

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

21 May 2021 AFR 51/4154/2021

SIERRA LEONE: ANNOUNCEMENT AT THE UN TO ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY IS A WELCOME DEVELOPMENT

UN member states highlighted other human rights priorities for the country at the Universal Periodic Review

Amnesty International today welcomes Sierra Leonean authorities' announcement at the UN to abolish the death penalty.

Responding to international community's calls, on 12 May 2021 in Geneva, during Sierra Leone's United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Deputy Justice Minister announced the commitment of President Julius Maada Bio's cabinet to fully abolish the death penalty.

Amnesty International welcomes the commitment, and urges Sierra Leone to promptly take all necessary steps required to abolish the death penalty in law for all crimes.

For years, Sierra Leone has been failing to take concrete actions to abolish the death penalty. Amnesty International's latest report on the global use of the death penalty shows that recorded death sentences increased in Sierra Leone in 2020 compared with 2019 from 21 to 39. The Correctional Service of Sierra Leone informed Amnesty International that no executions were carried out in 2020; seven death sentences were commuted by the President; and 94 people were under the sentence of death at the end of 2020.

Pending the abolition of the death penalty for all crimes, the authorities should establish an official moratorium on executions, commute all death sentences to prison terms and also ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty.

At the UPR session, UN member states voiced concerns about issues that included respect for the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, accountability for the excessive use of force by the police and taking steps to expedite the enactment of the Gender equality bill.

States urged Sierra Leone to ensure the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression, including that of human rights defenders, journalists, opponents, and activists. Human rights defenders should be protected to carry out their activities safely and without reprisals.

States also recommended Sierra Leone to put an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists, civil society actors and human rights defenders.

Authorities in Sierra Leone should introduce legislation to enhance accountability of police officers and military personnel, strengthen monitoring mechanisms, investigate any alleged case of excessive use of force and bring perpetrators to justice.

Adequate resources must be provided for the full implementation of the 2019 Amended Sexual Offences Act. The Gender Equality Bill, which provides for a minimum of 30% representation of women in parliament, local councils, ministries, departments, and agencies, must be enacted without delay.

Following the 12 May review, the Sierra Leone government has not yet submitted its responses to the recommendations but should do so before their adoption at the Human Rights Council in September 2021. Amnesty International encourages the Sierra Leone government to adopt all recommendations, especially those related to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, accountability for the use of excessive force by the police and gender equality.

Amnesty International considers UN member states have echoed what civil society activists, human rights defenders and several stakeholders have been campaigning on for years in Sierra Leone so that authorities take decisive steps in improving the country's human rights records.

Background

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a mechanism of the Human Rights Council under which UN member states review the fulfilment of the human rights obligations and commitments of all 193 UN Member States, with each state being reviewed every five years. It is a cooperative mechanism, based on objective and reliable information, and equal treatment of all states. It is complementary to the work of the UN treaty bodies.

Sierra Leone's human rights record was reviewed in 2011, 2016 and 2021.