

An Attack on Military Armoury and other Security Installations in Freetown November 26, 2023

INCIDENT PROFILE

On November 26, 2023, there was an attack on the military armoury at the Wilberforce Barracks in Freetown. According to a report by the Government of Sierra Leone, the unidentified individuals attempted to break into the military armoury but were rebuffed. However, the retreating gunmen made away with some weapons and ammunition which were used in attacks on other security installations including the Cockeril and Murray Town Barracks. The main detention or correctional centres on Pademba Road and New England Ville



A Map of Sierra Leone indicating Freetown
Credit: Google Images

were also breached and a total of 2,213 inmates were illegally released. Similar releases were done across police stations in the east end of Freetown.

This situation created insecurity in the country causing unrest and panic among citizens. Hence, the Government of Sierra Leone declared a nationwide curfew to isolate the attackers and facilitate their arrest. According to data from the Ministry of Information and Civic Education, 13 military officers have been arrested. Also, the ministry has confirmed 16 fatalities mainly security personnel. Additional casualties were recorded during the crossfire, but the details are yet to be made official.

KEY EVENTS PRECEDING THE NOVEMBER 26, 2023 ATTEMPTED COUP

- Between August 2022 and November 2023, Sierra Leone experienced three attempted security breaches. These include the August 8 - 10, 2022, economic and political protests in the capital, Freetown, and other areas in the northern region that spiralled into deadly clashes between security apparatus and ordinary citizens. Twenty-seven civilians and six police officers died, according to official figures. In August 2023, there was a reported military subversion in which 17 people, including military personnel and civilians, were arrested. The accused have been processed, and a court-martial is due to commence.
- Between 2020 and 2022, some senior security officers were dismissed and others were sent to early retirement. In the same period, recruitment and promotions in



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the security sector were alleged to be tribal-based which further suggests a deep division in the security sector.

- Continued economic challenges in the country including high poverty rates, unemployment, and inflation affecting food and fuel prices escalating social discontent and frustration among the populace, providing a breeding ground for political instability.
- Political tensions and violence in the June 24, 2023 elections. This political wrangling led to a sense of intimidation of political opponents in the so-called regional strongholds of the ruling government.
- Alleged irregularities and a lack of transparency as reported by international and national election observation missions in the June 2023 general elections. In the post-election, the main opposition political party, All People's Congress (APC) rejected the election results claiming that the election results were not credible. Also, the APC refrained from participating in the governance processes of the State at all levels including parliament, city, and district councils.
- The stalemate between the Government and the APC was resolved in October 2023 through a dialogue process organised by the Independent Commission of Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC), and facilitated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Africa Union (AU), and Commonwealth. The dialogue led to the signing of a communique between the Government and the APC. As an outcome of the dialogue process, the APC elected representatives have resumed duties in Parliament and Local Councils across the country. On November 21, 2023, the Government launched the *"Independent Cross-Party Committee on Electoral Systems and Management Bodies Review"*. A committee of 21 members comprising Government and APC representatives, the international community, civil society organizations and the media. The committee is responsible for reviewing Sierra Leone's current electoral system.

RISK ANALYSIS

The State's responses to multiple security breaches in the last 12 months demonstrate some level of security coordination, a strong sense of patriotism, and the commitment of security personnel to national service. However, persistent civil unrest and attempted coups portend deep divisions across various sectors of the state. This has the potential to truncate the country's fledgling democracy and derail its peace and stability.

The incident leading to arms theft from the military armoury, prison break and the escape of hard-core criminals has heightened public security concerns in the country. Assessment of the situation suggests a high probability of communities exposure to serious criminal threats, such as armed robberies, rape and other violent crimes over the Christmas and festivities.



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Consistent attacks on the security of the State could have a negative impact on the socio-economic activities of the country as a whole. This is because emergency security regulations in Freetown and other cities have implications for businesses, tourism, the education calendar and other social activities. In addition, this affects the socio-economic activities of market women and their household incomes.

MECHANISM FOR INTERVENTION

- A nationwide curfew was declared as amended by the Government and took immediate effect across the country.
- The International community including ECOWAS, AU, UN and other diplomatic missions issued condemnations of the attempted security breach in the country.
- Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the media and other stakeholders issued press releases and engaged citizens not involved in any act of violence in the country.
- WANEP's National Early Warning System (NEWS) structure will continue to monitor the situation across the country and report accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The security sector should intensify the ongoing investigations into the incident and other forms of security breaches to ensure deterrence.
- The Government should collaborate with international and relevant local partners to strengthen security sector reforms that would lead to depoliticization, enhance professionalism in the security sector, and ensure their submission to democratic order and the rule of law.
- The Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC) and the National Civic Education Commission should be provided with technical and financial support to strengthen socio-political dialogue, leading to national reconciliation in Sierra Leone.
- CSOS should intensify the engagement of citizens and state actors to promote peace and security across the country.
- Sierra Leoneans should refrain from any act that is likely to threaten the peace and security of the state. The citizens should collaborate with security in the ongoing investigation of the attempted security breach.
- Sierra Leoneans and the media should resist all attempts to disseminate unverified and/or inflammatory information on mainstream and social media platforms.