

# Sierra Leone

## KEY FACTS

**Joined Commonwealth:** 1961

**Population:** 6,092,000 (2013)

**GDP p.c. growth:** 0.5% p.a. 1990–2013

**UN HDI 2014:** World ranking 183

**Official language:** English

**Time:** GMT

**Currency:** Leone (Le)

## Geography

**Area:** 71,740 sq km

**Coastline:** 402 km

**Capital:** Freetown

The Republic of Sierra Leone (Portuguese for 'Lion Mountain') in West Africa is bordered by Guinea to the north, Liberia to the south-east, and the Atlantic to the south and west.

**Topography:** Sierra Leone has some 402 km of coast along the Atlantic Ocean, with magnificent beaches. Apart from the hilly Freetown peninsula (officially known as the Western Area), the coastal belt is flat, with a width of up to 110 km. The land rises to the Guinea highlands in the east, with mountain peaks up to 1,917 metres. There are eight main rivers; the estuaries of two of them can be navigated by ocean-going vessels.

**Climate:** Tropical and humid all year, but cooler on the coast. The dry season is November–May, when the dusty harmattan wind blows from the Sahara; the rainy season lasts the rest of the year.

**Environment:** The most significant environmental issues are depletion of natural resources during the civil war; deforestation and soil exhaustion due to over-harvesting of timber, expansion of cattle grazing, and slash-and-burn agriculture; and overfishing.

**Vegetation:** Mangrove swamps occur along the coast, with thickly wooded hills on the Freetown peninsula, and grasslands, woods and savannah on the interior plains. The central inland area, formerly forested, has been cleared for agriculture. Forest – including mahogany and teak – covers 37 per cent of the land area, having declined at 0.7 per cent p.a. 1990–2010. Arable land comprises 24 per cent and permanent cropland two per cent of the total land area.

**Wildlife:** Large game animals are now rare, but the Kilimi National Park in the north of the country has the largest concentration of chimpanzees in West Africa. The park is also home to 12 other primate species, including colobus monkeys, as well as rare large bongo antelopes and, in the river margins, pygmy hippopotami. After the civil war a chimpanzee sanctuary was established at Leicester in the Western Area. Some 17 mammal species and 14 bird species are thought to be endangered (2014).

**Main towns:** Freetown (capital, Western Province; pop. 836,600 in 2010), Bo (Southern, 215,400), Kenema (Eastern, 169,900), Makeni (Northern, 102,600), Koidu (Eastern, 91,600), Lunsar (Northern, 23,900), Port Loko (Northern, 22,700), Pandebu-Tokpombu (Eastern, 19,700), Kabala (Northern, 18,800), Waterloo (Western, 17,800), Kailahun (Eastern, 17,500), Magburaka (Northern, 16,000), Segbwema (Eastern, 16,000), Koindu (Eastern, 15,900) and Bonthe (Southern, 10,200).

**Transport:** There are 11,300 km of roads, eight per cent paved, but in poor repair; secondary roads may be impassable in the rainy season. The railway system (nearly 600 km in length) closed in 1974.

Freetown is the main port with a deep-water quay. There are smaller ports at Pepel, Bonthe, Niti and Sulima. Several rivers are navigable by small craft.

The international airport is at Lungi, 13 km north of Freetown, and is separated from the capital by a river estuary.

## Society

### KEY FACTS 2013

**Population per sq km:** 85

**Life expectancy:** 46 years

**Population:** 6,092,000 (2013); 39 per cent of people live in urban areas; growth 1.8 per cent p.a. 1990–2013; birth rate 37 per 1,000 people (46 in 1970); life expectancy 46 years (36 in 1970 and 40 in 1990); population figures are unreliable because during the civil war in the mid-1990s up to 50 per cent of the population had to leave their homes – there was mass migration to towns and to neighbouring countries.

The vast majority of the people are of Bantu origin: Temne (35 per cent in the 2008



census) and Limba (eight per cent) people mostly in the Northern province; Mende people (31 per cent) live in the Southern province and Eastern province. Additionally, there are nine other Bantu ethnic groups, including Kono (five per cent), Mandingo (two per cent) and Loko (two per cent). Krios (two per cent) are descendants of formerly enslaved 19th-century immigrants who live mostly in and around Freetown. The small Lebanese community, mostly of traders, decreased during the 1990s.

**Language:** English is the official language. Krio (an English-based Creole) is spoken in and around Freetown. Other major languages are Temne, Mende and Limba.

**Religion:** Muslims 60 per cent, Christians ten per cent, with most of the remaining population holding traditional beliefs, which often coexist with other religions.

**Health:** Public spending on health was two per cent of GDP in 2012. Climatic conditions are conducive to the spread of tropical diseases (notably malaria and guinea worm), and civil war made the country vulnerable to cholera. There was a high incidence of maiming during the civil war. Some 60 per cent of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 13 per cent have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2013). Infant mortality was 107 per 1,000 live births in 2013 (220 in 1960). In 2013, 1.6 per cent of people aged 15–49 were HIV positive.

The Ebola outbreak of 2014–15 has claimed nearly 4,000 lives in Sierra Leone so far, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The international response was headed by the United Nations and the WHO, with many charities and national governments pledging funding and medical personnel to help combat the crisis.

**Education:** Public spending on education was three per cent of GDP in 2012. There are six years of compulsory education starting at the age of six. Primary school comprises six years and secondary six, with two cycles each of three years. The school year starts in September.

The principal tertiary institutions are Fourah Bay College in Freetown and Njala University, with campuses in Bo and Njala. These universities, together with Milton Margai College of Education and Technology (Freetown), Eastern Polytechnic (main campus in Kenema) and other independent tertiary institutions, are all affiliated to the University of Sierra Leone. The country also has a number of teacher-training and technical/vocational institutions providing certificate and diploma courses. Literacy among people aged 15–24 is 59 per cent (2010).

**Media:** There are many newspapers including *Awareness Times*, *Awoko*, *Concord Times* and *Standard Times*.

Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation provides public radio and TV services. There are many private radio stations and ABC TV is a private TV channel.

**Communications:** Country code 232; internet domain '.sl'. The number of mobile phone subscribers is growing rapidly, though mobile phone coverage is limited. The public telephone system does not extend beyond Western Area. Post offices are found in the main towns.

For every 1,000 people there are three landlines, 441 mobile phone subscriptions and 17 internet users (2013).

**Public holidays:** New Year's Day, Independence Day (27 April), Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Mouloud (Prophet's Birthday), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan) and Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice).

## Economy

### KEY FACTS 2013

**GNI:** US\$4.5bn

**GNI p.c.:** US\$680

**GDP growth:** 5.0% p.a. 2009–13

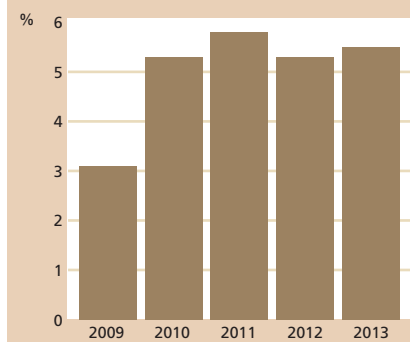
**Inflation:** 13.0% p.a. 2009–13

With real GDP falling almost continuously from the 1980s to the start of the 2000s, the economy of Sierra Leone became very depressed, despite the country's rich resource base, notably diamonds, rutile (an oxide of titanium), bauxite and gold. It still has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the Commonwealth. Civil war in neighbouring Liberia and its spread within Sierra Leone, particularly from 1995, caused total collapse of the economy. The country was burdened by an economically counter-productive parallel economy, which increased in the lawless conditions of civil war. Around 90 per cent of diamonds produced in Sierra Leone were estimated to be leaving the country illegally, and cash crops in the fertile south and east were being smuggled out. The cost of maintaining a large army and bringing in foreign troops put a further strain on the economy, and there were mass migrations of people to avoid the fighting.

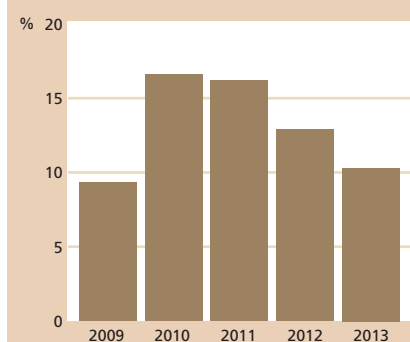
Restoration of democracy in February 1998 and the peace agreement with the Revolutionary United Front of July 1999 opened the way for a very substantial commitment of aid by the international community, led by the UN, IMF and World Bank, to reintegrate the military into civilian life, to restore institutions, to rebuild the economy and alleviate poverty.

Delivery of this aid was impeded and delayed by the collapse of the peace agreement in May 2000 and during 2001 by the slow pace of demobilisation of rebel troops and of returning all areas of the country to peace

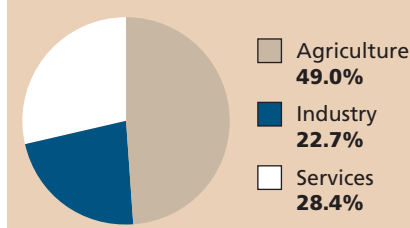
### Real growth in GDP



### Inflation



### GDP by sector (2013)



and security, but during 2001 the rutile mines were rehabilitated and agricultural production was resumed in large areas of the country. In 2001, too, reserves of offshore oil and gas were discovered and further offshore oil discoveries were announced in 2009 and 2010. The UN ban on the trade in uncut diamonds did begin to reduce smuggling.

In December 2006, Sierra Leone qualified for debt relief amounting to US\$994 million under the IMF/World Bank Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative.

The economy began to expand again in 2000. After a very strong surge of growth in 2001–03, it grew at about six per cent p.a. during the rest of the decade, while unemployment persisted at a high level and inflation rose from practically nil in 2000–02 to generally more than ten per cent p.a. in the second half of the 2000s, continuing into the 2010s. As the world economic downturn of 2008–09 depressed demand for Sierra Leone's exports, GDP growth moderated to 3.1 per cent in 2009, but recovered quickly in

## Sierra Leone on the international stage

Aminatta Forna, who was raised in Sierra Leone and the UK, won the overall 2011 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book award with her novel *The Memory of Love*.

Eunice Barber, born in Freetown in 1974, won the gold medal for the heptathlon at the World Championships in 1999 and also took the gold for the long jump in 2003. Initially competing for Sierra Leone, from 1999 onwards she competed for France.

Ibrahim Kargbo, born in 1982 in Freetown, plays football for Atlético CP in Portugal. Mohamed Kamara, born in Bo in 1987, plays for Maccabi Haifa, on loan from the UK's Bolton Wanderers.

2010, continuing at more than five per cent p.a. in 2010–15. The outbreak of ebola in late 2013 had a devastating impact on economic activity and caused the collapse of tourism.

## History

The Bulom are the earliest known inhabitants of the territory, with the Krim and Gola people arriving by 1400 CE. The Mende and Temne settled in the 15th century, and the Fulani moved into the northern region.

Around that time the Portuguese were exploring the coast – Pedro de Cintra gave the country its present name in about 1462 – and built a fort on the site of Freetown. Europeans traded along the coast without formally establishing themselves. In 1787 Granville Sharp and other British abolitionists settled 400 people, formerly slaves, on a strip of land bought from Naimbana, a local chief. Over the following years more settlers arrived, many of them freed slaves from Jamaica and Nova Scotia. The British parliament declared the slave trade illegal in 1807, and a British naval station was established at Freetown to intercept slavers continuing to operate; people rescued from the slave-ships were also settled in Sierra Leone. Freetown became a British colony in 1808 and the coastal and inland area a protectorate in 1896. During the 19th century the colonial rulers forged administrative links with The Gambia, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Lagos in Nigeria.

In 1863 a legislative council was created. It was progressively enlarged and made more representative in 1924 and 1951, evolving in 1956 into the House of Representatives. By 1957 most men were eligible to vote; women who were taxpayers or owned property were also enfranchised. A new constitution came into force in 1961, establishing formally a unicameral Parliament and Queen Elizabeth II as sovereign. On that basis Sierra Leone became independent on 27 April 1961.

At independence, two main parties shared the votes in a multiparty political system. First in office was the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) during 1962–67 under Sir Milton Margai. The 1967 elections were won by the All People's Congress (APC) under Dr Siaka Stevens. Almost immediately, Stevens was arrested in a coup, followed days later by another army coup which imposed military rule until the next year. Then, after a further coup, Stevens was reinstated as Prime Minister.

In 1971, the country became a republic with Stevens as executive President. The general election of 1973 was boycotted by the SLPP and easily won by the APC, which also won

the following elections in 1977 after a campaign which sparked violence. In 1978 the country became a one-party state, led by the ruling APC. Single-party elections in 1982 were once again violent. In 1985 Major-General Joseph Momoh succeeded Stevens as President.

By the end of the 1980s, economic conditions were continuing to deteriorate and there was a growing demand for constitutional reform. The government responded by setting up a constitutional review commission. The commission's recommendation of a return to a multiparty democratic system was overwhelmingly endorsed in a referendum in August 1991. A new constitution was adopted, allowing for a transition towards multiparty elections. Political parties started to register in preparation for elections.

### Civil war

The 1991 multiparty constitution was not, however, implemented. Fighting with a rebel movement, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which had started in March 1991, escalated, and there were incursions from neighbouring Liberia, the RUF in the south of the country being loosely in alliance with Liberian rebels.

In April 1992, Captain Valentine Strasser took control after a coup by junior army officers, and the constitution was suspended. The war escalated and, despite air and ground support from Nigeria, and troops provided by Guinea, for part of 1995 the government was in secure control only of the capital. In January 1996, Strasser was overthrown by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio.

### Multiparty elections and peace

Parliamentary and presidential elections under the 1991 multiparty constitution were finally held in February 1996. Of the 68 parliamentary seats, the SLPP won 27, the United National People's Party (UNPP) 17, People's Democratic Party 12, the APC five, the National Unity Party four and the Democratic Centre Party three. In a two-round presidential election the SLPP candidate, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, defeated UNPP's Dr John Karefa-Smart and Kabbah was sworn in as President at the end of March 1996.

In talks between the government and RUF leader Corporal Foday Sankoh in November 1996, an agreement was reached to end the war that had caused the displacement of two million people and more than 10,000 deaths. The agreement allowed the RUF to register as a political party and permitted it access to the media. In 1997 RUF leader Sankoh was arrested while on a visit to Nigeria.

In May 1997 the Kabbah government was overthrown in a military coup led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, but in October 1997, in a deal brokered by ECOWAS in Conakry, Guinea, the rebel Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) regime agreed to a six-month transition to restore the legitimate civilian government. Apart from a few skirmishes in the area of the diamond mines, the transitional period was reasonably peaceful until early February 1998 when renewed fighting broke out between Nigerian peacekeeping troops and Koroma's forces in Freetown and a few days later, on 12 February, the Nigerians captured Freetown and detained many members of the military regime, though not including Koroma himself. After nine months in exile in Conakry, President Kabbah returned to Freetown in March 1998. Parliament reconvened and about 50 per cent of its members attended. Within a few days thousands of people had returned to their homes in Freetown.

In July 1998 the UN agreed to establish an observer mission to monitor the military and security situation in the country and to advise the government on the rebuilding of the police and security forces. Sankoh was returned to Freetown from detention in Lagos to face charges of treason and was sentenced to death in October 1998. At the news of Sankoh's death sentence RUF and AFRC rebels launched a campaign of severe brutality in the towns and villages they took over as they advanced rapidly on Freetown and in January 1999 Nigerian troops halted their advance very close to the capital. A wider peace agreement was signed in July 1999, which included a power-sharing arrangement between Kabbah and the RUF (with four RUF leaders appointed to ministerial portfolios in November 1999), annulment of Sankoh's death sentence and the release of those sentenced for their role in the 1997 coup. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended the deployment of 6,000 troops to Sierra Leone to guarantee the peace agreement and this was increased to 11,000 on the departure of the Nigerians in 2000.

In May 2000, as the UN peacekeepers moved into the diamond-producing region and began to demobilise the rebels, the peace agreement collapsed when the rebels took 500 UN troops hostage and fighting resumed between the Sierra Leone Army and the rebels. Power-sharing ceased and Sankoh was arrested, though the hostages were released unharmed in due course. In July 2000 the UN resolved to ban trade in uncut diamonds from Sierra Leone until the government had established an authentication system but the

illicit trade continued into 2001, when there were signs that the ban was beginning to be effective.

In June 2004 special courts with Sierra Leonean and UN-appointed judges began trying those both on government and rebel sides of the civil war accused of war crimes.

## Constitution

**Status:** Republic with executive President

**Legislature:** Parliament of Sierra Leone

**Independence:** 27 April 1961

The independence constitution was abrogated during the series of military coups which followed. The 1971 constitution allowed for a ceremonial President; an amendment later that year created an executive presidency. A new constitution in 1978 established a one-party state, with the All People's Congress as the recognised party, and there was further constitutional amendment in 1985.

The 1991 constitution marked a return to a multiparty system, with many of the parliamentary features of the independence constitution, though the country was to remain a republic with an executive presidency. Implementation of this constitution was interrupted by an army coup. The National Provisional Ruling Council became the governing body, and rule was by decree.

These developments were in turn reversed by the implementation of the 1995 constitution, which (with amendments) restored the 1991 constitution, returning the country to a multiparty system with an executive presidency and a unicameral legislature. For the elections of May 2002, the legislature had a total of 124 members, comprising 112 directly elected – eight in each of 14 constituencies – and 12 paramount chiefs. Presidential and parliamentary elections are

held at least every five years, under universal adult suffrage and proportional representation. The President forms a government and appoints a cabinet.

## Politics

**Last elections:** 17 November 2012 (presidential, legislative and local council)

**Next elections:** 2017 (presidential and legislative)

**Head of state:** President Ernest Bai Koroma

**Head of government:** The President

**Ruling party:** All People's Congress

**Women MPs:** 12%

Following signature of the July 1999 peace agreement UN peacekeepers proceeded with disarming rebel troops and took control over a growing area of the country, and in May 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections were held with Commonwealth observers present. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) won a landslide victory, receiving about 70 per cent of the votes in the presidential election, defeating Ernest Bai Koroma, and in the parliamentary elections taking 83 of the 112 elective seats; Koroma's All People's Congress (APC) secured 27 seats and the Peace and Liberation Party two. The Revolutionary United Front Party failed to secure any seats. The Commonwealth observers said that the conditions were such as to enable the will of the people to be expressed.

In the parliamentary elections in August 2007, the APC was the largest party with 59 seats, the SLPP won 43 seats and People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) ten. The simultaneous first round of the presidential election was won by APC leader Ernest Bai Koroma with 44 per cent of votes; the incumbent SLPP candidate, Solomon Berewa, came second with 38 per cent and Charles Margai of PMDC third with 14 per

cent. Since no candidate received the 55 per cent needed to secure the presidency, the leading two candidates, Koroma and Berewa, went into a second round. Koroma received 54.6 per cent of second-round votes and was sworn in as President. Commonwealth observers reported that both parliamentary and presidential elections had been conducted in a democratic, credible and professional way in accordance with internationally accepted standards.

Presidential, parliamentary and local council elections were held in November 2012 with Commonwealth observers present. President Koroma was re-elected with 58.7 per cent of the votes cast, his main challenger, the SLPP's candidate, Julius Maada Bio, taking 37.4 per cent. In the parliamentary elections the APC secured 67 of 112 directly elective seats and the SLPP 42. The Commonwealth observers concluded that 'the organisation and conduct of these elections had met international standards and benchmarks for free and transparent multiparty elections'.

## International relations

Sierra Leone is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, African Union, Economic Community of West African States, Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

## Traveller information

**Immigration and customs:** Passports must be valid for at least six months from the date of visa applications. Visas are required by all Commonwealth nationals. A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from all travellers.

**Travel within the country:** Traffic drives on the right. Visitors wishing to drive will need an international driving permit. The main roads are paved.

Air charter is available. Buses link most towns and ferries run between coastal ports. Taxis are available in urban areas.

**Travel health:** Prevalent diseases where appropriate precautionary measures are recommended include cholera, dengue fever, diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, malaria, polio, rabies, schistosomiasis (bilharzia), typhoid and yellow fever. The World Health Organization has recommended vaccination against yellow fever.

There were 81,000 tourist arrivals in 2013.

## Further information

President's Office:	<a href="http://www.statehouse.gov.sl">www.statehouse.gov.sl</a>
National Electoral Commission:	<a href="http://www.nec-sierraleone.org">www.nec-sierraleone.org</a>
Parliament of Sierra Leone:	<a href="http://www.sl-parliament.org">www.sl-parliament.org</a>
Statistics Sierra Leone:	<a href="http://www.statistics.sl">www.statistics.sl</a>
Bank of Sierra Leone:	<a href="http://www.bsl.gov.sl">www.bsl.gov.sl</a>
Visit Sierra Leone:	<a href="http://www.visitsierraleone.org">www.visitsierraleone.org</a>
Commonwealth Secretariat:	<a href="http://www.thecommonwealth.org">www.thecommonwealth.org</a>
Commonwealth of Nations:	<a href="http://www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Sierra_Leone">www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Sierra_Leone</a>

## Media

*Awareness Times:* [news.sl](http://news.sl)

Click here to find out more about the  
**2015 Commonwealth Yearbook**

Click here to find out more about  
**Sierra Leone**