

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	118
Land:	Sierra Leone
Kilde:	British Home Office
Titel:	"Operational Guidance Note"
Udgivet:	15. december 2006
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10. maj 2007



OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE NOTE

SIERRA LEONE

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1. Introduction

- 1.1** This document evaluates the general, political and human rights situation in Sierra Leone and provides guidance on the nature and handling of the most common types of claims received from nationals/residents of that country, including whether claims are or are not likely to justify the granting of asylum, Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave. Caseworkers must refer to the relevant Asylum Policy Instructions for further details of the policy on these areas.
- 1.2** This guidance must also be read in conjunction with any COI Service Sierra Leone Country of Origin Information at:
- http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html
- 1.3** Claims should be considered on an individual basis, but taking full account of the guidance contained in this document. In considering claims where the main applicant has dependent family members who are a part of his/her claim, account must be taken of the situation of all the dependent family members included in the claim in accordance with the API on Article 8 ECHR. If, following consideration, a claim is to be refused, caseworkers should consider whether it can be certified as clearly unfounded under the case by case certification power in section 94(2) of the Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. A claim will be clearly unfounded if it is so clearly without substance that it is bound to fail.

Source documents

- 1.4** A full list of source documents cited in footnotes is at the end of this note.

2. Country assessment

- 2.1** Sierra Leone gained full independence on April 27th 1961. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) ruled until 1967 when the electoral victory of the opposition All People's Congress (APC) was cut short by the country's first military coup. The military handed over power to the APC and its leader Siaka Stevens in 1968. Siaka Stevens turned the country into a one-party state in 1978, handing the reins to his deputy, General Momoh, in 1985. Under

popular pressure, one party rule ended in 1991 and a new constitution providing for a return to multi-party politics was approved. Elections were scheduled for 1992, but by this stage Sierra Leone was a failed state, its institutions had collapsed, mismanagement and corruption had ruined the economy and rising youth unemployment was a serious problem.¹

- 2.2** The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) emerged with backing from Charles Taylor in neighbouring Liberia and in 1991 led a rebellion against the APC Government, leading to a Junior Officers coup in April 1992. Its leader, Capt Strasser, was in turn deposed in January 1996. The RUF refused to take part in elections held in February 1996 and continued the conflict. The elections were won by Tejan Kabbah and the SLPP. The new government signed a peace agreement, the Abidjan Agreement, with the RUF but it failed to stop the rebellion. Kabbah's Government was subsequently overthrown in a further coup in 1997. The military junta, headed by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, invited the RUF to join government. The Kabbah Government was re-instated in 1998.²
- 2.3** The rebellion reached Freetown when the RUF, combined with renegade elements of the army, invaded the capital in January 1999. They were repulsed by the Nigerian troops of ECOMOG. A second peace agreement, the Lome Accord of 1999, to be supervised by a UN peacekeeping force, brought the RUF officially into government, but this collapsed in 2000 when the RUF attacked UN peacekeepers upcountry and threatened to invade Freetown again. Security was restored with the intervention of British troops in May 2000, the signing of the Abuja peace agreement in November 2000, together with the deployment of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) across the country. This allowed the gradual restoration of government authority throughout the territory. The war was officially declared over in February 2002.³
- 2.4** Presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 2002 in which Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was re-elected president and his SLPP won a large majority in parliament. Many international monitors declared the elections free and fair; however, there were also numerous reports of election irregularities. More recently, national and international observers declared local elections in May 2004 free and fair, but again there were allegations of irregularities.⁴ The next presidential and parliamentary elections are due to take place in July 2007.⁵
- 2.5** The 10-year RUF rebellion saw widespread killings, rape, looting and destruction of property, largely in the countryside but also in Freetown in 1999. Renegade soldiers also took part in atrocities against civilians. At least 50,000 people died. A third of the population was displaced. Some 30,000 civilians were deliberately maimed through the amputation of limbs and other physical atrocities. Thousands of children were forcibly recruited into the RUF ranks where they too committed gross human rights abuses, often against their own families. Although human rights have greatly improved since the end of the conflict, a few issues such as the protracted detention of remand prisoners, and the widespread practice of female genital mutilation, remain of concern.⁶
- 2.6** In January 2002, The United Nations (UN) and the Government of Sierra Leone established the Special Court for Sierra Leone to bring to justice those who bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and atrocities. The Court opened in March 2004. A total of thirteen people have been indicted, from all sides of the conflict. Ten individuals currently face charges, the most high profile of them being former Liberian President Charles Taylor who was arrested in Nigeria on 29 March 2006 and has been charged with crimes relating

¹ Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Country Profile 2006

² FCO Country Profile 2006

³ FCO Country Profile 2006

⁴ U.S. Department of State report on Human Rights Practices (USSD) - 2005 (Introduction)

⁵ FCO Country Profile 2006 & BBC News Timeline: Sierra Leone

⁶ FCO Country Profile 2006

to the civil war. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also established in 2002. The Commission heard around 9,000 testimonies, and submitted its report in 2005.⁷

- 2.7 In 2004, UNAMSIL handed over responsibility for security countrywide to the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and Sierra Leone Police (SLP). The last UN peacekeepers withdrew in December 2005 leaving a civilian UN presence to support the Government. During 2005, the Government generally maintained effective control of the security forces.⁸
- 2.8 The Government generally respects the human rights of its citizens, but there are problems in a number of areas, exacerbated by poverty, wrecked infrastructure and a history of bad governance. In 2005, there were reports of police theft and extortion, prolonged detention in poor conditions, and the security forces using excessive force on detainees, including juveniles. There were also reports during the year of the authorities arresting journalists.⁹
- 2.9 In 2005, there were reports of an inefficient and corrupt judiciary, and official impunity. However, the judicial branch has sought to address some of these problems by dismissing charges, releasing detainees on bail, beginning delayed trials, and introducing a code of conduct for judicial officers.¹⁰

3. **Main categories of claims**

- 3.1 This Section sets out the main types of asylum claim, human rights claim and Humanitarian Protection claim (whether explicit or implied) made by those entitled to reside in Sierra Leone. It also contains any common claims that may raise issues covered by the API on Discretionary Leave. Where appropriate it provides guidance on whether or not an individual making a claim is likely to face a real risk of persecution, unlawful killing or torture or inhuman or degrading treatment/ punishment. It also provides guidance on whether or not sufficiency of protection is available in cases where the threat comes from a non-state actor; and whether or not internal relocation is an option. The law and policies on persecution, Humanitarian Protection, sufficiency of protection and internal relocation are set out in the relevant API's, but how these affect particular categories of claim are set out in the instructions below.
- 3.2 Each claim should be assessed to determine whether there are reasonable grounds for believing that the claimant would, if returned, face persecution for a Convention reason - i.e. due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. The approach set out in *Karanakaran* should be followed when deciding how much weight to be given to the material provided in support of the claim (see the API on Assessing the Claim).
- 3.3 If the claimant does not qualify for asylum, consideration should be given as to whether a grant of Humanitarian Protection is appropriate. If the claimant qualifies for neither asylum nor Humanitarian Protection, consideration should be given as to whether he/she qualifies for Discretionary Leave, either on the basis of the particular categories detailed in Section 4 or on their individual circumstances.
- 3.4 This guidance is **not** designed to cover issues of credibility. Caseworkers will need to consider credibility issues based on all the information available to them. (For guidance on credibility see para 11 of the API on Assessing the Claim)
- 3.5 All APIs can be accessed via the IND website at:

⁷ Home Office COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (paras 5.14 - 5.29), FCO Country Profile 2006 & USSD 2005 (Introduction)

⁸ USSD 2005 (Introduction), FCO Country Profile 2006 & CIA - The World Factbook 2006: Sierra Leone (Introduction)

⁹ USSD 2005 (Introduction)

¹⁰ USSD 2005 (Introduction)

<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/asylumpolicyinstructions/>

3.6 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

- 3.6.1** Some asylum and/or human rights claims will be based on a fear that the claimant or their daughter(s) will be subjected to female genital mutilation at the hands of non-state actors.
- 3.6.2 *Treatment.*** No law prohibits FGM in Sierra Leone and it was practiced widely at all levels of society during 2005, particularly as part of the initiation into women-only secret societies. UNICEF estimates that up to 90% of women and girls in Sierra Leone have undergone FGM, although some local groups put the figure lower.¹¹ The practice is carried out by all ethnic groups in the interior, but not by the Krio who live in and around Freetown. Traditionally carried out at puberty, FGM is being carried out at an increasingly young age. The actual age varies according to ethnic group, but can be at 3 or 5 years, at the end of secondary school or, in the case of the Sousous, at 40 days. Women who have not been circumcised are considered still to be children and not proper adults, and are considered unworthy of marriage and of holding any position of responsibility in society.¹² Children who come of age are liable to be forcibly seized and subjected to FGM.¹³
- 3.6.3** FGM is widespread in Sierra Leone, is accepted as the norm in society and is even seen as a vote winner by politicians. The President's late wife reportedly sponsored the circumcision of 1,500 girls to win votes for her husband in the Presidential election, with other politicians doing likewise on a smaller scale. It is therefore unlikely that the Government will outlaw the practice in the foreseeable future. There are NGOs working to end the practice or to improve the conditions in which it is carried out, often on medical rather than ethical grounds. These have had some success in persuading those who carry out circumcisions to take up alternative employment but there have been suggestions that FGM may actually be on the increase with increasing stability and prosperity now the conflict has ended.¹⁴
- 3.6.4 *Sufficiency of protection.*** During 2005, police occasionally detained practitioners on accusations of forced mutilation or manslaughter, however, human rights workers reported that police remained hesitant to interfere in cultural practices.¹⁵ As FGM is not illegal and there is no political will to stop it, individuals are unlikely to be able to seek and receive adequate state protection.
- 3.6.5 *Internal relocation.*** FGM is practiced throughout the country. Whilst there have been incidents of it being forcibly carried out on women and children during 2005,¹⁶ there is little evidence that it is routinely carried out forcibly against the will of adults and the Krio people in and around Freetown, for example, shun the practice. There is freedom of movement in Sierra Leone and it is therefore possible for an adult who is personally, or whose daughter, is at risk of forcible FGM in her home area to avoid that risk by moving to an area of the country where it is not practiced, such as the environs of Freetown. Whether it would be unduly harsh to expect her to do so will depend on the circumstances of the particular case, but it would not in general be unduly harsh to expect a young healthy woman to relocate internally.

3.6.6 *Caselaw.*

¹¹ USSD 2005 (Section 5)

¹² IRIN Web Special Documentary March 2005. Razor's Edge: The controversy of female genital mutilation (pages 25-29)

¹³ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (para 6.40)

¹⁴ IRIN Web Special Documentary March 2005. Razor's Edge: The controversy of female genital mutilation (pages 25-29)

¹⁵ USSD 2005 (Section 5)

¹⁶ USSD 2005 (Section 5)

[2006] UKHL 46 Fornah (FC) v Secretary of State for the Home Department. On 18 October 2006, the House of Lords allowed Zainab Esther Fornah's appeal against the Court of Appeal's findings. The Lords did not accept that 'young women in Sierra Leone' constituted a particular social group (PSG) within the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention, however, the Lords considered that 'uninitiated' or 'intact' women in Sierra Leone are a PSG.

[2003] UKIAT00080 S (Sierra Leone). With regard to the issue of internal relocation, the Tribunal found that although it would initially prove difficult for a young, educated, healthy single woman to relocate internally to Freetown, and establishing herself there may involve a degree of hardship and discomfort, the threshold to be crossed is a high one and it would not be unduly harsh to expect her to do so.

3.6.7 Conclusion. Each case should be considered on its individual merits. It is unlikely that an adult would be subjected to FGM against her will but that may not be the case for children. Where a real risk is established in the home area, although sufficiency of protection cannot be relied upon, it will not usually be unduly harsh to expect the claimant to relocate internally to escape those who she fears would subject her or her children to FGM. The House of Lords judgement in the case of Fornah considered 'uninitiated' or 'intact' women in Sierra Leone as a particular social group within the 1951 Refugee Convention. Therefore, where a real risk is established and internal relocation would, in the particular circumstances of the case be unduly harsh, a grant of asylum is likely to be appropriate.

3.7 Members/former members of rebel groups

3.7.1 Some claimants make asylum and/or human rights claims based on a fear of mistreatment by the Government or other persons or groups as a result of their or a family member's involvement with the RUF or other opposition groups.

3.7.2 Treatment. The eleven year civil conflict officially ended in February 2002, following the initial disarmament of an estimated 45,000 former combatants. The RUF also announced its reconstitution as a political organisation, the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUF), and contested the presidential and parliamentary elections of May 2002, albeit with limited success. By February 2004, more than 72,000 former combatants, including an estimated 6,000 children had been disarmed in accordance with the five-year programme for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.¹⁷

3.7.3 In January 2002, the UN and the Government of Sierra Leone established the Special Court for Sierra Leone to bring to justice those who bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and atrocities. The Court opened in March 2004 with the purpose of trying those leaders who are alleged to have directed and organised crimes committed during the war rather than the rank and file combatants and simple foot soldiers. The accused are charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity such as murder, rape, extermination, acts of terror, enslavement, looting and burning, sexual slavery, conscription of children into an armed force and attacks on UN peacekeepers among others. A total of thirteen people have been indicted, from all sides of the conflict. Ten individuals currently face charges, the most high profile of them being former Liberian President Charles Taylor who was arrested in Nigeria on 29 March 2006 and has been charged with crimes relating to the civil war.¹⁸

3.7.4 A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also established in July 2002. The Commission was viewed as the principal means of providing an impartial historical record of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law related to the civil war. The Commission also sought to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the abuses. The Commission heard around 9,000 testimonies, and submitted its report in 2005.¹⁹

¹⁷ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (para 4.02) & USSD 2005 (Section 2)

¹⁸ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (paras 5.14 - 5.26), FCO Country Profile 2006 & USSD 2005 (Introduction)

¹⁹ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report (paras 5.27 - 5.29) & FCO Country Profile 2006

- 3.7.5 Sufficiency of protection.** The Special Court does not pursue rank and file combatants or simple foot soldiers, but some former low-level members of rebel groups may face harassment from other members of the general public because of their activities during the period of civil conflict. During 2005, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), which has primary responsibility for maintaining internal order, received insufficient resources, lacked investigative and forensic capabilities, and was widely viewed as corrupt and incompetent.²⁰ However, there is no evidence to indicate that the SLP is not able to offer assistance to anyone seeking their protection, including members or former members of rebel groups.
- 3.7.6 Internal relocation.** The law provides for freedom of movement within Sierra Leone and the Government generally respected this right in 2005.²¹ Therefore, low-level members or former members of rebel groups will be able to internally relocate to another part of Sierra Leone where they are not known and will not be at risk should they encounter harassment from members of the wider public, and unless there are factors specific to the individual case it would not be unreasonable to expect them to do so.
- 3.7.7 Conclusion.** Applications based on minor involvement with rebel groups are unlikely to lead to a grant of asylum as such individuals are not generally facing persecution by either the Government or society in general. Members, former members or those related to suspected members of rebel groups who encounter harassment from the wider public will be able to seek redress from the authorities or internally relocate to another part of Sierra Leone. Applications under this category are therefore likely to be clearly unfounded and as such should be certified.
- 3.7.8** Claimants who are, or who are suspected to be, high profile members of rebel groups, may be of interest to the Special Court of Sierra Leone and may face prosecution upon return there on account of their involvement in the civil conflict. Such applications are unlikely to lead to a grant of asylum as there is no evidence to indicate that those who are prosecuted in the Special Court face treatment from the authorities that amounts to persecution. Caseworkers should note, however, that members of the RUF and other rebel groups have been responsible for numerous serious human rights abuses, some of which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. If it is accepted that a claimant was an active operational member or combatant for the RUF or another rebel group and the evidence suggests he/she has been involved in such actions, then caseworkers should consider whether one of the Exclusion clauses is applicable. Caseworkers should refer such cases to a Senior Caseworker in the first instance.
- 3.8 General political/humanitarian situation**
- 3.8.1** Some claimants will make an asylum and/or human rights claim based on ill-treatment amounting to persecution due to the general political, human rights and/or humanitarian situation in Sierra Leone.
- 3.8.2 Treatment.** The eleven year civil conflict officially ended in February 2002, and free and fair elections followed, in which Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was re-elected president and his SLPP won a large majority in parliament. In 2004, UNAMSIL handed over responsibility for security countrywide to the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP). The last UN peacekeepers withdrew in December 2005 leaving a civilian UN presence to support the Government. During 2005, the Government generally maintained effective control of the security forces.²²

²⁰ USSD 2005 (Section 1)

²¹ USSD 2005 (Section 2)

²² FCO Country Profile 2006, USSD 2005 (Introduction) & CIA - The World Factbook 2006: Sierra Leone (Introduction)

3.8.3 The Constitution provides for the protection of basic human rights such as life, liberty, security of person, the enjoyment of property, respect for private and family life, and the protection of law, and also provides for basic freedoms such as the freedom of conscience, expression, assembly and association.²³ The Government generally respects the human rights of its citizens, but there are problems in a number of areas, exacerbated by poverty, wrecked infrastructure and a history of bad governance. In 2005, there were reports of police theft and extortion, prolonged detention in poor conditions, and the security forces using excessive forces on detainees, including juveniles. There were also reports during the year of the authorities arresting journalists. Child abuse, female genital mutilation, people trafficking and forced labour are reportedly also problems within society in Sierra Leone.²⁴

3.8.4 In 2005, there were reports of an inefficient and corrupt judiciary, and official impunity. However, the judicial branch has sought to address some of these problems by dismissing charges, releasing detainees on bail, beginning delayed trials, and introducing a code of conduct for judicial officers.²⁵

3.8.5 ***Sufficiency of protection.*** In light of the nature of this category of claims, the availability of sufficient protection from the state authorities is not relevant.

3.8.6 ***Internal relocation.*** In light of the nature of this category of claims, the availability of an internal relocation option is not relevant.

3.8.7 ***Caselaw.***

[2003] UKIAT00068 C (Sierra Leone). The Tribunal rejected the claim that the appellant would have his human rights infringed by being returned to Sierra Leone and living in inhuman conditions in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Freetown. The Tribunal found that the appellant would be returned to a country where large sections of the population have been displaced, but where large sections of the population are returning to their places of origin and where the situation appears to be stabilising and improving.

3.8.8 ***Conclusion.*** Since the end of the civil conflict, claimants from Sierra Leone may encounter problems exacerbated by poverty, wrecked infrastructure and a history of bad governance, but the Government generally respects the human rights of its citizens. Therefore, claimants who apply for asylum based on the general political, human rights or humanitarian situation are not generally likely to be able to demonstrate that they will be at real risk of ill-treatment amounting to persecution within the terms of the 1951 Convention or torture or inhuman or degrading treatment that would engage the UK's obligations under Article 3 ECHR. The grant of asylum or Humanitarian Protection in such cases is not likely to be appropriate. Applications under this category are therefore likely to be clearly unfounded and as such should be certified.

3.9 Prison conditions

3.9.1 Claimants may claim that they cannot return to Sierra Leone due to the fact that there is a serious risk that they will be imprisoned on return and that prison conditions in the Sierra Leone are so poor as to amount to torture or inhuman treatment or punishment.

3.9.2 The guidance in this section is concerned solely with whether prison conditions are such that they breach Article 3 of ECHR and warrant a grant of Humanitarian Protection. If imprisonment would be for a Refugee Convention reason, or in cases where for a Convention reason a prison sentence is extended above the norm, the claim should be considered as a whole but it is not necessary for prison conditions to breach Article 3 in order to justify a grant of asylum.

²³ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (para 5.03)

²⁴ USSD 2005 (Introduction)

²⁵ USSD 2005 (Introduction)

- 3.9.3 Consideration.** Prison conditions improved in some locations in 2005, due in large part to a UN Development Programme (UNDP) - funded prison reconstruction and rehabilitation programme. However, conditions in most facilities, including the maximum security prison on Pademba Road in Freetown, remained poor. During 2005, human rights observers reported that prison conditions frequently fell below minimum international standards because of overcrowding, lack of access to food, unhygienic conditions, and insufficient medical attention. Case backlogs in the courts often lead to long pre-trial detention which causes severe overcrowding. In 2005, Government records indicated that there were approximately 1,740 detainees in prisons nationwide, 696 of whom had not completed their trials. During 2005, overcrowding was a severe problem at Pademba Road prison, which was designed to house 325 prisoners, but held an estimated 930. Conditions in police station holding cells also remained extremely poor during 2005, especially in small stations outside Freetown.²⁶
- 3.9.4** International monitors, including UNAMSIL and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), enjoyed unrestricted access to Pademba Road prison during 2005 and reported that the SCSL detention facilities met acceptable standards. The Government permits family visits for prisoners, but only for brief periods and the ICRC also provides a message delivery service that allows prisoners housed in all district prisons to communicate with their families. Male and female prisoners reportedly shared cells in Bo, Kenema, Moyamba, Kono, and Pujehun prisons during 2005 and adults and juveniles were sometimes incarcerated together. Juvenile detainees reportedly did not have adequate access to food, education, or vocational training during 2005 whilst pre-trial detainees were often held with convicted prisoners.²⁷
- 3.9.5 Conclusion.** Whilst prison conditions in Sierra Leone are poor, with overcrowding being a particular problem, conditions are unlikely to reach the Article 3 threshold. Therefore even where claimants can demonstrate a real risk of imprisonment on return to Sierra Leone a grant of Humanitarian Protection will not generally be appropriate. However, the individual factors of each case should be considered to determine whether detention will cause a particular individual in his particular circumstances to suffer treatment contrary to Article 3, relevant factors being the likely length of detention the likely type of detention facility and the individual's age and state of health. Where in an individual case treatment does reach the Article 3 threshold a grant of Humanitarian Protection will be appropriate.
- 4. Discretionary Leave**
- 4.1** Where an application for asylum and Humanitarian Protection falls to be refused there may be compelling reasons for granting Discretionary Leave (DL) to the individual concerned. (See API on Discretionary Leave) Where the claim includes dependent family members consideration must also be given to the particular situation of those dependants in accordance with the API on Article 8 ECHR.
- 4.2** With particular reference to Sierra Leone the types of claim which may raise the issue of whether or not it will be appropriate to grant DL are likely to fall within the following categories. Each case must be considered on its individual merits and membership of one of these groups should *not* imply an automatic grant of DL. There may be other specific circumstances related to the applicant, or dependent family members who are part of the claim, not covered by the categories below which warrant a grant of DL - see the API on Discretionary Leave and the API on Article 8 ECHR.
- 4.3 Minors claiming in their own right**
- 4.3.1** Minors claiming in their own right who have not been granted asylum or HP can only be returned where they have family to return to or there are adequate reception, care and

²⁶ USSD 2005 (Section 1)

²⁷ USSD 2005 (Section 1)

support arrangements. At the moment we do not have sufficient information to be satisfied that there are adequate reception, care and support arrangements in place.

- 4.3.2** Minors claiming in their own right without a family to return to, or where there are no adequate reception, care and support arrangements, should if they do not qualify for leave on any more favourable grounds be granted Discretionary Leave for a period of three years or until their 18th birthday, whichever is the shorter period.

4.4 Medical treatment

- 4.4.1** Claimants may claim they cannot return to Sierra Leone due to a lack of specific medical treatment. See the IDI on Medical Treatment which sets out in detail the requirements for Article 3 and/or 8 to be engaged.

- 4.4.2** Healthcare in Sierra Leone was undermined by the massive displacement of civilians during the civil war, which overwhelmed an already inadequate healthcare system. Provincial cities were inundated with civilians fleeing the violence, resulting in overcrowding, malnutrition, outbreaks of disease and the collapse of overburdened social services. Most healthcare is now provided by humanitarian and church organisations through a barely functioning health ministry. Sierra Leone also faces hazards from malaria as well as epidemics associated with poverty and poor hygiene, such as tuberculosis, typhoid, cholera and periodic rural outbreaks of Lassa fever. Most of the victims are children and women.²⁸

- 4.4.3** The HIV/AIDS infection rate is thought by non-governmental organisations to have risen to 4-5% in 2005, similar to elsewhere in West Africa. The Government of Sierra Leone has launched a programme to provide free antiretroviral (ARV) drugs to 300 people living with AIDS and has provided US \$180,000 to fund the initial one-year programme, run by the Sierra Leone Treatment Action Group (SILTAG). Infant and maternal health care in Sierra Leone is very poor, whilst mental health issues reportedly remain largely neglected.²⁹

- 4.4.4** Hospitals and health centres throughout Sierra Leone are ill-resourced and underfunded. Additionally, low salaries of health-care personnel, including doctors, has contributed to most of the medical officers leaving or planning to leave the country for better-paid jobs abroad. The shortage of doctors and qualified medical staff in Sierra Leone has led to the prevalence of 'pepper doctors'. These 'pepper doctors' are mainly untrained and their interventions often lead to further health complications or death. The prevalence of these doctors and the increase in street non-registered and unlicensed pharmacies as well as sales of expired or fake drugs remain problems.³⁰

- 4.4.5** There is limited healthcare available in Sierra Leone, but the Article 3 threshold will not be reached in the majority of medical cases and a grant of Discretionary Leave will not usually be appropriate. Where a caseworker considers that the circumstances of the individual claimant and the situation in the country reach the threshold detailed in the IDI on Medical Treatment making removal contrary to Article 3 or 8 a grant of Discretionary Leave to remain will be appropriate. Such cases should always be referred to a Senior Caseworker for consideration prior to a grant of Discretionary Leave.

5. Returns

- 5.1** Factors that affect the practicality of return such as the difficulty or otherwise of obtaining a travel document should not be taken into account when considering the merits of an asylum or human rights claim. Where the claim includes dependent family members their situation on return should however be considered in line with the Immigration Rules, in particular

²⁸ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (paras 5.42 & 5.43)

²⁹ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (paras 5.44 - 5.48)

³⁰ COI Service Sierra Leone Country Report March 2006 (para 5.43)

paragraph 395C requires the consideration of all relevant factors known to the Secretary of State, and with regard to family members refers also to the factors listed in paragraphs 365-368 of the Immigration Rules.

- 5.2** Sierra Leonean nationals may return voluntarily to any region of Sierra Leone at any time by way of the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme run by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and co-funded by the European Refugee Fund. IOM will provide advice and help with obtaining travel documents and booking flights, as well as organising reintegration assistance in Sierra Leone. The programme was established in 2001, and is open to those awaiting an asylum decision or the outcome of an appeal, as well as failed asylum seekers. Sierra Leone nationals wishing to avail themselves of this opportunity for assisted return to Sierra Leone should be put in contact with the IOM offices in London on 020 7233 0001 or www.iomlondon.org.

6. List of source documents

- Home Office COI Service Sierra Leone Country of Origin Information Report March 2006. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html
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Asylum and Appeals Policy Directorate
15 December 2006