



Human Rights Watch



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Human Rights Developments

Three agreements between the Sierra Leonean government and the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) contributed to an improvement in the human rights situation in Sierra Leone in 2001. The first, signed in Abuja, Nigeria in November 2000, led to a ceasefire. The second and third agreements, signed in May 2001, committed both parties to restart the disarmament process, provide for the reestablishment of government authority in former rebel held areas, and release all child combatants and abductees. Military pressure on the RUF by both the Guinean army, which responded to RUF cross-border raids by launching ground and air attacks into Sierra Leone, and the British-trained and led Sierra Leonean army, contributed to this process. Over 16,700 United Nations peacekeepers deployed into RUF strongholds, including the diamond-rich Kono District, and over 29,300 combatants were disarmed. The release of over 3,000 child soldiers, abductees, and separated children by the RUF and by pro-government civil defense militias was one of the most positive human rights developments of the year. However, serious violations, which often involved victims and perpetrators not only from Sierra Leone but also from neighboring Liberia and Guinea, were persistent and served to highlight the region's conflicts. The government extended its own mandate, but announced that elections due in 2001 would take place on May 14, 2002.

In 2001, Sierra Leone ratified the Mine Ban Treaty, the Convention against Torture, and the optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography.

Within government-controlled areas, pro-government militias committed numerous human rights violations with impunity. In the southern city of Bo, Kamajor militiamen intimidated and threatened police officers attempting to question several Kamajor suspects, forcing the police to later release them. There were numerous cases of sexual assault by Kamajor militiamen, including gang rape and the rape of children. Members of civil defense militias returning from refugee camps in Guinea through RUF-held areas attacked, looted, and burned several villages, and in June massacred at least twenty-two civilians, including nine children, in Yiriai village, in northern Koinadugu District, in what was the worst single atrocity of the year.

From January through November 2001, the government released 137 detainees, including thirteen children, who since May 2000 had been held without charge under the 1991 State of Emergency Act. However, scores

remained in detention and were systematically denied the right to counsel and to have contact with their families. The whereabouts of RUF leader Foday Sankoh remained undisclosed. At least ten RUF prisoners died in custody. In December 2000, the International Committee of the Red Cross received government authorization to visit detention facilities, although its delegates were again excluded for some two months following a March 14 riot over poor prison conditions within Freetown's central prison.

The human rights picture within RUF-held areas improved somewhat relative to previous years. Some RUF commanders attempted to discipline combatants who committed abuses. Nevertheless, RUF forces, often acting together with Liberian government troops, committed scores of serious abuses including rape, murder, abduction, and subjection to forced labor. The victims of these abuses included Sierra Leoneans returning from refugee camps in Guinea; Guinean civilians, attacked during a campaign of cross-border raids from September 2000 through April 2001; and Liberians fleeing renewed fighting in Lofa county from April 2001. The RUF abducted at least one hundred Guineans, including children and the elderly, and held them in Kailahun for up to five months. UNHCR and other aid agencies were on a few occasions refused permission to evacuate sick and severely malnourished refugees. Refugees were very often forced to work in exchange for permission to leave rebel held areas. Scores of refugees died of illness and hundreds suffered moderate to severe malnourishment. While the RUF released or demobilized more than 1,500 male child combatants, they were reluctant to release Sierra Leonean and Guinean female abductees, most of whom were suspected of having been sexually abused.

Fighting between the RUF and civil defense militias in the east of the country in June through August 2001 left tens of civilians dead. In June and July, RUF combatants attacked several villages, including Porpon, in which they killed at least three children, hacked off the ear of one man, and abducted at least sixteen civilians. On July 19, RUF combatants attacked Henekuma village and massacred at least ten civilians. There were several reports of members of pro-government militias having been tortured and summarily executed by the RUF, including the October 2000 execution of ten militiamen in Kambia District, and the May 2001 execution of two militiamen in Kono. In July, RUF rebels cut off the ear and severed the Achilles tendons of a militiaman captured in Koinadugu District.

From September 2000 through April 2001, RUF rebels and Liberian government forces acting together attacked refugee camps and villages just across the border with Guinea, then home to several hundred thousand Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees. Following the attacks, Guinean security forces and the local population retaliated against the refugees, frequently looting, extorting, raping, and unlawfully detaining them. At least eleven refugees were tortured or beaten to death while detained within the Forecariah Prison in Southwestern Guinean, and several more detainees died of illness and starvation.

Guinean forces responded to RUF raids into Guinea by killing and wounding dozens of civilians in indiscriminate helicopter and artillery attacks against rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone in northern Kambia, Bombali, and Koinadugu districts. At least forty-two civilians, including eleven children, were killed during at least thirteen attacks between September 2000 and April 2001. Guinean troops also conducted several ground attacks during which several civilians were gunned down, several girls and women were raped, and houses were set on fire. Captured RUF

combatants were summarily executed and at least eighteen RUF detainees "disappeared" following capture. In March 2001, Guinean troops amputated the hands of several RUF combatants detained during attacks on the towns of Kychom and Kasiri.

There were two reported cases of rape by U.N. peacekeepers, one involving a Guinean soldier accused of raping a twelve-year-old girl in Bo, and another involving a Nigerian. Both were at this writing under investigation. There were also reports of excessive use of force and illegal detention of civilians by Nigerian peacekeepers. In the most serious incident, in July 2001, the peacekeepers beat and in some cases tortured civilians they had detained after a riot in Port Loko. Following a UNAMSIL board of inquiry, disciplinary action was taken against two peacekeepers, including one lieutenant.

Defending Human Rights

Numerous nongovernmental human rights organizations operated in Sierra Leone, including the Campaign for Good Governance, Forum of Conscience, and Network Movement for Peace and Justice. Thirty-three of these groups were part of a coalition called the National Forum for Human Rights (NFHR) whose purpose was coordination and technical advice to the member groups. The establishment of government control over previously inaccessible areas allowed human rights groups to start operating outside the capital Freetown. However, most of these lacked proper funding, expertise, and institutional support. Most of their activities focused on human rights education for the public and preparing the groundwork for the planned Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As in past years, these groups did very little monitoring of continuing human rights abuses. Local human rights groups denounced the indiscriminate attack on civilians by a Guinean helicopter gunship, and governmental failure to provide due process for RUF prisoners, but in general remained reluctant to document and publicly denounce persistent abuses by either rebel or government forces.

The TRC mandated under the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord, was yet to be set up, though its establishment was a priority for both local human rights groups and the U.N. Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) human rights section. The formation of an autonomous, quasi-judicial national human rights commission, also provided for in the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord, was slow and received little national or international attention. Legislation to establish the commission had yet to be presented to parliament.

Meanwhile, the existing governmental body, the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights (NCDHR), formed in 1996, was severely constrained by lack of funds. It did little or no monitoring or documentation of human rights violations. Its activities consisted of human rights and civic education, and raising public awareness about the role of the TRC. It also continued to run a successful legal aid clinic for indigents.

The Role of the International Community

The activities of all key members of the international community were aimed at salvaging the fragile peace process shattered by the RUF in May 2000. Pressing human rights concerns received inadequate attention.

United Nations

UNAMSIL's budget for 2001 was an estimated U.S.\$744 million. Security Council Resolution 1346, passed in March 2001, mandated that UNAMSIL's troop strength be increased from 13,000, to 17,500. At regular U.N.-chaired meetings between the RUF and the Sierra Leonean government, UNAMSIL failed to aggressively interpret the part of its mandate that allowed for the protection of civilians or to emphasize concerns regarding ongoing violations against civilians. Members of the UNAMSIL human rights section were, for most of the year, not allowed to attend these meetings. The number of UNAMSIL human rights monitors – mandated in 2000 to be fourteen – was in mid-2001 increased to twenty by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, but as of this writing, the unit never operated with more than fifteen. For most of the year the unit concentrated on conducting human rights education, and preparation for the TRC, rather than monitoring ongoing violations. However, the unit did complete thorough reports on RUF and Civil Defense Forces (CDF) violence in the east and on prison conditions, but lacked a regular channel for disseminating information.

On August 14, 2000, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1315, which authorized the secretary-general to enter into negotiations with the government of Sierra Leone to establish a Special Court for Sierra Leone, using both international and Sierra Leonean law, judges, and prosecutors, to bring the perpetrators of the most serious violations since 1996 to justice. At this writing, the draft statute for the court was yet to be finalized and, despite considerable efforts on the part of the secretary-general, funds for its operation were yet to be secured. By May 2001, the lack of member state contributions for the original budget of U.S.\$114 (for the first three years) led to budget revision. On June 14, 2001, the secretary-general submitted a revised three-year budget of U.S.\$56.8 million. On July 24, 2001, the Security Council approved the plans to go ahead with the Special Court despite a shortfall of one million dollars for the first year and forty million dollars for the next two years. A Sierra Leonean government proposal that the temporal jurisdiction of the court be extended back to 1991, the commencement of the war, was not supported.

In 2000, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1306, which imposed an eighteen month ban on the trade in rough diamonds from Sierra Leone that did not have a government certificate, and mandated setting up a five-person panel of experts to look into violations of sanctions and the link between the trade in diamonds and arms. On December 20, 2000, the findings of the panel of experts were published in a report which implicated, among others, the governments of Liberia, Burkina Faso, United Arab Emirates, and Belgium in facilitating illicit arms and diamond sales to the RUF. On March 7, 2001, the Security Council voted unanimously in support of Resolution 1343, which placed a global ban on the direct or indirect import of all rough diamonds from Liberia, and placed an international travel ban on senior member of the Liberian government. The ban came into effect two months later. On March 26, the U.N. secretary-general appointed a Panel of Experts to investigate any violations of the sanctions and possible links between the exploitation of natural resources and the fuelling of the conflict.

On October 30, the Panel of Experts published its findings. The panel found widespread violations of sanctions against Liberia and recommended that the council impose an arms embargo on all rebel groups in Mano River Union countries, extend the Liberian arms embargo and the rough diamonds sanctions and urged all U.N. members to stop supplying weapons to Guinea and Sierra Leone. The panel also focused

on the importance of timber revenues for the government, and called for the U.N. to impose a ban on all log exports from Liberia starting in July 2002.

Several high-level U.N. officials visited Sierra Leone, including Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette who visited in April, and Undersecretary-General of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Hedi Annabi, in May. An August visit by U.N. Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy resulted in a call for more donor support to help victims of sexual violence.

UNHCR struggled to respond to the subregional crisis. After visiting the area in February 2001, High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers proposed a policy of humanitarian corridors for Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea to return through rebel-held territory. However, following international criticism, it was decided rather to relocate the refugees to camps further within Guinea.

Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

Responding to the unfolding regional crisis brought on by cross-border raids, the ECOWAS Defense and Security Commission in December 2000 proposed to deploy a force of some 1,700 troops to secure the borders between Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Although the OAU endorsed this plan in May, Guinea argued that the protection and monitoring mandate of the force was too weak. When neither Guinea nor Liberia had signed the status of forces agreement, and after ECOWAS heads of states insisted upon Security Council involvement and funding, the plan was dropped.

Nevertheless, members of the ECOWAS Committee of Six on Sierra Leone conducted considerable shuttle diplomacy aimed at restarting the Sierra Leonean peace process and seeking a diplomatic solution to the regional crisis. Together with the United Nations, ECOWAS was directly involved in securing the November 2000 Abuja Ceasefire Agreement, and a subsequent meeting in Abuja in May 2001 which committed the RUF and government to start disarming. During an extraordinary ECOWAS summit in Abuja, Nigeria on April 11, an ECOWAS mediation committee, comprising the presidents of Mali, Nigeria, and Togo was set up to encourage dialogue between the Mano River countries.

Ethiopian Kingsley Mamabolo, who was appointed the OAU special envoy to Sierra Leone in June 2000, made several low-profile visits to Sierra Leone, and representatives from the OAU were present as observers in several key meetings surrounding the Sierra Leonean peace process.

European Union

In February 2001, the European Parliament issued a resolution on the situation in the Mano River Union strongly condemning cross-border incursions by all sides and urging all parties to respect the human rights of refugees, civilians, and humanitarian workers. In May, Hans Dahlgren, the Swedish State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, led an eight-member European Union Ministerial Delegation to the Mano River countries. In July, Dahlgren was appointed E.U. special envoy in the Mano River region.

Since 1995 the European Commission has allocated more than 135 million

ECU (U.S.\$120 million) to Sierra Leone for development, good governance, social-economic infrastructure, child protection programs, and health and rehabilitation projects over five years. In March 2001, the European Community granted 11 million ECU (U.S.\$9.7 million) to be distributed through the community's Humanitarian Office (ECHO) for humanitarian assistance in Sierra Leone, specifically to help the internally displaced, women, children, and the disabled. In May, 4.5 million ECU was dispatched to help Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees in Guinea, and in October, an additional 5.1 million ECU was dispatched, much of it to be channeled through UNHCR, for refugees, returnees and IDP's within the Mano River Union.

At this writing, the E.U. itself has not contributed to the Sierra Leone Special Court. E.U. officials maintain that their contributions should focus on rehabilitation and reintegration, including vocational skills and education for returning refugees and IDP's. However, a number of member states contributed, including Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom continued to play a pivotal role in political and military developments in Sierra Leone. In January, Jonathan Riley, the British brigadier commanding in Sierra Leone, pledged that British troops would stay until the RUF was either defeated militarily or diplomatically. The U.K. also continued its commitment to rebuild and restructure the Sierra Leonean Army and the Sierra Leonean Police. From June 2000 through September 2001, some six hundred British troops were involved in training 8,500 Sierra Leonean Army soldiers. After September 2001, the 360 U.K. military personnel who remained continued to play a major role in advising and directing military operations, including the staffing of key positions within the Sierra Leonean Defense Headquarters. They also helped administer a program to train up to 3,000 ex-RUF and CDF combatants selected to join the new SLA. In coordination with the commonwealth secretariat, the U.K. provided officers and funds for training and administration of the Sierra Leonean police, including the secondment of the inspector general.

U.K. assistance to Sierra Leone since April 2001 was estimated to be 84.5 million pounds sterling, including funding for demobilization and reintegration programs, training and equipment for the army and police, human rights and civil society groups, rehabilitation of the legal system, humanitarian aid, and helping to restore the local Paramount Chiefs.

United States

U.S. policy on Sierra Leone revolved around ending external support for the RUF, supporting the British military actions, and providing humanitarian support. The U.S. pledge of U.S. \$15 million over three years to the proposed Special Court for Sierra Leone was the largest of any contributing nation. The U.S. total humanitarian and emergency contribution in FY 2001, including grants to aid agencies, UNHCR, and World Food Programme through USAID for food relief, assistance to refugees, and development programs was U.S. \$75 million.

After the May 2000 breakdown in the peace process, former U.S. president Bill Clinton initiated a program called Operation Focus Relief (OFR) to train and equip seven battalions of West African troops for peacekeeping with the U.N. in Sierra Leone. The training was conducted by U.S. Special Forces. The first phase of the program trained two

Nigerian battalions that were deployed in January 2001 to serve with UNAMSIL. The second phase, which ended in August, trained troops from Ghana and Senegal. The third phase, which will be completed before the end of 2001, involved three further Nigerian battalions. For FY 2001, OFR was budgeted at U.S. \$24 million in peacekeeping funds, as well as U.S. \$32 million in Department of Defense funds for equipment and transportation. The U.S. also deployed three military officers to work with the Sierra Leone army as part of the British training program. These officers, as well as other U.S. Embassy officials, had some responsibility for monitoring the performance of the U.S.-trained troops.

In addition to OFR, in June the administration notified Congress of its intention to provide U.S. \$3 million in nonlethal training and equipment to the Guinean military to assist that country in defending against the destabilizing activities of the RUF and Charles Taylor in Liberia. Congressional concerns about abuses by the Guinean military led to additional reporting and monitoring requirements. At this writing, however, the program had not yet begun.

