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Liberian warlord in 1990 massacre quietly living in Philadelphia

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About 600 people were killed in July 1990 when SATU troops raided the church compound, with the scene left in ruins full of decomposing corpses for months. (ANONYMOUS/AP)

Before Moses Thomas served up food at a suburban Philadelphia restaurant, he was a feared warlord who oversaw one of the most brutal units in Liberia's bloody civil war.

Now the 64-year-old immigrant faces a civil lawsuit from four survivors of a massacre they say Thomas masterminded.

The federal lawsuit, filed Monday in Pennsylvania's eastern district, alleges Thomas was commanding the ruthless Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SATU) and reported directly to then-Liberian dictator Samuel Doe.

It was during Doe's reign that 600 people were slaughtered in July 1990 at a Lutheran Church doubling as a Red Cross shelter in Monrovia, the nation's capital, where 2,000 people had taken refuge.

Thomas' troops "indiscriminately shot or hacked to death approximately 600 sleeping civilian men, women and children taking refuge there," the 38-page lawsuit claims.

The four unnamed plaintiffs suing Thomas survived the attack — possibly by hiding under bodies as his men stalked the pews with assault rifles and machetes — but several lost loved ones.

A woman identified as “Jane W” lost her husband, two daughters and an aunt when Thomas’ men stormed the church.

Thomas, who now lives in southern Philadelphia with his longtime girlfriend, isn’t accused of personally murdering anyone in the attack — but of giving the order to ruthlessly kill hundreds.

One of the survivors claims he saw the then-commander walking around and clutching a pistol during the lengthy massacre, and saw Thomas give the ceasefire order.

Thomas visited the Red Cross facility in the weeks leading up to the July 29, 1990, attack and told the huddled refugees “he would guard them and ensure their safety.”

The lawsuit details other horrific acts Thomas’ squad carried out on Doe’s behalf during Liberia’s first of two civil wars, which lasted from 1989 to 1997 and 1999 to 2003.

In June 1990, he and his SATU soldiers raided a residential compound looking for possible rebels.

People living in the compound were arrested and brought back to the nation’s executive mansion, while the warlord’s soldiers “looted the residential compound and raped some of the captured women,” the lawsuit charges.

Back at the executive mansion, those arrested were executed after “brutal interrogations.”

Thomas fled to the United States around August 2000, the lawsuit claims, through a program meant to help refugees of war crimes he’s accused of fueling.

He now works at Klade’s, a Liberian restaurant, reportedly registered in his girlfriend’s name.

“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 traumatizing for them,” Nushin Sarkarati of the Centre for Justice and Accountability [told the Guardian](#).

Sakarati’s California-based organization helped bring the lawsuit along with the Global Justice and Research Project, which is based in Liberia.

Thomas was identified as a possible war criminal in 2008, according to reports, but hasn’t stood trial.

Lawyers for the survivors brought the civil lawsuit through a series of legal routes that let victims sue in the U.S. for atrocities carried out in other countries.

Liberia’s government has toiled with prosecuting suspected war criminals, the lawsuit notes, making it tough to seek justice in the nation.

Thomas, [reached by BBC News](#) on Monday, said the lawsuit was “nonsense,” but didn’t deny he was a military leader.

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

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