Government Policies and Programs to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labor

The Government of Sierra Leone, with support from the African Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, is constructing 600 new primary schools and 100 junior secondary schools, and furnishing them with textbooks, furniture and other needed equipment. The Voice of Children, a radio program run by children for children, was launched in February 2003 and is supported by the Government of Sierra Leone. The government has also established a National Commission for War-Affected Children whose goals are to provide support to demobilized child combatants, to develop and implement strategies to ensure that the needs of young girls are addressed, and to continue to provide services for children who are separated from their parents.

The government has created a National Education Action Plan emphasizing improvements in the quality and relevance of education, expanding access to primary education, especially for girls and the rural poor, and building the planning and management capacity of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The World Bank is currently supporting a program to help Sierra Leone’s schools meet basic standards in a post-conflict environment and to build up the capacity of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology to deliver educational services. The Minister of Education, Science and Technology has stated that the national government will pay the fees for the National Primary School Exams and the Basic Education Certificate Education exams, and has pledged to reduce the cost of textbooks by 60 percent. UNICEF is engaged in projects to renovate schools, distribute teaching materials and equipment, retrain teachers, and promote girls’ education.

Incidence and Nature of Child Labor

In 2000, UNICEF estimated that 72 percent of children ages 5 to 14 years in Sierra Leone were working. The survey estimated that 2 percent of children between 5 and 14 perform paid work, while 48 percent of children in Sierra Leone perform unpaid work for someone other than a household member. The survey also found that...
10 percent of children spend more than 4 hours per day on domestic work, such as cooking, shopping, and cleaning. Street children are employed by adults to sell, steal and beg, and hundreds of children mine alluvial diamond fields. Human rights groups estimate that between 6,000 and 10,000 children under 16 years of age were forcibly abducted into military service during the civil war. Most child soldiers served the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and other military groups, which forced children into their ranks and made them serve as soldiers, sex slaves, or diamond miners. Children soldiers forced into military service by the RUF were required to engage in combat, massacres, and other acts of brutality. In May 2001, following reconciliation talks between the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF, the RUF began to release child soldiers. Between May 2001 and January 2002, 6,845 children from the RUF and Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and from the government-allied Civil Defense Force (CDF) militias, were disarmed and demobilized. Eight percent of these children were girls. However, UNICEF has identified at least 400 girls who remain with their RUF captors. Also, the number of street children, particularly in urban areas, is rising, and there are reports that children continue to be forced to work in diamond mines by former RUF commanders.

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The law mandates primary school attendance. In 2000, the gross primary enrollment rate was 92.8 percent (106.0 percent for boys and 79.8 percent for girls). That same year, however, the net primary school attendance rate was 40.7 percent. The lack of schools has made implementation of compulsory education impossible. Even before the war, the educational system was capable of serving only 45 percent of primary school-age children. As a result of the civil war, 1,270 primary schools were reported to have been destroyed, and in 2001, UNICEF estimated that 67 percent of all school age children were out of school. The Government of Sierra Leone has since introduced “free” primary education. However, there are widespread complaints among Sierra Leoneans that due to associated costs of schooling, including books, uniforms, supplies, and unofficial teacher’s fees, education is not free.

**Child Labor Laws and Enforcement**

The minimum age for employment in Sierra Leone is 18 years, although children between the ages of 12 and 18 years may be employed in some non-hazardous occupations with the consent of their parents. However, the government lacks resources to enforce these laws. Forced and bonded labor, including by children, is prohibited by the Constitution. There is no law that specifically prohibits trafficking in persons, but there are laws against procuring a female by threats or coercion for the purpose of prostitution. The government provides assistance to a special UN court in the trials of the leader of the pro-Government militia, later an Interior Minister, and former rebel commanders for kidnapping and recruiting child soldiers in March 2002.

The Government of Sierra Leone has not ratified ILO Convention 138 or ILO Convention 182.