

His Excellency Mr. Jongopie Siaka Stevens
The Embassy of
The Republic of Sierra Leone
Herwarthstraße 4
12207 Berlin

Ref.: The right to freedom of peaceful assembly

Dear Ambassador,

I am writing to you to express my serious concerns about the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Sierra Leone. For over a decade, Amnesty International has conducted continuous research into the human rights situation in Sierra Leone. Our latest report launched on 3 July **A FORCE FOR GOOD?** (AFR 51/8590/2018) focuses on restrictions on peaceful assembly and impunity for excessive use of force by the Sierra Leone Police.

The findings and conclusions included in this report are very concerning. Through a detailed analysis of a series of cases around the country Amnesty International has been able to document how the excessive use of force by the police unlawfully kills people, leaves victims with long lasting injuries and destroys peoples' properties and lives.

In Sierra Leone the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is treated like if it was a privilege granted by authorities when what Sierra Leone authorities should do it is to guarantee it as a fundamental right, which is what it is. In many cases the restrictions on peaceful assembly by the Sierra Leonean authorities have been based on overly broad national laws, including the Public Order Act 1965, which are inconsistent with regional and international human rights standards and should be reformed immediately.

One of the main reasons for the casualties and fatalities caused by the police is their indiscriminate use of lethal weapons. Police seem to use firearms as a standard tool to handle assemblies and tear gas has also been used by the police in an unnecessary and disproportionate manner. These actions violate clearly the international standards and the police's own rules of engagement.

As the Amnesty International report highlights, one of the main reasons that the excessive use of force by the police is an endemic problem in Sierra Leone is impunity. Lack of accountability sends a message to police officers that they can violate human rights without fear of any kind of repercussions. Impunity in cases of excessive use of force by the police should immediately be addressed by the Sierra Leone authorities. Mechanisms and institutions to tackle impunity, such as the Independent Police Complaints Board (IPCB) or the CDIID must be urgently reformed and strengthened.

I am fully aware that addressing Amnesty International's concerns might seem very challenging but we are not asking for the impossible. It is clear that things can be done well in the right way as demonstrated during the recent elections where campaign rallies were generally permitted, and the police – supported by training programmes – were able to use different tactics to de-escalate tense situations rather than resort to the use of firearms. This is something very positive and demonstrates that the police should similarly be able to support the right to freedom of peaceful assembly even in non-election contexts.

I really encourage you to address Amnesty International's concerns and to undertake all the reforms needed. I believe that Sierra Leone finds itself at a key moment. I am convinced that the change of government brings new opportunities for improvement and addressing all these concerns. I think that it is time for the vibrant civil society and dynamic population to fully use their freedom of peaceful assembly without any fear.

Yours sincerely,