

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Sierra Leone: Government launches free maternal healthcare**

Today, international non-governmental organisations welcomed the official launch of Sierra Leone's free care policy for pregnant and lactating women, and for children under the age of 5.

The government of Sierra Leone, with the support of the international community, must ensure that its free health care policy becomes a reality.

The government's historic decision on the country's 49th independence anniversary is an important step in removing one of the main barriers women and children face in accessing quality health care.

Maternal mortality in Sierra Leone is one of the highest in the world. Women and girls are unable to access lifesaving treatment because they are too poor to pay for it. Thousands of women bleed to death after giving birth. With approximately 70% of Sierra Leone's 6.4 million people living on less than a dollar a day, paying for basic health care can present an insurmountable challenge.

Free care is a major step in addressing maternal mortality. However, on its own, this measure is not enough. Insufficient funds, inadequate anti-corruption measures, acute staff shortages, and other failures will, if not addressed, prevent the progressive and full realisation of the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which is conducive to living a life in dignity.

To ensure this historic announcement really benefits the women and children of Sierra Leone, the government should also invest in more and better-paid health workers, desperately needed medicines and rigorous accountability to ensure people can not only access healthcare, but receive the good quality healthcare they need and deserve.

The Sierra Leonean government estimates that US \$90 million will be needed to implement free care in 2010, and that it has a funding shortfall of US \$20 million, for which it has requested international support. The measure announced by the government of Sierra Leone is a crucial step in the progressive realisation of its people's right to health as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

International support to Sierra Leone's health sector will need to be complemented by efforts by the government of Sierra Leone to ensure the proper management of its health care system, to combat gender-based discrimination, and to provide family planning services.

More than fifteen states, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, have adopted free care in the last five years. Recently, in the West Africa region, Burkina Faso was said to be favourable to the lifting of all financial obstacles to the provision of emergency obstetric care.

International cooperation and assistance will be important in enabling countries like Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso and others to meet their obligations for the poorest and most vulnerable.

Pregnant women and girls are dying in the thousands. Today marks a milestone on the path to ensuring Sierra Leonean women's rights to life and health.

### **Background**

Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, ratified by Sierra Leone in 1996, the government has an obligation to realize the right to health, including the right to maternal, child and reproductive health. The government is also under a duty to prioritize the most vulnerable and marginalized groups when allocating resources, and to address discrimination in health services and information. The realization of women's right to health requires the removal of all barriers interfering with access to health services, education and information, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health.

### **This public statement is issued with**

- Oxfam,
- Amnesty international,
- Médecins du monde (Doctors of the World),
- Avocats pour la santé dans le monde (Global Health Advocates).