

Jury finds Philadelphia liable for fire deaths in 1985 assault

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Eleven years after police dropped a bomb on the MOVE rowhouse, starting a fire that killed 11 people and destroyed a neighborhood, a jury ordered the city and two former officials Monday to pay \$1.5 million to a survivor and relatives of two dead cult members.

After nine days of deliberations, the jury found the city used excessive force and violated MOVE's constitutional protection against unreasonable search and seizure.

Ramona Africa, the only adult to survive the blaze, was awarded \$500,000 from the city: \$400,000 for pain and suffering and \$100,000 for disfigurement from burns suffered in the fire. Relatives of MOVE founder John Africa and his nephew Frank Africa, who both died, received a total of \$1 million from the city for pain and suffering.

"Long live John Africa," Ramona Africa said after the verdict.

The May 13, 1985, confrontation killed five adults and six children in the MOVE house and burned 61 homes in the surrounding neighborhood. Despite a special commission finding that top city officials were "grossly negligent" and two grand jury investigations, no one from city



Ramona Africa

government ever was criminally charged.

Ramona Africa, 41, escaped with a young member of the cult, a 13-year-old boy then known as Birdie Africa, by crawling through a basement window. She served seven years in prison on a riot charge. She and relatives of the dead sued the city, former Police Commissioner Gregore Sambor and former Fire Commissioner William Richmond.

The jury ordered Richmond and Sambor to pay Ramona Africa token damages of \$1 per week each for 11

years. Relatives of Frank and John Africa were given similar amounts.

Birdie Africa, who now goes by the name Michael Ward, had settled with the city for \$1.7 million.

Both sides accused the other of starting a war on May 13, 1985.

The city contended that MOVE had turned its home into an armed fortress — complete with a rooftop bunker and walls fortified with logs — and could have avoided any harm by cooperating.

MOVE was a mostly black group whose members adopted the surname Africa. It had been blaring anti-government messages over a loudspeaker in an effort to free nine members who had been convicted of killing a police officer in 1978.

A gunfight broke out as police tried to serve arrest warrants against four of the members, including Ramona Africa.

During the assault, police dropped a homemade satchel-bomb from a helicopter to destroy the wooden bunker and open a hole for tear gas. The bomb missed and started a small fire on the roof. Sambor and Richmond testified they decided to let the fire burn just long enough to destroy the bunker, but it quickly spread out of control.