

SIERRA LEONEAN

COMMUNITY PROFILE

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This booklet has been compiled by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to help state and territory governments, service providers and other key settlement stakeholders to settle new entrants under Australia's Humanitarian Programme.

Accurate information about the pre-arrival experiences of refugees, including environmental conditions in camps, can be difficult to obtain and verify. While every effort has been made to ensure this document is factually correct, it may contain some inaccuracies.

Refugee experiences can vary considerably between individuals. Readers should note that this document is intended to provide a general background of the possible experiences of arrivals under the Humanitarian Programme. Information presented here may not always be applicable to individuals within the community in Australia or to new arrivals.

Where possible, more detailed information on specific groups of arrivals will be provided to service providers as an adjunct to this and other community profiles.

Policies in relation to Australia's Humanitarian Programme change over time. For current information visit the department's website at www.immi.gov.au.

The information provided in this document does not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government or its employees.



Introduction

Sierra Leone is located on the Atlantic coast of West Africa and is bordered by Guinea and Liberia. The country is famous for its rich mineral resources, particularly raw diamonds.

Historically, Sierra Leone was a source country for the trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as a site for the repatriation of former slaves during the abolitionist movement. It is a diverse society, home to numerous indigenous tribal groups as well as the Krio community (descendants of those freed slaves who settled in the nineteenth century).

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1961, the country has experienced ongoing political instability. Numerous coups preceded a bloody civil war that began in 1991 and lasted for 11 years. The conflict was not based on ethnic or religious divisions. Resentment of a corrupt political class led to active opposition, however it is generally agreed that while government corruption contributed to rising tensions, fighting for control of the country's diamond mines was the principal factor in sparking and fuelling the war.

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group who initiated fighting in the diamond-rich eastern provinces, funnelled illegal diamonds to neighbouring Liberia and other countries, and received weapons and other material support in return. Over the course of the conflict both the RUF (backed by Liberia's President Charles Taylor) and pro-government militias terrorised Sierra Leone's civilian population.

After several failed attempts to secure peace, United Nations (UN) peacekeepers succeeded in arresting key rebel figures in 2000 and instituting a programme of disarmament. The UN estimates more than 75 000 ex-fighters disarmed and demobilised by early 2002. The civil war was declared over by President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah later that year and the process of rebuilding the war-ravaged country began.



Port Loko Internally Displaced Persons camp
World Food Program/Ramin Rafirasme

It is estimated that up to 75 000 people were killed during the civil war while a further two million people were displaced both internally and throughout the region. Since the conclusion of the war a large repatriation effort has taken place with over half a million refugees and internally displaced persons returning home by early 2007.

While several thousand refugees remain in neighbouring countries including Liberia and Guinea, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is focused on local integration

strategies for these groups and is not seeking to refer significant numbers for resettlement in third countries. However there is still instability in the region, particularly in Guinea where economic stress has led to political destabilisation.

Sierra Leonean arrivals to Australia are likely to continue under the Special Humanitarian Program as those in Australia sponsor family and friends. However, any applications referred by UNHCR from Sierra Leoneans for a Humanitarian visa under the Refugee category will continue to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Sierra Leonean community in Australia

The Sierra Leonean community in Australia is small. The 2001 census recorded 363 people whose country of birth was Sierra Leone.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship's Settlement Database has recorded 1979 Sierra Leonean entrants to Australia between 2002-06¹.

The vast majority of these entrants – around 1900 – arrived under Australia's Humanitarian Programme (Figure 1). Of these arrivals, around 46 per cent arrived as Refugees (visa sub-class 200), approximately 11 per cent as Woman at Risk (visa sub-class 204), and around 43 per cent as Special Humanitarian Program entrants (visa sub-class 202 - sponsored by family or friends in Australia).

Figure 1. Migration stream of Sierra Leonean arrivals, 2002-06

Migration stream		No. of arrivals
Humanitarian Programme	<i>Refugee</i>	881
	<i>Special Humanitarian Program (SHP)</i>	812
	<i>Woman at Risk</i>	208
	Sub-total	1901
Onshore Protection		23
Family stream		42
Skill stream		13
Total		1979

Entrants from Sierra Leone have settled in all states and territories. The majority have settled in Sydney with smaller communities in Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, Launceston, Hobart, Canberra and Melbourne. Small numbers of Sierra Leoneans have also settled in regional areas of Australia. Figure 2 shows arrival numbers to the top five states.

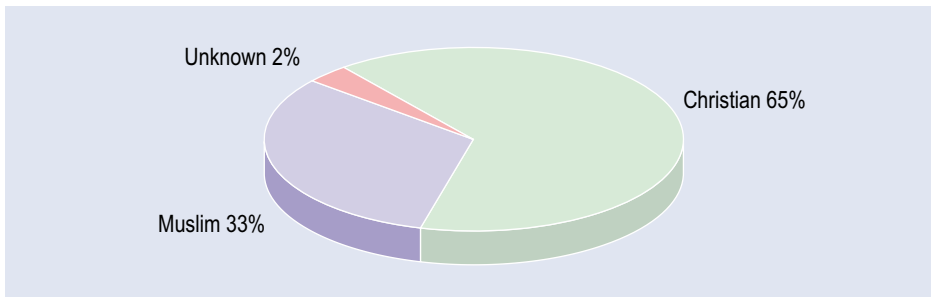
¹ Please note that all data in this section is for the last five calendar years (1 January 2002 to 31 December 2006).

Figure 2. Top five settlement locations of Sierra Leonean offshore humanitarian arrivals, 2002-06

Location	NSW	WA	QLD	TAS	SA
Arrivals	939	257	235	215	115

The majority of Sierra Leonean arrivals – approximately 65 per cent – identified themselves as Christian. Most did not further indicate their denomination though small numbers identified themselves as Catholic. Around 33 per cent of arrivals recorded their faith as Muslim (Sunni Islam is the dominant faith in Sierra Leone).

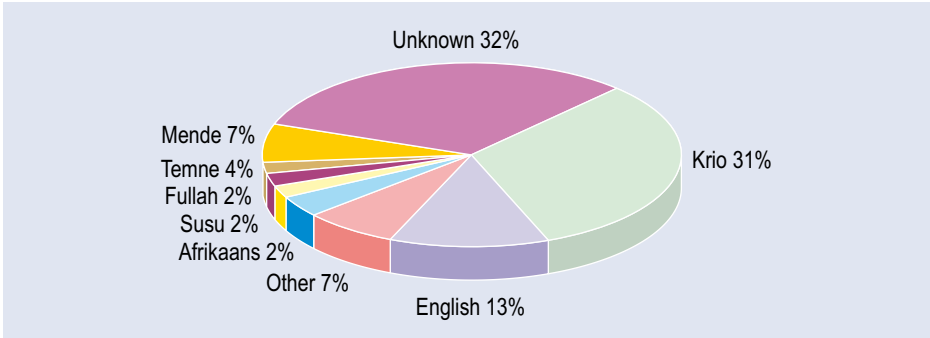
Figure 3. Religion of Sierra Leonean offshore humanitarian arrivals, 2002-06



A large number of languages are spoken in Sierra Leone and the languages spoken by entrants to Australia are correspondingly diverse (Figure 4). Around 31 per cent of arrivals identified their main language as Krio – an English-based creole language that developed among former slaves. Krio is Sierra Leone’s *lingua franca* so it is likely that other Sierra Leonean arrivals to Australia are also able to communicate in this language, even if it is not their first language.

Around 13 per cent of arrivals identified English as their main language. Smaller numbers of entrants recorded the major tribal languages Mende and Temne as their primary language, with a number of other tribal languages also spoken.

Figure 4. Main language of Sierra Leonean offshore humanitarian arrivals, 2002-06²



Around 36 per cent of arrivals characterised their English proficiency as either ‘very good’ or ‘good’ (Figure 5). This may not reflect an equivalent level of competence in an Australian context, however, as this is a self-assessment made while arrivals are still offshore. Around 41 per cent of entrants reported their English as poor and approximately 16 per cent stated that they spoke no English at all.

Figure 5. Self-reported English proficiency of Sierra Leonean offshore humanitarian arrivals, 2002-06

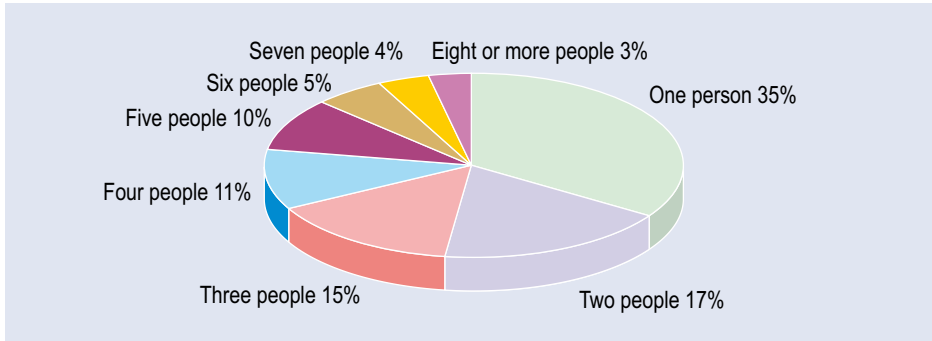
English proficiency	No. of arrivals	Per cent of arrivals
Very good	226	12
Good	454	24
Poor	783	41
Nil	299	16
Unknown/not recorded	139	7

A significant proportion of Sierra Leonean arrivals were single – approximately 35 per cent (Figure 6). Small families of between two and four people comprised

² There are a large number of different languages and dialects spoken in Sierra Leone. Many of the smaller language groups are not specifically coded by departmental systems and are represented in this table as ‘Unknown/not further defined’.

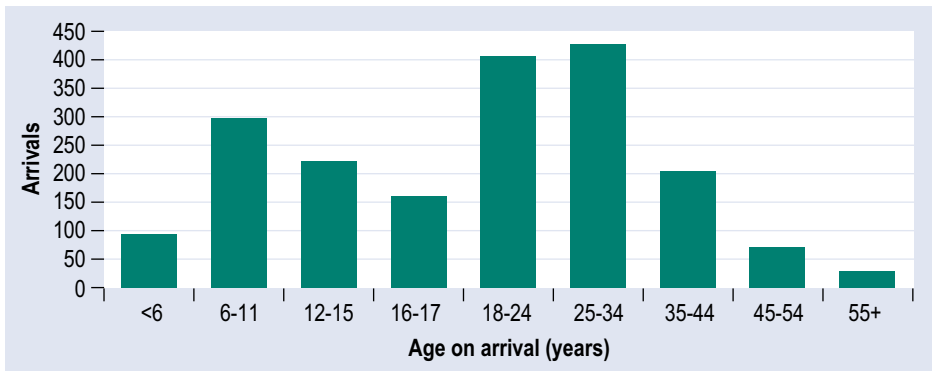
around 43 per cent of arrivals. Approximately 22 per cent of families included five or more people, with some significantly larger than the Australian norm.

Figure 6. Family size of Sierra Leonean offshore humanitarian arrivals, 2002-06



Young adults comprise the majority of entrants with around 44 per cent aged between 18 and 34 years on arrival. Significant numbers – around 40 per cent – were aged less than 18 years on arrival. The statistics reflect a similar age structure to Sierra Leone itself where very low life expectancy has contributed to young people forming a large proportion of the population (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Age on arrival of Sierra Leonean offshore humanitarian arrivals, 2002-06



Pre-arrival experiences

Sierra Leone's civil war became infamous around the world for the brutality inflicted on its population. Many civilians were killed. The mutilation of victims became the signature of the rebel fighters, particularly the removal of limbs. The sexual assault of women as a weapon of war was also common. Sierra Leonean arrivals to Australia may have been personally affected by acts of violence or have witnessed attacks on family members, friends or neighbours.

Sierra Leone's political environment has been highly unstable for many decades with numerous coups both military and civilian taking place since the 1960s. As a result of living in this environment arrivals may initially feel suspicious of government and authority figures such as the police. The West African region generally has experienced considerable volatility in recent years and some refugees escaping conflict in Sierra Leone may also have been affected by instability or conflict in their first country of asylum.

Refugee arrivals have experienced the stresses associated with the forced migration experience – separation from family and friends and the challenge of adjusting to an unfamiliar cultural milieu.

Living conditions in Sierra Leone itself are generally dire: it is ranked as one of the least developed countries in the world. The majority of its population have limited access to healthcare and education, and infrastructure such as electricity and running water is not available in most parts of the country.



A village in northern Sierra Leone *Peter C. Andersen*

Many Sierra Leonean refugees lived in camp environments in neighbouring countries before arriving in Australia. Information about camp conditions in West Africa can be difficult to obtain though some general observations can be made.

Accommodation is generally very basic with little protection from heat or wet weather. Refugee camps do not usually have running water or electricity. Water is often drawn from wells and transported to huts. Residents use kerosene lamps and candles, and open fires are used for cooking. Conditions are sometimes unsanitary and disease is common³. In Guinea, health services in camps are generally very good, however malaria is prevalent. Young children are vaccinated against diseases including polio. Camp residents are provided with latrines.

Limited food availability may lead to malnutrition, particularly among children. Employment opportunities are typically limited in camps, though some small-scale food production and retail opportunities may exist.

Entrants who have lived outside refugee camps before coming to Australia are likely to have led more independent lives. Nonetheless, due to the political instability and poverty common to most of West Africa, some have had limited access to employment, education or healthcare.



Flag of the Republic of Sierra Leone

³ Humanitarian entrants to Australia undergo medical screening prior to being granted a visa.

Settlement considerations


Sierra Leoneans are likely to experience culture shock on arrival in Australia. While most receive orientation about Australian life and culture before they arrive, the early settlement period may be overwhelming as entrants adjust to an unfamiliar climate, language, legal framework and cultural environment. Gender roles and approaches to parenting in Australia differ significantly from traditional Sierra Leonean society and for some arrivals this may be challenging.

In some instances, Sierra Leonean families are larger than the Australian norm. A small proportion of families are comprised of eight or more people. Entrants may need assistance to locate and secure appropriate long-term housing.

A large proportion of Sierra Leonean arrivals have limited or no proficiency in English and require interpreting and translating services. Some arrivals may also be illiterate or have low levels of literacy in their own language. School-aged arrivals may need guidance in adjusting to the Australian classroom environment. Australian schools generally use an interactive style of learning and value skills such as essay-writing and critical analysis which may be unfamiliar to Sierra Leonean students who have limited educational backgrounds. Intensive assistance is required for school-aged arrivals with limited literacy skills.

Some Sierra Leonean arrivals have skills in the English language or speak Krio, and will therefore be familiar with English vocabulary. These entrants may need assistance to understand Australian expressions and may initially find Australian accents difficult to understand.

Some Sierra Leonean arrivals have not had the opportunity to develop work skills and experience. Assistance may be needed to link entrants with vocational training opportunities or further study. Entrants may also need assistance to learn job-seeking skills in an Australian context. Most entrants, regardless of their employment history, will be unfamiliar with the Australian industrial environment including their rights and obligations in the workplace and Occupational Health and Safety practices.



Many entrants have lived in extremely poor conditions in both Sierra Leone and in camps and may not have had the opportunity to develop a range of life skills such as banking and managing finances, using public transport or driving, understanding tenancy rights and obligations and using western-style appliances and utilities. Assistance may be needed to help entrants negotiate the Australian service environment.

Some Sierra Leoneans have experienced considerable trauma before their arrival in Australia. As a result of these experiences, and the difficult adjustment of rebuilding a life in a new country, entrants may experience feelings of depression or frustration and need to access specialist counselling services.

Country background

Location

Sierra Leone is situated in West Africa and is bordered to the north and east by Guinea and to the south by Liberia. Its capital, Freetown, is in the west of the country, on the North Atlantic coast. It is a small country of approximately 71 740 square kilometres in size.

Climate and topography

Sierra Leone lies just north of the equator.

It forms part of the tropics and the climate is very hot and humid.

Temperatures in the capital of Freetown are consistently high all year round (typically around 30°C). There are two seasons: wet (May – December) and dry (December – April), when dry harmattan winds blow over the country from the Sahara Desert. Coastal regions receive very high rainfall.

Mangrove swamps cover most coastal areas, giving way to forested plateaus. Significant portions of land have been cleared for agriculture. Mountainous terrain dominates in the east of the country with mountain peaks rising to 1948 metres. Permanent cropland forms around one per cent of the total land area while arable land makes up around eight per cent.

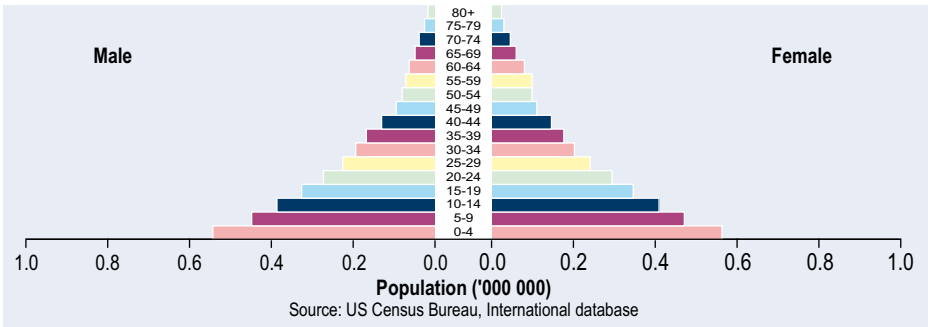
Sierra Leone's population is approximately six million. The average life expectancy is 41 years, one of the lowest in the world. An estimated 44.8 per cent of the population are aged 14 years and under, and the median age is 17.4 years (the median age in Australia is much higher at 36.9 years).



Map of Africa

World Factbook

Figure 8. Sierra Leonean population, 2007



Approximately 40 per cent of the population of Sierra Leone were estimated to live in urban areas in 2004, with a corresponding 60 per cent living in rural and regional areas.

Ethnicity

An estimated 90 per cent of Sierra Leoneans are indigenous Africans of various tribal ethnicities. The Temne ethnic group forms around 30 per cent of the population and dominates in the north of the country. The Mende also form around 30 per cent of the population and dominate in the south. Other tribal groups include Limba, Susu, Loko, Kuranko, Yulanka, Sherbro, Kono and Kissi.

The Krio population – descendants of freed slaves who migrated to West Africa from Britain, the United States and the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – is estimated at between two and 10 per cent. There are also small European, Lebanese, Pakistani and Indian communities.

African national borders were generally demarcated in the colonial period and do not always reflect traditional tribal groupings. As a result, members of Sierra Leonean ethnic groups may also be found in neighbouring West African countries such as Guinea and Liberia. In addition, there is some fluidity in regard to tribal identity as over time smaller tribes have merged or partly merged with larger ones.



Language

Mende and Temne are the most common indigenous languages with the former spoken in the south of the country and the latter in the north (reflecting ethnic groupings). Another 19 indigenous languages are also spoken. Kono, Kuranko, West-Central Limba, Loko, Pular, Sherbro, and Susu all have more than 100 000 speakers.

English is spoken by a small, literate sector of society and is the country's official language. It is used by Sierra Leoneans in administration, commerce and law. Arabic is spoken by some Muslims.

Krio (an English-based creole language) is understood by the vast majority of the population. It is also a first language for around 10 per cent, most of whom are of Krio ethnicity and live in the Freetown area. Similarities to English can be seen in basic greetings: "Ow di bodi?" translates as "How are you?" Krio is considered to be Sierra Leone's *lingua franca*. The language, or versions of it, is also spoken in parts of Gambia, Guinea, Senegal and Liberia.

Society

Modern Sierra Leonean society has developed from a range of diverse influences including traditional tribal cultures, colonial British rule and the Krio culture that emerged among former slaves resettled during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

There continues to be a socio-cultural divide in Sierra Leone between urban areas, which are Krio-dominant and strongly influenced by western culture, and rural areas where traditional indigenous practices predominate.

Most rural communities have a hereditary chief who exercises traditional authority, though chiefdoms coexist with more modern forms of local government such as district councils and a network of local courts.

Family and community

As in many other African countries, Sierra Leoneans place a high value on family. The family unit is typically larger than in Australia, and may include extended family members such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, and in-laws.

Marriages in Sierra Leonean society are an important means of influencing family and tribal alliances and cementing broader social relationships. In some cases, marriages are arranged, however it is becoming more common for young people to select their partner independently. Male suitors are often required to present gifts to the bride and her family to secure a marriage (known as a 'bride price'). This practice is common in rural areas. Financial contributions to the costs of a wedding are usually made by both sides of the family.

In many instances Sierra Leonean marriages are monogamous. Some marriages, though, are polygynous (the husband having more than one wife at a time, as distinct from polygamy which is not gender-specific). In some circumstances the first wife claims a higher status than those who follow.

Families with many children are viewed favourably in Sierra Leone. Child-rearing is an activity undertaken as much by extended family members and the community at large as by parents. Elders are highly respected in Sierra Leonean culture and may play a role in educating children, particularly through story-telling. Community activities of this kind are important mechanisms for transferring cultural knowledge to younger members of the community as well as providing opportunities for leisure and religious expression.

Song and dance are important to Sierra Leonean culture. Common local instruments include various drums and the 'balangi' (similar to the xylophone). The region also specialises in a number of crafts. Sierra Leone is well known for textile design including colourful tie-dyeing.

Housing

In rural parts of the country houses are typically constructed from clay and mud and may have thatched or bamboo roofs. Housing in towns and villages may be constructed from cement using metal sheeting for roofing. Cooking is often done in the open air and kitchens are situated outside, away from sleeping areas. Most villages have markets and spaces for the community to gather.

Traditional Western housing can be found in Freetown and other urban centres.

Gender

Traditional gender roles are the accepted norm in Sierra Leone (particularly in rural areas) and men are considered to be the head of household. Gender-appropriate behaviour is clearly demarcated and often grounded in religious belief. While the constitution prohibits gender discrimination, customary law is widely practised and highly conservative. Female genital mutilation is common practice in much of Sierra Leone, usually undertaken by traditional women's societies, and is not prohibited by law. Priority is often given to the schooling of boys and therefore women are, on average, less educated and have lower levels of literacy.

Outside of urban areas, men's work consists of intensive farm labour such as clear-felling and ploughing. Women also make a major contribution to farming activities through planting and harvesting. In addition they have responsibility for domestic tasks such as collecting and preparing food, cleaning, washing, and child-rearing. Men are usually community leaders.

In urban centres such as Freetown, western practices are more influential and traditional gender roles are less rigidly adhered to. Women are employed in the civil service and are also well represented in the non-government sector.

Religion

The largest religious group in Sierra Leone is Sunni Muslim, estimated to comprise between 50 and 60 per cent of the population (Muslim traders and scholars brought Islam to West Africa as early as the fifth century AD). Traditional African animist beliefs are the principal religion for around 30 per cent of Sierra Leoneans. Christians make up roughly 10 per cent of the population and are



A shop in Kissy, Freetown

Peter C. Andersen



Agricultural cooperative reclaiming land previously used for diamond mining
L. Lartigue/USAID

highly represented among the Krio community. There is also a small number of Hindus.

It should be noted that the practice of religions in Africa and Australia do not necessarily correspond. For example, a range of influences may be drawn on in Sierra Leonean religious practice and traditional rites are performed by many who are nominally monotheists. Life events such as the transition to adulthood are celebrated through

religious ritual that may take the form of dance or song. Many Sierra Leoneans believe in ancestral spirits that can influence current events and to whom they make offerings.

For the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans religion is an important part of life. It is not treated as a private or separate sphere but rather infuses everyday activities and community life. Various phenomena from weather events to perceived bad luck are often interpreted from a religious perspective.

Dress

Sierra Leoneans take pride in their dress and presentation. Clothing is modest in style and usually made of cotton as Sierra Leone has a warm, humid climate.

Women's dress in particular is colourful and striking. Tie dyed materials and patterned fabrics are often used. Women wear a 'lappa', a long piece of cloth wrapped around the body. Sometimes skirts and blouses are worn. Women often also wear a cotton wrap on their heads, covering the hair. This wrap is usually made from a matching fabric.

Health

Sierra Leone is currently ranked second last of 177 countries on the United Nation's 2006 Human Development Index (Australia is ranked third). Average life expectancy at birth is 41 years (42.4 years for men and 39.6 years for women). Child and maternal mortality are exceptionally high.

Sierra Leone's health system has been devastated by civil conflict and economic collapse. Advances in health services have been made since the civil war came to an end in 2002. Nonetheless, while attempts are being made at improvement, access to safe water and sanitation is limited. The prevalence of disease in Sierra Leone is exacerbated by a lack of trained medical staff as well as inadequate facilities and equipment. There are an estimated three physicians per 100 000 people and rural areas are particularly disadvantaged.

A number of diseases are prevalent in Sierra Leone including HIV, typhoid fever, cholera, and tuberculosis (TB). Yellow fever and Lassa fever outbreaks occur from time to time. Food and waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhoea and hepatitis A are also common. Extreme poverty has also led to inadequate nutrition throughout much of Sierra Leone. Approximately 50 per cent of Sierra Leoneans are undernourished and protein deficiencies are not uncommon.

Many Sierra Leoneans are unfamiliar with western notions of disease and treatment. Illness may be understood as the result of divine punishment or the ill will of another person manifested through witchcraft. The sufferer may consult a traditional healer to remove the curse afflicting them and herbs are sometimes used to cure ailments. Sierra Leoneans from urban areas are more likely to be familiar with western healthcare.

Food

In rural areas, cooking is typically done outdoors using pots heated over a traditional stove constructed from three stones. In urban areas, western-style appliances are more likely to be used. As in Australia, formal events and ceremonies such as weddings are marked by the sharing of food.

Rice is the principal staple of the Sierra Leonean diet and is consumed daily. It is typically served with a sauced dish made from fish, meat, peanuts



Drag-chain fishermen at Lumley Beach
Peter C. Andersen

and vegetables such as eggplant, yam, okra and tomato. Fish in particular is consumed regularly. Rice is rolled into balls and then dipped in the accompanying sauce or stew. Coconut oil is sometimes used in cooking and dishes are often spiced.

Starchy vegetables such as potato, cassava (a root vegetable cultivated in the tropics and sub-tropics) and plantains (a kind of banana) are also eaten. Tropical fruits including papaya, mango, avocado, guava and pineapple are consumed where available.



A rural school in Koindu, Sierra Leone *L. Lartigue / USAID*

Education

In the colonial period, Sierra Leone was regarded as an educational hub and dubbed the 'Athens of West Africa'. It was the site of the first university in the region and attracted large numbers of English-speaking Africans to study courses including theology, law and medicine. Political instability and civil conflict, however, have crippled the country's educational infrastructure.

Schools in Sierra Leone are often western in style but there are also

Arabic schools in some areas. According to current national education policy, six years of primary schooling and three years of junior secondary schooling are considered the standard for basic education. Beyond this students may proceed to senior secondary schooling or study at a vocational training institute. In reality however, school enrolment rates are very low (the gross enrolment ratio for secondary school was estimated at only 14 per cent in 2004).

School fees and equipment are prohibitively expensive for many families. This situation has been complicated by the closure of many rural schools since the conflict began in the early 1990s. Enrolment in tertiary education is particularly low with an estimated three per cent of men and one per cent of women enrolled in 2002.

English is the country's official language for schooling though French and Arabic may also be studied. Recent changes have meant that study in some African languages (Krio, Mende, Temne and Limba) is now encouraged throughout the nation's schools and centres of higher learning.

Levels of literacy in Sierra Leone are among the lowest in the world. In 2004 adult male literacy was an estimated 47 per cent while adult female literacy was only 24 per cent. However, literacy levels for young people aged 15-24 in the same period were slightly higher with young men having 59 per cent and young women having an estimated 37 per cent literacy.

In addition to formal schooling, young people in Sierra Leone are educated in the traditional practices of their tribe through men's and women's 'secret' societies ('Poro' for men and 'Sande' or 'Bundu' for women). These societies provide young people with training in the cultural traditions of their tribe and teach them the skills they will need as adult members of the community.

Economy

Considerable mineral resources, most notably diamonds, and a sizeable natural harbour contributed to Sierra Leone's colonial role as a centre for trade. However, political instability, corruption and financial mismanagement have shaped the economy of post-independence Sierra Leone. The official diamond trade suffered due to the prevalence of illegal mining and smuggling and the country experienced a downturn in the mining sector in the 1970s and 80s that significantly affected economic health. Later, civil war had a catastrophic effect on the national accounts and saw the collapse of industry and services.



A platform in the midst of a farm serves as a base to drive birds off the ripening rice
Peter C. Andersen

The illicit diamond trade played a significant part in the Sierra Leonean conflict. Reference is often made to the trade in 'conflict' or 'blood' diamonds that enabled rebel forces to smuggle diamonds into neighbouring countries for export in exchange for large numbers of weapons and other goods. The trade supported the RUF's capacity to maintain control of the mining districts. In 2000 a diamond export certification system was established in an attempt to counter illicit sales.

Since the end of the conflict in 2002 there has been significant economic improvement, primarily due to increased activity in the mining and agricultural sectors. Agriculture comprises the largest share of gross domestic product (GDP) at around 60 per cent. The mining and service sectors each contribute around 20 per cent of GDP. Major exports include minerals (diamonds, bauxite and rutile or titanium dioxide) as well as cocoa and coffee. Small-scale manufacturing includes production of sugar, soap, and textiles.

Living conditions for Sierra Leoneans remain poor however, with around 65 per cent of people relying on subsistence farming or fishing. Poverty is endemic and around 75 per cent of the population live on less than \$2 a day.

In 2006 it was announced that the overwhelming majority of Sierra Leone's external debt (owed to the World Bank, IMF and other creditors) was to be cancelled, assisting the country's economic prospects.

Early history

Indigenous African tribes settled in the region now known as Sierra Leone from the fourteenth century AD. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Portuguese arrived in West Africa and established a fort (now Freetown). The name Sierra Leone – from the Portuguese for 'Lion Mountains' – originates from this period.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries large numbers of Africans were removed from Sierra Leone as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. By the late eighteenth century a popular anti-slave trade movement had arisen in Britain and elsewhere. In 1787 abolitionists settled several hundred Africans in Freetown who had been living in London. Further resettlement of freed slaves from a number of countries continued for more than half a century. Slaves who had fought on the side of the British in the American War of Independence were

initially provided with land in Nova Scotia, Canada, but later settled in Sierra Leone. They were joined by former slaves from Jamaica who had rebelled against their oppressors. In addition, Africans rescued from slave ships after the trade was abolished in Britain in 1807 (known as 'recaptives') were also repatriated.

These former slaves did not necessarily originate from Sierra Leone, but included Africans from many parts of the continent. Despite their diverse backgrounds and experiences, former slaves had a shared experience of western culture, including Christianity, and many had developed English language proficiency. Over time this group developed a distinctive Creole (or 'Krio') identity, language and culture, encouraged by Protestant missionaries in the country.

In 1808 Freetown became a British colony, with surrounding lands being declared a British protectorate in 1896. Throughout the nineteenth century tensions existed between indigenous African tribes, and the recently arrived Krio settlers and British colonists who dominated the Freetown area.

Politics

Independence from Britain was gained in 1961 and a decade later Sierra Leone was declared a republic. Dr Siaka Stevens (formerly Prime Minister) became the country's first President, heading the All People's Congress (APC). Between these milestone events the first of Sierra Leone's numerous coups took place, heralding an era of ongoing political instability.

Large-scale rioting occurred in 1977, triggered by the country's troubled economy. Diamond smuggling had reduced government revenue from official exports. In 1978 a national referendum approved a new constitution that declared Sierra Leone a one-party state (under



Eastern Freetown

Peter C. Andersen



Diamond miner in Kono District

L. Lartigue / USAID


the APC). Economic difficulties and corruption led to demonstrations and violence during the 1980s. In 1991 public discontent with constitutional arrangements led to another referendum, this time under President Joseph Momoh. Changes provided for multi-party elections.

During Momoh's presidency a former military corporal, Foday Sankoh, led his Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in a campaign against the

government. RUF attacks on villages near the Liberian border and subsequent skirmishes with the Sierra Leonean army in diamond-mining areas heralded the beginning of a bloody civil war that lasted for 11 years. The RUF originated as a political opposition movement but became militarised by Sankoh and others who removed the former leadership. The rebel movement quickly degenerated, attracting opportunists and others attracted to a life of crime and violence.

The Front became infamous for its extreme violence including murder, mass rape, sexual slavery and mutilation. The group developed a trademark in the removal of victims' limbs. Large numbers of RUF fighters were recruited as child soldiers (sometimes made to murder their parents) who perpetuated the conflict in the absence of any other loyalties. The group received financial backing, arms and military training from Liberia's oppressive Charles Taylor who thereby gained access to lucrative mineral resources – most notably the country's diamonds.

A series of coups occurred over the period 1992 to 1997 as the RUF, military and civilian parties struggled for control. In 1996 a popular movement succeeded in demanding a return to civilian government. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected President and made moves towards a peace with the RUF. However, another coup in 1997 placed Major-General Paul Koroma in power as head of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and saw Kabbah flee to Guinea. The RUF soon joined Karoma's government, with fighting reaching the capital in 1998.



A Nigerian ECOMOG force (an armed monitoring group established by the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS) succeeded in driving the RUF from Freetown in February 1998 and Kabbah returned to office a month later. A small UN mission was established in 1998 (UNOMSIL) to maintain security and progress disarmament. In early 1999, however, the RUF attempted another coup with fighting again reaching Freetown. ECOMOG forces again succeeded in repelling the rebels but not before thousands were killed and injured during four days of fighting in the capital.

Throughout the late 1990s pro-government militias – notably the Civil Defense Force (CDF) largely made up of ‘Kamajor’ warriors from the Mende tribe – were also active in parts of the country. In some areas they terrorised civilians deemed to be collaborating with the rebels.

In an attempt to mainstream the RUF and end the bloodshed, the UN assisted Kabbah and Sankoh to negotiate the Lomé Peace Agreement in July 1999 which made the RUF leader Vice President of Sierra Leone and also handed him control of the diamond mines as head of the Strategic Mineral Resources Commission. UN peacekeepers (now UNAMSIL, a larger force) remained in Sierra Leone to implement the agreement. It was not long before violence erupted again. Fighting between the RUF and pro-government militias continued in diamond-mining areas and in May 2000, hundreds of UNAMSIL troops were abducted by the RUF. British troops were also deployed in the country following this incident. After his bodyguards fired on protesters in Freetown, Sankoh was captured and handed over to the government, depriving the RUF of a key leadership figure.

An initial cease-fire agreement failed to stop the fighting and elections were postponed in January 2001 due to ongoing instability. A second cease-fire agreement in May 2001 provided a more successful platform for a programme of Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration. President Kabbah formally declared the civil war over in January 2002. Presidential elections were finally held in May of that year and Kabbah secured a landslide victory. UN peacekeepers departed Sierra Leone in 2005 and were replaced by a UN assistance mission (UNIOSIL) dedicated to the restoration of stability and governance in the war-torn country.



"The war is over, we love peace" at the entrance to Koidu, Kono district
Peter C. Andersen

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was held in Sierra Leone in 2002-03, bringing together both perpetrators and victims of violence in an attempt to bring healing and integrate former combatants. In conjunction with the UN, the Sierra Leonean Government established a war crimes court (the Special Court for Sierra Leone) to prosecute those most responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Proceedings began in 2002.

Charged with war crimes after his arrest in 2000, Sankoh did not live to

stand trial, dying of natural causes in prison in 2003. The trial of Charles Taylor, for his role in supporting the RUF, began in June 2007. A number of other figures from the RUF, AFRC and the CDF have also been indicted for war crimes. Presidential elections are scheduled for July 2007.

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