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Republic of Sierra Leone

Head of state and government: **Ernest Bai Koroma**

Restrictions were imposed on the rights to freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly and of association. Hundreds of people died and thousands were left homeless following a mudslide. Prison conditions fell far below international standards. Pregnant girls were excluded from school.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Abdul Fatoma of the Campaign for Human Rights and Development International was arrested in the capital, Freetown, on 31 January after he participated in a radio discussion in which he criticized the government and Anti-Corruption Commission for their lack of accountability. He was released on bail on 1 February but his passport was withheld for 45 days.[1]

Three journalists from the *Salone Times* and *New Age* newspapers were summoned to court on 22 September to respond to various charges of seditious libel under the Public Order Act 1965, after they published stories criticizing plans by the National Telecommunications Commission to increase telecommunications prices. Their preliminary hearing was adjourned twice and they had not been summoned to appear in court by the end of the year.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

On 23 March, security forces killed a teenage boy of around 16 and seriously injured two students when they opened fire on a Njala University student protest in Bo, southern region. The students were protesting against a lecturers' strike during which time the university was closed for several months. Police said that the students did not obtain a permit to protest, and that they burned tyres and blocked roads. Seven students were arrested but released without charge after being detained for two days. The Independent Police Complaints Board launched an investigation into allegations that police used excessive force.

On the same day, police fired tear gas to disperse students protesting against the strike in front of the President's residence in Freetown. Fourteen students were arrested and charged with riotous conduct, and fined and released by the Magistrate Court. Two other students were arrested that day at State House and charged with conspiracy and possession of an offensive weapon. They were released on bail and their case was ongoing at the end of the year.

On 21 September, police prevented the Malen Land Owners and Users Association (MALOA) from holding a peaceful assembly in Pujeheun town. The gathering had been organized to coincide with a meeting between MALOA members and the District Security Committee on the International Day against

monoculture tree plantations. The police blocked the road and prevented them from joining the assembly, but allowed six members to attend the meeting.

In October, the District Security Committee denied MALOA permission to hold a meeting in Pujeheun on the grounds that the association was not registered in the Chiefdom. The Paramount Chief had refused to register the group since 2013, even though they were registered with the Registrar General in Freetown.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In February, the Human Rights Defenders Network submitted a draft bill to protect human rights defenders to the Attorney General's office.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

On 14 August, a mudslide in the Regent community of Freetown left more than 400 people dead and around 3,000 homeless. Most of the victims had been living in informal settlements. Poor planning, and a failure to implement relevant legislation or provide adequate housing exacerbated the scale of the disaster.[2] The authorities provided immediate support and temporary shelter for survivors but closed these camps in mid-November. Households were given cash and other benefits to help them relocate. No public enquiry had been established into the incident by the end of the year.

In August, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and wastes visited Sierra Leone. He raised concerns about the human rights impact of hazardous substances and waste, and called on the government to adopt and enforce laws and policies related to waste reduction and labour inspection requirements.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

In October, civil society organizations reiterated calls on the government to allow pregnant girls to attend mainstream schools and sit exams. Part-time education schemes for pregnant girls, available three days a week with a reduced curriculum, ended in July and were due to resume in January 2018. Many girls who had given birth were unable to return to school due to costs such as child care, school fees or other associated costs like uniforms.

DETENTION

Prisons remained overcrowded, largely due to prolonged pre-trial detention periods, and fell far below international standards. Civil society organizations raised concerns about delayed access to health care for inmates; inadequate food and basic items; poor conditions in police cells, including inadequate sanitation; and extended detention periods which violated detainees' constitutional rights.

In November, civil society organizations called for the decriminalization of petty offences, such as fraudulent conversion (criminalization of debt), and loitering, which were used disproportionately against women and marginalized communities. They also contributed to prison overcrowding. Legislation on these offences was vaguely worded and allowed for arbitrary arrests.

In May, new bail and sentencing guidelines to reduce the use of pre-trial detention were approved by the Rules of Court Committee and became binding on the courts.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

On 1 June, Mohamed Kamaraimba Manasary, leader of the Alliance Democratic Party, was arrested on allegations that he was in possession of a stun gun. He was charged with possession of an offensive weapon and released on bail on 7 June. On 21 June, the charges were dropped and a new charge was brought of unlawful possession of small arms under the Arms and Ammunition Act 2012 which does not specifically cover stun guns. His bail was revoked and he was detained for another week before being released on 28 June. His trial was ongoing at the end of the year. He and his lawyers claimed that his arrest was politically motivated.

DEATH PENALTY

Death sentences continued to be handed down. In September, six police officers were sentenced to death by firing squad for conspiracy and robbery with aggravation.

LEGAL, CONSTITUTIONAL OR INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

On 10 November, the government issued a White Paper in response to the Constitutional Review Committee's recommendations. It rejected over 100 of the Committee's 134 recommendations, including abolition of the death penalty, and constitutional provisions to protect economic, social and cultural rights and equal rights for women.[3]

[1] Sierra Leone: Anti-corruption activist's detention an attempt to stifle freedom of expression ([News story](#), 1 February)

[2] Sierra Leone: Housing and environmental failures behind shocking scale of mudslide deaths ([News story](#), 18 August)

[3] Sierra Leone: Government rejection of important constitutional review recommendations a missed opportunity to strengthen human rights protection ([News story](#), 6 December)

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