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### Republic of Sierra Leone

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

**At least 3,955 people died during the Ebola epidemic, during which exploitation and violence against women and girls increased. State of emergency powers were used to curtail the right to peaceful assembly of political opponents. Police accountability was limited. Visibly pregnant girls were discriminated against and prevented from attending school and taking their exams. Criminal libel and other laws were used to stifle freedom of expression.**

### BACKGROUND

An Ebola epidemic began in May 2014 and was declared over on 7 November 2015. A review of Sierra Leone's Constitution was launched on 30 July 2013 and is still ongoing, with progress delayed due to the Ebola crisis.

### EBOLA OUTBREAK

Sierra Leone was severely affected by the Ebola epidemic that spread across West Africa starting in March 2014, with at least 14,122 confirmed cases. More than 300 health workers were infected and the epidemic weakened an already fragile health care system, particularly for provision of maternal care. Concerns were raised about the lack of safe equipment and the working conditions for health workers. The state of emergency was extended in August 2015 for a year; some restrictions, such as the ban on public gatherings, were lifted. At the end of the outbreak, the President stated he would discuss ending the state of emergency with Parliament.

### ARBITRARY DETENTIONS

Numerous people were arbitrarily detained and prosecuted under the Public Emergency Regulations 2014 and by-laws, such as for public gathering or trading after hours. Pre-trial detention regularly exceeded constitutional time limits and a high number of people remained in pre-trial detention, including juveniles.

On 21 April, 11 men were charged under the Public Order Act 1965 and Public Emergency Regulations 2014, in connection with a riot about a suspected Ebola patient. Six of the men were arrested in October 2014, and the remaining five in February and March 2015, under an executive order issued by President Koroma. The detainees had no warrants or documentation supporting their detention; they were discharged and released in December.[1]

On 6 August, 13 members of the armed forces were acquitted after a two-year detention, including eight months incommunicado, for plotting to mutiny at the Tekoh barracks in Makeni.

## **POLICE AND SECURITY FORCES**

Police accountability remained weak. Despite the recommendations of three independent inquiries into allegations of unlawful killings since 2007, no police officer was prosecuted. There was minimal investigation into two other allegations of unlawful killings by the police in Kono in 2014. There were also allegations of unlawful killings in the capital, Freetown, in 2015, where in one case police officers were dismissed following an internal disciplinary proceeding and charged with manslaughter. In October, an Independent Police Complaints Board was launched.

## **WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS**

Exploitation and violence against women and girls increased during the Ebola outbreak. The Sexual Offences Act 2012 was still not implemented properly by the police. There was limited access to legal aid, shelter and rehabilitation services for victims of sexual and domestic violence. Health care services for victims of sexual violence were also inaccessible due to legal and cost barriers.

The Gender Equality Bill, which provides for a minimum 30% representation of women in Parliament and local councils and ministries, departments and agencies, was still not enacted.

In July 2015, Sierra Leone ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. Steps need to be taken to domesticate its provisions.

In December, Parliament passed the Safe Abortion Act. However, the President sent it back to Parliament in January 2016 after concerns by religious leaders.

### *Education*

In March, the Ministry of Education banned pregnant girls from attending school and sitting exams, in violation of their rights to education and non-discrimination. The policy seemed to be based on discriminatory views and negative stereotypes of pregnant girls and stigmatized an estimated 10,000 girls. The ban was enforced in some schools through humiliating and degrading treatment of girls.[2]

## **FREEDOMS OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY**

In February 2015, Mamoud Tim Kargbo was charged with five counts of defamatory libel under the Public Order Act 1965 for forwarding a WhatsApp message he received, said to be defamatory to the President. He was detained for 52 days, released on bail during the trial, and eventually discharged on 28 July.

There were disproportionate restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly during the state of emergency. Following the removal of former Vice President Samuel Sam-Sumana on 18 March 2015, there was an increase in arrests of opposition members, bans on peaceful protests and a crackdown on dissent.[3]

On 27 April, 15 members of Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), the main opposition party, and a senior officer from the Human Rights Commission were arrested in the town of Kenema following a protest at the SLPP office. They are currently on trial. There are concerns about excessive use of force during arrests by the police.

In August, *Monologue*, a radio programme hosted by journalist David Tam Baryoh, was suspended by the Independent Media Commission (IMC) due to allegations that the show infringed national security, and incited violence and public disorder. In October, he was fined 500,000 SLL (around US\$100), and is challenging the decision in court.

In December, Jonathan Leigh, managing editor of the *Independent Observer*, was arrested on accusations of publishing false information about reports of political violence ahead of a by-election. He was granted bail after four days in detention; his trial was ongoing at the end of the year.

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[1] Sierra Leone must release eight people arbitrarily detained after Ebola riot (Press release, 29 January); Two women released, 11 men charged (AFR 51/1603/2015)

[2] Shamed and blamed: Pregnant girls' rights at risk in Sierra Leone (AFR 51/2695/2015)

[3] Sierra Leone: Ebola regulations and other laws must not be used to curtail freedom of expression and assembly (News story, 4 May)

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