



THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Amnesty International's Annual Report 2021/22

SIERRA LEONE 2021

The president signed the Abolition of the Death Penalty Bill into law. The police used excessive force against protesters and other people. The government failed to protect the rights of LGBTI people. Sexual and gender-based violence remained prevalent. Sierra Leonians denounced poor sanitation in hospitals, and maternal and infant mortality rates were high.

Background

In January, 246 prisoners, including political opponent Alfred Paolo Conteh, were released following a presidential pardon. Restrictive measures used to control the Covid-19 pandemic intensified. Sierra Leone accepted 216 of 274 recommendations made under the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process.

Death penalty

On 23 July, parliament voted unanimously to abolish the death penalty for all crimes and passed the Abolition of the Death Penalty Bill, which was signed by the president on 8 October.

Excessive use of force

On 12 April, students at the Institute of Public Administration and Management participated in a protest against the institution's release of an incomplete graduate list which omitted hundreds of would-be graduates. The police violently dispersed protesters, beating and stripping a woman of her shirt.

Three days later, a police officer shot dead a young man in Hastings over a private land dispute. Following an internal investigation, five officers were dismissed and the officer who fired the gun was arrested and charged with murder.

Recommendations to strengthen the Independent Police Complaints Board went before the ministry of internal affairs as the basis for a proposed Act of Parliament to regulate police violence.

Freedom of expression

During the UPR process, the government accepted a recommendation to enact a law to protect human rights defenders. By the end of the year, the legislative process to do so had not yet started.

LGBTI people's rights

Consensual sexual relations between men remained a criminal offence under the Offences Against the Person Act and carried a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. LGBTI people continued to face discrimination and stigma and the government rejected all recommendations made during the UPR process to protect their rights and dignity.

Women's and girls' rights

Early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) were still prevalent. According to a Save the Children report published in March, Sierra Leone had the 18th highest child marriage rate in the world. The report also stated that girls often join secret societies upon puberty, such as the “Bondo Society”, where FGM is part of the initiation process.

The Rainbo Initiative, a national organization fighting sexual violence, recorded 1,691 cases of sexual and gender-based violence, mostly against women, of which 1,522 were sexual assault cases and 169 were physical assaults, in the cities of Freetown, Bo, Makeni, Kenema and the district of Kono between January and June. In July, the minister of gender and children's affairs reaffirmed the government's commitment to end such violence by 2030.

In October, the government introduced the Gender Empowerment Bill in parliament which aimed to increase women's access to finance and to reserve 30% of parliamentary seats and cabinet positions for women.

Right to health

Maternal and infant mortality rates remained high. Sierra Leonians used social media to denounce the lack of sanitation in two of the main public hospitals in Freetown, Connaught Hospital (the main referral hospital) and the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital (PCMH). On 13 April, junior doctors announced a strike, demanding, among other things, a clean working environment at the Connaught Hospital and a running water supply for PCMH.

With a limited number of oxygen plants in the country, hospitals struggled to respond to the third Covid-19 wave. By the end of September, more than 396,505 adults had received their first Covid-19 vaccine and more than 89,902 had received a second dose.

Mental health services failed to meet the needs of those suffering trauma from the recent conflict, and of Ebola survivors who lived with the after-effects of the virus. A lack of government spending, insufficient donor support and a shortage of skilled mental health professionals, among other factors, prevented them from receiving adequate care. There were only two practising psychiatrists and a visiting psychiatrist to serve the entire population.¹

Environmental degradation

In July, a report by the special select committee tasked by parliament to investigate alleged contamination of the Taia/Jong River disclosed that water pollution had been caused by extensive mining activities along the Pampana River and its tributary streams in Tonkolili District, and Hugy River in Valunia Chiefdom, Bo District, which finally emptied into the Taia/Jong River. The report further revealed that the mining activities had an adverse impact on farming, fishing and drinking water supplies. Seventeen deaths were caused by waterborne diseases. The committee recommended that all artisanal and illegal mining activities in the region be put on hold.

1. **Sierra Leone: “They Are Forgetting About Us”: The Long-Term Mental Health Impact of War and Ebola in Sierra Leone (AFR 51/4095/2021), 25 May**