

# The Star-Ledger

**Troopers detained Liberian official buying drugs for Ebola. Judge says they got it wrong.**

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Nov. 16, 2019

Nobody disagrees that there was heroin in that parking lot.

But in the process of arresting a suspected drug dealer, State Police also detained two innocent men — one of whom turned out to be the top security official in Liberia. He then sued, saying he and a friend had been targeted because they are black.

Now, five years later, a federal judge in New Jersey has ruled that state troopers improperly detained the official and his friend, as part of a unique racial profiling lawsuit that involves Ebola, international drug trafficking and a West African nation.

U.S. District Judge Kevin McNulty concluded that their hour-and-a-half stop was ultimately “too long and severe an intrusion on the privacy and dignity” of the two men, and he said that the lead officer could be held liable for his actions.

However, McNulty also said that the officers may have been justified for initially stopping the pair, and the judge did not buy the argument that the stop was the result of a white officer targeting men because of their race.

The opinion was published in August, and the judge reiterated his conclusions in October after the State Police asked him to reconsider.

The state attorney general’s office has filed paperwork to appeal the decision. A spokesman declined to comment further. A State Police spokesman also declined comment.

None of the court’s recent actions have been previously reported.

“It was a vindication,” Fombah Sirleaf, the former Liberian official, said about the ruling.

Sirleaf said he continued to believe that there had been “racial undertones” to the stop, even if there wasn’t enough evidence to convince the judge.

The fact that the State Police continued to fight his lawsuit, he said, “doesn’t shake my resolve.”

The suspect the troopers wanted was a man named Richard Parker.

On Oct. 8, 2014, Det. Sgt. Michael Gregory followed Parker to an Elizabeth shopping mall, according to court and police records.

It's unclear what, exactly, the troopers then watched Parker do in the Jersey Gardens parking lot.

Gregory wrote in an investigation report that he watched Parker exchange something through a vehicle window with another man. A different officer, however, said later that they didn't see that exchange until they checked surveillance video.

Either way, Parker was arrested with about 200 bricks of heroin, which were labeled "Street Fighter" and "Anaconda." He was later convicted of multiple charges and is still in prison, according to public records.

About 30 feet away, the cops also saw two men packing suitcases into a black Mercedes.

Gregory, the lead officer, worried the men were lookouts for a drug deal, according to his report. He rushed over with his gun drawn, ordered them to the ground and, with the help of other officers, put them in handcuffs.

There were drugs in the suitcases, about \$1,000 worth. But instead of heroin, these drugs were recently purchased over-the-counter medications intended to help Liberians fight Ebola, which was ravaging West Africa.

Furthermore, not only was one of the men part of the Liberian government, Sirleaf had once worked undercover for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency to try and take down international drug smugglers, according to court records.

Sirleaf's stepmom also happened to be Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who at that time was president of Liberia. She was also the first woman ever elected to lead an African nation. And the winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

None of this was obvious when the officers arrived. The judge wrote that it was possible that a jury could one day agree with the initial decision to detain the men, although he said that might depend on whether troopers had actually witnessed a drug exchange between Parker and another man.

There also wasn't enough evidence to show racial bias, the judge wrote. The cops didn't use racial slurs, and surveillance video didn't show white shoppers nearby, which might have revealed that cops ignored a white passerby in favor of black men. (Gregory, the lead officer, is white.)

But the judge repeatedly criticized the 90 minutes officers spent interrogating the pair. The men answered questions, allowed the car to be searched and showed documents backing up their innocence. The troopers continued to hold them. At one point, Sirleaf said he was accused of possibly having Ebola, according to court records.

“The officers’ decision to pursue these increasingly tenuous theories one-by-one suggests a detention in search of a basis,” the judge wrote.

The men were eventually released.

Sirleaf, who is no longer in office, said he now lives in Philadelphia and runs a used car dealership in south Jersey. His lawyer, Jerry Graves, said he plans to meet next month with lawyers for the officers to see if a settlement can be reached.

*NJ Advance Media Staff Writer S.P. Sullivan contributed to this report.*