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MAURITANIA: GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO MORE THAN HOST HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

The Government of Mauritania should do more than host the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, it should comply with its obligations under the African Charter, Amnesty International said today, as the African Commission meets this week in Nouakchott for its 21st Ordinary Session.

"Hosting this meeting is nothing but an illusion that human rights is firmly on the Mauritanian Government's own agenda," the organization said. "The human rights situation has in fact deteriorated over the past three months as the authorities have increasingly sought to silence opposition to its policies by detaining government critics for short periods."

Even the formal opening of the Commission's session by the Prime Minister of Mauritania yesterday was marred by the heavy presence of soldiers who were trying to prevent local human rights organizations from participating in the public opening session. The human rights organizations were allowed in only after persistent protest from Amnesty International and other international human rights activists.

Since the beginning of the year at least 27 and possibly as many as 40 government critics have been arrested in connection with their political activities and detained for short periods -- mostly outside the judicial process. Only six of them were eventually charged and brought to trial. All the others were released without charge after being detained incommunicado for periods ranging from 24 hours to 27 days.

"Most of these people were probably prisoners of conscience -- arrested solely because of their political activities in an attempt by the authorities to silence any criticism of its policies," Amnesty International said.

At least nine government critics were arrested on 22 January 1997 and accused of unauthorized political links with Libya. They included leaders and members of two opposition parties, *Action pour le Changement* (ACP), Action for Change, and *Alliance populaire progressive* (APP), Peoples' Progressive Alliance, as well as supporters of a campaign to expose the widespread practice of slavery in Mauritania -- a practice which has persisted despite its abolition under Mauritanian Law since 1980. Six of them, including the leaders of ACP and AFP, were later released without charge after being detained incommunicado for between seven to 27 days.

On 11 March 1997, at least seven members of the *Syndicat independant des professeurs du secondaire* (SIPES), the Independent Union for Secondary School Teachers, were arrested by the *Direction de la Sûreté de l'Etat*, security police after the union issued a strike notice. They were held for 24 hours before being released without charge.

On 31 March and 1 April 1997, 11 students, including Abdallahi Ould Naha, Bitrigha Mkaber (F) and Dah Ould Weddady, all reportedly involved in a strike at the university of Nouakchott, were also arrested by the *Direction de la Sûreté de l'Etat* and held for 24 hours before being released uncharged.

In both cases, those arrested were publicly accused of causing “public disorder” (*troubles de l'ordre public*). However none are known to have been charged with any offence; instead they were reportedly banished from the capital and taken back to their home villages where they have to report to the police station on a daily basis. Lawyers have reportedly been informed that they cannot appeal on behalf of their clients because they have not been formally charged.

Amnesty International considers that this practice amounts to a form of administrative detention and believes that the absence of all judicial process in these cases is a strong indication that they are probably prisoners of conscience who have been arbitrarily detained to prevent them from conducting their non-violent political activities.

The African Commission undertook a mission to Mauritania in 1996 on receiving complaints of massive and gross violations of human rights from human rights organizations and other individuals, in particular about imprisonment, torture and extrajudicial executions; some dating back to the early 1990s. No report has been published.

Amnesty International calls upon the Government of Mauritania, as a state party to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, to comply with its obligations under the Charter by among other things releasing any prisoners of conscience -- including those suffering from restriction under banishment orders without any form of judicial process, or to promptly charge them and bring them to trial on criminal charges consistent with international human rights standards.

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