

Death Penalty

Submitted by: The Advocates for Human Rights, the Society for Human Rights and Development Organisation, and the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty

MECHANISM

Universal Periodic Review

SESSION

52nd Session of the Working Group for the UPR

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Summary: Sierra Leone formally abolished the death penalty effective 21 April 2022, but it has not signed or ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The criminal legal system fails to respect fair trial rights. Sierra Leone also fails to prevent arbitrary arrests and detention conditions do not comply with international human rights standards.

Sierra Leone has not ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR.

- Sierra Leone formally abolished the death penalty effective 21 April 2022.
- In its third-cycle UPR in 2021, Sierra Leone supported nine recommendations to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty. Nonetheless, Sierra Leone has not taken any meaningful steps toward OP2 ratification.

The criminal legal system fails to respect fair trial rights.

- Attorneys in the criminal legal system are often overworked due to staffing shortages, resulting in longer trials and prolonged pre-trial detention for people in conflict with the law.
- The shortage of public defenders impedes the ability of people in conflict with the law to know their rights and prepare for their own defense.
- Authorities do not always inform defendants of the charges against them. People in conflict with the law have limited access to interpreters and can experience lengthy delays during the appeals process.
- Many people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds who come into conflict with the law do not receive any legal aid and face additional barriers due to high court fees.

Authorities conduct arbitrary arrests and detention conditions are inadequate.

- Authorities carry out arrests of people who engage in political protests and other forms of political expression.
- Authorities detain people without a hearing for periods of time that exceed the constitutional limit.
- People in detention experience corporal punishment, overcrowding, unhygienic conditions, inadequate food, and insufficient access to medical care.

- Women in detention experience conditions that harm their mental health, placing them at heightened risk of self-harm, including suicide.

Recommendations

- Ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- Expand funding for public defenders and legal aid, prioritizing legal assistance for people in conflict with the law.
- Ensure that every person subject to arrest receives prompt notification of the charges against them, receives a hearing within the constitutionally prescribed time limit, and has access to legal aid to request pretrial release.
- Direct courts and detention facilities to facilitate the immediate release of any person who has been held in pretrial detention for a period longer than the maximum sentence for which the person is eligible to be sentenced if found guilty.
- Monitor compliance with provisions in the Criminal Procedure Act of 2024 relating to bail and limits on pretrial detention.
- Expand access to pretrial bail under the Criminal Procedure Act of 2024 to include all people charged with non-violent offenses and reduce or eliminate bail for people in conflict with the law from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Dedicate additional funding to bringing detention conditions into alignment with the Nelson Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules, prioritizing health and sanitation.
- Eliminate all forms of corporal punishment at all detention centers and prisons and create independent reporting and investigation mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable.
- Investigate allegations of arbitrary arrest and detention of supporters of political opposition parties in the lead-up to the 2023 elections.
- Promote and expand gender-appropriate mental health services for women in detention.