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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sierra Leone

SIERRA LEONE (Tier 2)

The Government of Sierra Leone does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore Sierra Leone remained on Tier 2. These efforts included referring all identified trafficking victims to care and providing in-kind and financial assistance to NGO-operated shelters. The government increased investigations and established two new coordination bodies to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government prosecuted fewer traffickers and did not convict any traffickers for the second consecutive year. Victim services remained limited, especially for male victims, and the government's national anti-trafficking hotline was inoperable.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Expand victim protection services for all trafficking victims, including shelter for male victims. * Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute traffickers and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should include significant prison terms. * Increase training for police, prosecutors, and judges on investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases under the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act of 2022. * Increase training for all officials on the SOPs for victim identification and the NRM to ensure trafficking victims receive appropriate and timely services. * Increase proactive screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including Sierra Leonean women traveling abroad for domestic work, women in commercial sex, undocumented migrants, girls, and children in informal foster care arrangements. * Increase

implementation of the Labor Migration Policy, including by providing predeparture education about human trafficking and labor rights, improving recruitment agency licensing procedures, and increasing the capacity of Sierra Leonean missions abroad to support victims. * Increase coordination with regional governments to prosecute transnational cases, coordinate victim protection, and prevent trafficking. * Improve data collection on anti-trafficking law enforcement and victim assistance efforts. * Screen any North Korean workers for signs of trafficking and refer them to appropriate services, in a manner consistent with obligations under United Nations Security Council resolution 2397.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained law enforcement efforts. The Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act of 2022 criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of a minimum 25 years' imprisonment. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with other grave crimes, such as rape.

The government reported investigating 34 trafficking cases, compared with investigating 26 cases in the previous reporting period. The government also reported 41 investigations remained ongoing from the previous reporting period. The government reported prosecuting an unknown number of suspects in 12 cases, compared with prosecuting 13 suspects in 13 cases in the previous reporting period. The government did not report any trafficking convictions for the second consecutive year. Judicial inefficiencies, general corruption, and procedural delays hindered courts from holding traffickers accountable and diminished confidence in the judicial system. As a result, victims' families often accepted payments from traffickers rather than pursue cases in court, and families sometimes exerted pressure on victims to not participate in investigations and prosecutions because of security concerns, community ties to alleged traffickers, and the high cost and travel required to participate in such cases.

Under the anti-trafficking law, all trafficking prosecutions should commence in the High Court, bypassing the sometimes lengthy preliminary investigation stage overseen by the Magistrate Court. The Family Support Unit (FSU) and the Transnational Organized Crime Unit (TOCU) of the Sierra Leone Police both had mandates to investigate trafficking, among other crimes. In addition, there were two specialized judges assigned to trafficking cases. However, observers reported inadequate resources hindered the government's law enforcement efforts, and confusion among officials about the anti-trafficking law hindered implementation. The government, in partnership with NGOs and an international organization, trained law enforcement and judicial officials on investigating and prosecuting cases under the anti-trafficking law and disseminated a draft training manual to prosecutors. The

government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes, particularly in the judiciary, remained concerns, inhibiting law enforcement and judicial action.

The government, in collaboration with an international organization, trained border officials on SOPs for victim identification and the NRM. Police officers did not receive anti-trafficking training while at the police academy. Observers reported a lack of resources and training in evidence gathering and victim-centered and trauma-informed witness interviewing, particularly of children, hindered prosecution efforts. The government cooperated with Guinean authorities on cross-border anti-trafficking efforts. The government conducted an investigation with Malian authorities involving 11 Sierra Leonean children in Mali, which may have included potential trafficking victims.

PROTECTION

The government increased efforts to identify and protect victims. The government, in collaboration with international organizations, identified and referred to services 51 trafficking victims, including five sex trafficking victim and 46 forced labor victims; this compared with 34 victims the government identified and referred to care in collaboration with international organizations in the previous reporting period. Of the 51 victims identified, five were adults (one man and four women) and 46 were children (15 boys and 31 girls); two were from Guinea. The government reported the 51 victims received services from government-supported NGOs or international organizations. The government had SOPs to identify trafficking victims, including victims among vulnerable populations, and an NRM to refer them to services. The government reported the SOPs and NRM included updated measures to identify, protect, and assist victims; facilitate the safe return and reintegration of victims abroad; and support the participation of victims in criminal proceedings. Ministry of Social Welfare officials did not uniformly implement the SOPs for referring victims to NGOs for specialized care.

Victims were usually referred to NGOs for services, including temporary shelter, counseling, vocational training, family tracing, and return and reintegration assistance. Two NGO-operated shelters for female and child trafficking victims provided medical, psycho-social, educational, legal, vocational, family tracing, and reintegration support. One of the shelters provided ad-hoc arrangements in interim care facilities for boy victims. Victim services remained inadequate for male victims as NGO shelters could not accommodate adult male victims; sources reported cases of male victims sleeping on office floors or in a make-shift facility at the TOCU. TOCU officials paid for food for these victims out of personal funds, as they did not have a budget for providing victim services. The government sometimes provided adult male victims with funds to rent

housing during investigations; however, some male victims stayed at police stations during investigations, and the government did not refer them for additional services. The government relied on NGOs to care for the majority of trafficking victims but provided some funding and in-kind support, such as a facility for a shelter. In August 2023, the government began funding the salary of a shelter manager at an NGO-operated shelter. The government allocated 500,000 NLe (\$22,030) in financial and in-kind support for victim protection and assistance in fiscal year 2024 as part of the Victims of Human Trafficking Trust Fund, this compared with no dedicated funding in the previous year. The Trust Fund had a Board of Trustees which included government and NGO representatives.

The government offered victim-witness assistance to victims participating in criminal justice proceedings; this included immigration relief, legal services, transportation, and lodging support. In addition, prosecutors could request closed court sessions to protect victims' identities and prevent re-traumatization during trials. The government reported 51 victims voluntarily participated in investigations and prosecutions. Victims could provide testimony via video or written statements. An international organization previously reported limited victim assistance, lack of legal representation, and fear of retaliation resulted in many victims declining to report their cases to law enforcement. The law allowed victims to obtain restitution, but no courts ordered restitution. The government launched a victim compensation fund in February 2024; sources reported funding remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The law provided legal alternatives to the removal of trafficking victims to countries in which victims would face retribution or hardship; the government did not report providing these services to any victims. Due to inconsistent application of SOPs on victim identification, authorities may have detained or arrested some unidentified trafficking victims.

PREVENTION

The government increased efforts to prevent trafficking. The anti-trafficking task force, chaired by the Ministries of Social Welfare and Justice, was responsible for coordinating the government's anti-trafficking efforts and implementation of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act, 2022. The government created two new coordination bodies focused on trafficking. First, a Task Force Advisory Board was established to engage on anti-trafficking policy and program monitoring and had their inaugural meeting in October 2023. Second, a Task Force Technical Committee was established to coordinate program development and implementation, case management, and reporting on victim identification and referral and meets monthly. The government provided 55,000 NLe (\$2,420) for anti-trafficking prevention activities, compared with 600 million leones (\$26,430) the previous year. The government continued implementing the NAP against Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children (2021-2023), and began drafting a revised 2024-2026 NAP, which remained pending at the end of the

reporting period. In April 2023, the government co-hosted the first regional conference of ECOWAS States to combat human trafficking. More than 300 delegates representing ECOWAS ministers, government agencies, as well as development and trafficking experts coordinated on anti-trafficking measures. The government also conducted awareness campaigns on social media, radio, television and in print, including some efforts in partnership with international organizations. The government trained journalists, in partnership with NGOs, on human trafficking. The government did not consistently maintain its nationwide hotline for reporting trafficking crimes run by the police due to technical issues; the hotline remained inoperable at the end of the reporting period.

The government had strict licensing procedures for new recruitment agencies to prevent exploitation of migrant workers, including a formal business registration and police clearance. The government also enacted new labor recruitment regulations which required recruitment agencies and sub-brokers to obtain an overseas recruitment license along with an exit permit and travel clearance for all prospective migrant workers. The government reported implementing MOUs with the Governments of Lebanon, Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia to enhance protections for migrant workers and began drafting an MOU with Oman, which remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security continued its Labor Migration Policy to improve protections for migrant workers in Sierra Leone and Sierra Leoneans working abroad by ensuring greater cooperation among government stakeholders. Labor inspectors conducted most inspections in the formal sector in the Freetown area in factories, quarries, and mining operations. Labor inspectors did not have sufficient resources to effectively monitor and investigate labor violations; there were no dedicated child labor inspectors, which limited efforts to identify potential cases of forced child labor. The government did not report providing labor inspectors training on identifying cases of child labor or human trafficking. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Sierra Leone, and traffickers exploit victims from Sierra Leone abroad. Traffickers recruit and transport victims largely from rural provinces to urban and mining centers for exploitation in sex trafficking and forced labor in domestic servitude, artisanal diamond and granite mining, petty trading, portering, making ceramics, rock breaking, quarrying, and begging. Working conditions in the quarries were hazardous, resulting in some children subjected to forced labor becoming fully or partially blind due to ricocheting rocks. Traffickers exploit victims in fishing and agriculture and sex trafficking or forced labor through customary practices, such as forced marriages. Experts noted girls living in

poverty were exploited in sex trafficking in exchange for food and clothing. The government reported child sex trafficking – especially of children from low-income families – was most common in Freetown and provincial capitals, as well as beaches and in nightclubs. In 2023, the region of Freetown-West had the highest cases of child trafficking in the country. Local demand fuels most child sex trafficking, although foreign tourists exploit children in extraterritorial sexual exploitation and abuse. In some cases, parents exploit their children in commercial sex for financial gain and even sell their children to traffickers; traffickers use this as an opportunity to exploit children in sex trafficking and forced labor. Traffickers exploit women and girls in sex trafficking on commercial fishing boats. Traffickers exploit traditional foster care practices called *menpikin* to convince parents to hand over their children by promising to provide an education but instead exploit children in various forms of forced labor, including domestic servitude, street vending, mining, agriculture, scavenging for scrap metal, “okada” (motorbike taxi) driving, and sex trafficking. Under the guise of “menpikin,” some children are sent to Liberia, Guinea, or Mali to beg; others are sent to Cote d’Ivoire to work on plantations. Some corrupt Quranic teachers force children to beg or work in mines or farms. Climate change compounds vulnerability as traffickers prey on victims of natural disasters, such as floods and mudslides, with false promises of employment abroad.

Some Sierra Leoneans migrated through informal channels, subsequently increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers exploit victims from neighboring West African countries in forced begging, forced labor, and sex trafficking in Sierra Leone, and traffickers exploit Sierra Leoneans in neighboring countries, including Mali, Niger, Liberia, and Guinea for forced labor and sex trafficking. In previous years, traffickers exploited People’s Republic of China (PRC) national, Indian, Lebanese, Kenyan, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan men in forced labor in Sierra Leone. Cuban government-affiliated medical professionals who worked in Sierra Leone to combat the COVID-19 pandemic may have been forced to work by the Cuban government. Sierra Leonean migrants travel to other West African countries, including Mauritania and Guinea, as well as to the Middle East and Europe, where traffickers exploit some into forced labor and sex trafficking. In Greece, the highest number of potential foreign trafficking victims identified in 2023 were from Sierra Leone. Traffickers exploit Sierra Leonean women in domestic servitude in Middle Eastern countries, such as Oman, Iraq, and Kuwait; reports indicate an increasing number of victims were exploited in Lebanon compared with other Middle Eastern countries. Sources reported 99 percent of nearly 500 Sierra Leone domestic workers interviewed in Oman were forced labor victims and a third reported experiencing sexual abuse. In previous reporting periods, an international organization reported some Libyan soldiers sold stranded Sierra Leonean migrants in their custody to Libyan and Middle Eastern traffickers. North Korean nationals working in Sierra Leone may

be operating under exploitative working conditions and display multiple indicators of forced labor.

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