



UPR Pre-session

on

The Situation of Human Rights

Defenders in

Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

- This statement is made by the Human Rights Defenders Network – Sierra Leone. We would like to draw the Committee's attention to the very important issues faced by Human Rights Defenders including Women Human Rights Defenders in Sierra Leone.
- In the last UPR in 2021; the government accepted 261 recommendations out of 274.

- Out of the 216 recommendations accepted, recommendations 143.107 to 143.115 aimed at protecting human rights defenders including women human rights defenders and their work environment.
- The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) ranks 110th out of 142 in the Rule of Law Index, and its score has decreased, ranking 18th out of 34 in Africa
- The network appreciate the GoSL national consultations on the drafting on the state report which witnessed the participation of civil society organizations, and government Ministries, Departments and Agencies.

Our statement focuses on the following:

1- BACKGROUND OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

(HRDN-SL)

2 – RISK FACING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

3 – LAWS AND DISCRIMINATION;

4 – IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS;

5 – OBSERVATIONS and CONCERNS/EMERGING ISSUES

6 - RECOMMENDATIONS

1- BACKGROUND OF HRDN-SL

- The Human Rights Defenders Network – Sierra Leone (HRDN-SL) is a coalition of civil society human rights organisations and individuals working for the protection and promotion of human rights in Sierra Leone.
- It was established as a local chapter of the West Africa Human Rights Defenders Network based in Togo in line with the 1998 UN Declaration on the Situation of HRDs and registered in Sierra Leone in July 2013 as a Company Limited by Guarantee.
- With support from Irish Aid, HRDN-SL has District structures in all 16 districts and 4 regional offices in the 5 regions to ensure decentralization and quick response to human rights situations.
- It has a membership of 160 organisations and 17 individuals from all 16 districts and 5 regions in Sierra Leone.

2-RISK FACING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

- In line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly are guaranteed under Chapter III of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone.
- Despite the significant contributions HRDs make to society, they are subjected to various forms of intimidation, threats, labeling, and harassment, including smear campaigns, trolling, criminalization, and arrest.
- In some cases, HRDs are linked to a “color revolution”, allegedly controlled by opposition political parties,
- Environmental and land rights defenders are labeled as anti-development, and political saboteurs.

RISK CONTINUES

- The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression protected under international law are systematically violated in Sierra Leone, and human rights defenders are increasingly perceived as **THREATS** rather than **LEGITIMATE ACTORS OF CHANGE** by the authorities.
- Although Part V (seditious and criminal libel) of the Public Order Act of 1965 has been repealed, HRDs are required to seek police clearance before any gathering or event, even though this practice is not stated in the Public Order Act of 1965 causing increasingly oppressive security acting under the pretext of **PUBLIC ORDER MANAGEMENT** and restrictive Legal amendments

RISK CONT.

- State control has similarly increased online, in an attempt to shrink civic space on the social media
- State interference in and monitoring of, human rights defenders' activities has also become a systematic practice, which has had a chilling effect on civil society.

3- LAWS AND DISCRIMINATIONS

- Criminal laws punishing loitering and other petty offences remain in force in Sierra Leone. On 7 November 2024, the ~~Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)~~ Court found Sierra Leone's vagrancy laws in breach of its duties under the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and ordered the government to take appropriate steps to address this matter;
- The Offences Against the Persons Act, 1861 is still in force which criminalizes same sex and can be use to silence HRDs whose voice are critical of government

4- IMPLEMENTATION OF UPR RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROTECTIONS OF HRDs

- During the last UPR, the Government of Sierra Leone accepted almost all recommendations (143.107 to 143.115) relating to protecting and safeguarding HRDs, including women human rights defenders;
- The government has repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965,
- The Human Rights Defenders Network-SL, in collaboration with the Human Rights Commission for Sierra Leone has developed and presented a draft protection law for HRDs to the Government through the office of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice

5 a- OBSERVATIONS

- Investigate, prosecute and punish all those allegedly responsible for political-tribal violence during and after the 2023 elections;
- The Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone and the Political Party registration Commission to ensure that the 30% quota for women representation is fully implemented;
- GoSL to develop National Action Plans on Children and on Human Rights
- Fully implement the TRC recommendations and set up the TRC follow up committee and task it to monitor and track progress in the implementation of the TRC recommendations

5 b -CONCERNS/EMERGING ISSUES

The Network would like to draw attention to the following emerging human rights issues on the ground since the third cycle review which have impacted on the human rights situation in Sierra Leone:-

- Constitutional Review (Implementation of the Justice Cowan Constitutional Review Report/Recommendations)
- Access to clean and safe drinking water
- Right to Shelter
- *Business* and Human Rights (SOCFIN, Lucas, Shandon Mines,)
- The rights of vulnerable groups particularly the aged
- Electoral Violence
- Land governance

6- RECOMMENDATIONS

- Align the existing legislation and bill on freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly with international human rights standards by repealing Part III of the Public Order Act of 1965 and review of the Counter Terrorism Act of 2025.
- Create a safe and enabling environment for civil society and human rights defenders including by adopting the draft bill on the recognition and protection of human rights defenders.
- Ensure that violations by law enforcement are thoroughly investigated and that perpetrators are held to account.