

After 27 Years Lutheran Massacre Survivor Sees Chance for Justice



Photo credit: James Harding Giahvue

Soul Clinic, Paynesville – It has been 27 years since Rufus Kartee, 50, was wounded during the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church massacre, but for him it is like it happened yesterday. His gunshot wounds have still not healed.

There is one on his thigh, one on his buttocks and one beneath his knee. His wounds are fresh as his memory of that terrible night of July 29, 1990. He cannot walk without a crutch or a cane.

“I only [survived] from Lutheran only because God wanted me to narrate this story,” says Kartee. “I have suffered my whole life.”

The Lutheran massacre is the single worst atrocity of the Liberian civil war (1989-2003), where 600 unarmed civilians were killed by soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL).

The killings drew the attention of the world, with front pages of western newspapers carrying pictures of men, women and children lying dead on the floor of the church on 15th Street in Sinkor.

Kartee's and other survivors' hope for justice was rekindled on Monday when a former commander of the defunct Special Anti-Terrorists Unit (SATU), Moses Thomas, was sued by survivors of the killings in Philadelphia, U.S. where he now lives.

The survivors are represented by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability.

The four survivors are Jane W, John X, John Y and John Z. All live in Liberia. They are not using their real names because they fear reprisal here in Liberia. Thomas denies the allegations against him.

The case is the first case in the world that is linked to the massacre.

"I am happy and at least I will feel fine because I am hurt and other people are suffering," Kartee says of the lawsuit against Thomas.

"He has been enjoying for long while we have been suffering for long. Let him the man go [and face] justice."

From Church to Slaughterhouse

During the civil war in 1990, soldiers loyal to then President Samuel K. Doe hunted and killed members of the Gio, Mano and Mandingo tribes. Kartee felt unsafe in his Gaye Town residence as the purge of the tribes continued.

His wife warned him against seeking refuge in the St. Peter's Lutheran Church after the killings of many civilians at the UN headquarters (now

headquarters of Lonestar MTN in Congo Town), but he thought it was safer in the church than at home.

There were 2,000 people at the church, mainly women and children.

Kartee recalls: “When the people (soldiers) came, they started shooting.

What made me to survive was when the bullet hit me I dropped and all the other people who they were killing were just falling on top of me.

After the killings, people started flashing flashlights checking around to see whether people were shaking.

They had a finishing team with cutlass killing people.” Kartee lay in the church with the dead bodies still on top and all around him until the next morning.

The tale of his survival is the same as the four people on whose behalf the case has been filed against Thomas.

Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee, 19 at the time, who also sought refuge in the church, narrates her account of the horror in her book “Mighty be our Powers”.

“Among the pews where we sang and prayed, where on Women’s Day husbands and children pinned flowers on their mothers’ clothes, they raped, slashed, shot and hacked,” Gbowee wrote.

“The Gio and Mano inside had pushed open the doors and ran out into gunfire, and there were bodies on every street corner...I saw dead and bloody pregnant women.

A dead man lying with his dead child in his arms, the baby bottle still in his hands.”

The killings did not stop in the church. The soldiers followed the wounded to hospitals and clinics.

Kartee says he saw a woman who he knew from his village in Nimba County being hacked on her hospital bed.

'Dying slowly'

Sitting in a chair at the back of an unfinished building he is taking care of in Soul Clinic in Paynesville, Kartee leans on his right side so as not to hurt the wound on the left side of his buttocks.

He is careful too not to hurt the wounds on his legs. His rips pierce through his skin like a washboard.

His face shows the pain. It is old like a 75-year-old.

Kartee says he lives hell day by day.

"I'm dying slowly," he cries. "As I am sitting, I am bleeding."

He lives on painkillers. He takes them every two hours or so and takes them along wherever he goes. He says he's in need of immediate medical attention.

"If I hear about justice, let justice prevail but I need help. I am suffering, no help.

Maybe this is my last interview...I am bleeding, sometimes water, sometimes blood and sometimes grease. I have no money to go to hospital, but the people who did this thing [to me] are enjoying."

'Small victory'

If Thomas is found guilty, he is only expected to pay the complainants compensation as the lawsuit they filed against him is a civil lawsuit.

War crimes such as torture committed by a non-U.S. citizen outside the United States was criminalized in 1996, six years after the massacre.

However, the civil lawsuit is being hailed by campaigners at home and abroad.

“It is a small victory in a big effort that we hope we yield more fruits in the future,” says Hassan Bility of the Global Justice and Research Project, CJA’s Liberian partner on the case (the other is Civitas Mixima).

“It is also important for us to underscore... the victims and the survivors should understand that they have not been forgotten,” adds Bility.

“This will bring some level of closure, we hope, to the survivors of the Lutheran Church massacre.”

“That is the first step,” says Peterson Sonyah, Executive Director of the Liberia Massacre Survivors Association (LIMASA).

”I think victims and survivors of the St. Peter Lutheran Church massacre will be at peace this evening.”

It brings hope that justice will be served,” says Lovetta Tugbeh of the Coalition for Justice in Liberia, based in California.

Thomas is one of 98 people recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2009 to face prosecution for the crimes they allegedly committed during the civil war as was done in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Liberia is a signatory of the Rome Statute that created the International Criminal Court but more than decade after the end of the war, it is yet to establish a war crimes court.

As cases linked to the Liberian civil war go in the United States and Europe go on, there are high hopes in current President George Weah, who has no war connection.

A number of international civil society organizations, including the ones in connection with Thomas’ case, have urged him to establish a court to end impunity.

The Lutheran massacre case follows the October 2017 conviction of Mohammed Jabateh, an ex-rebel general, who was found guilty by a Philadelphia court of two counts of immigration fraud and perjury for concealing his role in the civil war when he applied for asylum in the United States in the late 1990s.

Expected cases in 2018 include the prosecution Agnes Reeves Taylor for torture in the UK, former rebel commander Martina Johnson for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Belgium, ex –commander with the UNLIMO faction Alieu Kosiah in Switzerland for war crimes and ex-rebel Defense Minister Tom Woewiyu for immigration crimes in the U.S.

“It is sad to note that some of the recommendations of the TRC were implemented but the ones on [war] criminal accountability and economic [crime] accountability were not taken into consideration,” laments Rev. Christopher Wleh Toe, . of the Liberia Council of Churches that helped set up St. Peter’s Lutheran Church for refugees.

“It takes the country backward.”

Report by James Harding Giahyue. This story was produced in collaboration with New Narratives