

NATIONAL

# US group sues ex-Haitian mayor over human rights claims

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BOSTON — A U.S. human rights organization filed a federal lawsuit Thursday in Massachusetts against the former mayor of a small town in Haiti on behalf of three Haitian citizens who allege he violently persecuted them.

The former mayor, Jean Morose Viliena, now lives in Malden, just north of Boston.

The Center for Justice & Accountability lawsuit includes claims of torture, killing and arson. It seeks unspecified monetary damages for the family of a Haitian man who was killed and two other men who were seriously wounded when Viliena allegedly led an armed group in attacks on his critics and perceived political opponents.

Viliena was the mayor of Les Irois, a town of about 22,000 in the southwest region of Haiti, from late 2006 to early 2010. The center alleges that he and his men killed the brother of a man who accused him of misconduct in office, attempted to kill two men during a raid on a community radio station, and burned down 36 homes targeting members of an opposing political party.

The center says the men have turned to U.S. courts because Viliena has not been held accountable for his alleged crimes in Haiti. They are suing under the Torture Victim Protection Act of 1991, a U.S. law that allows foreign victims of human rights abuses to file lawsuits in the U.S. against foreign officials who commit torture or killings.

"The Number One goal here is to shine a light on the human rights abuses that have been taking place and the endemic problem of impunity in Haiti for people who can literally get away with murder," said Scott Gilmore, a staff attorney with the San Francisco-based center.

Viliena could not immediately be reached for comment Thursday. A message was left at his home.

Viliena was elected mayor of Les Irois as a candidate for the Haitian Democratic and Reform Movement. He was backed by a political machine called the Committee for Resistance in Grande-Anse, which dominates local politics in the region through patronage, threats and armed violence, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit alleges that in 2007, Viliena began a "campaign of persecution" against David Boniface, a supporter of the opposition political party in Les Irois, after he tried to defend a neighbor who allegedly was struck on the head with a gun by Viliena after he accused her of piling her garbage in the street.

During a hearing before a Les Irois judge, Boniface accused Viliena of abusing his authority. That night, Viliena allegedly led a group of about a dozen men armed with guns, machetes and clubs to Boniface's home. He was not there, but his younger brother, Eclesiaste Boniface was dragged out of the house and fatally shot by one of Viliena's men, the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit also alleges that Viliena and his men beat and shot two men at a community radio station in 2008. One of the men was blinded in one eye and the other's injuries led to the amputation of one of his legs.

Gilmore said Viliena moved to Massachusetts in 2009, but made multiple trips back to Haiti and continued to lead a militia. During one of his visits to Haiti, his supporters set fire to 36 homes of perceived political opponents, the lawsuit alleges.

In 2010, Viliena and 19 co-conspirators were indicted in Haiti on charges of murder, battery and property destruction. Six men were convicted in 2015, but Viliena has not been put on trial.

"All we want is justice," said Nissage Martyr, one of the men wounded during the radio station attack.

"We want our community to feel safe again. We want to be able to speak freely, without being afraid that the Mayor's men will gun down our relatives or burn our homes," he said in a statement distributed by the Center for Justice & Accountability.