

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

**STATEMENT OF
YAHSYNDI MARTIN-KPEYEI
HUMAN RIGHT ADVOCATE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE
CO-CHAIR BOARD OF DIRECTORS,
INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE GROUP (IJG)
TESTIMONY**

**Liberia: Next Steps toward Accountability for War & Economic Crimes”
June 13, 2024- 10:30 a.m.**

THE CHAIRPERSON AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, UNITED STATES CONGRESSIONAL HEARING GREETINGS, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN:

I would like to acknowledge and thank you for the opportunity to hear our story three years (on June 21, 2021): the story about Liberia’s women and children and the civil crisis. We are forever grateful to the Thomas Lantos Human Rights Commission for another opportunity to add our voice today to “The next step.”

Let me also thank the United States government that gave many of us a second chance and created a safe space for us not to only live but also to grow and develop. This Commission has given a voice and face to the women and children who endured 14-year horror called the

Liberian Civil War: this war impacted every town and village in Liberia.

Introduction

My name is Yahsyndi Martin-Kpeyei and I was born in Liberia and was a victim of the first civil war. I am one of hundreds of thousands of Liberians who were victimized by the civil wars and the massive atrocities committed during that time. It has been my personal mission to seek justice and accountability for the 250,000 Liberians killed and for the victims affected by the civil wars.

So, today I am here on behalf of the Movement for Justice for Liberia, a non-profit organization, based in Atlanta, GA. Our organization advocates for women and children, groups that were disproportionately and adversely impacted by the Liberian civil war. I stand on the shoulder of many Liberia civil rights and advocacy groups that have campaigned for the rights of Liberians.

Our organization worked along with other human rights organizations in garnering grass roots support for the establishment of the war and economic crimes court for Liberia and I would like to acknowledge the efforts of groups that gathered over 300,000 signatures of Liberians across Liberia and those signatories that showed the eminent needs for justice and accountability: those signatures were presented here as petitions in 2022. Congressman Smith you will recall in May 2022 we presented the original petitions to you at the steps of the Capitol to demonstrate to you the unwavering and unrelenting desire of the people of Liberia for the establishment of the war and economic crimes court. Those petitions were followed by an open letter to President Joseph Boakai on the “Potential Pitfalls of Executive Order 131” on the occasion of the signing of an executive order to explore the process leading to the establishment of war crime tribunal and an anticorruption court in Liberia. Some of the pitfalls include other who would try to exploit the establishment of the war and economic crimes court for personal gain and not for the people of Liberia, which I discuss later in my testimony.

The Need for Justice and Accountability

Today’s appearance before you furthers the efforts for justice and accountability in Liberia. I am appearing today to reflect on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC) and to reflect on the war that robbed me of my childhood: the results for which we continue to struggle. The work from the TRC recommended the establishment of the War & Economic Crimes Court (WECC) for Liberia and created the road map to the future of my birth nation. We are here to add our voices to those of Liberians seeking progression on the work of the TRC: “Next Steps toward Accountability for War & Economic Crimes.”

Reflection on the Liberian Civil Crisis

In December 1990, while living in Liberia during the civil war, my mother gathered my siblings and me together and warned us that there were rebels in the country and fighting a war: they were reportedly coming for the president (President Samuel K Doe). We had gone through horrible experiences during the years of Doe: the streets were turned into killing fields with bodies being discovered as days turned into weeks. As the war engulfed Liberia, children were taken from their parents, drugged, and conscripted for killing purposes. Women and girls were conscripted or abducted and became properties of fighters on both sides of the conflicts. At times, we heard cries of many pleading for their lives: sometimes, I still hear some of those voices. On July 31, 1990, I remembered when a doctor from the ELWA Hospital (in Monrovia) brought to the Graystone

compound (an annex of the US Embassy near Monrovia and our place of refuge) a young man who had survived the Lutheran Church Massacre in Sinkor, Monrovia.

The survivor, "Jimmy," had a severe wound that exposed his internal organs; when Jimmy was discovered, he had been butchered and left for dead.

After months in the Graystone compound, my mother decided it was time for us to leave and seek refuge in neighboring Sierra Leone. As we trek out of the compound and through Monrovia, the scenes were unbelievable: a river filled with young and old bloated bodies (male and female). We encountered soldiers of the rebel groups: children with bloodthirsty eyes with no human feeling (the scenes in the movie Blood Diamond provide mild depictions of my experience). Next, we trekked out to Brewerville, where we were caught in the middle of a skirmish between two rebel groups. After the fight had subsided, all houses were checked, and those that sought refuge from the fight were lined up to be killed. I witnessed an incident where a woman was ordered to be raped by her son. Afterward, she was killed. Then, the commanders returned for the next group, but through some miraculous intervention, the commander, Colonel Varney of the INPFL, called off the execution of those that had been caught and lined up: including my family and me. My story and shared experience are not unique: there are listless Liberians with similar stories.

Why I Advocate for Justice and Accountability

This experience shaped my fight for justice. This experience framed my advocacy for women and children. This experience occurred in the first phase of the civil conflict.

We believe hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Unfortunately, our people are increasingly losing hope for some form of justice. Some of our people are slowly departing from this world without realizing justice for their loved ones. In 2020, Tori Ward, an advocate for justice, who lost her father (Dr. Victor Ward), departed this world without seeing justice that she yearned for her loss and We also lost one of the signatories from the 300 thousand in 2022 , Mrs.

Davitta Tarley a survival and victim who 2 children were killed by the NPFL Rebels and her husband beheaded and his skull used at the check while making their way to the INPFL for help after the murdered of their children without getting the justice that she fought for . Equally, the perpetrators of war crimes are also passing or getting old, and their memories are fading.

As a survivor of the Liberian civil war, I experienced the result of human shortcoming:

the wickedness and depravity that people would willingly go in the name of power. I witnessed the unimaginable: the extent to which people exact pain, cruelty, and human suffering on vulnerable populations for temporary pleasure and greed. Those experiences scarred my memory; although those scars are not visible, their psychological effects will be long-lasting.

We can surmise that the war was never about the redemption of our people; after the death of President Doe in September 1990, the fighting did not end, instead other warring factions (THE ULIMO K & J, AFL, LPC, MODEL, LDF, LURD, ATU) sprung up and extended the conflict to fourteen years.

The Urgent and Cautious Need for Justice and Accountability

We believe Liberia is at an extremely critical moment in time. Almost twenty-one years since the cessation of civil conflicts, you remain our last hope for justice: based our relationship with you and as leader of the free world. Many of survivors have reached points (boiling points): it is just a matter of time and not when. People will start taking the law into their own hands. WE speak not only for justice that is long overdue, but to protect the future from what the women and children of Liberia endured and continue to endure.

I appear today on behalf of the Movement for Justice and the women and children to support the process leading to establishing the War and Economic Crime Court (WECC) in Liberia. We seek justice for the victims of the Liberian civil conflict. We seek justice for those who have departed this world seeking justice for their loved ones in Liberia.

While we seek justice and accountability for the victims of the war, we are also cautious how false allegations and fraudulent processes that taint noble goals and objectives when person interests supersede national interests. There are individuals and some organizations who have accused individuals of committing war crimes and those cases have prosecuted: during trials there were allegations of witness tampering and coaching. In 2020, we wrote an article in the Spotlight newspaper cautioning those involved in the coaching witnesses. In one instance, we flew to Liberia and met with Darius Tweh. Mr Tweh provided an insider's account on the practice of recruitment and coaching. Mr. Tweh testified before the world at the Gibril Massaquoi trial that he had worked along Mr. Hassan Bility on fraudulent war crime trials.

We have waited so long for justice and now we learn that Hassan Bility, someone who has been proven to be involved in a witness coaching scheme that coached people to provide false information and lie under oath for personal and financial gain, cannot be affiliated with the

establishment of the war and economic crimes court. We are baffled why the US government would support Bility and others involved in coaching witnesses to lie and be a part of the court. We urge Congress not to let the US government allow Bility or any of his affiliates to be involved in any way of the establishing the court as they will undermine the credibility and do irreparable harm to the court by tainting it from the beginning! The people of Liberia deserve a court that everyone can believe is just, transparent and free from people that have been involved in criminal activities.

Conclusion

I would like to close with this quote from the UN Special Representative to Liberia

(Jacque Klein) in an interview with World Chronicle in 2004: "The poor of Liberia were forgotten for so long." Members of the Commission, you can help us remember the poor of Liberia...Support the Establishment of the War and Economic Crime Court in Liberia to bring accountability: this would provide remembrance for the forgotten. Thank you.