

2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unlike the previous year, there were no credible reports of arbitrary or unlawful killings by the government or its agents.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of arbitrary arrest or detention.

The government took some steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, but impunity persisted.

Section 1.

Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

Unlike the previous year, there were no credible reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2.

Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right.

In June, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) Criminal Investigation Department arrested and detained a lawyer on allegations of cyberstalking the president and the leader of the bar association, based on the lawyer's tweet questioning their legitimacy. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) protested the arrest, expressing concern at the impact on freedom of expression. The lawyer was released on bail the next day.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

In February, the SLP arrested the editor of *Night Watch Newspaper*, a publication associated with the All Peoples Congress, following its publication of a controversial article entitled "We Cannot Wait for Bio to Continue in Power until 2028 – Sierra Leoneans." Authorities released the editor from police custody within a week.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers in the public and private sectors to join independent unions of their choice without prior authorization, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law did not prohibit discrimination against union members or prohibit employer interference in the establishment of unions. The government could require workers to provide written notice to police of an intent to strike at least 21 days before the planned strike.

The government generally protected the right to bargain collectively and the right to strike. Collective bargaining was widespread in the formal sector, and most enterprises were covered by collective bargaining agreements on wages and working conditions. Although the law protected collective bargaining activity, the law required it take place in trade group negotiating councils, each of which had to have an equal number of employer and worker representatives.

While the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) and labor unions reported the government generally protected the right of workers in the private sector to form or join unions, the government did not enforce applicable law through regulatory or judicial action. The government generally respected freedom of association and effectively enforced governing laws.

Penalties for violations of association, bargaining, and the right to strike were less than with those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

There was a national minimum wage for all sectors, but it fell below the basic poverty line in the country. Although not stipulated by law, the customary workweek was 40 hours (60 hours for security personnel). There was no statutory definition of overtime wages to be paid if an employee's work hours exceed 40. Alleged violations of wage, hour, and overtime were common in informal artisanal diamond mining, domestic work, and agriculture.

Occupational Safety and Health

There were no occupational safety and health (OSH) standards generally appropriate for the main industries in the country. The government did not proactively identify unsafe conditions, but only responded to worker complaints, if at all. Workers could not remove themselves from situations endangering health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

According to NGOs, alleged violations of OSH standards were common in the health, medical, and mining sectors.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, hour, and OSH standards, particularly in informal sectors, and the penalties for noncompliance were not commensurate with those for similar violations such as fraud or negligence. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security was responsible for enforcing labor laws, including wage, hour, and OSH regulations, but the number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance, although inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. Approximately 90 percent of laborers worked in the informal sector, predominantly in subsistence or small-scale agriculture.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. According to Prison Watch Sierra Leone (PWSL), the government generally observed these requirements for adults, but Defense for Children International Sierra Leone (DCISL) reported indiscriminate detention of children was a significant problem.

The law required warrants for searches and arrests of persons taken into custody on criminal grounds, and arrests without warrants were not common. The HRCSL reported the SLP made some arrests without warrants and held suspects in custody beyond the legally mandated period.

The law required authorities to inform detainees of the reason for their arrest within 24 hours and charge them in court within 72 hours for suspected misdemeanors, or within 10 days for suspected felonies. According to Amnesty International and the HRCSL, detainees were not always informed promptly of the charges brought against them.

Detainees had the right to access family members and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. According to NGOs, lawyers typically were allowed unrestricted access to detainees, and the SLP or detention officers largely respected this policy.

Lengthy pretrial detention remained a significant problem. Several NGOs, including the Campaign for Human Rights and Development International and the PWSL, reported pretrial and remand detainees spent an average of two to three years in pretrial detention before courts examined their cases or filed formal charges, frequently exceeding the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. Further, the DCISL reported the law allowed for indiscriminate detention of juveniles when an "officer has reason to believe that the release of such a person would defeat the ends of justice," resulting in lengthy detentions.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibited such practices. In September, the Family Support Unit (FSU) of the SLP reported two accusations against police officers for physically and sexually abusing children. The FSU stated the police officers remained under investigation at year's end.

Impunity was a significant problem in the security forces, notably the SLP.

The law did not prohibit female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) for women or girls. According to local NGOs, as of February, 83 percent of women and girls ages 15 to 49 had

experienced FGM/C, a decrease from a 2013 report of 90 percent.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/> .

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18. In June, adoption of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act rectified an anomaly in the law, wherein children younger than age 18 could marry with parental permission. The new law prohibited marriage or cohabitation with a child with parental permission and provided counseling and safeguarding services. Authorities began effectively enforcing the law after its passage.

According to the 2019 *Demographic and Health Survey*, girls from poor rural families were most likely to be married before age 18.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for protecting refugees.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

There was a very small Jewish community. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

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