

Sierra Leone: Deportees seek government accountability in deportation practice

When deported, discrimination and stigmatization make it extremely difficult for deportees to find back their voices in their societies. That is slowly changing in the West African state of Sierra Leone.

The Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers Sierra Leone (NEAS-SL), a group consisting mostly of deportees from Germany, has begun the course of critically discussing with Sierra Leone government officials regarding their role in a practice that paid little attention to fundamental human rights.

Few months back, they hardly could speak and talk about their experiences. People saw them as outright criminals who must have committed some crimes in Europe - a reason for their deportation. They were discriminated and stigmatized. In June 2012, the group had its first symposium to openly talk about their experiences and make their voices heard.

Although the deportees still face numerous social problems, ongoing public education exercises on Radio, TV and Newspapers have been paying off. Feedbacks from the public during live radio discussions for example show that the people are beginning to understand what transpires during the asylum process in Europe which in most cases leads to deportation when rejected.

Successful involvement of key government representatives

A challenge, notwithstanding, has been involving the government who the deportees think have somehow been involved in the deportation practice regarding its dealings with the European authorities. After failed previous attempts, on December 13th 2012, NEAS-SL was able to bring in key government representatives to a Civil Society Discussion Forum on Migration, Deportation and Human Rights that was hosted in Freetown. Among representatives of several civil society organizations and community based groups at the forum were Dr. Philip Donald Kargbo, the Director of European Affairs at Sierra Leone's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Mohamed Koroma, a senior officer at the Immigration Department.

The Chairman of NEAS-SL, Abdulai Daramy, reiterated the importance of the forum. He said it was a platform for his group to dialogue with civil society organisations and government stakeholders on key issues relating to migration, deportation and human rights.

Daramy informed that their removal would not have been possible without the cooperation of the Sierra Leonean authorities. He said it was therefore necessary that the government of Sierra Leone be held accountable and takes responsibility for its actions.

“As much as we castigate the German and other European deportation authorities for the abuses we have suffered, we also have to look inwards and ask questions to our own authorities,” Daramy stressed.

Controversial issuance of Travel Certificates

The forum created the platform for an intense discussion session. The government representatives faced questions from a critical audience which sought to understand the actions of the Sierra Leone authorities in the deportation practice. Most contentious was the

issuance of Travel Certificates to German and other European immigration officials to facilitate deportation. The participants were especially critical of officials from the Sierra Leone immigration department who periodically travel to various European countries with traveling costs undertaken by the European hosts to identify and issue out travel certificates for the deportation of rejected asylum seekers.

Other issues discussed included how those whose rights have been violated could seek redress and how the Sierra Leone authorities have a responsibility of supporting deportees presently in the country.

Deportees get better involved

At the end of the discussions, the government representative urged the deportees to come up with concrete recommendations to be submitted for government to look into and find ways of addressing their concerns. The group is presently putting together a plan of action to be presented to the Sierra Leone authorities.

The forum which was covered and reported by various media outlets in Sierra Leone was significant because for the first time key government officials were brought onboard to answer questions from a critical audience regarding its dealings in the deportation process. This represents the initial step in ensuring that the Sierra Leonean authorities are also held accountable for their role in the deportation of its nationals.

Additionally, the event moved the course of mainstreaming the discourse on migration and human rights in Sierra Leone forward, with deportees who have been silenced and have been facing stigmatization and discrimination in Europe and since being sent back taking the centre stage.

New civil society network on migration and human rights

Meanwhile, at the end of the forum, a civil society network on migration and human rights to better lobby and engage with government authorities on the numerous issues put forward by the deportees was created.

The forum boosted further the self-confidence and belief in NEAS members that was badly battered by the events in Europe and the rejection and stigmatization they witnessed and to some extent continue to witness after being deported.

The strength of the deportee group has no doubt grown from merely telling their stories as victims of migration control in Europe and social outcasts in Sierra Leone to a rather empowering situation in which they were lively participants with other organizations in an interactive and critical manner to alter the status quo.

medico international is supporting the work of NEAS in Sierra Leone.

By Tejan Lamboi,

Journalist and social researcher
who has been supporting the work of NEAS-SL for the past two years