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Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2014 - Sierra Leone

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sierra Leone is a constitutional republic with a directly elected president and a unicameral legislature. In 2012 the ruling All People's Congress (APC) party won an expanded majority in parliament, and citizens re-elected President Ernest Bai Koroma in peaceful multi-party elections. Authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most significant human rights problems included a lack of universal access to justice; widespread official corruption in all branches of government; and trafficking in persons, including for child labor.

Other major human rights problems included abusive treatment by police; prolonged detention and imprisonment under harsh and life-threatening conditions; discrimination and violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); early and forced marriage; official and societal discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals; and discrimination against those with disabilities.

The Anti-Corruption Commission investigated and prosecuted cases of corruption in a nonpartisan fashion but achieved only limited success before the judiciary. Impunity remained a serious concern.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices; however, there were reports that police and other security personnel continued to use excessive force. The law allows cane lashes as a form of corporal punishment, although the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Prison Watch noted sensitization on human rights led to a reduction during the year in such incidents.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions were harsh and sometimes life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, lack of adequate clean water, and inadequate sanitary conditions.

Physical Conditions: There were 2,413 prisoners, including 120 female inmates. Overcrowding was a major problem, particularly in urban prisons in Freetown, Kenema, Bo, and Makeni. Prison Watch reported that, as of July 2013, all 17 of the country's prisons were overcrowded. For example, the Freetown Central Prison, with a capacity of 342 inmates, held 444 convicted prisoners, 292 prisoners on remand pending trial, and 441 prisoners standing trial. The Freetown Female Prison, with a capacity of 18 inmates, held 16 convicted prisoners, seven prisoners on remand pending trial, and eight prisoners standing trial. In some prisons cells measuring six feet by nine feet held nine or more prisoners. A lack of juvenile detention centers in many districts meant minors were frequently detained with adults in police cells.

According to Prison Watch's 2013 assessment, the incidence of torture and inhuman punishment declined in recent years.

Human rights observers reported detention conditions remained below minimum international standards because of overcrowding, unhygienic conditions, and insufficient medical attention. Prison cells often lacked proper lighting, bedding, ventilation, and protection from mosquitoes. Most prisons did not have piped water systems, and some prisoners lacked sufficient access to drinking water.

A 2012 report into prison conditions issued jointly by the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) following visits to each of the country's 17 prisons and three juvenile detention centers--as well as to many police and local court cells--found that poor infrastructure and lack of maintenance resulted in prisons not meeting international standards. The report noted lack of lighting, furniture, beds, sanitary, and medical facilities were often the rule rather than the exception. Access to food and drinking water was often inadequate, hygienic conditions were poor, and medical care was limited. Authorities often held different categories of prisoners together and sometimes mixed juvenile detainees with the adult prison population.

One NGO noted an improvement in nutritional standards, but prisoners continued to receive inadequate portions of food. The Bureau of Prisons received only 2,500 leones (\$0.55) per prisoner per day for food rations; further, the failure of the government to pay food vendors resulted in severe food shortages throughout the year.

Conditions in police station holding cells were poor, especially in small stations outside Freetown. Cells were often dark with little ventilation. Overcrowding in some police cells continued to be a problem, as there were only five roving magistrates covering the entire country, and some regions did not see a magistrate for several months at a time. The 2012 UN report highlighted police holding cells as the worst of the country's detention facilities.

Few prisoners had access to adequate medical facilities, and clinics lacked supplies and medical personnel to provide basic services. The Pademba Road Prison had a clinic staffed by one doctor. Prisons outside Freetown sent patients to local government hospitals and clinics. Authorities allowed only emergency patients to visit the clinic outside of the assigned schedule. Officials treated female prisoners as outpatients or referred them to local hospitals for special care, but doctors and nurses in these hospitals often refused to treat prisoners or provided inferior care because of the government's failure to pay medical bills. Sanitation remained poor, with prisons in Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Pujehun, and Kono relying on waste buckets instead of sewer systems.

Prison Watch reported a shortage of prison staff, resulting in a lack of security that endangered prisoners' safety.

Authorities confirmed that 22 prisoners had died in custody as of September. According to Prison Watch, causes of death included malnutrition, severe anemia and related infections, malaria, immunodeficiency, and dehydration.

Authorities held men and women in separate cells in all prisons except those in Kono District. Several prisons held infants, most of whom were born in prison and initially kept there with their mothers. Once these children were weaned, authorities released them to family members, or the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs placed them in foster care.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs was responsible for all juvenile facility services except security. Authorities sent offenders under 18 to "approved schools," or reformatory institutions. Although authorities made an effort to avoid detaining juveniles with adults, they regularly imprisoned minors with adult offenders. Prison Watch reported authorities often sent young adults over 18 to the approved schools, while some children under 18 were sent to prison. Police officers had difficulty determining a person's age, given the lack of documentation, and they often depended on circumstantial evidence, such as possession of a voter registration card or affidavits from parents who may have reasons to lie about their child's age. In some cases police officers inflated the ages of juveniles to escape blame for detaining them. Several boys reported they were victims of physical abuse, including sodomy, by older prisoners. In the three juvenile facilities, detainees did not have adequate access to food and education and sometimes were unable to attend court hearings due to lack of transportation.

In most cases pretrial detainees were held with convicted prisoners. According to data provided by Prison Watch, as of July only 567 prisoners were convicted.

Administration: Prisoners could file complaints through internal prison procedures--covering complaints between inmates and between inmates and prison officials--and could also bring complaints to the Office of the Ombudsman and to the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRC-SL).

There was no alternative sentencing program for nonviolent offenders.

Authorities permitted regular family visits, although frequency and duration of the visits varied from prison to prison. According to NGOs, family members often paid bribes to gain visiting privileges.

Prison recordkeeping was inadequate as the system relied exclusively on written ledgers. The UNIPSIL-OHCHR report described the storage of prisoner information as problematic, noting cases of lost files and inmates without any records.

Prisoners could engage in religious observance.

Prisoners refrained from filing complaints because they believed such actions would spur retaliation by judicial authorities. The UNIPSIL-OHCHR report noted isolated cases of interference with the confidentiality of complaints and some limitations on reviewing authorities' access to prisoners but reported that in rare cases complaints had triggered results.

Independent Monitoring: International monitors, including UNIPSIL, had unrestricted access to the prisons, detention centers, and police holding cells. Additionally, some NGOs such as Prison Watch, AdvocAid, Don Bosco Prison Ministry, and Defense for Children International monitored the prisons. The monitors generally reported free access to the prisons and data. Local NGOs generally operated independently and without interference from the government.

The Prisons Department invited civil society organizations and other government agencies to inspect and comment on prison operations. Civil society organizations and the Sierra Leone Red Cross conducted inspections.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention; however, police occasionally arrested and detained persons arbitrarily. The government allows both the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the chiefdom police to hold suspects in police detention cells without charge or explanation for up to three days for suspected misdemeanors and up to 10 days for suspected felonies.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The SLP, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is responsible for maintaining internal security, but it was poorly equipped and lacked sufficient investigative, forensic, and riot control capabilities. The military is responsible for external security but also has some domestic security responsibilities through the "Military Aid to Civil Power" program, which provided additional assistance to police in extraordinary circumstances upon request.

As part of the Ebola-related state of emergency declaration made in August, the president ordered military aid to other government departments to augment police operations to maintain order and quarantine of high-infection areas in support of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the SLP and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), and the government has mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. Nonetheless, impunity continued.

As in previous years, cases of police corruption remained a serious problem. Some police and guards stole from detainees, exacted bribes at checkpoints, falsely charged motorists with violations, impounded vehicles to extort money, and accepted bribes from suspects to drop charges or to have their rivals arrested and charged with crimes.

In exchange for kickbacks, police reportedly arrested persons without charge for civil causes such as alleged breach of contract or failure to satisfy a debt.

The Police Complaints, Discipline, and Internal Investigations Department (CDIID) heard complaints against police officers. A Police Council, which included the vice president, minister of internal affairs, inspector general, and others, accepted written complaints against senior police officers. The CDIID conducted all hearings and trials related to complaints against junior police officers. Officers often used an appeals process. After the CDIID imposes disciplinary measures on an SLP officer, the officer is also subject to trial in civilian court in cases involving criminal charges. As of August the CDIID received 940 complaints countrywide; as a result authorities dismissed 32 officers, suspended 72 officers, and took action—including corrective training—against many others. Complaints most frequently lodged against police were for lack of professionalism, corruption, unauthorized absence from duty, incurring debts, unfair treatment, and assault.

Police continued to receive professional, leadership, and human rights training, and new recruits received a six-month introductory course before deployment. Because of training programs during the year and the introduction in 2010 of community policing conducted by the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and other foreign organizations, police professional conduct improved. In 2011 the United Kingdom committed 19.4 million pounds sterling (\$30.2 million) to establish the “Access to Security and Justice Program” to run from 2011 to 2014.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires warrants for searches and arrests; however, arrest without warrant was common. Prison Watch and the Lawyers’ Center for Legal Assistance (LAWCLA) reported most arrests were made without warrants and the SLP rarely followed proper arrest procedures.

Authorities must tell detainees the reason for arrest within 24 hours and charge them in court within 72 hours for suspected misdemeanors or within 10 days for suspected felonies. According to NGOs and prisoners, authorities routinely brought remanded prisoners to court on a weekly basis to be remanded again in order to bypass the legal restrictions.

Detainees have the right to access family members and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. Lawyers generally were allowed unrestricted access to detainees, but only an estimated 5 to 10 percent of inmates had access to legal representation, which was often delayed. Only defendants in the military justice system had automatic access to attorneys, whose fees the Ministry of Defense paid. Only 41 state counsels served the entire country, and they were often overburdened, poorly paid, and available only for more serious criminal cases, with few providing legal aid outside of Freetown. Although the law provides for attorneys at state expense, because state attorneys (counsels) were overburdened, indigent detainees did not usually receive legal advice prior to trial.

Several local NGOs, including Timap for Justice, Access to Justice Law Center, and AdvocAid, provided training and support to community-based paralegals. The Access to Security and Justice Program, a five-year United Kingdom-funded initiative, provided support to government and civil society institutions with the aim of increasing access to security and justice services, especially among members of marginalized communities.

There were provisions for bail and a functioning bail system; however, authorities applied the system inconsistently and sometimes demanded excessive bail.

There were no reports of suspects held under house arrest or being detained incommunicado.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports of individuals being held for questioning for longer than permissible under law.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem. Prison Watch reported that due to a severe shortage of legal professionals, 60 percent of prisoners were waiting to be charged or tried, or their trials were not completed. Pretrial and remand detainees spent an average of three to five years in pretrial detention before courts examined their cases or filed formal charges. In extreme cases the wait could be as long as 10 years. According to the NGO Open Society Initiative for West Africa, remand prisoners frequently changed their

pleas from “not guilty” to “guilty” to be removed from the remand section to the less substandard areas of a prison. The joint UNIPSIL-OHCHR prison conditions report noted that limited access to bail, the absence of magistrates, and the irregularity of court sittings resulted in prisoners on remand often waiting more than a year to appear before a court and reported the majority of prisoners were not serving a sentence.

Amnesty: In celebration of Independence Day, President Koroma granted 197 pardons.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary; however, observers believed the judiciary acted under government influence, particularly in the dismissal or acquittal of some corruption and electoral cases.

In addition to the formal civil court system, local chieftaincy courts administer customary law with lay judges; appeals from these lower courts are heard by the superior courts.

The limited number of judicial magistrates, high court fees, and few lawyers, restricted access to justice for most citizens. Some districts lacked resident magistrates, contributing to lengthy delays in the administration of justice.

The RSLAF has its own military justice system, although soldiers can also be tried in civilian courts for some crimes. The sometimes ad hoc decision regarding which justice system to use is subject to pressure from RSLAF leadership.

If a case remains in military channels, military police conduct an investigation and forward the findings to the Ministry of Defense Law Office, which decides whether to handle the offense through a “summary dealing” process or a court-martial.

Summary dealing cases are limited to low-level military offenses. The commanding officer determines the punishment, the most severe of which is a 28-day custodial sentence. The court-martial hears all civilian and serious military offenses committed by military personnel and cases involving senior officers. Such cases are tried before a civilian judge and board; the latter determines guilt or innocence, and the former the sentencing recommendation. The court-martial heard an average of four cases per year.

The military justice system has an appeals process. For summary dealing the defendant can appeal for the redress of complaint, which goes to the next senior ranking officer, while the civilian Supreme Court hears appeals in a court-martial. The redress system, however, reportedly was corrupt.

Traditional justice systems also functioned, especially in rural areas. Paramount chiefs maintained their own police and courts to enforce customary local laws. Chieftaincy police and courts exercised authority to arrest, try, and incarcerate individuals and sometimes abused that power. The government sent growing numbers of paralegals to rural areas to provide access to justice and training for chieftain officials.

Trials were generally fair; however, there was credible evidence that corruption influenced many cases. Paramount chiefs acting as judges routinely accepted bribes and favored wealthier defendants.

Authorities generally respected court orders.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, but this right was not always enforced.

The lack of judicial officers and facilities regularly resulted in repeated long trial delays. Some cases reportedly were adjourned 40 to 60 times. Trials are public, but the accused do not have the right to a trial by jury in the magistrate courts. Juries were drawn from a list maintained by the master and registrar of active and retired civil servants and youth groups; however, to expedite cases the attorney general frequently exercised his power to determine that cases be heard by a judge alone. Defendants generally enjoyed a presumption of innocence. While defendants have the right to be present and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner, many were not afforded access to counsel. The law provides for attorneys at public expense if defendants could not afford their own; however, state-appointed attorneys were overburdened and poorly paid, and indigent detainees usually did not receive legal advice prior to trial. Defendants were not always informed promptly and in detail of the charges against them and did not always have access to free interpretation. Defendants generally had adequate time to prepare their defenses, although they generally did not have adequate facilities to do so. Defendants could confront or question witnesses against them, present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf, and access government-held evidence relevant to their cases. Police officers, many of whom had little or no formal legal training, prosecuted a majority of cases on the magistrate level. Although the law provides defendants with the right to appeal, delays in the appeals process were excessive, sometimes lasting more than two years. The law extends these rights to all citizens.

Human rights NGOs noted wide disparities in sentencing patterns from district to district. Sentences imposed were often disproportional to the offense. Many prisoners served excessively long sentences for noncapital offenses, such as sacrilege (50 years), larceny (25 years), and burglary (45 years). Local civil society organizations attributed the harsh sentencing to the defendants' inability to pay a fine or bribe. The UNIPSIL-OHCHR report noted prison sentences across the country were inconsistent.

Traditional justice systems continued to supplement the central government judiciary, especially in rural areas, in cases involving family law, inheritance, and land tenure. The customary law guiding these courts was not codified, however, and decisions in similar cases were inconsistent. Paramount chiefs sometimes referred cases to the police to give arrests for civil complaints the appearance of legitimacy. Local chieftains at times exceeded their mandates and administered harsh punishments.

Laws on gender equality were inconsistently enforced, and many traditional courts continued to ignore the rights of women regarding family law and inheritance. Juveniles were afforded few rights in the traditional justice system.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Both the central government judiciary and customary law courts handled civil complaints; however, corruption influenced some cases and judgments, and awards were inconsistent. Administrative and judicial remedies were available for alleged wrongs, but enforcement was difficult. Victims of human rights abuses have access to the regular courts to seek redress for human rights violations.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and laws prohibit such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. Unlike in previous years, official rhetoric was not hostile to press freedom.

Freedom of Speech: Government officials occasionally used criminal libel provisions of the Public Order Act to impede witness testimony in court cases, including anticorruption matters.

Press Freedoms: International media could operate freely but were required to register with the Ministry of Information and Communications and the Independent Media Commission (IMC) to obtain a license. Most registered newspapers were independent, although several were associated with political parties. Newspapers openly and routinely criticized the government and its officials as well as opposition parties.

In July the cabinet instructed the media regulator, the IMC, to suspend Citizen FM's radio show *Monologue* because the program was a threat to national security.

Radio remained the most important medium for public dissemination of information due to the low level of literacy and the relatively high cost of newspapers and televisions.

Violence and Harassment: On November 4, police arrested David Tam-Baryoh, host of a popular weekly radio program, who had made several strong political statements, including criticism of the use of military to quarantine two eastern districts, but not his home area in the north. Baryoh also stated that the vice president was being sidelined and that those arrested during the Kono riots were primarily the vice president's allies. He interviewed the vice president (with whom the president had a strained relationship) and alleged that the president was trying to extend his term in office. Baryoh compared the country's situation to that of Burkina Faso. Attorney General Kargbo, however, countered that Baryoh's statement was "likely to incite public hatred and instability." The president used the emergency powers granted to him in August to order Baryoh's arrest for

incitement. Baryoh publicly denied reports that he was beaten or denied access to medication. He was held at the Pademba Road Prison until his release on bail on November 14.

Libel Laws/National Security: In March, two prominent members of the ruling party charged two newspaper editors with conspiracy to commit libel. They were acquitted after running a retraction of the allegedly libelous story.

The IMC provides an alternative to pressing libel charges but was generally not used. It can impose fines and other sanctions on journalists and organizations that violate the media code of practice, including fines for showing disrespect towards elected officials. NGO and media observers increasingly questioned the IMC's significance and independence. Most media cases were filed directly in court.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. The International Telecommunication Union reported that less than 2 percent of citizens used the internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provide for the freedoms of assembly and association, and the government generally respected the right of freedom of association.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/rpt/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

In-country Movement: In August, due to the Ebola outbreak, the president declared a public-health emergency, deploying security forces to restrict movement to and from the epicenters of the outbreak.

There were reports police officers operating security roadblocks outside the capital often extorted money from motorists.

Foreign Travel: Generally, the borders shared with Liberia and Guinea were officially open, and authorities generally allowed refugees, returnees, and other persons to move regularly between the countries. Due to the Ebola outbreak, however, increased screening at land borders with Guinea and Liberia began in March.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The laws provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The law provides for refugee status as defined by international convention to be granted to eligible asylum seekers. The UNHCR worked with government authorities to develop standard operating procedures for refugee status determination.

Durable Solutions: As of September the country was host to 2,429 refugees, the great majority from Liberia, and 26 asylum seekers. The Liberians' prima facie refugee status expired in 2012, upon implementation of the cessation clause by the government as recommended by the UNHCR. As of September a total of 1,324 refugees had sought UNHCR assistance in applying for Liberian passports in order to obtain Sierra Leonean residence permits. The government cooperated with the UNHCR and the government of Liberia on local

integration of the remaining Liberian population in Sierra Leone, granting residence permits to all 935 residual residents who obtained Liberian passports during the year.

Temporary Protection: According to the UNHCR, the government did not provide temporary protection to certain individuals who may not qualify as refugees under the 1951 convention and the 1967 protocol.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to change their government through free and fair elections, and citizens exercised this right through elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In peaceful presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections held in 2012, the ruling APC won an expanded majority in parliament, and voters re-elected President Ernest Bai Koroma. Domestic and international observers noted the benefits of incumbency gave the APC a significant competitive advantage but still characterized the elections as free, fair, transparent, and credible, commending the 87 percent turnout among registered voters. The opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) alleged widespread voter fraud and refused to accept the results of the poll until almost a month later.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), which oversees the country's 10 registered political parties, does not have authority to sanction any political party for inappropriate behavior. It received 22 complaints during the year and acted as a mediator to address the problems. The PPRC may use only moral suasion to convince persons and parties to act according to agreed-upon guidelines, such as the parties' constitutions. The PPRC provided material assistance such as vehicles, computers, office supplies, and internet connectivity, funded by the UN Development Program, to political parties to assist them with campaigning in 2012. A party must meet certain requirements to receive such assistance, including representation in parliament, visible political activity for at least two years, membership in the All Political Parties Women's Association and the All Political Parties Youth Association, and participation in a National Election Commission-sponsored by-election since 2008.

A parallel system of tribal government, headed by a paramount chief, operated in each of 149 chiefdoms. The paramount chief is elected for a life term. Candidates for the position are limited to members of local ruling houses. Only tribal authorities (those who collected local taxes from at least 20 taxpayers) were allowed to vote for paramount chief, and in the North only men could be designated as tribal authorities. Although paramount chiefs' authority exists independently of the central government and local councils, they frequently displayed party affiliations, were influenced by the party in power, and allegedly influenced the votes of their constituents. In turn political parties occasionally interfered with elections of paramount chiefs. The election of paramount chiefs at times exacerbated ethnic tensions.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Women have the right to vote, but husbands or other patriarchal figures were known to influence their decisions. Of the 124 parliamentarians, 14 were women. Women led two of the 22 ministries at year's end. There were three female justices, including the chief justice, on the seven-member Supreme Court. Four of six judges on the Court of Appeal were women.

All citizens have the right to vote; however, citizenship at birth is granted only to persons of "Negro-African" descent, thus disenfranchising the significant number of Lebanese and other non-Negro-African persons who were born and continued to reside in the country. Persons of non-Negro-African groups may apply to be naturalized. If naturalized, they are eligible to vote in all national and local elections, but no naturalized citizen may run for public office.

Ethnic affiliations strongly influenced political party membership for the two dominant ethnic groups, the Mende and Temne, each of which accounted for approximately 30 percent of the population. The Mende traditionally supported the SLPP and the Temne the APC. Other than the Limba, the third most populous ethnic group, who traditionally supported the APC, the other ethnic groups had no strong political party affiliations. Opposition parties regularly accused President Koroma of giving preference to Northerners in filling government positions. As of September ministers from the North occupied 67 percent of cabinet offices, ministers from the South and East occupied 25 percent of cabinet offices, and ministers from the western peninsula held the remaining 8 percent.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides for criminal penalties for official corruption. The government attempted to implement the law, although with diminished vigor. Despite several well-publicized cases of corruption, officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Police and prison staff regularly extorted or solicited bribes from detainees and prisoners. The World Bank's most recent Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a severe problem.

Corruption: During the year the government began to implement its 2014-18 national action plan to combat corruption. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) conducted sensitization campaigns with the public and government ministries.

As of September the ACC had received 770 corruption cases, of which it assigned 56 to staff, completed investigations on 54, closed 35 without charges, and issued warnings in one. The ACC secured six convictions as of September. The remaining cases were pending.

By September the ACC recovered approximately 525 million leones (\$115,500) from public officers and private businesspersons in fines, restitutions, and settlements in corruption-related cases. Although the ACC did not offer to settle cases out of court, suspects may request a settlement, and many cases were resolved in this way. Several defendants also chose to pay fines rather than face imprisonment. The ACC has the authority to prosecute cases directly without first having to refer them to the Ministry of Justice, and it did so.

Financial Disclosure: The law requires public officers, their spouses, and children to declare their assets and liabilities. It also mandates disclosure of assets for government ministers and members of parliament. The ACC is empowered to verify asset disclosures and may publish in the media the names of those who refuse to disclose and petition the courts to compel disclosure. Failure to disclose also carries a penalty of up to 20 million leones (\$4,400) and one year in prison. The particulars of individual declarations were not available to the public without a court order.

Public Access to Information: A 2013 law requires public authorities to grant citizens access to government-held information. The law incorporates a sufficiently narrow list of nondisclosure exceptions, a reasonably short timeline for disclosure, and reasonable processing fees. It includes civil and criminal sanctions for noncompliance. The law also provides for establishment of an information commission to facilitate enforcement of its provisions. Information applicants may appeal a disclosure denial to the information commission and subsequently to the courts.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The government, including security forces, was generally responsive to human rights concerns raised by the HRC-SL, the IMC, and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations. A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restrictions, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to the views of local and international NGOs and generally acknowledged the problems presented. They often scheduled forums in conjunction with NGOs to discuss such topics as women's rights and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Most domestic human rights NGOs focused on human rights education. A few NGOs, including the Campaign for Good Governance, LAWCLA, Timap for Justice, the Center for Accountability and Rule of Law, and Access to Justice, monitored and reported on human rights abuses.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Parliamentary Human Rights Committee operated without government or party interference. It focused on keeping human rights issues on the parliamentary agenda, paving the way for the passage of amended laws and ratification of international conventions, and doing public outreach.

The HRC-SL generally operated without government interference, but government agencies were slow to support the commission or implement its recommendations.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, tribe, sex, place of origin, political opinion, color, creed, or disability. The law does not acknowledge sexual orientation or gender identity as protected categories.

The government did not effectively enforce the prohibition of discrimination based on gender as it affected women and girls, and a number of legal acts and customary laws contravened the constitutional provision. The other prohibitions on discrimination were generally enforced.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law prohibits rape, which is punishable by up to 15 years' imprisonment; however, rape was common and viewed more as a societal norm than a criminal problem. The law establishes the age of consent at 18 and specifically prohibits spousal rape. Cases of rape were greatly underreported, and indictments were rare, especially in rural areas. A reluctance to use the judicial system on the part of both victims and law enforcement, combined with women's lack of income and economic independence, helped perpetuate violence against women and impunity for offenders. Despite the establishment of the family support units (FSUs) and the passage of pertinent legislation in 2007 and 2009, reports of rapes, especially involving child victims, steadily increased.

Rape cases frequently were settled out of court or did not make it to trial because of inefficiencies and corruption in the judicial system. Most legal advisors assigned to prosecute rape cases had only three weeks' training in this type of case and could not compete against well-trained defense lawyers. Most perpetrators were known to their victims and included teachers, family friends, relatives, traditional leaders, and neighbors.

Medical and psychological services for rape victims were limited. Authorities historically required victims to obtain a medical report for the filing of charges, examinations, reports, and court appearances, and most government doctors charged 10,000 to 70,000 leones (\$2.20 to \$15.40), fees that were prohibitively expensive for most victims. The International Rescue Committee ran Rainbo centers in Freetown, Kenema, and Koidu to perform medical examinations, provide counseling for victims of sexual assault, and offer legal assistance for victims who wanted to prosecute their cases. These Rainbo centers were the only such centers in the country, and many victims had no access to medical attention or services. The law provides that the victim of a sexual offense shall be entitled to free medical treatment and a free medical report, but in reality many victims had to pay for medical services.

Domestic violence is an offense, punishable by a fine of up to five million leones (\$1,100) and up to two years in prison. Nevertheless, violent acts against women, especially wife beating and spousal rape, were common and often surrounded by a culture of silence. Police were unlikely to intervene in domestic disputes except in cases involving serious injury or death. The SLP used mediation as its primary tool for handling domestic violence. Between January and June, the FSUs reported 456 cases of domestic violence. In addition NGOs observed in many cases that women withdrew rape or other complaints of violence due to social stigma, fear of retaliation, or acceptance of payment in lieu of pressing charges. The lack of convictions resulted in a high degree of impunity for rape and other violence. Awareness of the law resulted in an increase in reported cases in urban areas; however, most human rights organizations noted domestic violence continued to be most prevalent and underreported in the northern provinces.

According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the majority of women felt that wife beating was justified for actions such as going out without telling a husband, neglecting their children, refusing sex, or burning food. Women suspected of marital infidelity often were subjected to physical abuse. Because husbands could claim monetary indemnities from their wives' partners, beatings often continued until the women named several men, even if there were no such relationships. There were also reports that women suspected of infidelity were required to undergo animistic rituals to prove their innocence.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not prohibit the practice of FGM on adults, which is practiced almost exclusively on girls under the age of 18 (see section 6, Children).

Sexual Harassment: The law criminalizes sexual harassment. Under the act it is unlawful to make unwanted sexual advances, repeatedly follow or pursue others against their will, initiate repeated and unwanted communications with others, or engage in any other "menacing" behavior. No reliable data was available on the prevalence of sexual harassment. The FSU, a division of the SLP, assists victims of sexual assault and harassment.

Reproductive Rights: Women and men generally were free to decide responsibly the timing, number, and spacing of their children; to have the information and means to do so; and the right to attain the highest standard of reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Most couples who practiced family planning made independent decisions, while some reported that other influences and pressures, such as family and religion, were determinant factors in family-planning decisions. Family-planning services, including long-term and permanent methods, such as intrauterine devices, tubal ligation, contraceptive implants, and injections, as well as oral contraceptives and male and female condoms, were available, but the Ministry of Health and Sanitation was unable to provide data on utilization. The 2013 Demographic and Health Survey reported that 16 percent of married women of reproductive age used modern contraceptive methods.

Although the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and NGOs made efforts to meet the demand for family-planning services, outreach teams rarely served rural women and families. Many parents refused contraceptives for their sexually active teenage children because of a misunderstanding that contraceptives would prevent pregnancy later in life.

An increasing share of women gave birth in hospitals and in “peripheral health units,” grassroots health posts located primarily in rural areas although few hospitals offered full obstetric and postpartum services. Most women did not have access to transportation to make regular doctor’s visits or lived in locations with few services. Women also rarely had equal access to family finances, and male partners often did not see pre- and post-natal care as a priority.

According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the maternal mortality rate was approximately 1,100 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. The World Health Organization reported in 2010 that skilled health personnel attended 61 percent of births. With support from the international donor community, the government continued to implement the free health-care initiative launched in 2010, and the number of women seeking prenatal care and giving birth in medical facilities increased. Nonetheless, the program continued to be plagued with problems delivering drugs and other supplies to rural areas.

The UN Joint Program on AIDS estimated that in 2012, almost 1.5 percent of the population ages 15-49 was infected with HIV. Almost 55,000 persons were living with AIDS, 6,000 of whom were children under age 14.

Discrimination: The law gives either spouse the right to acquire property and stipulates that gifts, payments, or dowries upon marriage are nonrefundable, allowing women in unhappy marriages to divorce without being forced to return dowries.

The law provides for intestate succession, including the transmission of property to the deceased’s spouse and/or children as well as to single persons who cohabited with the deceased for 10 or more years. Since the law defines “property” as mutually owned land and because land outside of Freetown is generally communal or family property, it was difficult to prove that a couple owned the land together and that the widow thus had a right to it.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children’s Affairs continued to implement the Sierra Leone National Gender Strategic Plan, a four-year (2010-13) strategic framework drafted in conjunction with the UNFPA. Several “sensitization programs” were conducted around the country targeting traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and rural assemblies of women composing community wellness advocacy groups (CAGs) that in turn trained other women in more remote regions. The TBAs and CAGs focused on fighting sexual and gender-based violence, while also promoting reproductive health, reproductive rights, and broader human rights, and ensuring that women were aware of their rights under the law.

Women faced widespread legal and societal discrimination, particularly in matters of marriage, divorce, property, and inheritance, which are guided by customary law in all areas except the capital. Formal laws apply in customary as well as formal courts, but customary judges had limited or no legal training and often were unaware of formal laws or could choose to ignore them. Chiefs sometimes colluded with men to evict women and children forcibly from their homes or subject them to arbitrary detention. In some cases chiefs imposed arbitrary and exorbitant fines, imprisoned women unlawfully in their homes or “chiefdom jails,” and expelled them from the community. Women’s rights and status under customary law varied significantly depending upon the ethnic group to which they belonged, but such rights and status were routinely inferior to those of men. Under customary law women’s status in society is equal to that of a minor. A woman was frequently perceived to be the property of her husband, to be inherited on his death with his other property. In rural areas polygyny was widespread. All women in the Western (Freetown) Area, which is governed by general law, have a statutory right to own property in their own names, but many women in the provinces, which are governed by customary laws that vary from chiefdom to chiefdom, did not.

In the Temne ethnic group, women could not become paramount chiefs, subordinate chiefs, or chiefdom authorities; however, in the Mende ethnic group, there were several female leaders. Every local council had at least one female representative.

Women did not have equal access to education, economic opportunities, health facilities, or social freedoms (see section 7.d.). In rural areas women performed much of the subsistence farming and had little opportunity for formal education. According to a 2008 government survey, 66 percent of women had never attended school, compared with 50 percent of men. Women also experienced discrimination in access to employment, and it was common for an employer to dismiss a woman if she became pregnant during her first year on the job. Further discrimination occurred in access to credit, equal pay for similar work, and the ownership and management of a business.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs has a mandate to protect the rights of women; however, most international and domestic NGOs asserted that the ministry did not have the resources, infrastructure, and support of other ministries to handle its assigned projects effectively. The ministry routinely relied on the assistance of international organizations and NGOs to help combat women's rights violations.

Women were active in civic and philanthropic organizations. Domestic NGOs such as 50/50, the Forum for African Women Educationalists, the Women's Forum, and the All Political Parties Women's Association raised awareness of gender inequality and other women's issues, and they encouraged women to enter politics as candidates for mayoral positions and local councils.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is generally limited to persons of Negro-African descent, but non-Africans who have lived in the country for at least eight years (two years for foreigners married to Sierra Leonean citizens) may apply for naturalization, subject to presidential approval. Citizenship derived by birth is restricted to children of parents of Negro-African descent. Children not meeting the criteria must be registered in their parents' countries of origin. In 2012 Plan Sierra Leone, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, National Births and Death Office, District Health Management Teams for Western Sierra Leone, and the Christian Brothers, launched a three-year universal birth registration campaign under the Count Every Child program.

Birth registration was not universal due to inadequate staffing and resources; however, lack of registration did not affect access to public services or result in statelessness.

Education: Although no tuition was charged, many parents were unable to put their children through primary school because they could not afford school uniforms, books, and fees charged by school authorities. According to UNICEF's 2013 data, only 52 percent of girls and young women (ages 15-24) were literate, compared with the male rate of 71 percent. At the secondary level, pregnancy forced many girls out of school. The law allows girls to return to school after giving birth, but many communities did not respect that right.

Child Abuse: Sexual violence against children was a widespread and growing problem. Rapes of children under one year old were documented. In spite of government efforts to address the problem, including passage of the Sexual Offenses Act, substantial enforcement challenges remained. FSU personnel were trained in dealing with sexual violence against children, and cases of child sexual abuse generally were taken more seriously than adult rape cases. In many cases of sexual assault against children, parents accepted payment instead of taking the perpetrator to court due to difficulties dealing with the justice system, fear of public shame, and economic hardship. Conviction numbers remained very low. From January to June, the FSU reported 539 cases of child abuse, which included unlawful carnal knowledge (a general term for child rape), child neglect, child cruelty, and child theft and trafficking. Although authorities charged and convicted perpetrators in many of these cases, a large number of cases were withdrawn or resolved through informal negotiation.

Child rights laws also provide for the creation of family courts and child committees at the local government level, but NGOs reported that significant work remained to establish such entities nationwide. There were many child-welfare committees across the country, but they were fully functioning only at the district and chiefdom level and not at the village level.

Early and Forced Marriage: Although the law prohibits marriage of girls under the age of 18, including forced marriage, forced child marriage continued to be a problem.

Forty-eight percent of women reported being married by the age of 18. Prevalence of early marriage was highest in the North. UNICEF supported the government in addressing child marriage issues at the local level through awareness raising and training of communities and stakeholders, and supporting the development of bylaws.

Female Genital Mutilation Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not specifically prohibit FGM/C, but the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs interprets the section of the Child Rights Act that prohibits subjecting anyone under the age of 18 to harmful treatment as including FGM/C. Nonetheless, the practice continued on a large scale.

FGM/C was practiced on girls as young as two years old, and many NGOs reported cases in which toddlers underwent FGM/C because their very young age made it cheaper for parents. Excision, type II of the four categories of FGM/C, was the form widely practiced on women and girls, and it was performed predominantly by women's secret societies. In such societies the women who perform genital cutting, known as "sowies," continued to advocate the practice. According to the 2013 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey, approximately 90 percent of women and girls ages 15-49 had undergone FGM/C.

While the 2007 Child Rights Act does not explicitly address FGM/C, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs interpreted FGM/C to be covered within the section of the law that prohibits subjecting anyone under the age of 18 to harmful treatment, including any cultural practice that dehumanizes or is injurious to the physical and mental welfare of the child. In 2012 eight of the country's 14 districts signed a memorandum of understanding criminalizing FGM/C among children in Western Area Rural, Western Area Urban, Bo, Kambia, Port Loko, Pujehun, Bonthe, and Kailahun. Nonetheless, the practice continued in many of these districts.

FGM/C ceremonies (bondo) were led by sowies, who are exclusively women, generally at the behest of mothers who themselves underwent the procedure when young and want their daughters initiated into a women's secret society. Although most sowies had other employment, performing FGM/C was a major source of income for many. At the community level, eradication efforts focused on providing opportunities to sowies to obtain other income, as well as sensitizing parents not to subject their daughters to the procedure. Simultaneously, the UNFPA and local NGOs worked with traditional leaders and local chiefs on a range of interventions, including establishing sowie associations aimed at convincing sowies to increase the minimum age of initiations to 18 or to eliminate FGM/C from initiation ceremonies, as well as efforts to persuade local chiefs to impose bylaws outlawing FGM/C for children and include FGM/C eradication in district development plans. The UNFPA also held or funded workshops for local social workers and traditional leaders on prevention measures, as well as health care and psychosocial support for victims, particularly girls who had run away from home to escape the cutting. The UNFPA supported the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and the Human Rights Commission to educate communities and FGM/C practitioners on the harmful consequences of the practice.

NGOs reported some decline in the practice of FGM/C, likely due to increased awareness and interventions.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law explicitly criminalizes child pornography, although there was no record of any charges or convictions for child pornography. The law prohibits commercial sexual exploitation of minors. The minimum age of consensual sex is 18. Forced child prostitution continued to be a problem. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs and the British NGO Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL) in 2011 completed a four-month headcount of street children in 17 cities and towns, ultimately involving more than 60 domestic NGOs in the counting process. The survey results, published in 2012, identified nearly 50,000 street children and indicated that more than 11 percent of female street children were forced into prostitution.

Displaced Children: Besides prostitution, many children were forced to engage in petty trading and other economic activities to survive and were vulnerable to trafficking and other exploitative practices. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and SCoSL report found that two-thirds of street children were engaged in some type of income-generating activity. The survey specifically categorized child laborers as participants in fixed businesses, moveable businesses, casual workers, beggars, or victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Several NGOs expressed concern over the potential displacement of children orphaned by the Ebola crisis.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Anti-Semitism

There was no indigenous Jewish community. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The Persons With Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment and provision of state services, calls further for free health care and education for the disabled, equal access to government buildings, housing, and public transportation, and provision of rehabilitation services. At year's end only three rehabilitation centers existed. The government made progress in implementing the act's provisions, launching the National Commission on Persons with Disability in February 2013. The commission, however,

was substantially underfunded. In January 2013 President Koroma appointed the vision-impaired Mustapha Bai Attila as deputy minister of social welfare, making Attila the most senior ranking disabled individual in recent memory. Given the high rate of general unemployment, work opportunities for persons with disabilities were few, and begging by them was commonplace. Children with disabilities were also less likely to attend school than other children.

There was considerable discrimination against persons with mental health issues. The Sierra Leone Psychiatric Hospital in Kissy, the only inpatient psychiatric institution, had capacity for 400 patients, but beds for only 200 patients. In 2013 the hospital housed an estimated 95 patients due to staff and resource constraints, since the government poorly funded the hospital, and it received only small donations from private charities. The hospital had one consulting psychiatrist. Patients were not provided sufficient food. Patient restraints were primitive and dehumanizing. The hospital did not have running water and only sporadic electricity. Basic medications were available, but many drugs targeted at specific problems were lacking. Hospital staff was poorly paid. The hospital generally released patients to their families or communities as soon as possible, and they received follow-up counseling on a regular basis. The vast majority of persons with mental health disabilities remained untreated and received no public services.

The Ministry of Health and Sanitation is responsible for providing free primary health-care services to persons with polio and diabetic retinopathy as well as those who are blind or deaf. The ministry did not provide these services consistently, and organizations reported that many persons with disabilities had limited access to medical and rehabilitative care. The National Committee for Social Action provided some support through limited programs to vulnerable communities. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs has a mandate to provide policy oversight for issues affecting persons with disabilities but had limited capacity to do so.

Some of the many individuals maimed in the civil war, including those who had their limbs amputated, received special assistance from local and international humanitarian organizations. Such programs involved reconstructive surgery, prostheses, and vocational training to help victims acquire new work skills; however, other amputees complained that they did not receive sufficient assistance.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The population consisted of 18 ethnic groups of African origin, and many spoke distinct languages and were concentrated outside urban areas. In addition there were significant Lebanese and Indian minorities, and small groups of European and Pakistani origin. Little ethnic segregation was apparent in urban areas, where interethnic marriage was common. The two largest ethnic groups are the Temne in the North and the Mende in the South. These groups each constituted an estimated 30-35 percent of the population. The Krio, 2 percent of the population, historically dominated the civil service and judiciary. Strong ethnic loyalties, bias, and stereotypes existed among all ethnic groups. The Temne and Mende vied historically for political power, and violence during the 11-year civil war had some ethnic undertones. Ethnic loyalty remained an important factor in the government, the armed forces, and business. Complaints of ethnic discrimination in government appointments, contract assignment, and military promotions were common.

Residents of non-African descent faced some institutionalized discrimination, particularly in the areas of citizenship and nationality (see section 6, Children, Birth Registration).

A small percentage of the Lebanese population (naturalized in the past) enjoyed the full rights of citizenship, such as suffrage, access to health care and education, and the right to purchase freehold land. Naturalized citizens not of Negro-African descent cannot transmit citizenship to their children born in the country; these children must apply for naturalization if they want to become citizens. While not entitled to the rights of citizens, nonnaturalized persons born in the country are entitled to a Sierra Leonean passport, and many Lebanese Sierra Leoneans traveled on one without difficulty.

The Lebanese community reported no cases of overt discrimination based on race or nationality, although community leaders stressed that, although many Lebanese families had resided in the country since the 1880s, they felt alienated from the indigenous population.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

A law from 1861 prohibits male-to-male sexual acts ("buggery" and "crimes against nature"); however, there is no legal prohibition against female-to-female sex. The 1861 law, which carries a penalty of life imprisonment for "indecent assault" upon a man or 10 years for attempting such an assault, was not enforced. The constitution does not offer protection from discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. During the country's Universal Periodic Review before the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, the attorney general told the Working

Group that all persons in the country would be protected regardless of their sexual orientation. The government subsequently rejected three of 129 Working Group recommendations, two calling for decriminalizing all sexual activity between consulting adults and one calling for legislation to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

A few organizations, including Dignity Association and the local chapter of Pride Equality, supported LGBT persons, but they maintained low profiles. Gay pride parades and other public displays of solidarity could not safely take place.

Social discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity occurred in nearly every facet of life for known LGBT persons, and many chose to have heterosexual relationships and family units to shield them. In the areas of employment and education, sexual orientation or gender identity was the basis for abusive treatment, which led individuals to leave their jobs or courses of study. It was difficult for gay men and lesbians to receive health services due to fear that their confidentiality rights would be ignored if they were honest about their ailments; many chose not to be tested or treated for sexually transmitted infections. Secure housing was also a problem for LGBT persons. Families frequently shunned their gay children, leading some to turn to prostitution to survive. Adults could lose their leases if their sexual orientation became public. Lesbian girls and women were also victims of "planned rapes" initiated by family members in an effort to change their sexual orientation. Religious groups reportedly promoted discrimination against the LGBT community.

In 2013 international NGO Global Rights, in cooperation with local LGBT organizations, released a report on discrimination against LGBT individuals. The report, *Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Access to Health Care and Violence/Bias: A Sierra Leone Case Study*, documented specific examples of abuse, while also providing survey results illustrating high levels of discrimination experienced by LGBT persons. More than half of medical practitioners surveyed were unwilling to provide medical services to LGBT patients, and virtually all LGBT respondents had experienced some form of harassment or discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

The law prohibits discrimination based on actual, perceived, or suspected HIV status; however, society stigmatized persons with HIV/AIDS. There was no official discrimination against HIV/AIDS-positive persons, but NGOs reported children were denied access to education because of their HIV status. HIV/AIDS-positive adults lacked employment and promotion opportunities. There were also reports that men often divorced their HIV/AIDS-positive wives, leaving them without financial support.

Reports of violence against HIV/AIDS-positive persons were uncommon. Instead, families more likely abandoned them. NGOs noted that, due to discrimination and stigmatization, those with HIV/AIDS sometimes chose suicide rather than continue to suffer rejection and stigma.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law allows workers in both the public and private sectors to join independent unions of their choice without prior authorization, conduct legal strikes, and bargain collectively; however, it prohibits police and members of the armed services from joining unions. The law allows workers to organize but does not prohibit antiunion discrimination against union members or prohibit employer interference in the establishment of unions. Unions have the right to strike, although the government can require 21-day prior notice. The law prohibits workers at certain specified public utilities from going on strike. Labor union officials, however, pointed out that public utility workers frequently went on strike (and were in fact among those union employees most likely to strike), the legal prohibition notwithstanding.

While the law provides for collective bargaining, it must take place in trade group negotiating councils, each of which had an equal number of employer and worker representatives. There were no other limits on the scope of collective bargaining or legal exclusions of other particular groups of workers from legal protections.

While labor unions reported that the government generally protected the right of workers in the private sector to form or join unions, the government has never been called upon to enforce applicable laws through regulatory or judicial action.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were respected. All unions were independent of political parties and the government. In some cases, however, such as the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union, the

union and the government had a close working relationship, and the Sierra Leone Labor Congress enjoyed a cordial relationship with the government.

There were no reports of violence, threats, or other abuses targeting union leaders and members by government or employers. There were concerns that some union leadership did not effectively represent the interest of members. In some private industries, particularly the private security and domestic workers sectors, employers were known to intimidate workers to prevent them from joining a union. Since 1992 the International Labor Organization (ILO) continued to note the government's failure to adopt specific provisions with sufficiently effective penalties for the protection of workers and workers' organizations against acts of antiunion discrimination and acts of interference.

The government generally protected the right to collectively bargain. Collective bargaining was widespread in the formal sector, and most enterprises were covered by collective bargaining agreements on wages and working conditions. There were no reports that employers refused to bargain, bargained with unions not chosen by workers, or used hiring practices to avoid hiring workers with bargaining rights.

Most industrial actions were taken against the government, primarily to protest unpaid salaries and reduced benefit packages. For example, on different occasions in various cities throughout the country in August through October, health-care workers used a work stoppage as a means to demand more resources for an ongoing public health crisis. The government generally did not interfere with peaceful demonstrations and attempted to negotiate with workers and labor unions in good faith.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced and compulsory labor, including by children. The penalty for trafficking is a fine of 50 million leones (\$11,000), 10 years' imprisonment, or both. Under a provision of the Chiefdom Councils Act, however, individual chiefs may impose forced labor as punishment (compulsory cultivation) and have done so in the past, although there were no reports of it during the year. Chiefs also may require villagers to contribute to the improvement of common areas, a practice that occurred in rural areas. There is no penalty for noncompliance. Confinement and arbitrary fines are punishments available under chiefdom law, but there were no available statistics on the frequency of their application.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. The government's Anti-Trafficking-in-Persons Task Force--composed of senior representatives from relevant ministries, the security forces, development partners, and nongovernmental organizations--held monthly meetings under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs. The task force continued implementation of its program to raise awareness of trafficking in persons and its illegality, with the aim of enhancing enforcement efforts.

Police met with some success in combating forced labor, with several cases pending at year's end against individuals charged with human trafficking offenses. In January a shipping company came to a settlement out of court regarding allegations of trafficking and forced labor of six adult Sri Lankan and Indian citizens.

Men, women, and child victims of forced labor originated largely from rural provinces within the country and were recruited to urban areas for artisanal and granite mining, petty trading, portering, rock breaking, and begging (see also section 7.c., and section 6, Child Sexual Exploitation).

In remote villages children were forced to carry heavy loads as porters, resulting in stunted growth and development. There were reports that children whose parents sent them to friends or relatives in urban areas for education were forced to work on the street where they were involved in street vending, stealing, and begging.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law limits child labor, allowing light work at age 13, full-time nonhazardous work at age 15, and hazardous work at age 18. The law states that children under 13 should not be employed in any capacity. Provided they have finished schooling, children age 15 may be apprenticed and employed full time in nonhazardous work. The law also proscribes work by any child under 18 between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. While the law does not stipulate specific conditions of work, such as health and safety standards, it prohibits children under the age of 18 to be engaged in hazardous work, that is, work that poses a danger to the health, safety, and "morals" of a person, including going to sea; mining and quarrying; portering of heavy loads; chemicals manufacturing; work in places where machines are used; and work in places such as bars, hotels, and places of entertainment where a child may be exposed to "immoral behavior."

The Child Labor Unit of the Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing child labor laws and monitoring compliance. The Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources is in charge of enforcing regulatory prohibitions against the worst forms of child labor in the mining sector. The ministry also is charged with protecting children working in the diamond-mining areas. The laws were not effectively enforced. Lack of funding hindered the unit's functionality. Inspectors from the ministry completed a three-month training program and were deployed to the provinces.

The Ministry of Labor addressed previous logistics problems, providing computers, vehicles for inspectors, and generators to support employment promotion and other labor issues throughout the country. The ministry cited lack of funding and difficulty in monitoring child labor in the informal sector as major hindrances.

The Ministry of Labor continued to implement the Tackling Child Labor through Education project with funding from the EU and the International Program for Elimination of Child Labor of the ILO. That four-year project ended in August. The ministry, in conjunction with Statistics Sierra Leone and with ILO funding, conducted a nationwide cross-sector survey on child labor in mid-2011. Preliminary results were released in June, but the final report was pending at year's end. Mitigation efforts had mixed results. Some international NGOs were reluctant to advocate against children working for school fees too strongly, since without those fees the children would not be able to attend school. In addition local civil society organizations reported that families and individuals often resisted attempts to mitigate this problem because of a sense that outsiders were trying to impose alien "Western" values on traditional African society.

Child labor remained widespread. Almost half of children ages 14 and 15 were engaged in some form of child labor. The rate varied from 27 percent in urban areas to 57 percent in rural areas. Children were subjected to a variety of exploitive labor, including petty trading, carrying heavy loads, breaking rocks, harvesting sand, begging, deep-sea fishing, agriculture (coffee, cocoa, palm oil), domestic work, the sex trade, scavenging for scrap metal and other recyclables, and other age-inappropriate forms of exploitive labor under often hazardous conditions. Larger companies enforced strict rules against child labor, but it remained a pressing issue in small-scale informal artisanal diamond and gold mining.

According to a 2011 survey by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs and the British NGO Street Child of Sierra Leone in 17 cities and towns, two-thirds of the nearly 50,000 street children identified by the study were engaged in some type of income-generating activity.

In many cases children worked alongside parents or relatives and abandoned educational or vocational training. In rural areas children worked seasonally on family subsistence farms. Children also routinely assisted in family businesses and worked as petty vendors. There also were reports that adults asked orphanages for children to work as household help. Because the adult unemployment rate remained high, few children were involved in the industrial sector or elsewhere in the formal economy.

Tradition requires children fulfill their traditional roles, which include working to help generate income for the family or village even if it means missing school. In subsistence farming families, many children did not attend school in order to work as field laborers. Others worked part time to earn money necessary to pay school fees. This was equally true in the sand and stone quarries in the Western Area surrounding Freetown. While these children attended school, they were effectively denied the time and energy to study and complete homework during their off-hours.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/findings/.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on race and creed. The government generally enforced that provision.

Discrimination occurred based on sex, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity with respect to employment and occupation.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The national minimum wage, covering all occupations including in the informal sector, was set in 2013 at 500,000 leones (\$110) per month. The minimum wage, although statutorily required, had not gone into effect in the public sector. The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing the minimum wage. In 2013 Sierra Leone and the World Bank established a poverty line of approximately 133,000 leones (\$29) per month for Sierra Leone.

Although not stipulated by law, the standard workweek was 40 hours (60 hours for security personnel). Employers negotiated work hours with employees at the time of hiring and overtime. There is no statutory definition of overtime wages to be paid if an employee's work hours exceeded the standard workweek. There was no prohibition on excessive compulsory overtime or a requirement for paid leave or holidays.

Initially a union could make a formal complaint about a hazardous working condition; if the complaint was rejected, the union could issue a 21-day strike notice. The law also requires employers to provide protective clothing and safety devices to employees whose work involves "risk of personal safety or potential health hazard." The law protects both foreign and domestic workers. The law does not provide workers with the right to remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and the government took no steps to protect employees who so acted.

The Ministry of Health and Sanitation is responsible for setting and enforcing safety and health standards. The Ministry of Labor is responsible for setting and enforcing workplace health and safety standards. The regulations are outdated and were under review. The government did not effectively enforce these standards in all sectors. The Ministry of Labor employed 20 labor officers to ensure employee health and welfare and 10 factory inspectors to ensure factories met minimum technical standards for safety.

According to government and NGO sources, laws and standards continued to be violated primarily due to lack of enforcement, rather than the deterrent effect, or lack thereof, of the penalties. Minimum-wage compliance was particularly difficult to monitor in the informal sector. According to the World Bank and Statistics Sierra Leone, 91.9 percent of the workforce worked in the informal sector. Most workers supported an extended family. It was common to pool incomes and to supplement wages with subsistence farming and child labor.

Violations of wage, overtime, and occupational safety and health standards were most frequent within the unorganized artisanal diamond-mining industry. No information on working conditions in the artisanal mining sector was available, due to its informal and ad hoc nature. Violations were common in the case of street vendors and market-stall workers, rock crushers, and day laborers, many of whom migrated to Freetown to seek employment but, out of desperation, were vulnerable to exploitation in order to earn enough for a meal. There were numerous complaints of unpaid wages and lack of attention to injuries sustained on the job, but victims often did not know where to turn for recourse, or their complaints went unresolved.

Credible data on workplace fatalities and accidents during the year were not available.