thomas was calm and receptive.

“This is absolute nonsense. I don’t who did it and was never around there when it happened. I saved people from the Lutheran compound, including Bishop Diggs son, and I have a written letter from him from years ago,” he said.

“I was so angry after reading the first few lines [of the complaint], I was unable to finish the whole document. So I’ll read the full document tonight and I will issue a full rebuttal tomorrow.”

Victims and justice advocates in Liberia and the US celebrated the lawsuit.

“Today, I am very happy that, at least, to some extent, the survivors of the Lutheran Church massacre—the most widely publicized massacre in the history of the Liberian civil war - are finally taking someone to court,” said Hassan Bility, head of the Monrovia- based NGO, the Global Justice and Research Project.

GJRP has been gathering evidence of war crimes committed during Liberia’s civil war since the failure of the Sirleaf administration to establish a war crimes court as recommended by Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

“On behalf of the victims I want to say thanks to U.S. authorities, and most especially the survivors themselves who stood up, on whose accounts he is being taken to court.”

In Monrovia Peterson Sonyah, Executive Director of the Liberia Massacre Survivors Association (LIMASA) and a survivor of the Lutheran Church massacre was pleased.

“I want to be very thankful today that one of the persons who committed heinous crimes today has been indicted in the U.S. for what he did to the Liberian people, most especially the Lutheran Church massacre. I think victims and survivors of the St. Peter Lutheran Church massacre will be at peace this evening. That is the first step.”

The identities of the four victims are being withheld because of fear of retaliation. They are being named only as Jane W, John X, John Y and John Z. It is expected that many more victims will testify when the case is brought to trial.

The victims are being represented by The Center for Justice and Accountability, a San Francisco based US-based human rights group which represented one of the victims in the prosecution of former Liberian President Charles Taylor’s son “Chucky” Taylor, for torture committed while he was head of the Anti-Terrorist Unit of Liberia from 1999 to 2003. (He is currently serving a 97-year sentence in a Florida prison.)

“Our clients managed to survive the Lutheran Church Massacre by hiding under the bodies of friends and family executed by the government forces. What they endured is beyond comprehension and this suit presents their first opportunity to see some form of justice carried out,” said Nushin Sarkarati, Senior Attorney for CJA.

Survivors of the massacre said government troops broke into the Church, in the city’s Sinkor district, and opened fire on the crowded sea of men, women, children and babies. Survivors told aid workers that troops used knives, guns and cutlasses. Witnesses said at least 600 refugees were killed.

The survivors told foreign correspondents that a group of 30 soldiers surrounded the compound in the middle of the night, as rebel forces threatening to overthrow the Samuel Doe government stepped up their attacks on government positions on the outskirts of the capital.

They said soldiers then went to the upper floor and fired at hundreds of refugees. Soldiers ordered some women who tried to flee with their children to stand aside, according to the account, and other soldiers then fired on them.

Foreign correspondents who rushed to the scene of the massacre reported a nightmare:

The entire floor of the church was thick with bloodstains and bodies were huddled under pews where the victims tried to hide. Bodies of boys 7 or 8 years old were draped on the altar and a pile of bodies was half-hidden in a dark corner.

Dead women lay on the floor with children wrapped in shawls on their backs. A crucifix had been thrown to the floor. Bullet holes riddled the ceiling.

The compound was filled with the bodies of women and children brought out after the massacre. People passing by were speechless as they looked at the rows of bodies.

The Red Cross and the Liberian Council of Churches had set up shelters at several churches in Monrovia, including St. Peter's Lutheran Church, to house the nearly 9,000 internally displaced people.

Many of the displaced were seeking safety from government forces loyal to President Doe and his majority Krahn tribe, who at the time were committing retaliatory attacks against Manos and Gios, two ethno-linguistic groups perceived as loyal to Charles Taylor's rebel movement.

Moses Thomas belongs to the Krahn tribe. He fled to the U.S. after Doe was captured and mutilated by a rival militia led by Prince Johnson.

Victims and Witnesses in the US Celebrate Justice

Charles Sunwabe was a teenager hiding with his family in the church. His mother and younger brother were executed. Charles and several of his relatives survived. Charles is now an attorney, working in Pennsylvania. He is not a client in this case.

"Although I am a victim of the Liberian civil war, I am not remotely interested in retribution. But neither am I interested in a reconciliation process that does not embrace justice. Without justice, it is impossible to speak of a democratic free society in Liberia. Liberian warlords and their lieutenants must be held account. Otherwise, we will be heading for another conflict."

Andrew Voros, an American working in Wildlife Conservation in Liberia for many years, lived a few streets up from the Lutheran compound. When the sounds of gunfire ceased, Andrew was one of the first to get to the scene of the massacre. "Women and children were slaughtered like animals," he recalled in an emotional phone interview from his home in the U.S. Ten days after the Lutheran Church massacre, Andrew was arrested for hiding tribal minorities and imprisoned at then President Samuel Doe's Executive Mansion compound where he witnessed multiple atrocities. He was turned over to US Embassy personnel nine days later.

Voros celebrated news of the lawsuit. "If those responsible for that are in the U.S. pretending to be the victims of that war, we have a responsibility to bring them to justice."

Sister Bette McCrandall served the Lutheran Church as Executive Secretary to Bishop Roland Diggs. She lived in the Church's compound on the night of the attack. She also became emotional at the memories.

"That very night soldiers came in the compound looking for rebels. They carried several people away, some were released, some we never saw again," she remembered by phone her home Flint, Michigan. "After the massacre, I went into the church looking for survivors. It was a horrible experience looking at all those babies dead on top of each other."

She also applauded the suit. "They can run away from men but God got everything recorded," McCrandall said. "It's one thing to follow orders as a soldier or a rebel and it's another thing for those who have the orders."

Thomas Faces Damages not Jail

Thomas will now have time to hire a lawyer and respond to the allegations. Because this is a civil and not criminal case Thomas will be required to pay "damages" or monetary compensation to the victims if he is found guilty. He will not face criminal charges or deportation because of this case. Only the US government can pursue criminal charges.

That does not mean that he won't ever face criminal charges. US prosecutors may still choose to pursue Thomas on immigration fraud charges as they did with Mohammed Jabbateh.

The former ULIMO leader known as "Jungle Jabbah" was convicted of lying about his war crimes when he applied for asylum and then a greencard. He could receive 30 years in a US prison when sentenced, likely next month.

Thomas has been living in the U.S. since 2001 and is currently legally resident under Temporary Protected Status according to Sarkarati.

He runs popular Liberian restaurant Klades in South West Philadelphia with his girlfriend.

Members of the Liberian diaspora identified Thomas and notified CJA. Since Thomas is now residing in the US, he is subject to U.S. law, and the survivors in Liberia can use the US court system to seek justice.

The victims are bringing the case under the Alien Tort Statute and Torture Victim Protection Act - two federal laws enacted to help ensure that human rights abusers cannot seek safe haven in the U.S. and that the laws are available to victims, regardless of their nationality.

The US criminal law on torture committed on foreign soil used to convict Chucky Taylor was enacted in 1994 after the 1990 Lutheran Church Massacre and therefore cannot be used in this case.

The lawsuit represents the latest in a global push by a coalition of human rights lawyers led by Monrovia-based NGO, the Global Justice and Research Project, and Civitas Maxima in Geneva along with CJA to give victims of Liberia's civil wars a chance to seek justice.

In the wake of Mohammed Jabbateh's conviction cases expected to go ahead in 2018 include the trial of former National Patriotic Front (NPFL) Defense Minister [Tom Woewiyu](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.frontpageafricaonline.com%2Findex.php) ([http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.frontpageafricaonline.com%2Findex.php)

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Commander [Martina Johnson](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fglobal-development%2F2014%2Foct%2F07%2Fmartina-johnson-liberia-war-crimes-trial) ([http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fglobal-development%2F2014%2Foct%2F07%2Fmartina-johnson-liberia-war-crimes-trial)

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Belgium for atrocity crimes in Liberia; United Liberation Movement (ULIMO)

Commander [Alieu Kosiah](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2015%2F01%2F17%2Fw) ([http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2015%2F01%2F17%2Fw)

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Switzerland for crimes against humanity and torture; and [Agnes Reeves Taylor](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrw.org%2Fnews%2F2017%2F06%2F03%uk-arrest-civil-war-crimes-step-justice)

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[t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrw.org%2Fnews%2F2017%2F06%2F03%uk-arrest-civil-war-crimes-step-justice](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=kv4lnm7ab.0.0.z5aocvbab.0&id=preview&r=3&p=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrw.org%2Fnews%2F2017%2F06%2F03%uk-arrest-civil-war-crimes-step-justice)) in the United Kingdom for her alleged role in NPFL abuses in Liberia.

Bility said this was just the beginning. "This victory must be applauded by the Liberian people, the victims and all peace-loving people.

It is also important for us to underscore this: since these killings occurred in 1990, the people, the victims and the survivors should understand that they have not been forgotten.

There are some people... who have been working to make sure that cases are brought against individuals who have been [alleged] to be responsible for those crimes.

It possible that in the future we can bring cases against other people who are responsible for massacres in Liberia. This small victory we take pride in for now."

This story was produced in collaboration with [New Narratives](http://www.newnarratives.org) (<http://www.newnarratives.org>).

By Jackson Kanneh in Philadelphia and James Harding Giahue in Monrovia