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Republic of Sierra Leone

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

Sierra Leone agreed to ratify several international human rights treaties, but did not accept a number of recommendations made during the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. Unwarranted restrictions on the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association continued to be imposed. Violence against women and girls was widespread and pregnant girls were excluded from school, including exams. Disputes over land use caused growing tensions.

INTERNATIONAL SCRUTINY

After undergoing its second UPR in April, Sierra Leone accepted 177 of 208 recommendations.^[1] These included ratifying international human rights treaties, such as Optional Protocols to the ICCPR, the ICESCR, the Convention against Torture and CEDAW. Sierra Leone agreed to repeal or revise laws used to restrict freedom of expression and association, but refused to prohibit by law female genital mutilation (FGM), to allow pregnant girls to attend school or to guarantee the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.^[2] In September, Sierra Leone was reviewed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which made various recommendations regarding addressing sexual exploitation and FGM.

FREEDOMS OF EXPRESSION, ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

Unwarranted restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association continued to be imposed.

On 27 April, Independence Day, 29 people were arrested and detained for over a week following a parade organized by the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). Police said the parade was unauthorized and used tear gas to stop it. Several people were injured, including the women's leader Lulu Sheriff. In August, six of the 29 were sentenced to six months' imprisonment, and one

to nine months' imprisonment, on charges including unlawful procession and riotous conduct. They appealed against their conviction. The trial of the others continued.

The trial of 15 members of the SLPP and a senior officer from the Human Rights Commission arrested in the town of Kenema on Independence Day in 2015 following a protest had not concluded by the end of 2016.

In July, police refused permission for women's groups to assemble outside a conference centre in the capital, Freetown, during the Constitutional Review process to request greater protection of gender rights in the draft Constitution.

On 24 July, journalist Sam Lahai was detained for two days by police after raising questions on social media about the role of the Deputy Internal Affairs Minister. He was released on police bail after intervention by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, which had been calling for reform of restrictive criminal libel laws for many years.

In August, two people were shot dead and several injured by police in Kabala during a protest against the loss of a planned youth training centre. A curfew was imposed after several buildings were burned down. Seventeen people were sent to trial for offences such as arson and riotous conduct. The recently formed Independent Police Complaints Board launched an investigation into allegations that police used excessive force. Its recommendations to the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Inspector General of Police were not made public.

NGO Policy Regulations were proposed containing provisions which human rights defenders said would restrict their activities.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The incidence of violence against women and girls remained high. Specialist organizations providing support to women and girls risked closure due to funding constraints.

In March, President Koroma refused to sign a bill legalizing abortion in certain situations, despite the fact that it had been adopted by Parliament twice.^[3]

Sierra Leone had a very high rate of FGM. During the Ebola crisis, FGM was banned and this ban was not officially lifted during 2016. However, FGM of young girls and women remained common.

In September, a woman in her late 20s was subjected to FGM and locked in a house for four days in Kenema. She was rescued by the police and went into hiding. The woman accused of cutting her was detained by police but released after several cutters mounted a protest outside the police station.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Pregnant girls were banned from attending mainstream school and sitting exams, in violation of their rights to education and non-discrimination. Pregnant girls could only participate in a part-time "temporary alternative education scheme" offering a reduced curriculum. This temporary scheme ended in August but was expected to continue under a new scheme. Many girls who had given birth were unable to pay school fees to return to school.^[4]

In September, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child urged Sierra Leone to immediately lift the discriminatory ban on pregnant girls attending mainstream schools and sitting exams, and

ensure that they and adolescent mothers are supported to continue their education in mainstream schools.^[5]

LAND DISPUTES

There were growing tensions over land-related issues. In February, six people were sentenced to six months' imprisonment or fines for destroying palm oil trees during protests in the Pujehun District in 2013 against a palm oil project operated by Socfin. Landowners claimed that they had not given consent to the acquisition of their land.

In February, the High Court ordered a Chinese company, Orient Agriculture Limited, to restore 1,486 acres of land to about 70 families in Nimiyama Chiefdom, Kono District. The company had signed a deal in 2013 with the Paramount Chief and local leaders to purchase land cheaply without the knowledge of the landowners.

1. Sierra Leone: Amnesty International Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review ([AFR 51/2905/2015](#))

2. Sierra Leone must protect and promote women's and girls' human rights, including to education and physical integrity ([AFR 51/4353/2016](#))

3. Sierra Leone: Sign bill allowing safe abortions ([News story](#), 4 February)

4. Sierra Leone: Continued pregnancy ban in schools and failure to protect rights is threatening teenage girls' futures ([News story](#), 8 November)

5. Sierra Leone: Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child
([AFR 51/4583/2016](#))

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