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Ramona Africa survived the Philadelphia police bombing of the MOVE group and still is rebuilding her life.



AFTER MOVE

TO PHILADELPHIA CITY LEADERS IN 1985, MOVE simply meant trouble: uncompromising, foul-mouthed misfits who had preached and demonstrated against "the system" for more than a decade, disrupted public meetings and blasted street corners with their loudspeakers.

But today, in martyrdom, MOVE has come to mean much more.

Initially, MOVE was just a dreadlocked band of back-to-nature activists who took the surname of its leader, known as John Africa (Vincent Lopez Leaphart, before MOVE), who founded the group with Donald Glassey, a White college instructor who in 1981 began informing on the group for the federal government. Self-described revolutionaries, MOVE fed stray animals, fought police and harangued their neighbors.

But with the bombing of their row house in West Philadelphia at the direction of the city's first Black mayor, W. Wilson Goode, MOVE would become a symbol, its members internationally known victims of alleged government misconduct and police brutality.

On May 13, 1985, in response to complaints from neighbors, city officials embarked on a violent plan to force members of the group out of their heavily fortified home at 6221 Osage Ave. Law enforcement wanted ostensibly to execute four arrest warrants and force MOVE off the block.

After machine-gun fire and fire department water cannons failed to oust the radical group, a police officer riding in a state helicopter dropped C-4 and Tovex TR-2 explosives onto the roof of the house.

The explosives ignited a fire and a deadly chain of events watched by television viewers across the city and nation. When the day long siege was over:

- Scattered, charred bones and the body parts of 11 people were excavated from the site; the torso of John Africa was found under the rubble.

- Five children had been killed.
- Two city blocks, with 61 homes, were reduced to rubble.

MOVE members had tried to survive in the burning house by huddling in the basement under wet blankets. But in the end, only a woman, Ramona Johnson Africa, then 30, and a 13-year-old boy called Birdie, got out alive.

For the most part, firefighters and more than 500 police stood by and watched the fire burn, doing nothing after the bombing.

But both Ramona and the boy (renamed Michael Moses Ward by his biological father, a non-MOVE member who took custody) said police shot at group members and children as they tried to flee the burning house. The remains of Ward's mother, Rhonda Africa, were riddled with fragments from shotgun buckshot.

As the fire raged, nearly everyone was repeating the same question: "Why don't they put out the fire? Why don't they put out the fire?"

In the days that followed, people outside Philadelphia expressed shock and outrage. Goode said at the time he would do it again, a position he later revised.

A decade ago, people were blaming MOVE. But not now.

"Today, I don't hear people blaming MOVE. People are looking to 'the system' and saying that's unconscionable. Did they have to destroy 11 people and burn down 61 houses?" asks Father Paul M. Washington, a Philadelphia Episcopal priest who investigated the tragedy.

Gerald Wayne Renfrow, who lived across the street from MOVE and lost his home in the fire, says that for him, what happened "makes every day a sad day."

That sadness, he says, is exacerbated by the fact that no police officer or government official ever was charged with a crime.

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"We need a fair resolution. The blame has not been assigned and the guilty penalized," says Renfrow, now living in one of the houses the city rebuilt for him on the original site.

THE GOVERNMENT'S deadly and destructive response to neighbors' complaints about MOVE and the criminal justice system's failure to indict any police or public officials have turned the sadness of May 13 into a moral victory for the strategy of John Africa, in the view of Ramona Africa.

"Brutality existed long before MOVE, but the strategy of John Africa forced official brutality into the open where it couldn't be denied," Ramona Africa says in an *Emerge* interview. Africa is the only person involved in the tragedy who ever faced criminal charges for what happened that day. She served seven years at the State Correctional Institution for women in Muncy, Pa.

There were two related prosecutions: A tenant in one of the burned homes, dissatisfied with the property settlement reached with the city, shot and seriously wounded his attorney and was sentenced to seven to 20 years in jail in 1988. Also, the developer hired by the city to rebuild the houses was convicted of stealing \$137,000 from the building fund.

Amid smoke and waist-high water, Ramona was taken into custody as she fled. She was tried and acquitted on charges that she assaulted police officers but was convicted of riot and conspiracy in connection with MOVE's treatment of its neighbors.

"Brutality doesn't begin and end with MOVE. People are hung in jail cells and beaten on street corners," says Ramona, who lives in one of two houses that MOVE still operates in Philadelphia. "But we put it out there to set that example. The whole world watched."

According to Ramona, MOVE means to generate, to move against "the system," which is wrong. "Our belief is life and the definition of life as movement," she says.

For the group, the whole struggle began in 1978. At another confrontation with MOVE, whose members had been brandishing weapons, the city, then led by Mayor Frank Rizzo, stormed MOVE's house in West Philadelphia's Powelton Village, and bulldozed it, despite a restraining order against demolishing the house. One police officer was killed, eight other officers and firefighters were wounded, and nine MOVE members went to jail for murder, each sentenced to 30 to 100 years.

After failing to win imprisoned members release through established legal means, MOVE members in 1983, following the strategy of John Africa, began staging a unique protest to force government action.

They barricaded their new residence in an amiable middle- and working-class neighborhood on the city's west side. They wired an elaborate

loudspeaker system and for two and a half years, according to neighbors, MOVE members made almost daily 12-hour-long, high-decibel, profanity-laden protest speeches through a bullhorn, beginning in the afternoon and continuing past midnight.

"We all agreed MOVE had a right to protest. But when they set up their protest stage on our block, they made us hostages," says Renfrow.

Beleaguered neighbors demanded city help, and the city adopted a policy of avoidance. On May 1, 1985, neighbors held a press conference blasting the city's inaction and seeking the help of then-Gov. Richard Thornburgh.

City officials met and decided to act. And so at dawn on May 13, 1985, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Gregore Sambor would himself take up a bullhorn, announce to MOVE that "this is America" and order them to leave their two-story row house.

MOVE HAD BEEN ON its loudspeaker talking tough and threatening police who had encircled the evacuated block. MOVE taunted that it would be a long fight, making biting comments with descriptions of the officers' White wives and daughters spending their death benefits on Black lovers.

At one point, the group named possible intermediaries (a MOVE member outside the house, two radio personalities and a television news reporter), saying:

"MOVE ain't asking for no communication, but we know well that the strategy of John Africa has put you in a predicament where you have to communicate with us, where you'll want to stop this confrontation."

MOVE kept talking all night, but the first police communication came at 5:35 a.m., with Commissioner Sambor's announcement. When MOVE did not come out at 5:50 a.m., police fired tear gas and smoke projectiles to cover officers entering the houses on both sides of the MOVE house.

At 6 a.m., a gun battle ensued, during which 32 city police fired approximately 10,000 rounds of ammunition at the house. Philadelphia police used Uzis, M-16s, a Browning automatic rifle, a Thompson submachine gun, M-60 machine guns, shotguns and a silenced .22 caliber automatic rifle. Water cannons from fire trucks pounded the house for hours. Philadelphia police preparedness cut a sharp contrast to the two pistols, a shotgun and a .22 caliber rifle that later would be found under the rubble at the burned-out MOVE site.

For the people who lived for miles around the "urban battlefield," the tranquility of a clear spring morning was wrecked by gunfire for about 90 minutes.

The gunfight, accompanied by the police use of tear gas



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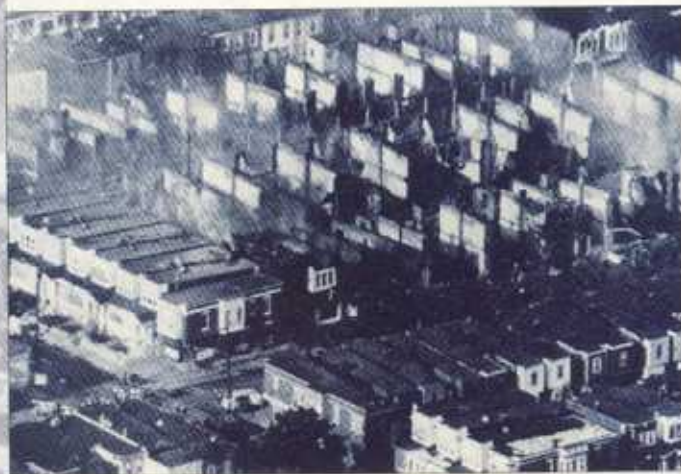
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Father Paul M. Washington was on the panel that faulted the city for what happened.

and explosives, which tore through adjoining side walls and collapsed the fronts of neighboring houses, continued through the morning. But by late afternoon, city officials were frustrated at the ineffectiveness of those efforts and decided to take more drastic action to end the standoff.

At 5:27 p.m., a Philadelphia police officer riding in a state helicopter dropped a satchel filled with explosives onto the roof of MOVE's row house. The goal was to dislodge a shed-like roof-top bunker that was giving MOVE a tactical gun battle advantage. The bunker withstood the bomb blast initially — but the roof caught fire. Events then moved quickly out of control. According to the investigative commission:

5:49 p.m.: Police first saw fire.

6:08–6:12 p.m.: The police and fire commissioners conferred. With the fire commissioner's reassurance that once the bunker burned, the fire could be contained, police commissioner Sam-

bor decided to let the fire burn.

6:20 p.m.: The bunker fell through the roof.

6:54 p.m.: The first fire alarm sounded, but efforts to fight the flames were limited.

7–7:30 p.m.: Gunfire was reported in the alley behind the house. It was during this time that MOVE members tried to escape.

7:35 p.m.: The two badly burned survivors were taken into custody in the alley as they fled through smoke and water.

9:30 p.m.: Firefighters began fighting the blaze.

9:34 p.m.: The sixth fire alarm was sounded.

11:41 p.m.: The fire was declared under control.

IN THE ENSUING 10 YEARS, there were investigations but no indictments. First was a detailed, publicly aired investigation commission; its final report, completed in March 1986, was highly critical of top city officials, even though Goode had appointed commission members.

The report found that: “The mayor, the managing director, the police commissioner and the fire commissioner accepted the suggestion of an aerial attack on a Philadelphia row house known by each of them to be occupied by a large number of adults and children. By approving the bombing, each of these individuals exhibited a reckless disregard for life and property.”

The report also noted: “The mayor paused only 30 seconds before approving the dropping of explosives.”

On the decision not to fight the fire, the commission wrote: “Allowing the fire to burn should have been rejected out-of-hand. That it was not rejected cannot be justified under any circumstances.”

A grand jury investigation, headed by a Republican district attorney and released in May 1988, six months after Goode was re-elected mayor, brought back no indictments.

Some police officers appeared to have perjured themselves about their knowledge of the contents and origins of the bomb (a mixture of C-4 and Tovex explosives). According to the District Attorney Ronald D. Castille, now a Pennsylvania Supreme Court justice, those officers could not be fairly indicted when top city officials, “those morally responsible,” could not be charged and successfully prosecuted.

William H. Brown III, a prominent lawyer who headed the commission, says that the grand jury applied a double standard of justice in not indicting the officers who perjured themselves before the grand jury.

“The explanation that they were just small fish has never been a standard for not indicting,” says Brown. Indictments against those officers might have been used as leverage to get information from them about the shooting as MOVE members tried to escape.