

Thomas Woewiyu's Trial and Liberia's Quest for Justice

1. Who is Thomas Woewiyu?

Jucontee Thomas Woewiyu was born 1946 in Liberia. Mr. Woewiyu has held legal permanent resident status in the United States since 1972. There, he founded the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia (ACDL) among the Liberian expatriate community in the U.S., an organization that advocated against the regime of the Samuel Doe, then President of Liberia. In 1984, together with Charles Taylor, he founded the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) a rebel faction responsible for numerous war crimes during Liberia's First Civil War (1989 - 1996) and served as its Spokesman and Defense Minister.

Throughout Liberia's First Civil War, records show Mr. Woewiyu traveled between the United States and Liberia. He would frequently meet with news agencies, including the BBC, and speak on behalf of Charles Taylor and the NPFL. Serving as Spokesman and Defense Minister, he allegedly was both directly and indirectly involved in the mass violence and atrocities orchestrated by the NPFL between 1989 and 1994. When ideological differences in 1994 led Mr. Woewiyu to split from Taylor's NPFL and establish the NPFL-CRC (Central Revolutionary Council), he held both founding and leading roles. He reunited with Taylor later after Taylor was elected President in 1997, serving as his Minister of Labor from 1997 to 1999.

In 2014, upon return from a trip to Liberia Mr. Woewiyu was arrested, accused of lying on immigration applications by omitting his role and authority within the NPFL. In June of 2018, he faced justice in PA, Philadelphia, United States.

After three weeks of trial he was found guilty of 11 of 16 counts. For detailed information on the counts [click here](#).

2. Why did Thomas Woewiyu face justice?

While filing naturalization papers in 2006, and again in 2009 after his first application was denied, Mr. Woewiyu failed to disclose his membership in the NPFL, and later NPFL-CRC - both of which were rebel factions during the First Liberian Civil War. He omitted his participation in advocating government overthrow, he denied persecuting people discriminately, and he failed to disclose a previous criminal conviction.

Thomas Woewiyu was charged with:

- 2 counts of fraudulently attempting to obtain citizenship
- 4 counts of fraud in immigration documents
- 3 counts of false statements in relation to naturalization
- 7 counts of perjury.

Specifically, he allegedly lied when asked:

- If he has ever been a member of or associated with any organization, association, fund, foundation, party, club, society, or similar group in the US or any other place, answering yes, however mentioning only one association in the US and not disclosing his membership to the NPFL or NPFL-CRC.
- If he ever advocated (directly or indirectly) to overthrow any government by force or violence, answering no and not disclosing his advocacy to overthrow the government of former Liberian President Samuel Doe.
- If he ever persecuted (directly or indirectly) any person because of race, religion, national origin, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, answering no and not disclosing NPFL membership and persecution of others based on political opinions and race (Krahn and Mandingo tribes).
- If he ever was convicted of a crime or offense - answering no and not disclosing a 1970 conviction in New York State for falsification of business records.

Mr. Woewiyu was held guilty of 11 out of the 16 counts. He faces a maximum sentence of 110 years in prison and a maximum fine of \$4 million. His sentence will be determined on 15 October.

Click [here](#) for a detailed list of the counts and verdict.

3. What was Thomas Woewiyu's defense?

The defense claimed Mr. Woewiyu answered the complex and unclear questions on the immigration application to the best of his ability. Largely through cross-examination of U.S. officials, the defense argued that the government already knew about Woewiyu's ties to the NPFL, because he served as Spokesman and due to the prior investigations on him. His defense attorneys assured that Woewiyu had nothing to do with the persecution of Liberians based on ethnicity, and that Doe's regime was not a legitimate government and he therefore did not lie when he denied ever having participated in the overthrow of a government. The defense called on Mr. Woewiyu's immigration lawyer to testify to the immigration application meeting and claimed a rushed experience. To testify to Mr. Woewiyu's honest and trustworthy character, the defense called Mr. Woewiyu's children.

The defense has announced that it will appeal the verdict.

4. Why is this trial significant?

This trial represents more than a conviction, it is an additional step in the tireless pursuit of justice and accountability for Liberia's victims of war crimes. After both the international community and the Liberian government have failed to provide justice to the numerous victims of the Liberian Civil Wars, these victims are pursuing alternative legal avenues of justice through criminal court proceedings in other countries. This marks the second trial in the U.S. where Liberian victims testified to hold an alleged war criminal accountable for his actions during the First Liberian Civil War (1989-1996).

Mr. Woewiyu is not charged with war crimes, but the alleged fraud is based on connections to war crimes in Liberia - demonstrating that it is becoming increasingly difficult for alleged war criminals to escape the rule of law.

In addition, this is the very first time Liberian victims testified in criminal proceedings about atrocities committed by NPFL forces. The final report of Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recorded over 60,000 violations committed by the NPFL and deemed the NPFL responsible for over 40% of all atrocities committed. This is also the first trial where testimony to 'Operation Octopus' was presented. 'Operation Octopus' was a violent attack on Monrovia in 1992 by the NPFL, which saw the murders of five American nuns among other human rights violations and war crimes.

Furthermore, this trial demonstrates that war crimes committed on multiple sides of the Liberian conflict will be brought to justice. Impunity in Liberia has effectively been challenged via this U.S. immigration trial. Since Mr. Woewiyu is neither the same ethnicity nor from the same fighting faction as "Jungle Jabbah," sentenced in April 2018 (see question 8), accountability is indiscriminate.

5. Why is Woewiyu on trial in the U.S. and not in Liberia?

Mr. Woewiyu was arrested at the Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, USA, in May of 2014 by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. His indictment outlines the total of 16 counts for which he is charged relating to immigration fraud and perjury. Therefore he was tried in the U.S., and proof of his alleged criminal behaviour during Liberia's 1st Civil War served to prove his fraudulent claims on his U.S. immigration applications.

The U.S. has jurisdiction over its own immigration processes and this case is fundamentally about crimes of immigration fraud and perjury committed in the U.S. (see question 2). This does, however, provide the opportunity to document alleged war crimes committed in Liberia by someone residing in the U.S. in a legitimate criminal court of law.

6. Why is Thomas Woewiyu not on trial in front of the International Criminal Court (ICC)?

The ICC in the Hague has only had jurisdiction since July, 2002, and therefore does not have jurisdiction over crimes committed during Liberia's 1st Civil War, spanning from 1989-1996 - which is before the existence of the ICC and before Liberia ratified the Rome Statute, the founding document of the ICC. Liberia ratified the Rome Statute of the ICC in 2004.

In addition, since the charges are related to U.S. immigration and Mr. Woewiyu had legal residency in the U.S., the United States holds jurisdiction.

7. Who is Charles Taylor and what is the NPFL?

Charles Taylor is Liberia's former President (1997-2003) and was the leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) during Liberia's First Civil War.

He was found guilty in 2012 of aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Hague by the Special Court for Sierra Leone and was sentenced to 50 years in prison. Despite his conviction of crimes committed in Sierra Leone, he has not been tried for his alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity during both Liberian Civil Wars (1989-1996 & 1999-2003).

The NPFL is reported to have campaigned for ethnically-targeted killings, conscripted child soldiers, forced women into sexual slavery, organized and carried out 'Operation Octopus.' While the NPFL was committing these crimes, Thomas Woewiyu served as the faction's Spokesman and Defense Minister.

8. What other verdicts and sentences have U.S. courts rendered connected to the Liberian Civil Wars?

Since trying individuals for war crimes is a lengthy and legally highly complex and complicated process in the U.S., often individuals will be tried for non-war-crimes charges, such as immigration-related charges, and their alleged connections to war crimes become an applicable consideration in their legal cases - thus documenting their alleged crimes in a court of law.

Past cases include:

- Mohammed "Jungle Jabbah" Jabateh, was found guilty after three weeks of trial in Philadelphia, PA, of immigration fraud and perjury. The charges were connected to failing to disclose his role with the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) as commander of the rebel faction. In April, 2018, "Jungle Jabbah" was sentenced to 30 years in prison.
- George Boley, Liberian immigrant to the United States was subject to administrative removal proceedings for his connection to the recruitment of child soldiers and extrajudicial killings. He was deported to Liberia in 2012. Mr. Boley was elected in 2017 as part of the Legislator of the Republic of Liberia.

However, there has also been a case where an American citizen was held accountable for atrocities committed during Liberia's Second Civil War:

- Chuckie Taylor, American son of Charles Taylor, was sentenced in 2009 in the U.S. for torture he committed during the Second Liberian Civil War. He was tried for torture, and not immigration-related crimes, as a U.S. citizen and was the first-ever to be tried under 18 U.S.C. § 2340, or the "Torture Act," which states an act of torture committed outside the U.S. by a U.S. national is punishable by law.

9. What is Civitas Maxima's and Global Justice and Research Project's mandate in connection to this case?

Civitas Maxima and Global Justice and Research Project assisted the U.S. authorities' investigations on the case. Furthermore, both organizations have been documenting war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the Liberian civil wars for the past six years. They represent approximately 500 victims in their quest for justice and have developed a unique model in which they work on cases on behalf of victims. Their work contributed to the arrests of Martina Johnson (2014, in Belgium), Alieu Kosiah (2014, in Switzerland), Agnes Taylor (2017, in the UK), and Mohammed "Jungle Jabbah" Jabbateh (2016, in the US). As the primary organizations working on supporting Liberian victims in their quest for justice, they are interested in the impact of the Thomas Woewiyu trial and want to ensure Liberians are well-informed and engaged - (see question 9).

10. What is the Liberian Quest for Justice?

It's an outreach campaign led by Civitas Maxima and its Liberian sister organization, the Global Justice and Research Project. Through cartoons, videos and other artistic tools it provides engaging ways of understanding justice for war crimes in Liberia and the legal aspects of trials of alleged Liberian war criminals. The campaign plays a key role in providing independent reporting from the courtroom in the United States to be relayed in the streets of Liberia and West Africa. Its main objective is to raise awareness of the victims' fight for justice, the Liberian Civil Wars, and alternative avenues for justice, ultimately seeking to empower and support victims quest for justice. The Liberian Quest for Justice followed the Thomas Woewiyu closely, through our partnership with New Narratives, to convey daily trial reports and important information to Liberians in an effort to increase local engagement for the pursuit of justice. New Narratives is a collective of independent African journalists, based in Monrovia, using the media to inform public audiences of accountability. Trial Woewiyu is Chapter II of the campaign and Liberian victims continue to claim justice on a global scale.

11. Why has justice been difficult to achieve in Liberia?

The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by the Liberian Transitional Government in 2005, published its final recommendations in 2009, suggesting that Liberia establish a Special Criminal Court to prosecute war-related crimes. However, Liberia lacks the political will to implement the recommendations and many alleged war criminals hold positions of power making prosecution for war crimes impossible in the national criminal justice system.

12. What will come next?

Other trials of Liberians allegedly implicated in war crimes are expected to happen in the near future. The Liberian Quest for Justice will continue to provide information and explanation of upcoming trials. Civil Society and International Organizations have been

mobilizing efforts on demanding justice for war crimes within Liberia. This will not stop until it happens.

We invite you to join the Liberian Quest for Justice campaign against prevailing impunity in Liberia via our Facebook page. We also invite you to follow our legal monitoring of the trial on our website civitas-maxima.org, as well as our Twitter and Facebook pages. For any questions or inquiries, please contact info@civitas-maxima.org