



Sierra Leone – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 18 July 2014

Information on witchcraft in Sierra Leone, including community and state responses; Imprisonment of women accused of witchcraft; and state protection of women accused of witchcraft.

A report published by the UN Human Rights Council, in a section titled “Harmful traditional practices” (paragraph 40), states:

“Many Sierra Leoneans, including Muslims and Christians, seem to believe in witchcraft. The Special Rapporteur heard many gruesome stories about people allegedly using ‘witch guns’ in order to inflict serious injury and even kill fellow humans. He met with individuals who claimed they could detect ‘witches’ and other ‘evil persons’ by using their own spiritual intuition or by employing magical instruments. Some told him they had handed over ‘witches’ to local courts, which had subsequently locked them up. In a number of cases, persons accused of witchcraft have been chained indefinitely to a specific place in their villages. The Special Rapporteur also heard about incidents of lynching of alleged ‘witches’. While the ‘punishment’ of people accused of witchcraft appears to be mainly practised by local communities outside of the formal judicial system, the formal criminal code still contains provisions against the exercise of magical powers.” (UN Human Rights Council (23 December 2013) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Addendum : Mission to the Republic of Sierra Leone*, p.12)

Paragraph 41 of this report states:

“The fact that people are deprived of their personal liberty based on accusations of witchcraft raises major human rights issues. This assessment was clearly shared by the Human Rights Commission, the Law Reform Commission and other institutions dealing with judicial affairs. The empirical ‘evidence’ presented against ‘witches’ remains more than dubious, and the ‘culprits’ de facto do not enjoy the minimum guarantees of due process and habeas corpus, in spite of the existing constitutional provisions. A member of the Government pointed out that most people who are accused of witchcraft stem from the poorest strata of society. In many cases, they are helpless and lack any support from families or neighbours, which renders them vulnerable to negative projections. For example, elderly women who have remained childless easily become victims of witchcraft allegations, and the same can happen to persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities or persons who are described as somehow ‘strange’ in their behaviour.” (ibid, p.12)

A 2009 Agence France Presse report states:

“A mob sought to attack nine people accused of acting as witch doctors in Sierra Leone as police arrested the suspects, who were linked to the deaths of young people, authorities and a witness said. Police questioned the nine

suspects Saturday after overnight raids east of the capital that saw hundreds of bystanders held back by police when they sought to attack them.” (Agence France Presse (28 June 2009) *Mob tries to attack Sierra Leone 'witch doctors'*)

A research paper published by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in a section titled “Women as a risk group”, states:

“Traditional justice mechanisms may punish women or girls for offences that are not illegal under national or international law. In Sierra Leone, although chiefs are not authorized to adjudicate on witchcraft cases, for which there is no crime in national Sierra Leonean law, chiefs have nevertheless illegally carried out functions beyond their competency and ‘at times they collude with men in the community to forcibly evict women and children from their homes or subject them to arbitrary detention and other forms of gender based violence.’ Charges and fines against one woman accused of witchcraft by her husband were dropped by the chief only after being contacted by a human rights lawyer from the Access to Justice Project in Makeni.” (UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (January 2009) *Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence*, pp.8-9)

In an article published on the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies website the author Leo Igwe states:

“Allegations of witch-gun killings are taken seriously in many parts of Sierra Leone and Guinea. Accused persons are attacked, beaten up, banished, and sometimes may be lynched by a mob. Suspects are tried and convicted by state courts, though witchcraft is not recognized under the law in these countries.” (Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (10 September 2013) *‘Witch-Gun’ and Superstition in Guinea and Sierra Leone*)

This article also states:

“In a related development, a man, Gbongbo Mansaray, has appeared before a court in Sierra Leone. He was charged with ‘witch-gun’ sorcery. The incident allegedly led to the death of a person in Tonkolili district. Mansaray pleaded guilty to practicing witchcraft and killing one Mohammed Fullah of Masingbi town with a ‘witch gun’. Mansaray said he was hired by one Alhaji Adamu to carry out the ‘murder’. But he never explained exactly –how, when and where- he gunned down Fullah. He only claimed that Fullah died shortly after he was taken to a local ‘herbalist’ for treatment. Given the state of the justice system in Africa, Mansaray is likely to be convicted and jailed. The judge should not have entertained this case in the first place. That Mansaray pleaded guilty should not be an excuse to try and convict him for ‘killing’ somebody with an imaginary weapon. Due to lack of adequate health facilities, many people resort to witchcraft to explain cases of deaths and diseases in their communities. They invoke cultural narratives that have no basis in reason or medical science. And when witchcraft cases are brought to court, judges and magistrates often convict the accused due to social and political pressure, not based on evidence.” (ibid)

An article published by The Economist states:

“Many people in Sierra Leone, where an ebola epidemic has gripped the country for the first time, refuse to accept that the disease can be tackled by Western medicine. They prefer to use traditional healers instead. This may make it spread faster. At least 22 people have died so far; another 96 have been infected. The Sierra Leonean authorities are therefore up against both a health-care problem and a cultural one. Traditional healers and herbalists are popular across west Africa. With secret recipes of herbs and potions, they claim to cure everything from the common cold to malaria. ‘We’re only looking at the ears of the hippo,’ says Amara Jambai, Sierra Leone’s director of disease prevention and control. ‘Many cases stay in the communities because people still like to use alternative sources of treatment. So we miss a lot of cases and only capture a few.’ Plenty reckon that those who succumb to the disease are victims of a curse fired by a ‘witch gun’; Western medicine is thought to offer little defence against it. Only a witch doctor can have the curse removed—for a fee. Official health workers sometimes face physical resistance from those they seek to help. Some have been denied access to the sick; others have been refused blood samples. In one incident, medical staff were stoned by villagers bent on removing ebola patients from a health centre.” (The Economist (19 June 2014) *Which doctor?*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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