



## **HRDN-SL FOURTH**

### **STATEMENT**

Your Excellencies, 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.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the 2021 UPR, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) accepted 216 of 274 recommendations. Of the 216 recommendations accepted, recommendations 143.107 to 143.115 focused on protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, and their work environments.

The network appreciates the GoSL national consultations on the drafting of the state report, which witnessed the participation of civil society organizations, and government Ministries, Departments, and Agencies.

HRDs in Sierra Leone have been subject to harassment, threats, and intimidation from the Government and opposition that has sought to label them as a “color revolution”, allegedly controlled by the opposition or ruling political party, anti-development, and a political saboteur.

### **BACKGROUND OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK-SL (HRDN-SL)**

The Human Rights Defenders Network – Sierra Leone (HRDN-SL) is a coalition of civil society human rights organisations and individuals working to protect and promote 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

### **RISK FACED BY HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

A riot in Freetown left two guards and five inmates dead on 29 April 2021. The riot reportedly took place in the maximum Pademba Road Correctional Service after the Ministry of Justice announced that a detainee had tested positive for COVID-19 on 27 April 2021. To date, the Government has not published a comprehensive report on the situation at the maximum Pademba Road Correctional Service.

On 10 August 2022, Sierra Leone suffered another phase of shocking violence emanating from a clash between protesters and security forces over the economic and fuel crisis in the country. These disturbances resulted in the loss of the lives of 27 civilians and 6 security personnel of the Sierra Leone Police.

The GoSL established a Special Investigation Commission (SIC), and in April 2023, the SIC released its report on its investigation into the killing of six police officers and 27 protesters and bystanders during the August 2022 protests. In the report, the protests were described as attempts to overthrow the

government, but failed to recommend investigations be conducted on the excessive use of force by security forces.

In June 2023, such protests happened again, and this time, the security forces allegedly shot one of the protesters, though they denied responsibility, and 66 protesters were arrested. Similarly, in September 2023, security forces dispersed protests in Freetown, during which two people died of gunshot wounds, and 72 people were arrested.

In October 2023, the government finalized a policy to ensure NGOs' work aligns with national development priorities. The NGO policy was widely believed to close the civic space and control the operations of human rights defenders through the signing of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with Line Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs), including the mandatory registration with Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (SLANGO) and the alignment of NGOs' activities to that of the activities of the government

In March 2024, the NGO Campaign for Human Rights and Development International publicly condemned restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly. It occurred after the authorities denied permission for a protest against the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education's decision to dissolve the University of Sierra Leone Court.

The New Counter Terrorism Act 2025 exposes HRDs, especially journalists, to heavy, unjust prison sentences and restricts access to information in the name of national security. The Act's definition of "terrorist" is vague and broad and could be used against HRDs.

The Offences Against the Persons Act, 1861, is still in force, which criminalizes same-sex relationships and can be used to silence HRDs whose voices are critical of the government.

#### **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;

Recommendation 143.106, which calls on the government to "repeal or expunge Part III of the Public Order Act 1965 dealing with processions to protect freedom of peaceful assembly was NOTED. Part III of the POA has been frequently invoked by the Sierra Leone Police to deny citizens and HRDs their civic rights under the pretext of national security and state security. While the Government has accepted all these recommendations, it has yet to take concrete action to translate them into legislative or administrative measures.

We note, however, that the government has repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965, although Part III of the same act undermines the full enjoyment of freedom of association and assembly. This is compounded by the introduction of the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2022, which targeted and controlled the use of online social media platforms.

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. We are pleased to report that the Attorney General and Minister of Justice are currently reviewing the draft bill and developing a Cabinet paper for Cabinet approval.

#### **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 the human rights situation in Sierra Leone:-

- Constitutional Review (snail pace 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 and LGBTQI
- Electoral Violence
- Land governance

#### **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 reviewing 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.

I thank you all for giving me this opportunity to present the situation of human rights defenders in Sierra Leone