

U.S. Federal Court Awards Damages to Liberian Victims of Lutheran Church Massacre

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Judge calls acts committed by Liberia's government armed forces "unspeakably brutal" and orders compensation for victims

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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 19, 2022—On Tuesday, a Pennsylvania court [issued a historic damages](#) award totaling \$84 million to four victims of the Lutheran Church Massacre, one of the deadliest attacks on civilians during the Liberian Civil Wars. In determining this award, the magistrate judge made clear the egregiousness and brutality of the Massacre. The court's ruling on damages follows a September 2021 decision holding Col. Moses Thomas responsible for the war crimes, crimes against humanity, extrajudicial killing, attempted extrajudicial killing, and torture that took place during the Massacre. Thomas, formerly a resident of Pennsylvania, has now returned to Liberia. "A U.S. court has made clear Thomas's responsibility, yet he continues to live freely in Liberia," says Ela Matthews, Senior Staff Attorney at the Center for Justice and Accountability. "Liberia has an opportunity to see that he is prosecuted for his crimes. Liberia must act and ensure the Defendant is fully brought to justice for his actions."

The case was brought in 2018 by four survivors of the massacre – Jane W, John X, John Y, and John Z – against Moses Thomas, a former commander of the Armed Forces of Liberia. The survivors, represented by CJA and Debevoise & Plimpton LLP with support from the Global Justice and Research Project, submitted nearly [2,000 pages of evidence](#) arguing that Thomas commanded an elite special forces unit in the massacre of 600 civilians in a Red Cross shelter at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia, Liberia during the country's first civil war in July 1990. On September 15, 2021, in a detailed 51-page decision, the court [found Col. Moses Thomas responsible](#) for the massacre – the first time any member of the Armed Forces of Liberia had ever been held accountable for abuses committed during the Liberian Civil Wars. Wednesday's decision ordered Thomas to pay each survivor \$6 million in compensatory damages and \$15 million in punitive damages.

The court's decision emphasized the importance of ensuring that the United States is not a safe haven for torturers and death squad leaders – pointing out that Thomas had lived freely in the U.S. for approximately 19 years before fleeing back to Liberia less than two years after this case was brought. The decision also expressly recognizes that even though this was one of worst

single episodes of the Liberian Civil Wars, Thomas has never been criminally prosecuted for leading the attack.

“This judgment by a U.S. court is an important milestone in our clients’ quest for accountability, but it is important to remember that it is not enough. Liberia has an obligation under international law to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the Lutheran Church Massacre,” said Catherine Amirfar, partner at Debevoise & Plimpton LLP. “Despite recommendations from Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission over a decade ago calling for an investigation, Liberia has taken no steps to hold a single perpetrator of the Massacre accountable.”

The survivors’ statements in the case emphasize the importance of accountability and how Liberia has failed them. John Y – who, like all the plaintiffs in this case, filed under pseudonym – said: “Each time I recall these events or see the Lutheran Church, I have bad memories. I can’t escape the trauma. No one was held accountable, even though they devastated our lives.” Ongoing impunity for the Massacre has meant that they live in fear of violent retribution for seeking accountability.

“It is very difficult for me to remember and speak about these events, because it makes me feel terrible,” said John Z. “But I joined this case and am speaking out now because I know that what Moses Thomas did was wrong, and I want to bring him to justice. I want him to be held accountable for what he did to me and so many others at the Lutheran Church.”

For more on this case, visit: <https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/jane-v-thomas/>

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.

About Debevoise & Plimpton LLP

[Debevoise & Plimpton LLP](#) is a premier law firm with market-leading practices, a global perspective and strong New York roots. Debevoise delivers effective solutions to its clients' most important legal challenges, applying clear commercial judgment and a distinctively collaborative approach. Debevoise's globally recognized team of International Dispute Resolution lawyers has extensive experience advising and litigating in relation to all aspects of public international law.