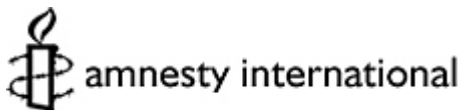


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Amnesty International Report 2010 - Sierra Leone

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

Head of state and government: Ernest Bai Koroma

Death penalty: retentionist

Population: 5.7 million

Life expectancy: 47.3 years

Under-5 mortality (m/f): 160/136 per 1,000

Adult literacy: 38.1 per cent

Violence erupted in March between supporters of the ruling All People's Congress (APC) and the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), during which people were seriously injured and there were allegations of rape and other sexual assaults. Sexual and gender-based violence against women continued, including harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). The government made efforts to reduce the high rate of maternal mortality.

Background

Political violence erupted between APC and SLPP supporters in three areas of the country in March in the run-up to local elections. In Pujehun in the south, violence between 9 and 12 March left several people seriously injured. In Freetown, violence between 13 and 16 March resulted in injuries and the looting of the SLPP headquarters; there were also allegations of rape and other sexual assault of SLPP supporters. In Kenema between 13 and 14 March, violence and arson attacks targeted APC supporters.

In April, a Joint Communiqué Adherence Committee facilitated by the UN and the Political Parties Registration Commission was established and agreed by APC and SLPP representatives, which helped to defuse tensions. In July, the government appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the reasons for the violence and the allegations of rape and other sexual assaults. An independent review panel was not constituted. The same month, the Independent Media Commission reported that radio stations owned by the APC and SLPP appeared to have contributed to the violence with hate speech, and that their licences would be withdrawn. Members of civil society were concerned that the ruling of the commission threatened freedom of expression.

In September and October, the government deployed soldiers to help police in response to public concerns about the police's response to a sharp rise in armed robberies.

In May, the government launched the Agenda for Change, its second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. It was used as the framework to seek donor funding at the Sierra Leone Investment and Donor Conference held in London, the UK, in November.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) made significant progress. In February, four public officers were indicted on various counts of corruption. In June, two former senior officials of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service and the former Ombudsman were convicted of misappropriation of funds and sentenced to jail and/or heavy fines. In May, the ACC reviewed the work of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and made several recommendations to improve the health care delivery system and reduce the risk of corrupt practices in the Ministry. In October, the Minister of Health was charged with corruption and subsequently dismissed. A fast-track anti-corruption court with dedicated judges and prosecutors, which had been proposed by the ACC in 2008, had not been established by the end of the year.

Some progress was made in implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – established after the 1991-2002 civil war – but no follow-up committee was appointed and the constitutional review process stalled. The mandate of the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) was renewed in September for a further year.

Special Court for Sierra Leone

The prosecution case in the trial of former Liberian President Charles Taylor before the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) in The Hague ended on 27 February, and included 91 witnesses. He faced 11 charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the civil war in Sierra Leone. The defence case began on 13 July; Charles Taylor was the sole witness during the rest of 2009.

On 26 October, the Appeals Chamber of the SCSL upheld the convictions of the Revolutionary United Front leaders Issa Sesay, Morris Kallon and Augustine Gbao on nearly all counts. The convictions were the first for attacks on UN peacekeepers as a violation of international humanitarian law and for forced marriage as an inhumane act constituting a crime against humanity. In October, all eight of the convicted men were transferred to Rwanda, honouring a March agreement with the SCSL, to serve their prison sentences. The sentences ranged from 15 to 52 years, with credit given for time served in detention at the SCSL. No prison facility within Sierra Leone meets the required international standards. In November, the SCSL handed over its detention facilities to the Sierra Leone prison service to be used to house female prisoners.

Reparations programme

The reparations programme, set up under the TRC, devoted most of 2009 to identifying 28,000 war victims, implementing symbolic reparations in 18 chiefdoms, and making available fistula surgery for victims of sexual violence. The only funds for the reparation programme, drawn from the peacebuilding fund, ran out in late 2009 and the government took no steps to ensure funding for the future.

Maternal mortality

In July, the National Human Rights Commission released its second annual report, which highlighted among other things the high rate of maternal mortality. In September, Amnesty International released a report and delegates, including the Secretary General, toured Sierra Leone to raise awareness about the issue. On 23 September at the UN General Assembly, President Koroma announced plans for providing free care for pregnant and lactating women, and for children under five. Implementation of the plans was expected to start in April 2010.

Violence and discrimination against women

Using the Child Rights Act (2007), NGOs made some gains in their campaign to stop the practice of FGM among girls below the age of 18. Some traditional leaders imposed by-laws in their communities outlawing the practice of FGM for children.

- In February, four women journalists were abducted, stripped and forced to parade naked through the streets of Kenema by women initiators of FGM who said that the journalists were disrupting their tradition. After the journalists were released, the police took no action against the alleged attackers.

There were allegations that women were raped and otherwise sexually assaulted during the March political violence. The Commission of Inquiry set up in July concluded that sexual violence did take place but that rape did not. No action was taken against those alleged to have perpetrated sexual violence. Civil society and women's rights groups contested the findings of the inquiry.

- A woman in the northern district of Kono was barred from chieftaincy elections in November because of her gender.

Freedom of expression

The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists filed a suit in the Supreme Court in February seeking to repeal archaic seditious libel provisions. The case remained pending at the end of the year.

Concern was raised by the UN in July that some of the provisions of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act passed in 2009 could undermine the independence of the broadcasting corporation. President Koroma gave assurances that this would not be the case.

In July, the Independent Media Commission announced that licences of political party radio stations would be withdrawn because of the March political violence, a move opposed by civil society groups. The SLPP filed an action challenging the decision.

Death penalty

No new death sentences were passed by ordinary courts. Nine men and three women – Sia Beke, Mankaprie Kamara and Nallay Foday – remained on death row. Five of the men had been on death row for six years.

- In October, the conviction against Marie Sampa Kamara, who had been sentenced to death for murder, was overturned and she was released.

In August, a member of the military convicted after a court martial for a killing was sentenced to death by firing squad. Under martial law, the President must sign the death sentence; this had not happened by the end of the year.

In October, President Koroma called for the death penalty to be imposed for armed robbery. However, no further action was taken.

Amnesty International visit/reports

- In September, Amnesty International delegates, including the Secretary General, visited Sierra Leone. They toured the country for 12 days to raise awareness about the high rate of maternal mortality and related issues, and met senior government officials including the Minister of Health, Minister of Gender and Vice-President.

- Sierra Leone: Lives cut short – make pregnancy and childbirth safer (AFR 51/001/2009)
- Sierra Leone: President Koroma must commute all death row prisoners (AFR 51/003/2009)
- Sierra Leone: Out of reach – the cost of maternal health in Sierra Leone (AFR 51/005/2009)
- Sierra Leone: End maternal mortality – join our campaign (AFR 51/006/2009)
- Sierra Leone: Investment in the health sector needed to implement free care policy (AFR 51/014/2009)

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