

Victims of 1990 Liberian Church Massacre Seek Damages

LOWELL NEUMANN NICKEY February 13, 2018

PHILADELPHIA (CN) – Four survivors of a brutal machete and gun attack that left 600 dead at a Lutheran church during Liberia’s civil war on Monday sued the military commander they claim ordered the carnage.

In a federal lawsuit filed in Pennsylvania by attorney Laurence Shtasel, the plaintiff claim the defendant, Moses Thomas entered the United States under the auspices of a refugee program by posing as a victim of the alleged war crimes he is now accused of committing.

Thomas, who now lives in a suburb of Philadelphia, told the BBC Monday that the claims by the plaintiffs are “nonsense.”

As recounted in the complaint, Liberia was in the throes of its first civil war and the church was designated as a Red Cross humanitarian center when the attack occurred.

The plaintiffs, who are identified by pseudonyms, claim Thomas, a colonel at the time, was the head of a specialized branch of the government’s Armed Forces of Liberia, also known as the AFL.

“At Thomas’s command, these armed forces surrounded the Lutheran Church and, over the course of several hours, indiscriminately shot or hacked to death approximately 600 sleeping civilian men, women, and children taking refuge there,” the complaint says.

According to the plaintiffs, “Thomas was aware that the Church was a shelter for civilians. In the days before [the massacre], government military vehicles drove past the Church frequently.”

“On at least one of these occasions,” the complaint says, “Thomas himself, accompanied by a small group of soldiers under his command, stopped at the Church.

“When the soldiers arrived, the church compound was filled with women and their young children, preparing food and washing clothing in the front yard,” the complaint continues, “Thomas addressed the people directly, telling them to remain at the Church and promising that he would guard them and ensure their safety.”

The plaintiffs claim they survived the massacre, which they say was part of a campaign of violence against the nation’s Mano and Gio ethnic groups, by hiding under piles of dead bodies.

“To this day,” they say, “no one has been held accountable for the attack either in Liberia or in any other jurisdiction.

Speaking to reporters from the BBC Monday Thomas denied the allegations saying, “I don’t want to give any credence to the allegation. No one in my unit had anything to do with the attack on the church.”

According to the complaint, Thomas began his military career sometime before 1985, receiving specialized training in Israel before returning to Liberia to serve in an elite anti-terrorist guard unit for then-president, Samuel Doe, who gained power in a 1980 coup d’état.

Thomas’ group, nominally guards for the president, began carrying out raids officially were said to be targeting rebel strongholds. In reality, the plaintiffs claim, the raids were carried out

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against members of the minority Mano and Gio ethnic groups who were displaced earlier in the war.

The plaintiffs say the church was attacked as Taylor marched toward Monrovia, Liberia's capital. Doe, growing increasingly paranoid, ordered the killing of Mano and Gio minorities, as he suspected they would join Doe in revolt when he reached the capital, the plaintiffs say.

Plaintiff Jane W says that during the attack she watched as her two daughters, husband and aunt were shot in front of her.

Another plaintiff, John Z, says he hid in a pile of bodies, and was stabbed with a machete while doing so. He also says the church massacre ended only when Thomas gave a ceasefire order from the church courtyard, hours after the attack began.

The plaintiffs say because the civil war, with its attendant chaos and violence, continued for several years, only to be followed by the Ebola outbreak in western Africa, it has been next to impossible to hold anyone responsible for the attack on the Lutheran church.

The plaintiffs contend the United States is an appropriate venue given that Thomas is now living in Pennsylvania, that the church is U.S.-affiliated, and because one of the victims was an American missionary's daughter.

Liberia recently had its first democratic transition in 74 years, with former professional soccer player George Weah being sworn in on January 22. He succeeded Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was Africa's first elected female head of state.

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