



Sierra Leone 2014 Crime and Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Civil War; Disease Outbreak; Cyber; Assault; Burglary; Hotels; Drug Trafficking; Financial Security; Oil & Energy; Maritime; Bribery; Elections; Religious Terrorism; Riots/Civil Unrest; Floods; Landslides and mudslides; Fraud; Information Security

Africa > Sierra Leone; Africa > Sierra Leone > Freetown

7/16/2014

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Sierra Leone presents an exceptionally challenging operating environment for business investors, as it continues to struggle with pervasive corruption, rebuilding from the decade-long civil war (1992-2002) and the consolidation of democratic procedures. One lasting effect of the war is the lack of skilled and semi-skilled workers, making finding competent and qualified employees difficult. The country ranks 180 of the 187 countries in the U.N. Human Development Index, and poverty is endemic, as the GNI per capita is less than U.S.\$1 per day. Drug and alcohol use within the 20-40 year-old age range is high and increasing. Hyperinflation, high unemployment rates, and low incomes associated with work in the informal sector create conditions of gross economic hardship. Poor infrastructure, unreliable communications and electricity, and the full range of tropical health risks -- including endemic malaria -- deter many foreign investors and entrepreneurs.

There has been a steady proliferation in the number of gangs and cliques in Freetown over the past five years. They present a potential threat to public order that has increased criminality and encouraged anti-social behavior. Most often, these groups are comprised of unemployed youth who align according to geographic or ethnic/tribal similarities or according

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to pop music preferences (i.e. rival local hip-hop artists). Most gang activity is confined to eastern Freetown and does not involve visitors or foreigners.

Freetown's extremely limited infrastructure suffers from lack of maintenance and planning. The absence of reliable power and water in most areas of the city, heavy wear and tear on vehicles contending with poorly maintained or unpaved roads, long logistical lead times, and licensing restrictions can be burdensome and costly for all businesses. Telephony is limited to cellular phones, and there are no traditional "land line" telephone services. There are several Internet service providers, however, bandwidth is limited, and service is extremely slow and expensive. The launch of fiber optic cable has improved some service. The 3G and 4G networks are oversubscribed.

Crime Threats

The Department of State classifies Sierra Leone as Critical for crime. Nighttime robberies, assaults, petty street crime, and home invasions are common. Expatriates are frequent targets due to their perceived wealth. Theft and malfeasance is a problem for business owners; employers should be prepared for substantial pilferage and internal losses.

The majority of crimes against Americans are non-violent confrontations characterized as crimes of opportunity (i.e., pickpocketing, theft of unattended possessions in public places or hotel rooms, bag snatching, and financial confidence scams). Pickpocketing is common, and the perpetrators are very adept. Thieves often attempt to distract a victim by asking questions, begging for money, bumping or jostling the individual, or offering to sell items. While the victim is distracted, an accomplice may take a piece of luggage or pick the victim's pocket or purse.

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Occasionally, the nightclubs along Aberdeen Road and Lumley Beach Road are the scene of incidents including theft, prostitution, drug sales, and bar fights.

The number of violent crimes is comparable to most other West African countries. Violent crime and the use of weapons in the commission of crime is commonplace.

Most diplomats, expatriates, foreign businesses, and wealthy Sierra Leoneans rely on 24-hour private security guards or armed SLP Operational Support Division officers to protect residences and other property. Most residential break-ins at well protected compounds are "inside jobs" and are typically non-violent. However, they can also be perpetrated by small groups of well-organized, armed bandits equipped with tools and/or machetes or homemade firearms. The preferred method of entry is using stealth techniques (during a rainstorm to mask their movements, sneaking past a sleeping guard, cutting through roofs, or tunneling under walls). Security plans should include layers of protection to make their property less attractive for break-ins.

Americans have reported theft of money/property from locked hotel rooms. A majority of these crimes were inside jobs by hotel employees and house-keeping staff. No hotel – even upscale establishments -- is immune.

Sierra Leone is generally a cash economy, but U.S. dollars from 2006 are not accepted. There are some ATMs that accept international Visa cards. Some businesses are beginning to accept credit cards, but only Visa can be used locally. Point of sale credit card terminals

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exist in some major shops, hotels, and restaurants. An anti-money laundering law passed in 2005 prohibits importing more than \$10,000 in cash except through a financial institution. Travelers' checks are not usually accepted.

Members of the greater Sierra Leone Diaspora normally return to Freetown to visit family/friends during the Christmas and New Year holidays. As a result, travelers are advised that hotel rooms and international flights may be in short supply from November until February. There is also an uptick in criminality during this period (i.e., petty theft, luggage pilferage, pickpocketing, confidence scams, etc.) due to the presence of affluent visitors.

Sierra Leone does not have major problems with piracy within its territorial waters. With the increase in oil exploration activities in littoral waters, piracy has become a security concern. As such, lawmakers are attempting to develop specific laws to punish this crime; piracy is currently prosecuted as "armed robbery." Sierra Leone has also become a "flag of convenience" in the international shipping industry. The government has certified a shipping agency headquartered in Singapore to manage Sierra Leone registrations of vessels; however, Sierra Leone's registry of sea vessels remains poorly managed.

Overall Road Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Driving is a serious challenge. Motor vehicles are a major cause of death/injury. Visitors are advised to exercise extreme caution when near any road or in motor vehicle traffic. Freetown's

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downtown streets are narrow, crowded, and in a state of constant disrepair. The lack of street lights, stop lights/signs, sidewalks, and guardrails, combined with steep hillside drop-offs, potholes, and unpaved road surfaces, increase risk of injury/death for drivers and pedestrians. Local drivers do not follow general road safety rules. Drinking and driving is a major concern and poses a significant risk particularly after dark. Motorbikes, usually carry multiple passengers, weave in/out of traffic, drive on any available surfaces or nearby sections of the road, and adhere to no rules. Several major arterials are undergoing road widening, a positive development for the city; however the long-term construction results in significant delays, congestion, and an “anything goes” driving style (i.e., using the opposite lane for forward movement, disregard for the proper flow of traffic in roundabouts, etc).

Roads outside of Freetown are unpaved, unlit, poorly maintained, and can be hazardous to drive. For these reasons, U.S. Embassy personnel are counseled to not drive the roads outside of Freetown after dark. Fuel stations and police assistance are limited outside Freetown, so motorists should plan accordingly.

During the rainy season, mud, deep puddles, flooding, glare from oncoming high-beam headlights, and near-zero visibility present an even greater challenge for travelers. Several hours of travel time may be added to a trip.

Pedestrians are a constant hazard and tend to walk on/near roads often only inches from passing vehicles, frequently oblivious to motorists, and mindless of their own personal safety. Be especially aware of pedestrians at night.

Taxi cabs, motorbikes (okadas), and the ubiquitous mini-van transports (poda-poda) present a hazard because they are poorly maintained, crowded, and driven erratically. These

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conveyances should be avoided when possible and are off-limits to U.S. Embassy personnel. Other forms of public transportation are minimal. There are no railways or domestic flights and only a very limited bus network.

Use of public transportation, including buses, taxis, and mopeds, is highly discouraged. Hiring a dedicated car/driver from a trusted, reliable source is recommended. Keep doors locked and windows rolled up at all times when inside your vehicle. Always park in secure, well-lit locations. Do not hitchhike or pick up hitchhikers. If you are involved in a vehicular accident, a large crowd may gather and could become hostile and aggressive. This may happen even if you are not at fault. If you feel threatened or fear for your safety, go to the nearest police station.

Sierra Leone does not have major problems with banditry along its highways. However, children and road repair crews often establish impromptu roadblocks using string, rocks, or branches in order to exact money from passing motorists. These roadblocks are illegal, and drivers should not feel compelled to stop.

The Freetown airport, located across the Sierra Leone River in Lungi, is serviced using ferries and water taxis. There is no helicopter service to Freetown from the airport. There is no convenient roadway to the airport, though one is under construction. The Embassy recommends only using licensed taxis and ferries, not dhows or cheaper transport.

Theft from vehicles is common with criminals reaching through windows or opening unlocked doors while cars sit in traffic. Several American citizens have been victimized in the evening along Signal Hill Road near the former UN Compound in Western Area. Due to the poor road condition, vehicles are forced to move slowly and negotiate through large potholes. Criminal

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gangs take advantage of unsuspecting motorists by throwing rocks (causing vehicles to stop) or by simply opening doors and grabbing items through passenger side windows and then running away through the heavy foliage.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

The threat of political violence against American interests in Sierra Leone is rated as medium. There were no instances of political violence directed against Americans in 2012. Political violence is sporadic and tends to increase during election periods.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

The government is sensitive to the threat of terrorism and is engaged with international partners to combat it.

There is an element that is sympathetic to Hizballah's political agenda and may provide financial and moral support. There is no known organization targeting American citizens or affiliated interests in Sierra Leone. Similarly, there is no evidence to indicate that terrorist organizations have operational capacity or are actively targeting Western interests in Sierra Leone.

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Sierra Leone's participation in the United Nations peacekeeping efforts in Somalia has caused concerns that terrorists may turn their sites on Sierra Leone. The government is keenly aware and actively monitoring against this. Anti-American sentiment is rare; however, visitors are cautioned to avoid large public gatherings (i.e., concerts, sports matches) that could be attractive targets for terrorists.

Civil Unrest

Although political demonstrations and rallies are normally peaceful, spontaneous rioting and attacks on individuals can occur. Over the past year, there have been violent confrontations in Freetown, Kono, and Kenema. Participants at political rallies are often intoxicated and may use weapons of opportunity, including sticks and rocks. SLP Crowd Control Units have been mobilized, and tear gas was deployed to control politically-based conflict. Crowds of students have been known to become destructive and vandalize buildings and vehicles in Freetown after soccer matches between rival schools. Political demonstrations also can become dangerous, with rival factions becoming aggressive toward one another and the police. Police often respond in kind, exacerbating already tense situations. The large, loosely affiliated union of commercial motorbike riders (okadas) is quick to mobilize and has caused several public order problems across the country. Similarly, strikes and demonstrations by employees in the mineral extraction industry and teachers/lecturers, based upon salary grievances and conditions of employment, are a perennial issue and often cause widespread disturbances.

Religious or Ethnic Violence

Religious violence is rare, and Sierra Leonean society overall is religiously tolerant, with a

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mixture of religions serving throughout the government and living side by side.

Tensions do run high between tribal groups, and there is evidence of favoritism between regional tribes and their political representatives.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Freetown lacks the drainage infrastructure to accommodate storm water runoff. As a result, low-lying parts of the city and major vehicle thoroughfares flood during the rainy season (June-October). Torrential rains also challenge Freetown's often poorly-constructed hillside structures. Mudslides and building collapses result in several deaths every rainy season. Visitors should familiarize themselves with flood-prone areas and consider travel in a high-clearance 4x4 vehicle.

Drug-related Crimes

Narco-trafficking represents a growing threat to stability and security in the region. The increase in narcotics trafficking through Sierra Leone, with links to international organized crime syndicates, is a disturbing trend. Porous borders, endemic poverty, and relative geographic proximity to South American and European markets make Sierra Leone

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vulnerable to organized criminal elements. The considerable wealth associated with the drug trade, channeled through corruption and complicit officials could have a destabilizing impact on the country. Illicit drugs are readily available in Freetown and are often offered for sale in bars and nightclubs. Transiting drugs are commonly found on the local market, adding cocaine and methamphetamines to the more traditional drug of choice, marijuana.

Police Response

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) have problems addressing crime elements. It suffers from limited resources and training. Public perception of the police is poor.

Police response is often slow and unreliable, and the quality of service declines as one travels farther from Freetown. Receiving police assistance can be especially difficult for Americans because:

- local police stations do not have working landline telephones. Most police officers rely on private cell phones, and these numbers are not publicized.
- officers answering the telephone often do not understand English. It is the official language, but Krio is the lingua franca.
- the police frequently lack transportation to respond to the scene of the incident.
- when transportation is available, fuel often is not.

Some American citizens who have gone to a police station to report crime claim that police officers requested money in order to purchase paper/pens before the officer could take a statement or write a report. There is a fee to make a police report; for foreigners the cost is

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300,000 Leones, (about \$70) and 50,000 Leones for citizens. Payment is made at the bank, not at the police station. It is not recommended to pay bribes, comply with requests for a “gift,” or pay on-the-spot fines. Instead, obtain the officer’s name and badge number and politely ask to speak with a supervisor and/or request to be taken to police headquarters for further processing.

Police and immigration checkpoints can be found throughout Sierra Leone. These checkpoints are official and require all vehicles to stop so that passengers and materials can be searched and/or passports/entry visas can be confirmed. They are staffed with SLP officers in uniform and normally feature a “Police” sign or SLP logo.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

SLP are required to notify the U.S. Embassy when an American citizen has been arrested; however, it consistently fails to do so. If arrested, be certain to assert this right and demand to speak with a representative from the U.S. Embassy by calling (076) 515-000 or, if after normal business hours, (076) 912-708.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if you Become a Victim of Crime

Travelers requiring police assistance are advised to contact the police through the Joint Communications Center (076) 319-978 or Control Room (076) 771-721, which are the best equipped offices to assist international travelers.

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Other Police Contacts:

Central Police Station: (076) 607-742

Eastern Police Station: (078) 319-984

Lumley Police Station: (076) 561-065

Congo Cross Police Station: (078) 137-348

Goderich Police Station: (088) 208-910

Malima Police Station: (076) 921-765

Various Police/Security Agencies

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) Force is a national police force administered from Freetown.

Of the approximately 12,000 members of the Sierra Leonean Police force, there are about 3,000 officers assigned to the Operational Support Division (OSD). OSD officers are armed with shoulder weapons and usually staff roadside checkpoints, serve on emergency response patrol teams, and are assigned to protect foreign missions. Accusations of excessive force by the OSD has caused protests and rioting in recent months.

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There are also traffic police, a Criminal Investigation Division, and regular police.

Medical Emergencies

Medical facilities fall critically short of U.S and European standards. There are no 911 equivalent ambulance services in Sierra Leone. Trauma care is extremely limited, and local hospitals should only be used in the event of an extreme medical emergency. Blood transfusions can be life-threatening due to lack of screening and poor quality control. Many primary health care workers, especially in rural areas, lack adequate professional training. Medicines are in short supply, and due to inadequate diagnostic equipment, lack of medical resources, and limited medical specialty personnel, complex diagnoses and treatments are unavailable.

Visitors with serious health concerns (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, asthma, or who are on blood thinners (with the exception of aspirin)) are discouraged from traveling to Sierra Leone.

Visitors should bring their own supply of medications, as the quality of medications is inconsistent, and counterfeit drugs remain a problem.

Patients are required to pay up front, before being admitted to a hospital or provided treatment. All travelers are advised to purchase insurance to cover medical evacuation in case of a serious accident, injury, or illness. Medical evacuation can cost thousands of dollars,

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depending on the severity of the situation, so all travelers should ensure their policies provide sufficient coverage.

Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics

The Consular Section maintains a more complete list of medical contacts at http://freetown.usembassy.gov/list_of_local_doctors_and_hospitals6.html

Medical Facilities

Choithram Memorial Hospital: (076) 623-483

Emergency Hospital Goderich: (076) 611-386

Davidson Nicol Medical Centre: (076) 977-028

Physicians

Cardiology: Dr. Russell, 3 Liverpool Street, (076) 412-442

OB-GYN: Dr. Frazer, 60 Wellington Street, (076) 225-539

Pediatrician: Dr. Robin-Coker, 12 Main Motor Road, (076) 230-374

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Recommended Air Ambulance Services

Emergency Transport: Western African Rescue Association, (078) 666-111 (provides helicopter and ground ambulance service from anywhere in the country to local hospitals in Freetown or neighboring countries).

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Malaria is a major cause of death/injury in Sierra Leone. Malaria is endemic, and prophylaxis is a necessity. Expatriates have died from cerebral malaria in the last year. Visitors are advised to take properly prescribed anti-malarial medication. Prior to arrival, all visitors should have current vaccinations, including, but not limited to: tetanus, yellow fever, polio, meningitis, typhoid, hepatitis A and B, and rabies. Lassa Fever is endemic in Eastern Province, and yearly cholera outbreaks are common, but the cholera vaccine is not required.

Since sanitary conditions are poor, and refrigeration is unreliable, use caution when eating uncooked vegetables, salads, seafood, or meats at restaurants and hotels. Only bottled water should be consumed.

Information on vaccinations and other health precautions, such as safe food and water precautions and insect bite protection, may be obtained from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747) or via the CDC's website. For information about outbreaks of infectious diseases abroad,

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consult the infectious diseases section of the World Health Organization's (WHO) website. The WHO website also contains additional health information for travelers, including detailed country-specific health information.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Crimes/Scams

In recent years, American citizens have been victimized by confidence scams involving the purchase of gold and diamonds. Individuals have been defrauded of thousands of dollars by local nationals claiming to be affiliated with gold dealerships, government ministries, the Government Gold and Diamond Office (GGDO), customs, and police. American citizens considering purchasing gold or diamonds need to complete their due diligence before entering into deals. Offers to sell diamonds and other gems should be ignored. These items are highly regulated and must be purchased through licensed brokers. Any offer made on the street is illegal, illegitimate, and likely involves fake gems. Do not purchase diamonds, gold, or other gems/minerals from an unlicensed source. Many diamond distributors are unlicensed and produce fraudulent gem certificates.

Foreign businesses are often the target of other scams, among them claiming false ownership of land and charges for electrical use purportedly by the National Power Authority. Similarly, businesses should be cautious when choosing legal representation, as local attorneys are often at the center of criminal scams. Prospective American business owners should be aware that the vetting process of employee candidates is extremely challenging and unreliable because the police do not have an electronic computer database and the

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destruction of most hard copy criminal records during the war. Similarly, there is no formal way to vet potential business partners.

Advance-fee fraud schemes typically associated with Nigeria are prevalent throughout West Africa and pose a danger of grave financial loss. These scams begin with unsolicited communication (usually e-mails) from strangers who promise quick financial gain, often by transferring large sums of money or valuables out of the country, but then require a series of "advance fees," such as for legal documents or taxes. The final payoff does not exist; the purpose of the scam is to collect the advance fees. A common variation is the scammer's claim to be a refugee or émigré of a prominent West African family or a relative of a present or former political leader who needs assistance in transferring large sums of cash. Still other variations appear to be legitimate business deals that require advance payments on contracts. Sometimes victims are convinced to provide bank account and/or credit card information and financial authorization that is used to drain their accounts, incur large debts against their credit, and take their life savings. The best way to avoid becoming a victim of advance-fee fraud is common sense: if a proposition looks too good to be true, it probably is. Any unsolicited business proposal should be thoroughly researched before committing any funds, providing any goods or services, or undertaking any travel. It is virtually impossible to recover money lost through these scams.

Areas to be Avoided

Do not walk on the beach, including Lumley Beach, at night.

Best Situational Awareness Practices

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All American citizens are advised to follow common sense guidelines to avoid becoming victims of crime.

Maintain control of your personal items when in public areas and move away from anyone who you believe is acting suspiciously. Do not carry valuables in excess of immediate needs and keep what you need in a secure place on your person. Never carry anything that you are not willing to relinquish in a confrontation with a thief. In the event an armed criminal confronts you, immediately hand over the desired property to avoid escalation or injury.

Do not leave anything of value unlocked in your unoccupied hotel room. Even the safes provided by the hotel are vulnerable and should not be trusted.

Do not invite strangers into your quarters. Supervise/escort all workers in your quarters.

Travelers are advised to use credit cards cautiously because very few facilities accept them. Credit cards are generally not accepted at most stores, restaurants, and hotels. If you do use a credit/debit card, do not relinquish it to a server or clerk. Credit card machines operate over the cell phone system, so the machine should be brought to you. There is a serious risk that using a card will lead to the number being stolen for use in fraudulent transactions. Currency exchanges should be handled through a bank or established foreign exchange bureau. Exchanging money with street vendors is dangerous because criminals may "mark" individuals for future attack, and there is also the risk of receiving counterfeit currency.

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Carefully protect all financial and personal information, as incidents of financial fraud and identity theft are increasing.

Be alert to any unusual surveillance or activity near the places you frequent. Vary your routes and times so that others cannot predict your schedule. Keep valuable items out of sight.

Practice good operational security if you are transporting valuable items into and around Sierra Leone. Some reported robberies committed against expatriates appear to have been carried out by persons with inside information regarding the victims.

Always ask permission before taking a photograph. Local citizens may request a small fee for taking a picture of them or their surroundings. Do not photograph government buildings, embassies, military installations, airports, harbors, or other locations/items of a possible security or intelligence interest. Cameras can be confiscated.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

The U.S. Embassy is located at Leicester Square, off Regent Road, in the hills above the city.

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Embassy hours: Monday – Thursday 8:00am – 5:15pm and Friday 08:00am – 1pm

Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy switchboard: (232-76) 515-000 from overseas or (076) 515-000 if dialing locally.

After hours: (076) 515-160

After hours Embassy Duty Officer: (076) 912-708

RSO email: RSOFreetown@state.gov

Consular Section, non-emergency e-mail: consularfreetown@state.gov

Visitors are encouraged to register with the U.S. Embassy Consular Section online or in person. American citizens should register with the Consular Section's American Citizen Services on-line at <https://travelregistration.state.gov> prior to travelling or at the Consular Section upon arrival. U.S. citizens wishing to conduct business in Sierra Leone should consult the Embassy Freetown Economic Section website for advice and words of caution: <http://freetown.usembassy.gov/business.html>.

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OSAC Country Council Information

Embassy Freetown does not have a formal OSAC Country Council due to the limited number of American-owned or -operated business interests. The nearest OSAC Country Council is in Dakar, Senegal. Embassy Freetown has supported the establishment of an American Chamber of Commerce in Sierra Leone. The RSO provides country briefings for representatives of American businesses, non-governmental organizations, academia, and faith-based organizations as requested.

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