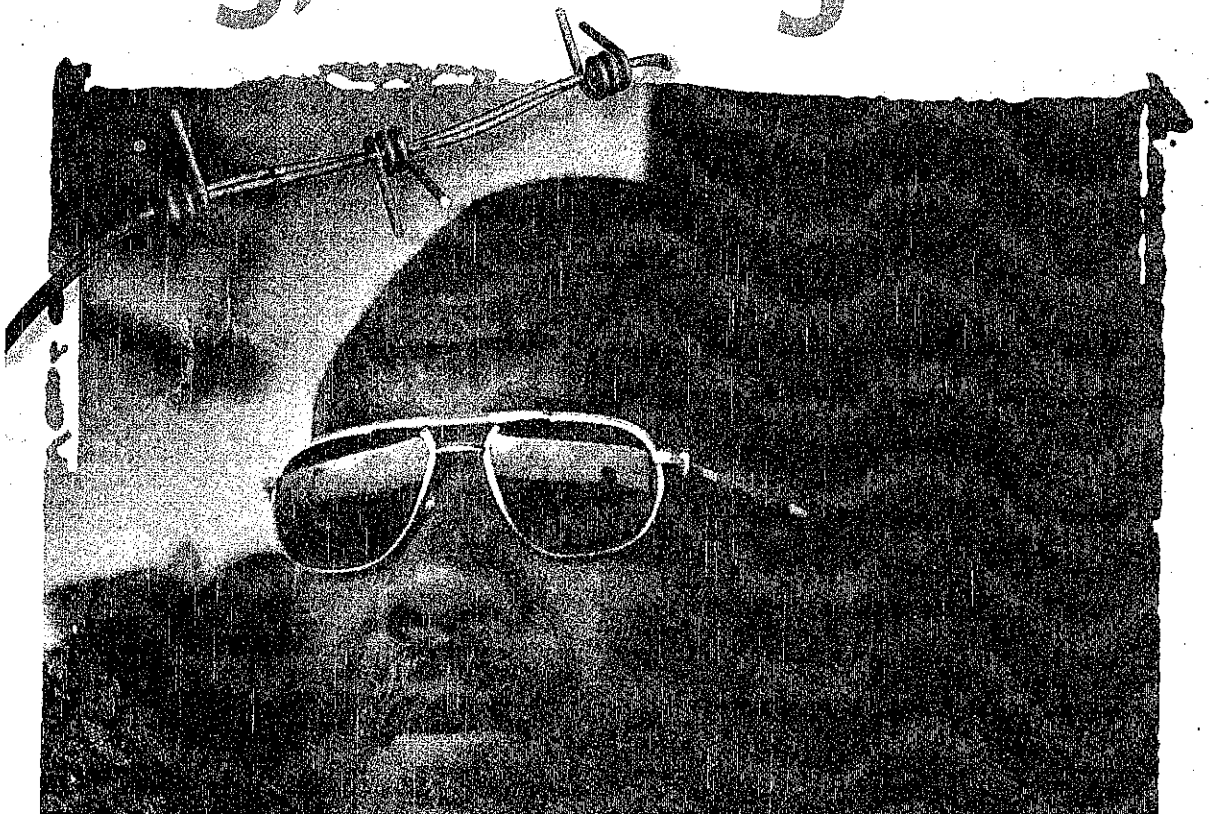
Staten Island's West Africans:

Watching, waiting

Following years of terror in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Taylor's war crimes trial begins tomorrow

By TEVAH PLATT
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE



The trial of Charles Taylor, the warlord who became Liberia's president, is set to begin tomorrow in the Dutch city of The Hague. Taylor is the first head of an African state ever to be indicted for war crimes; the world is watching.

"Liberians are really anxious," said Telee Brown, vice president of the Staten Island Liberian Community Association (SILCA). "They want to know what's going to happen to Charles Taylor, and to show other warlords that what they do will not go free of charge."

Staten Island is home to thousands of West Africans and one of the largest Liber-

country that you fall in tears."

Sierra Leoneans also grieve.

"The community hasn't discussed the trial so much," said Ahmed Kargbo, president of the Sierra Leone Community Association. "People are putting the past behind them. Many try to refrain from even thinking about it. To me, his trial might bring closure to some events, but the wounds are still raw. Most of those wounds will never heal."

Some Liberians on the Island, including SILCA chairman Rufus Arkoi and Rose Kingston, founder of Stapleton's Century Dance Complex, which provides services to refugee youth, say they feel frustrated that many individuals responsible for war crimes in their country have not been prosecuted.

"Charles Taylor is the reason why I'm in exile. The war has left me with memories and nightmares that will never go away," said Ms. Kingston. "But there are so many more who need to be

Taylor, who started Liberia's civil war in 1989 and served six years as president following his election in 1997, is accused of backing the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, who were guilty of atrocities in neighboring Sierra Leone. It was an era when the machete ruled, when insurgencies fomented brutal chaos: The rape of women and girls, the extraction of tongues, the butchering of innocents.

Human rights groups hold Taylor responsible for providing arms to the RUF rebels, in exchange for diamonds and political power, as well as for causing widespread instability in West Africa throughout the 1990s. Tens, possibly hundreds, of thousands were killed in the interrelated conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone; strife spread also to neighboring sections of Ivory Coast and Guinea.

"Charles Taylor is one of the mega-murderers of the 20th century," said David Crane, a law professor at Syracuse University and founding chief prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, who called Taylor's indictment "a new dawn for the people of Africa."

Political analysts frequently characterize Taylor, who maintains his innocence, as a great manipulator, a charismatic leader who was able to win loyalty even among those who were victimized under his regime. In Liberia, where he received 75 percent of the vote in the election of 1997, supporters had chanted on the streets the unlikely campaign slogan: "He killed my ma. He killed my pa. But I will vote for him."

Today, in the headquarters of the International Criminal Court, Taylor stands accused of crimes committed in Sierra Leone, including rape, pillage and the use of child soldiers. The brutal civil war in Sierra Leone that began in 1991 had effectively spilled over from the civil war in Liberia. Taylor's own fighters joined the ranks of RUF leader Foday Sankoh, whose rebels used Liberia as a base and channel for the exchange of arms and diamonds.

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/ALBERTO CERVANTES

At his first appearance before the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Taylor hesitated to enter a plea, informing Justice Richard Lussick that he did not recognize the court's jurisdiction. But he ultimately responded to all 11 counts:

"Most definitely, your Honor, I did not, could not have committed these acts against the sister republic of Sierra Leone." Video footage of this staid appearance filmed in April 2006 can be viewed on the court's Web site at www.sc-sl.org.

Taylor still commands considerable loyalty in Liberia and, to a lesser extent, among Staten Island's Liberian population. After deposing the former dictator Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, who was later assassinated, the warlord had appealed to his countrymen with a rhetoric of reform and liberation.

Leaders of the Island's Liberian community say that most of his initial constituency came to regret his ascension to power and hold him at least partly responsible for the brutality that spread through West Africa.

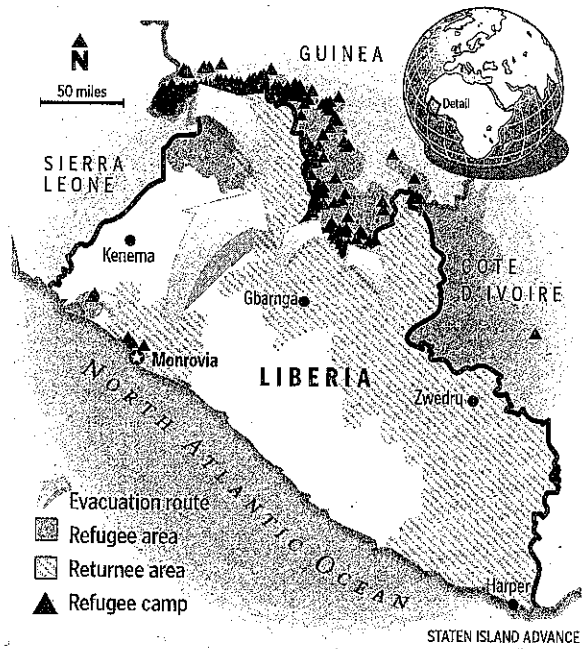
George Curtis, president of the community association, estimates that some 65 percent of Liberians and at least 85 percent of Liberian Islanders are glad to see Taylor brought to justice.

"I believe what the Bible says, you will reap what you sow," he said. "The evidence is there. He made his bed hard, he will sleep in it hard."

If found guilty, Taylor would face life imprisonment, possibly in Britain.

"The trial is meaningful because of the suffering and the needless killing that went on during the time of the civil war," said the Rev. G. Laurenzo Stevens, pastor of West Brighton's New Life Church, where the congregation is predominantly Liberian. "We all felt the enormous pain of the civil war. These are moments you remember in the history of the

1980 to early 1990's: Diaspora from Liberia



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

I've Taylor should be punished, but it angers me that all the spotlight is on him. And if he rots in jail, it's not going to take away even a piece of the pain that I feel."

Muctarr Jalloh of Sunnyside, a Wagner College graduate who advocated for victims of war in his native Sierra Leone, holds Taylor largely responsible for the destruction in his country— where he witnessed rape, beheadings and the amputation of his own arm against a mango tree.

"The war in Sierra Leone is something that no one can ever explain in words," he said. "I blame Charles Taylor a lot because all of the diamonds and ammunition were coming through him."

"He has to pay for what he has done," said Zainab Bangra of the Park Hill section of Clifton, who fled Sierra Leone in 1997 and sells wares at the West African outdoor market on Sobel Court. "We cannot undo what he has done. But for people to hear he has been convicted, everyone will be satisfied."

But the trial represents more than retribution to those who blame Taylor. Religious and civic leaders among the Island's West African community and human rights groups worldwide herald the trial as a sign of the end of impunity for warlords.

"There are lessons to be learned," said SILCA vice president Brown. "There are other warlords who are still around, in Monrovia, and even here in America. They are waiting to see what will happen to Charles Taylor. This will be a new chapter in the history of international justice."

Following tomorrow's opening statements, the prosecution is scheduled to present evidence beginning June 25. The trial is expected to last for about 18 months.

Tevah Platt is a news reporter for the Advance. She may be reached at platt@siadvance.com.

He wakes each day with a wound in his heart

A survivor, Muctarr Jalloh looks to the future, but never forgets atrocities of his painful past

By TEVAH PLATT
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Maneuvering his prosthetic arm with the muscles in his back, Muctarr Jalloh writes his name. He ties his shoelace. He hands over his bus fare.

These seemingly trivial moments assume terrific importance in the young man's life. They turn the wobbly stone that caps his past, exposing his memories to the light.

"Sometimes you want to do something, and you can't do it," says Jalloh, who began a new life in Sunnyside after surviving atrocities in his native Sierra Leone. "That is the wound in your mind. That is the wound in your heart. The moment you can't do something, you reflect on what happened to you."

Jalloh was a teen-ager at the outset of his native country's brutal civil war, in 1991. His age today is impossible to read in the light fuzz of his mustache, his babyish cheeks, his knowing eyes brightening in the frame of deep crow's feet when he smiles. He is 29.

Charles Taylor, the warlord who became Liberia's president, backed the rebel leader Foday Sankoh and his Revolutionary United Front (RUF) when the decade-long war broke out in Sierra Leone, accompanied by horrific attacks on civilians.

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/CHAD RACHMAN

Muctarr Jalloh lost his arm in the atrocities in Sierra Leone. He currently practices social work at Coney Island Hospital in Brooklyn, and resides in Sunnyside with two other men from Sierra Leone, both double amputees.

SPECIAL REPORT: WARLORD ON TRIAL

The Advance's three-day special series about former Liberian president Charles Taylor concludes today with profiles of two more expatriates whose lives were forever changed by forces Taylor put into motion in Western Africa in 1989. Taylor passed through Staten Island in 1989 on his way back to his native country, after escaping from a prison near Boston, Mass. The North Shore of Staten Island is home to one of the largest populations of Liberians outside Liberia.

Yesterday, Taylor boycotted the first day of his trial for war crimes in The Hague, saying he did not believe he would receive a fair trial; his defense attorney also walked out.

After a two-month hospital stay, Jalloh entered refugee camps — first the Waterloo camp, on the outskirts of Freetown, then in Aberdeen, following a major attack on Freetown in 1999. By the end of 1998, rebels had killed Jalloh's father in Kabala and six of his family members.

In August, Jalloh took on a life-altering role when he was elected president of the Victims of War advocacy group in the refugee camp. He supposes he garnered votes because he was laid-back and friendly; it turned out he also had a talent for leadership.

For the next two years, Jalloh gave speeches to visiting dignitaries and helped secure medical care, food, supplies and schooling for victims of war.

Jalloh smiles as he remembers:

"People looked to me as a parent. This job gave me life. ... In the camp, I was looking to the future."

In 2000, the Rotary Gift of Limbs Project, a New York coalition, brought Jalloh and eight other war amputees to Staten Island to receive prosthetic limbs. Local organizations — Rotary clubs, the ARIMED prosthetics firm, Staten Island University Hospital and the Staten Island Hotel, helped give Jalloh and his companions shelter, prosthetic limbs and new hope; Jalloh received asylum in 2001.

FINDING THE DREAM

When Wagner College president Dr. Richard Guarasci surprised Jalloh by extending him a scholarship

child soldiers, waged offensives that killed tens of thousands and displaced millions with programs of arson, looting and massacre.

"It was a horrible thing," Jalloh remembers. "The things that happened in Sierra Leone, no one can ever explain in words. It's like nothing else in the history of war."

By 1998, the government in Sierra Leone had toppled; the RUF had joined ranks with the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council military junta, and Jalloh had left his hometown in Kabala province still nursing a dream of entering technical school.

He had traveled south that year to Kono District to request money from his uncle for his education, when the city came under attack. Gun shells blasted. Residents fled.

For the next three months, Jalloh banded with his uncle and his uncle's family and hid in the nearby jungle, foraging to survive.

WITNESS TO BRUTALITY

In a notebook, Jalloh began keeping a diary he titled "Struggle in the Bush." It chronicled the brutality he witnessed — the raping of women and the murder of innocents — and his own story of survival.

Jalloh's book was burned the day he lost his arm, the day his uncle's baby was drowned in a toilet, the day a rebel commander's whim averted his own beheading.

On April 19, 1998, Jalloh and his party began walking toward the city of Koidu, hoping the area might be protected by peacekeeping forces. But rebels were everywhere. In the town of Tombodu, a group of armed boys, aged 10 to 13, and two adults carrying rocket-propelled grenade launchers met them on the road and ordered them to their nearby base.

Under a grove of trees Jalloh was ordered to stand in a line with six other men, men whom he watched beheaded, one by one.

"You would come put your head on the trunk of a tree, and the guy would blow a whistle and then just *fsst*. Cut off your head. It was like, *pam, pam, pam*. You would put your head down. 'Next! Next!' Like that."

Jalloh would have been the seventh. But in the roulette of war's chaos, the sound of rebels shouting nearby annoyed a commander, who ordered the rebels to leave Jalloh and go quiet the noise.

Next, a rebel soldier sacked Jalloh's pockets and burned his documents— his notebook, his high school diploma and his Scout ID card. He tied back Jalloh's arms and legs, binding him to a pole like an animal hung to roast, and beat him with a group of soldiers for five straight hours. As evening approached, a rebel took Jalloh aside and ordered him to

> *"You would come put your head on the trunk of a tree, and the guy would blow a whistle and then just fsst. Cut off your head. It was like, pam, pam, pam. You would put your head down. 'Next! Next!' Like that."*
>
> — MUCTARR JALLOH

hold out his right arm. He ordered his uncle to hold it steady. Over Jalloh's pleading, the rebel sliced him across the hand with an old machete, then held his arm against a mango tree and chopped at the limb, he remembers, "like someone chopping meat."

The rebels that day amputated Jalloh's right ear and his uncle's arm. They drowned his uncle's baby.

Jalloh finally staggered away. He took a few steps at a time in any direction, fainting intermittently. He lost his family in the darkness of night and mind.

RACE AGAINST TIME

Walking nearly seven miles, Jalloh finally reached the town of Koquimoa, where he joined as many as 100 amputees awaiting transport to a hospital in the capital city of Freetown. Blood drained from his body. Nineteen days passed before he reached a hospital, and when he got there, he gave up hope as he watched the patients on both sides of him die.

He found the dream he had abandoned the moment he lost his arm.

Jalloh graduated in 2005 and now practices social work at Coney Island Hospital in Brooklyn. He lives in Sunnyside with two other men from Sierra Leone, both double amputees.

The trial of Charles Taylor was to have begun this week in the Dutch city of The Hague, over Taylor's role in the war in Sierra Leone, where the RUF carried out programs such as Operation Burn House, Operation Pay Yourself and Operation No Living Thing. Analysts struggle to apply logic to a campaign in which rebels committed countless brutal acts against the people they claimed to represent.

Jalloh says he hopes the warlord and all supporters of the rebellion will be brought to justice. But he wishes the funds and resources going to the trial could go toward rebuilding his country.

"Let the world see that what they did is wrong," he says. "Trying them is a good thing. But the millions spent on the trial could be spent on the people of Sierra Leone, to support the people who suffered. There are people for whom surviving is really hard. The wounds are in our minds."

The war in Sierra Leone ended in 2002. Millions survived with "wounds in their minds"; tens of thousands still pause as they struggle over pen strokes and shoelaces.

Tevah Platt is a news reporter for the Advance. She may be reached at platt@siadvance.com.

Survivor of atrocities on a mission to aid others

From horrid civil war to life as an advocate on the North Shore

By TEVAH PLATT
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

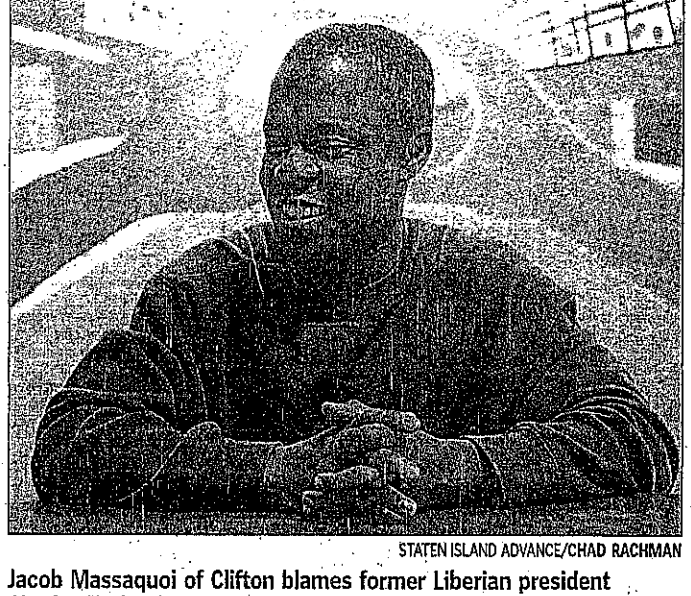
Hiding in the eave of a roof — starving and forced to relieve himself where he lay— Jacob Massaquoi had three days to remember the massacre he had just survived and to plot his escape across rebel lines in his native Liberia.

The 18-year-old Massaquoi could not have then known that instead of running toward safety, he was headed toward a death trap and would witness further atrocities on the other side of Liberia's civil war. He would barely escape with his life.

"On both sides of the war, a policy of deception led to the death of many innocent people caught up in the conflict," says Massaquoi, 35, who heads the African Refuge community center in the Park Hill section of Clifton. He blames former Liberian president Charles Taylor for instituting a "policy of terror" that only redirected the brutality enacted under his predecessor, Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe.

In Massaquoi's view, Taylor preyed on the deep ani-

SEE SURVIVOR, PAGE A 4



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/CHAD RACHMAN

Jacob Massaquoi of Clifton blames former Liberian president Charles Taylor for instituting a "policy of terror."

SPECIAL REPORT: WARLORD ON TRIAL

The Advance's three-day special series about former Liberian president Charles Taylor continues today with profiles of two Staten Islanders whose lives were forever changed by forces Taylor put into motion in Western Africa in 1989.

Taylor's trial for war crimes began today in The Hague; Taylor said he did not believe he would receive a fair trial and boycotted its opening.

The series will conclude tomorrow with two more profiles.

SURVIVOR FROM PAGE A 1

Survivor of atrocities on a mission to aid others

mosity that oppressed Liberians felt toward Doe's government — promising liberation and a new government to be based on justice, equal rights and the rule of law.

"When the war started a

Reported first on silive.com yesterday at 7:17 p.m.

Refuge deliver psychological support to victims of trauma.

Massaquoi is a member of

A soldier approached with a torch light. Massaquoi lay still. The man who'd been shot was still shaking. The soldier shot him again. Daylight ended the massacre and soldiers departed. For fifteen

shot behind him and knew his brother was dead.

That's when he hid in the eave of an abandoned building— where coincidentally, Augustus— the sergeant who had saved him during the

when a Kisi officer boasted of taking part in the church massacre.

On August 9, Massaquoi's 19th birthday, Taylor's rebels took over the Monrovian district where he was staying, in

the next two years in the hospital and an orthopedic clinic where his leg was reconstructed.

"While at the hospital, I almost committed suicide," remembers Massaquoi. "I also realized that life was sweeter

quoi. "He misled my countrymen and instituted a policy of terror. People were transformed into killing machines overnight."

Massaquoi had just graduated from high school in 1989, when the war broke out in his hometown of Butuo in Nimba County; he has never been home since.

A DEVOTED ADVOCATE

In the early years of the war, Massaquoi remembers that Doe's armies and Taylor's forces both carried out policies of ethnic cleansing — not popularly supported — with Doe persecuting the Mano and Gio tribes and Taylor targeting the Krahn and Mandingo tribes, along with intellectuals and government employees, from security guards to schoolteachers.

"I watched that," says Massaquoi, in the gentle staccato of his accent. "I saw that. It drove some of us to become advocates for the oppressed."

Massaquoi would lose several inches of his right leg to the conflict, and counts nine the number of times that he barely eluded death.

In Park Hill, Massaquoi works at all hours to serve the immigrant community, balancing projects that help residents secure jobs, education, housing and healthcare; various programs at African

in New York University's School of Public Service and a man who won't pass anyone on the street without offering a handshake and a soft-spoken greeting. He came to Staten Island in 2002. His accent is thick; he is short, but not slight, and he walks with a barely discernable limp.

His war story begins in 1990, when he had just started school at the University of Monrovia. Massaquoi learned that his landlord had betrayed him and his brother— who belong to the Gio tribe— and was to hand them over to be executed by a group of Krahn soldiers. They fled immediately to army barracks where another brother resided, also in Monrovia, but it became an untenable refuge after soldiers opened fire on anti-war demonstrators who marched in the city that May.

Amid the chaos of gunfire, a friend of his brother's, a sergeant named Augustus, saved Massaquoi's life when he whisked him into his Ford Escort and brought him to St. Peter's Lutheran Church, a complex of church offices and classrooms where thousands of refugees were seeking safe haven.

SURVIVING A MASSACRE

Massaquoi survived an infamous massacre there on July 22, 1990, when the Army forced open the gates and began shooting indiscriminately through the night. They loaded trucks with corpses to be dumped on a nearby beach, remembers Massaquoi, who took cover behind an embankment in the compound where a man next to him was shot in the head.

"The whole blood and brains splashed over me," remembers Massaquoi. "To be honest, the life went out of me. I thought I was dead."

bers utter silence. Then, the survivors began crying.

"That's just the beginning of my journey," Massaquoi says quietly.

The victims of the massacre, with the wounded in a wheelbarrow, sought help at the nearby U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but Massaquoi says they were seen as a threat to the facility and were turned away.

"Since the government considered us *personae non gratae* in Monrovia, I started to march [with my brother] toward the rebel lines. Little did we know about the atrocities taking place across rebel lines," says Massaquoi.

Walking toward Taylor's territory, Massaquoi forced himself to keep walking when a soldier recognized his brother on Tubman Boulevard.

"We decided that if either of us ever got caught, we should not identify with each other," says Massaquoi. "We wanted someone to be alive to tell the story. So I kept going."

Massaquoi heard the gun-

also hiding, along with two other men. They had stripped naked to make themselves less visible on the rooftop and were biding their time to cross the rebel lines.

Massaquoi was the only man hiding there who would survive the week.

Guns blasted just after the first two men left the rooftop. When Massaquoi and Augustus left the roof, a checkpoint guard spotted them and they took off running. Massaquoi heard Augustus beg for his life before a gun fired. Massaquoi eluded his pursuer and hid himself in the grasses inside an unfinished building, in an area that was being used by locals as a bathroom.

A NEW IDENTITY

Thirty minutes later, he buried his identification in the ground, stood up casually as though he had just used the bathroom, and lived for the next two weeks under a false identity. He introduced himself to a group of men as Sah Momo, a displaced member of the Kisi tribe, and later forced himself not to flinch

fire. Massaquoi recognized a few of the rebels as former classmates.

"When we crossed into rebel territory, what I saw was contrary to what we had heard on the radio," says Massaquoi. "While I was there I witnessed terrible crimes beyond human imagination. Taylor waged a brutal war. ...He was the absolute leader."

Had Massaquoi spoken out against the atrocities that sickened him to see, he says he would have been killed; four years later, after he returned to the university and became active in the anti-war movement, again, he nearly was.

It was October 20, 1994, the day that a campus group issued a leaflet calling for the prosecution of war criminals. Armed rebels came looking for Massaquoi in the building where he resided and shattered his leg with bullets with guns they forced beneath the door. Massaquoi managed to crawl to a closet in the house before the rebels stormed the house, and he was not discovered. He spent

AT THEIR MERCY

At the end of his hospital stay, Massaquoi would face one more brutal episode.

On April 6, 1996, the staff of the clinic abandoned their two patients when fighting erupted in Monrovia as Taylor took on rebel leader Roosevelt Johnson and his supporters. The nearby ECOMOG peacekeeping forces retreated.

"We were left at the mercy of the murderers," says Massaquoi.

Moving on crutches, Massaquoi and his companions locked themselves within the clinic's surgical room. But they saw through a window that rebels had set surrounding buildings on fire with gasoline. So they gave themselves up as fighters broke into the clinic. A soldier spared their lives when they claimed to be civilians recovering from an accident and supporters of Taylor's cause.

"They allowed us to go and walk through the crowd. It was like walking through the valley of the shadow of death. They were asking people [to name] their tribe, and shooting people up. They would just spray you. That was the order of the day."

Massaquoi ends his story there, and laughs.

"Another day I will tell you about how I escaped from Liberia," says Massaquoi, and he laughs again.

This particular laugh doesn't signal humor.

It's a laugh that hoists up the remarkable weight of the story he's told and punctuates the miracle of his survival.

Tevah Platt is a news reporter for the Advance. She may be reached at platt@siadvance.com.