

Independent Legal
Representation of
Victims of War Crimes
and Crimes Against
Humanity

**CIVITAS
MAXIMA**

The Trial of Laye Sekou Camara

Questions and Answers

On 21 January 2025, Laye Sekou Camara, allegedly a former high-ranking member of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, will stand trial for immigration fraud in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. The trial is expected to last three weeks.

Who is Laye Sekou Camara?

Laye Sekou Camara, also known by his *noms de guerre* General K-1 and General Dragon Master, is alleged to have participated in Liberia's brutal second civil war, which ran from 1999-2003, as a high-ranking member of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a rebel group which committed war crimes and atrocities, resulting in the death and displacement of thousands of Liberians.

What is he charged with?

Sekou Camara was arrested in New York, U.S., on March 26, 2022, pursuant to a criminal complaint submitted to the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. On April 8, 2022, he was released on bail subject to home monitoring except for employment, court and medical visits.

He is charged with three counts of use of a fraudulently obtained immigration document, and one count of possession of a fraudulently obtained immigration document.

The indictment states that in June 2011, Sekou Camara applied for a non-immigrant visa to the US. In this application, he allegedly fraudulently indicated that he was not a member of a tribe, had never served in or been a member of a rebel group or insurgent organization, and had never committed, ordered, incited, assisted or otherwise participated in political killings or other acts of violence. His visa application was approved, and he entered the US for around two months. Almost a year later, he applied for an immigrant visa to reside in the US.

The indictment alleges that in this application for an immigrant visa, Sekou Camara contended he had never sought a visa, or entry into the US, by fraud or misrepresentation, and that he had never engaged in the recruitment or use of child soldiers. His application was approved, and he later received a Green Card which granted him permanent residence in the United States. Once he had obtained this permission, he used the Green Card to apply for a Pennsylvania State identification card, the third document he is alleged to have obtained by fraud.

What crimes is Sekou Camara alleged to have committed during Liberia's civil wars?

Camara is allegedly responsible for numerous atrocities committed during Liberia's second civil war, including being responsible for numerous extrajudicial killings of civilians and the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Why is he only charged with immigration fraud and not the crimes he committed during the civil war?

While torture, war crimes and the recruitment or use of child soldiers are all criminal offenses under U.S. federal law, they are rarely prosecuted. The U.S. has never prosecuted anyone for the criminal offences of war crimes or the recruitment or use of child soldiers, and there have been only two criminal prosecutions (and convictions) of individuals for torture, with two additional cases pending. Chuckie Taylor, the son of Charles Taylor, was the first to be convicted of torture in the U.S. He commanded the notorious Anti-Terrorist Unit in Liberia.

This is because there are certain requirements in the laws that make it difficult to bring cases for those crimes. One of the main legal limitations, particularly for war crimes, is that before 2023, the U.S. could only initiate prosecutions if either the defendant or the victim was a U.S. national and the defendant was present in the U.S. and only for events that took place after August 12, 1996. Additionally, a prosecution had to be brought within 5 years. In 2023, a new law was passed which removed some of these barriers, including the time limit, so prosecutions can now take place at any time after the alleged crime and neither the defendant nor the victim no longer need be a US national. However, the new law is not explicitly retroactive so it may not apply to crimes committed before January 5, 2023.

Similarly, the criminal offense of recruitment or use of child soldiers can only be applied to acts that took place on or after October 3, 2008, and a case must be brought within 10 years. It would be difficult to apply these charges to the case of Sekou Camara given these limitations. The authorities therefore must find other creative ways to hold individuals accountable, like through immigration proceedings. For example, George Boley, the former leader of the Liberian Peace Council, responsible for human rights abuses during the civil war in the 1990's was deported from the U.S. for the use and recruitment of child soldiers. This was the first ever removal under the Child Soldiers Accountability Act.

How was the case investigated?

The case was investigated by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), a federal agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Amongst other things, HSI has the legal authority to investigate human rights violations committed by individuals who knowingly misrepresent information in order to travel to or stay in the US. Their agents conduct investigations in the U.S. and abroad to identify both perpetrators for prosecution and enable victims to come to the US and testify.

How will the trial be conducted?

A United States Attorney will prosecute the case, which will be heard by a 12-member jury. The defendant will be represented by his own attorneys. A judge will oversee the trial

to ensure compliance with procedural rules and decide what evidence is admissible for the jury's consideration. While the judge manages the trial process, the jury is responsible for determining the defendant's guilt or innocence.

The trial will begin with the opening statements of both the prosecution and the defense. The prosecution will then begin its case by presenting evidence and calling witnesses. The defense will have the chance to question these witnesses through cross-examination. After the prosecution's case is complete, the defense will present its own witnesses and evidence, which the prosecution can also cross-examine.

Following the presentation of evidence, both sides will deliver their closing arguments. The judge will provide the jury with instructions on the relevant laws to apply. The jury will deliberate in private and must reach a unanimous verdict to convict the defendant in a federal criminal case, ensuring guilt is proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Their decision will be announced in court by the jury foreperson.

How long is the trial of Sekou Camara expected to last and what are the possible outcomes?

The trial is expected to last three weeks. If the defendant is found guilty, the judge will determine the appropriate sentence. Sekou Camara faces a maximum possible sentence of 40 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

What happened in Liberia during the civil wars?

In 1985, General Thomas Quiwonkpa led an attempted coup d'état against then-Liberian President Samuel Doe. The failure of the coup d'état forced many opponents of President Doe into exile. Charles Ghankay Taylor, a former official in Doe's government, took over the leadership of a rebel group called the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) that had been founded in Cote d'Ivoire to bring together disparate groups opposing President Doe. The NPFL fighters launched their first offensive to overthrow Doe in December 1989 marking the start of the country's first civil war. President Doe was tortured and killed in 1990 by a breakaway faction of the NPFL, an event that was widely televised in Liberia.

In early 1991, the war had spread to neighboring Sierra Leone. The United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), which brought together supporters of the former regime of Samuel Doe, led attacks against the NPFL from Sierra Leone starting in May 1991. Several other armed movements developed in Liberia, each seeking to gain control of the country's natural resources, while the country descended into anarchy.

In September 1993, the United Nations Security Council created the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to assist the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in trying to establish peace. The Abuja Accord was signed on August 17,

1996, ending Liberia's first civil war. Following the Accord, fighters were disarmed and peaceful elections were held. Charles Taylor of the NPFL, with 75% of the vote, was elected Liberia's President.

During Taylor's presidency, despite an initial attempt to foster reconciliation, divisions continued to form along ethnic lines. To eliminate any potential opposition, Taylor began to rid the government of Krahn and Mandingos. Those who had been ousted by Taylor's regime formed an armed group called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD).

First taking control of a small part of northern Liberia in 1999, assisted by another rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), LURD escalated the war in 2003 with an attack on Monrovia. Widespread violations of international law were reported, including the killing of civilians, sexual violence, looting and the recruitment and use of child soldiers. The war finally ended in 2003, following the resignation of Charles Taylor and the deployment of peacekeepers. In 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected as President.

What is LURD?

The second Liberian civil war, waged from 1999-2003, was fought primarily between the government forces of Charles Taylor and two rebel groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). Both groups are known to have committed war crimes and atrocities – included looting, rape, forced labour, murder of civilians, and the recruitment and use of child soldiers – resulting in the death and displacement of thousands of Liberians.

LURD was created in 1999 by a group of predominantly Mandingo dissidents in the refugee camps of Guinea. Their stated goal was to remove Charles Taylor from power and they were recognized as one of the “significant violator groups” active during the second Liberian civil war by the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

What does this case mean for victims of Liberia's civil wars and Liberian communities?

While Sekou Camara is not being charged for the crimes he committed in Liberia, it will still be necessary for the prosecution to prove that he was responsible for certain violations. For example, to prove that Camara fraudulently answered the question of whether he had ever engaged in the use or recruitment of child soldiers in his application for U.S. residency, it will need to be established by the prosecution that he had indeed been involved in such acts. In this way, some of the crimes that took place in Liberia will be on record in the U.S., and Camara's prosecution could serve as a measure of justice for victims of his crimes.

What other efforts have been made to ensure justice for crimes committed during Liberia's civil wars?

On May 2, 2024, the President of Liberia, Joseph Nyuma Boakai, signed Executive Order No. 131 establishing an Office with the specific mandate of setting up a Special War Crimes Court and a National Anti-Corruption Court. While this marks a positive step towards accountability for the crimes committed during the two Liberian civil wars, Liberians have not yet been unable to obtain justice at home. For many years, they have had to resort to pursuing justice outside their borders. For example:

- 2017: first criminal conviction of a Liberian national for acts related to the civil war (Mohammed Jabbateh case, United States);
- 2018: second criminal conviction of a Liberian national for acts related to the civil war (Thomas Woewiyu case, United States);
- 2021: first criminal conviction of a Liberian national for war crimes (Alieu Kosiah case, Switzerland);
- 2022: first criminal conviction of a Liberian national for crimes against humanity (Kunti Camara case, France).
- 2024: acquittal of Gibril Massaquoi for war crimes, crimes against humanity torture and murder (Gibril Massaquoi case, Finland).

The hope is that cases like these will help spur the Liberian government to dedicate sufficient resources and expertise to a court in Liberia that would allow the Liberian victims' quest for justice to manifest in their own country, where they experienced so much suffering at the hands of the armed forces and rebel groups.

Are other individuals currently being investigated outside Liberia for crimes committed during the civil wars?

Several other Liberian cases are also under investigation:

Case of Martina Johnson in Belgium

Martina Johnson, an alleged former artillery commander of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), was arrested in 2014 in Belgium on suspicion of war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed during the first Liberian civil war. This was the very first time an alleged Liberian perpetrator was charged with core international crimes committed in Liberia during the first civil war. The investigation is still ongoing.

Case of Saturday Tuah in France

Saturday Tuah was arrested in France in September 2023 for his alleged involvement in crimes against humanity committed during the first Liberian civil war (1989-1996) where he is believed to have been acting as a commander of the NPFL. The investigation is still ongoing.

Case of Moses Wright in the United States

On June 23, 2022, an indictment against Former Commanding General of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) was unsealed. Arrested in Philadelphia, Wright is suspected of having lied to U.S. immigration authorities about atrocities he allegedly committed or ordered troops under his command to commit, including the persecution, murder and imprisonment of civilians. Moses Wright will be the first ever member of the Armed Forces of Liberia military to be tried for crimes related to the Liberian civil wars.

How can the public, journalists and communities in Liberia follow the trial proceedings?

The trial will take place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and is scheduled to begin at 8.30 am EST on Tuesday, 21 January 2025. The trial will take place in courtroom 11-B before Honorable Chad F. Kenney. The trial is open to the public and the court is located at:

James A. Byrne U.S. Courthouse
601 Market Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Civitas Maxima with a team of pro-bono help will be attending the trial every day. We will publish summaries of the trial on our [website](#). Once the trial is complete, Civitas Maxima will publish a full report of the trial.

As the trial will not be streamed online, individuals in Liberia cannot follow the trial “live”. However, you can follow proceedings via Civitas Maxima’s updates and through the reports of journalists from [New Narratives](#), a non-profit organisation supporting independent journalism in Africa.