

# Centuries-old cotton tree, a national symbol for decades, felled by storm in Sierra Leone

May 25 2023, by Sam Mednick

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Cars drive past the iconic Cotton Tree in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone on March 2015. The centuries-old tree, seen as a symbol of liberty and freedom by early settlers, fell late Wednesday May 24 2023 during torrential rains in the capital causing a great loss to the nation and leaving "a gap in our hearts", President Julius Maada Bio told The Associated Press. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Duff

Torrential rains in Sierra Leone's capital felled the centuries-old Cotton

Tree, a national treasure whose loss has left "a gap" in people's hearts, the country's President Julius Maada Bio said Thursday.

"There is no stronger symbol of our national story than the Cotton Tree, a physical embodiment of where we come from as a country," Bio told the Associated Press. "Nothing in nature lasts forever, so our challenge is to rekindle, nurture, and develop that powerful African spirit for so long represented,.'

Standing 70 meters tall and 15 meters wide, the roughly 400 year-old tree has been Sierra Leone's national symbol for decades.

It has appeared on bank notes, woven into lullabies and visited by royalty, such as Queen Elizabeth the II, to mark the country's independence in 1961, according to a statement by Zebek International, a press agency working with Sierra Leone's government.

While the tree had withstood damage throughout the years, including a lightning strike that has left it partially scorched, Wednesday's storm left nothing of the tree but a stump.

For Sierra Leone, the loss is comparable to the fire that destroyed Paris' Notre Dame cathedral in 2019, said Zebek, the government's press agency.

Sierra Leone is among the countries most impacted by climate change. In 2017 more than 1,000 people were killed by a landslide due to heavy rains.



A bulldozer clears the fallen Cotton Tree in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone, Thursday May 25, 2023. Sierra Leone's centuries-old iconic Cotton Tree, seen as a symbol of liberty and freedom by early settlers, fell during torrential rains in the capital causing a great loss to the nation and leaving "a gap in our hearts", President Julius Maada Bio told The Associated Press. Credit: AP Photo/TJ Bade



A bulldozer clears the fallen Cotton Tree in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone, Thursday May 25, 2023. Sierra Leone's centuries-old iconic Cotton Tree, seen as a symbol of liberty and freedom by early settlers, fell during torrential rains in the capital causing a great loss to the nation and leaving "a gap in our hearts", President Julius Maada Bio told The Associated Press on Thursday. Credit: AP Photo/TJ Bade



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People look at the fallen Cotton Tree in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone, Thursday May 25, 2023. Sierra Leone's centuries-old iconic Cotton Tree, seen as a symbol of liberty and freedom by early settlers, fell during torrential rains in the capital causing a great loss to the nation and leaving "a gap in our hearts", President Julius Maada Bio told The Associated Press. Credit: AP Photo/TJ Bade

President Bio said he looks forward to discussions how best to use the space.

"What the Cotton Tree represents will live on: How something so big and strong can grow from something (as small) as a seed, how many people can gather together under the protection of something bigger than the sum of their parts; and how for centuries it would be an embodiment of

our history, unity, and resilience," he said.

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