

# CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUE ON MIGRATION AND DEPORTATION

The Government of Sierra Leone now prioritizes the issue of migration and human rights and deportation in its 'Agenda for Change' policy framework, according to the Acting Director of Europe in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Dr Philip Donald Kargbo made the disclosure at a one-day Civil Society Dialogue Forum on Migration, Deportation and Human Rights held at Santanno House, Howe Street, Freetown on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

He said the Government of Sierra Leone had already signed a Memorandum of Understanding with its United Kingdom and Netherlands counterparts for the systematic repatriation of its citizens in a dignified manner consistent with international legal instruments.

The senior diplomat's pronouncement gave succor to the ex-asylum seekers and deportees in attendance who had recounted harrowing experiences of frightening abuses and despicable acts of brutality suffered at the hands of European law enforcers in the course of their forced deportation.

The news which was greeted by thunderous applause is the strongest indication yet that the Government of Sierra Leone is beginning to take the issue of deportation of its citizens in inhumane conditions very seriously as has been advocated by the Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers Sierra Leone (NEAS-SL) whose membership largely constitutes deportees denied asylum in Europe, particularly Germany.

"Deportation mostly affects refugees and migrants and nobody likes to be deported because it is very degrading. It is therefore the primary responsibility of government to enquire from its European counterparts what went wrong with its citizens in their countries," Dr Kargbo reiterated.

It could be sensed from the body language of the audience that the mere presence of two high profile officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Immigration Department respectively highlighted the political will on the part of government in addressing their plight.

When a similar programme was organized late last year government representatives failed to turn up for unexplained reasons despite confirming receipt of their invitations well ahead of time.

As Dr. Kargbo himself put it: "Sierra Leone like any other country experiences families being deported from Europe and these deportees do experience social dilemma including families torn apart; emotional and psychological effects; families financial burden; children developing behavioural problems; low respect in society etc."

Perhaps most striking was the point hammered home that deportees are not criminals although they sometimes get criminalized in the process of seeking asylum. The issue of stigmatization is the biggest challenge faced by deportees when they are sent back home. The negative perception people have about them that they might have been involved in one crime or another or were just outright unserious refuses to go away. For this reason they are usually subjected to provocation and shockingly, marginalization.

Asked what government is doing to address this disturbing situation, Dr Kargbo said they are presently working on a variety of mitigating factors that will help end stigmatization of deportees and ensure that their rights are no longer violated with impunity even in the process of being sent back after asylum rejection.



**NEAS-SL Organizers of the forum**

He made reference to the recently signed MoU which he said frowns on deportees being sent back without their belongings and also later refused entry into the countries they once resided despite having families there.

This however did not spare him very critical questions from the audience who sought clarifications on ambiguities, inconsistencies and loopholes in his presentation. The following questions came up:

- 1) What channel is there for those whose rights have been violated to seek redress?
- 2) What is government doing about deportees presently in the country facing all sorts of social problems?

Dr Kargbo responded by urging participants to come with concrete recommendations that will form the basis of policies designed by government to adequately address the issue.

What was constantly reiterated at the dialogue forum is that migration is a fundamental human right enshrined in all global human rights instruments. In the same vein, asylum is a legal protection offered to persons who are in fear of persecution in their native countries based on international law and recognized in certain treaties regarding refugees.

On his part, the Immigration Officer from the Immigration Department, Mohamed Koroma, received his fair share of critical questions from participants especially with regards the issuance of Emergency Traveling Certificate (ETC) by the country's Missions abroad that facilitate the deportation of Sierra Leoneans. It was put to him in no uncertain terms that sometimes the ETCs turn out to be fake, suggesting collusion between staff of our Missions and European authorities in return for cash rewards.

Although denying his institution's tacit involvement in the nefarious act and shifting blame entirely to the Missions, it was further put to him that it is officials from the Immigration Department who travel

to Europe with all expenses undertaken by their European hosts specifically for the purpose of verifying the citizenship (Sierra Leonean) of would be deportees before ETCs are prepared for them. This aroused suspicion of complicity with most participants charging that our Missions are often compromised when it comes to deporting citizens in whatever condition. Mr Koroma made reference to certain international instruments which he said forbids states from deporting terribly ill persons, adding that he and his colleagues have maintained that stance on a couple of occasions when confronted with such cases.

Several other relevant issues were taken up with him while his institution was challenged to rise up to the occasion of restoring the dignity of Sierra Leoneans not lucky to be granted asylum in Europe and eventually get sent back.

The representative from Amnesty International, Sierra Leone Chapter, though, pledged that they would collaborate with their head office in England to see how they can go about addressing the blatant human rights violations associated with forced deportation.

She recommended that deportees seek guidance counseling on how to cope and forge ahead in the midst of their predicament.

In a press release read out by the Public Relations Officer of NEAS-SL, Mac-Adams Kamara, ex-asylum seekers asked that utmost attention be given to their plight by authorities concerned to help them overcome post traumatic stress disorder. The objective of the Dialogue Forum was to generate as much information as possible on immigration issues, according to Mr Paul Brima Bangura, the Project Coordinator of NEAS-SL.

At the end of the day long forum, a Civil Society Network on Migration and Human Rights was set up to better engage with government and other stakeholders on the numerous issues put forward by the deportees. The civil society network is expected to hold its first meeting before the close of the year.