



THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Bringing Human Rights Abusers To Justice.

## LANDMARK HUMAN RIGHTS COMPLAINT FILED AGAINST LIBERIA IN WEST AFRICAN COURT FOR FAILURE TO PROVIDE JUSTICE FOR MASSACRE OF SIX HUNDRED CIVILIANS

### Media Contact

Lisa Cohen

(310) 395-2544 / [lisa@lisacohen.org](mailto:lisa@lisacohen.org)

**ABUJA, Nigeria, October 4, 2022** – The Center for Justice and Accountability, along with its partners the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA) and Debevoise & Plimpton LLP, have [filed suit](#) against the government of Liberia on behalf of survivors of a brutal 1990 massacre at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia and a Liberian NGO. The case, filed in the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), seeks justice after Liberia’s failure to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of the attack, and to provide redress to the victims and their families. This will be the first time that a court will examine Liberia’s failure to investigate human rights and humanitarian law violations committed during two civil wars that ravaged the country between 1989 and 2003.

The Global Justice & Research Project (GJRP) and three siblings who lost approximately 16 family members in the Lutheran Church Massacre are the plaintiffs in this suit. GJRP is a Liberia-based nongovernmental organization that has worked for decades to advance the interests of justice and accountability for the nearly 2,000 survivors and victims of the Lutheran Church Massacre, the single deadliest attack on civilians during Liberia’s First Civil War.

At the time of the attack, St. Peter’s Lutheran Church operated as a Red Cross shelter, housing close to 2,000 civilians seeking refuge from rising violence in the country. In the submission to the ECOWAS Court, [one plaintiff describes](#) the chaos in the church and the horror he experienced as government soldiers killed his mother and brother in front of him. Since the Massacre, he has dedicated his life to advocating for justice for the victims and survivors of Liberia’s civil wars because, as he testifies to the Court, no one has been held accountable for the atrocities he witnessed during the massacre. As he explained in his statement to the Court, “[B]ecause there’s been no justice, I sometimes feel that a dog on the streets of Monrovia has greater value than my mother and other victims of the Lutheran Church Massacre.”

In September 2021, a [U.S. court found that](#) soldiers from the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) under the command of Colonel Moses Thomas stormed the church on July 29, 1990, and shot and hacked to death approximately 600 unarmed civilians. The U.S. court found that the attack amounted to war crimes, torture, and crimes against humanity, and awarded the four survivors \$84 million in damages. “Despite the U.S. court’s findings, Moses Thomas lives freely in Liberia because the government has taken no steps to ensure justice for him or many other known and alleged perpetrators of civil wars era atrocities, and none of the victims have received a cent of reparations,” said Ela Matthews, senior staff attorney at CJA. “With alleged perpetrators on its soil, Liberia has an obligation under international law to investigate their alleged civil wars era crimes and bring them to justice.”



THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Bringing Human Rights Abusers To Justice.

Even though Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), concluded that investigating the Lutheran Church massacre was of interest to the entire country given the scale of the atrocities that occurred, Liberia has not done any investigation of the massacre. "Twelve years ago, the TRC directed Liberia to establish an extraordinary criminal tribunal to investigate and prosecute these violations, but Liberia has taken no action to bring perpetrators to account or provide justice for survivors and victims," said Oludayo Fagbemi, Senior Legal Officer at IHRDA. "It's high time that Liberia finally conduct effective investigations and prosecute civil wars era human rights violations and atrocities."

Catherine Amirfar, co-chair of Debevoise's Public International Law and International Dispute Resolution Groups, said: "Today's court filing is a historic step forward in pursuing justice for survivors of the Lutheran Church Massacre. The ECOWAS Court of Justice has the power and the opportunity to hold Liberia accountable for its more than three decades of inaction regarding one of the worst atrocities of Liberia's civil wars."

This case builds on longstanding efforts by Liberians to end impunity for civil war atrocities, as Hassan Bility, a human rights activist and the director of GJRP, stated, "For decades, victims of the Liberian civil wars have tirelessly advocated for criminal accountability for civil war era atrocity crimes. Still, today, known and alleged warlords live freely and among the people they terrorized. This culture of impunity cannot continue. We hope that this case will amplify the voices of victims who are shouting for the justice they deserve."

To learn more about the case, visit our [website](#) and read our [FAQ on the case](#).

### **About the Center for Justice and Accountability**

The [Center for Justice and Accountability](#) (CJA) is a San Francisco-based human rights legal organization dedicated to deterring torture, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious human rights abuses around the world through innovative litigation and transitional justice strategies. CJA partners with impacted communities seeking truth, justice, and redress, and has successfully brought cases against defendants such as the Minister of Defense of Somalia's Siad Barre regime, the military officer responsible for the assassination of Chilean activist and singer Victor Jara, and Syria's Assad regime for its targeted killing of war correspondent Marie Colvin.

### **About the Global Justice and Research Project**

Established in 2012, the [Global Justice and Research Project \(GJRP\)](#) is a Liberia-based non-profit, non-governmental organization that documents war related crimes in Liberia and, where possible, seeks justice for victims of said crimes, with the full consent of the victims. The GJRP works in partnership with [Civitas Maxima](#), a Geneva-based non-profit, non-governmental organization, which ensures the coordination of a network of international lawyers and investigators who work for the interests of those who have been victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity.



THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Bringing Human Rights Abusers To Justice.

### **About Debevoise & Plimpton LLP**

[Debevoise & Plimpton LLP](#) is a global law firm headquartered in New York with expertise in public international law, including in representing parties before regional and international courts.

### **About the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA)**

The [IHRDA](#) is a pan-African non-governmental organization (NGO) working to promote awareness of human rights in Africa and improve the effectiveness of the African Human Rights system. The three pillars of IHRDA's work are litigation, capacity-building and information sharing about the African human rights system. IHRDA envisions an African continent where all have access to justice via national, African and international human rights mechanisms.