Cases from apartheid era resurface in South Africa

by Ryan Lenora Brown in the April 15, 2015 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Joyce Ledwaba's son Samuel was 17 years old when he disappeared from their Pretoria home in 1986. Although his body was never recovered, he is believed to have been tranquilized by South African security agents and then burned to death.

Three decades later, Ledwaba is still waiting for the man she believes is responsible to be punished. He is Wouter Basson, who ran a top-secret biological warfare program known as Project Coast, tasked with developing chemical and biological weapons for the apartheid government to eliminate its enemies covertly in the 1980s.

Nicknamed Dr. Death, Basson was never convicted of a single criminal offense. But over the last seven years he has been on trial to determine whether he should be banned from practicing medicine. Found guilty last year, he has yet to be sentenced.

South Africa became a democracy in 1994, but many of the apartheid era's most notorious killers never faced justice for their crimes. Others were convicted, served their time, and are now becoming eligible for parole.

Under Basson's watch, Project Coast carried out chemical assassinations of antiapartheid leaders, amassed fearsome stores of deadly diseases such as Ebola, and prepared large-scale biological weapons—including a sterilization vaccine—to deploy against the black population.

Project Coast was officially disbanded during the transition to democracy.

When called before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998, Basson asked for neither forgiveness nor amnesty—unlike others who testified for the TRC—arguing that he was simply following orders from his military superiors.

When Basson's case went to a criminal trial, he fought for close to three years and was eventually acquitted of all charges.

“I am a dedicated and committed medical practitioner and very proud to have served my country during what was a war,” Basson told the judge who eventually declared him not guilty of murder in 2002. He remains publicly unrepentant for his actions.

In the years that followed, Basson returned quietly to practicing medicine, leading a successful private cardiology practice in the suburbs of Cape Town. But in 2006, the Health Professions Council of South Africa began its own probe into his past to determine if the doctor had violated medical ethics.

For more than six years, the case proceeded haltingly, as Basson’s legal team—who were paid by the state because he was a government employee—repeatedly petitioned to have the proceedings postponed or dismissed for bias and lack of evidence.

In 2013, the commission declared Basson guilty of “unprofessional conduct.” More than a year later, however, no sentence has been determined. His counsel continues to dispute elements of the case, and the proceedings drag on in an airless basement conference room of the HPCSA offices in Pretoria.

In the room are family members such as Ledwaba and activists clutching old news articles and yellowing photos of family members and friends they say died at Basson’s hands.

“We want their bodies exhumed so we can see what really happened to them, but the government tells us it’s too expensive,” said Marjorie Jobson, an activist and medical doctor who works closely with the families of murdered activists. “But Basson’s trials have cost millions that they pay without question.”

Mananoko Mokgonyana, an activist, looked to Basson himself.

“The most important thing for us is that he shows remorse, that he admits what he did was wrong,” Mokgonyana said. “We are tired of waiting.”

On January 30, Justice Minister Michael Masutha announced that parole would be granted to another of apartheid’s most notorious killers, Eugene “Prime Evil” de Kock, after 20 years in prison.

Unlike Basson, de Kock—who commanded a counterinsurgency unit implicated in the torture, imprisonment, and deaths of hundreds of activists—has apologized

repeatedly for his crimes and helped lead dozens of families to the bodies of his victims.

His release, like Basson's trial, has forced South Africans to challenge their thinking on forgiveness, South African author Antjie Krog wrote in a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*.

"Mr. de Kock is a problem for South African society precisely because he presents the capacity of an evil man to change," she wrote. "But his parole also reminds us of something more universal: the different life he might have led, had he grown up in a different and more just society. What would he and many others have become if they were not schooled in racism, indoctrinated through religion, and educated into violence to protect an unequal social order?"

Basson's case, however, presents no such neat ending. The trial, though not a criminal one, is a chance for grieving parents like Ledwaba to see justice done. She has been a constant presence at the HPCSA hearings, and they have allowed her to do what she thought impossible: to let go.

"I did forgive him, not for him, but because I don't want to die angry," she said. "I want to forgive, and then I want to forget."