

2025 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 securing convictions of traffickers for the first time in two years and slightly increasing the number of identified trafficking victims. The government adopted and began implementation of a revised NAP and increased funding for trafficking prevention activities. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government investigated fewer trafficking crimes and did not cooperate with foreign counterparts on anti-trafficking investigations. Victim services remained limited, especially for male victims, and the government's national anti-trafficking hotline remained 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, and children in child welfare systems.
- Increase implementation of the Labor Migration Policy, including by providing predeparture education on 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 other governments in the region to prosecute transnational cases, coordinate on victim protection, and prevent trafficking.
- Improve data collection on anti-trafficking law enforcement and victim assistance efforts.

PROSECUTION

The government increased 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 13 trafficking cases (10 sex trafficking, two forced labor, and one involving an unspecified form of exploitation), compared with investigating 34 cases in the previous reporting period. The government reported prosecuting 20 suspects, compared with prosecuting an unknown number of suspects in 12 cases in the previous reporting period. The government reported convictions of four traffickers, the first in two years, including three traffickers for sex trafficking and one trafficker for forced labor. 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. In addition, judicial inefficiencies, general corruption, and procedural delays prevented courts from holding traffickers accountable and diminished confidence in the judicial system. Prosecutors sometimes refrained from pursuing child labor cases involving children exploited by a parent. 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.

The Transnational Organized Crime Unit (TOCU) of the Sierra Leone Police led trafficking investigations, and the Family Support Unit (FSU) supported anti-trafficking efforts involving child trafficking victims. The state counsels at the Law Officers Department prosecuted trafficking cases, and there were two specialized judges assigned to trafficking 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. However, specially trained police and judges were not located in every district and inadequate resources, and confusion among officials about the anti-trafficking law hindered law enforcement efforts. Police officers did not receive anti-trafficking training while at the police academy. The government, in collaboration with an international organization, trained border officials on the anti-trafficking law, SOPs for victim identification, and the NRM.

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 did not report cooperating with any foreign counterparts on anti-trafficking investigations.

PROTECTION

The government maintained efforts to identify and protect victims.

The government, in collaboration with international organizations, identified and referred to services 58 forced labor victims; this compared with 51 victims the government identified and referred to services in collaboration with international organizations in the previous reporting period. Of the 58 victims identified, 11 were women, 27 were boys, and 20 were girls, and all were exploited domestically. In addition, civil society and international organizations identified six trafficking victims: five children exploited in forced labor and one woman exploited in sex trafficking. The government reported 64 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. Ministry of Social Welfare officials did not uniformly implement the SOPs for referring victims to NGOs for specialized care, although the government trained more law enforcement officers and other officials on how to use the procedures during the reporting period.

The government usually referred victims to NGOs for services, including temporary shelter, counseling, vocational training, family tracing, and return and re-integration assistance. The government lacked shelters that could accommodate trafficking victims and relied on an NGO-operated shelter for female and child trafficking victims to provide medical, psycho-social, educational, legal, vocational, family tracing, and reintegration support. The government initiated plans to open a dedicated shelter for male victims and continued to rely on an NGO shelter to provide ad-hoc arrangements in interim care facilities for boy victims. However, victim services remained inadequate for male victims as NGO shelters could not accommodate them. TOCU officials paid for food for male victims out of personal funds, as they did not have a budget for providing victim services. The government sometimes provided adult male victims with temporary accommodation in police stations or funds to rent housing during investigations; however, the government did not refer them for additional services. The government continued to rely 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 where victims could stay during criminal justice proceedings in the high court. The government, in collaboration with NGO partners, began to expand victim services and access to standardized care to trafficking survivors outside of Freetown. The government spent 100,000 NLe (\$4,427) in financial and in-kind support for victim protection and assistance in the first six months of 2024 as part of the Victims of Human Trafficking Trust Fund, compared with 500,000 NLe (\$22,134) in fiscal year 2024. 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 only one victim voluntarily participated in investigations and prosecutions. Victims could provide testimony via video or written statements. The law allowed victims to obtain restitution, but no courts ordered restitution. The government maintained a victim compensation fund to provide basic support for reintegration and livelihood. 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 screening, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.

PREVENTION

The government slightly 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 task force maintained two coordination bodies: a Task Force Advisory Board overseeing anti-trafficking policy and program monitoring, and a Task Force Technical Committee to coordinate program development and implementation, case management, and reporting on victim identification and referral. The government provided 245,700 NLe (\$10,876) for anti-trafficking prevention activities, compared with 55,000 NLe (\$2,435) the previous year. The government adopted and began implementing a revised NAP for 2024-2028. The government dedicated a quarterly budget of 450,000 NLe (\$19,920) to support implementation of the new NAP. The government also conducted awareness campaigns on social media, on the radio, on television and in print, including some efforts focusing on vulnerable populations. The government made efforts to upgrade its nationwide hotline – operated by police – to report trafficking crimes, although the hotline remained inoperable at the end of the reporting period. The government enacted legislation that banned child marriage for anyone younger than 18 years old and prohibited men from living with underage girls in marriage-like arrangements.

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 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, in collaboration with an international organization, trained private employment agencies to conduct trainings for prospective migrant workers, including predeparture trainings. The government had MOUs with the Governments of Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia to enhance protections for migrant workers. 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. Migrant workers were not allowed to change employers without completion of their contracts, except by mutual consent of their employer. Labor inspectors conducted most inspections in the formal sector in the Freetown area, including factories, mining operations, and quarries. 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:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking 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 agriculture, artisanal diamond and granite mining, begging, ceramics making, domestic servitude, fishing, petty trading, portering, quarrying, and rock breaking. Children in child welfare systems or who are homeless, and undocumented female migrants, remain particularly at risk of sex trafficking, while children begging, undocumented migrant workers, and members of vulnerable populations – especially in low-income areas – faced the highest risks of forced labor. Traffickers also exploit victims in sex trafficking or forced labor through customary practices, such as forced marriages. Traffickers prey on victims of natural disasters, such as floods and mudslides, with false promises of employment abroad. Traffickers continued to use social media to recruit victims with false jobs and promises of employment.

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. Local demand fuels most child sex trafficking, although foreign tourists exploit children in extraterritorial sexual exploitation and abuse in Sierra Leone. In some cases, parents exploit their children in commercial sex for financial gain or sell their children to traffickers who subsequently exploit children in sex trafficking and forced labor. 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 sex trafficking and in forced labor, including in agriculture, domestic servitude, mining, street vending, *okada* (motorbike taxi) driving, and scavenging for scrap metal. Under the guise of *menpikin*, some children are sent to Guinea, Liberia, Mali, or Senegal to beg; others are sent to Cote d'Ivoire to work on plantations. Some corrupt Quranic teachers force children to beg or work in farms or mines.

Some Sierra Leoneans migrated through informal channels, including deceptive recruitment processes, subsequently increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers exploit victims from neighboring West African countries in forced labor, including forced begging, and sex trafficking in Sierra Leone, and traffickers exploit Sierra Leoneans in neighboring countries, including Guinea, Liberia, Mali, and Niger. In previous years, traffickers exploited Chinese, Indian, Kenyan, Lebanese, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Zimbabwean men in forced labor in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leonean migrants travel to other West African countries, including Guinea and Mauritania, as well as to the Middle East and Europe, where traffickers exploit some in forced labor and sex trafficking. Traffickers exploit Sierra Leonean women in domestic servitude in Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman. Media and NGOs report unscrupulous actors, including Russian officials and illicit recruiters, fraudulently recruited women ages 18-22 from Africa – including Sierra Leone – South Asia, and South America for vocational training programs and subsequently placed them in military drone production sites. Media report workers at these sites are subjected to hazardous conditions, surveillance, hour and wage violations, contract switching, and worker-paid recruitment fees, all of which are indicators of human trafficking.

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