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Mauritania: Where is Lieutenant Didi Ould M'Hamed?

Amnesty International is extremely concerned as to the fate of Lieutenant Didi Ould M'Hamed, who was extradited from Senegal to Mauritania during the night of Thursday 17/Friday 18 July 2003 under circumstances that are not yet clear.

"Thus far, no-one seems to know where the lieutenant is, which leads us to fear for his safety in a country in which torture is a frequent occurrence," Amnesty International today declared.

Lieutenant Didi Ould M'Hamed is suspected of having been involved in an attempted coup d'état that took place in Mauritania at the beginning of June 2003. Seeking refuge in Senegal, his repatriation to his country of origin was made possible by a recommendation of the Indictments Chamber of the Dakar Court of Appeal, which ruled in favour of his extradition on 3 July 2003. In this case, the Senegalese Procedural Code provides that this person can be extradited by decree issued by the President of the Republic.

The actions for which Lieutenant Didi Ould M'Hamed is allegedly responsible are punishable by death and other people arrested in Mauritania following this attempted coup d'état appear to have been tortured.

Amnesty International is thus protesting against the decision taken by the Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, which contravenes the international commitments assumed by his country under the terms of the UN Convention against Torture, ratified in 1984. In fact, article 3 of this text states that, *"no State Party shall expel, return or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture"*.

This extradition of a Mauritanian soldier by Senegal takes place within the context of a series of dismissals and arrests on the part of the Mauritanian authorities of servicemen accused of being responsible for the failed coup of 8 and 9 June 2003. Several people having families ties with soldiers suspected of being involved in this coup, in particular the President of the Supreme Court, Mahfoudh Ould Lemrabott and the Secretary of State for Women, Mrs. Mintata Mint Hdeïd, have been arbitrarily arrested and some held in secret locations for several weeks, which is contrary to all international rules on detention. They have all been released without charge or trial.

"It is thus urgent that the Mauritanian authorities indicate the whereabouts of this person and authorise his immediate access to his family, a doctor and a lawyer, in accordance with international law. If the Mauritanian authorities persist in their silence with regard to the fate of Lieutenant Didi Ould M'Hamed, the worst is to be feared with regard to his safety and even his life," the organization today stated.

Background

Since 30 April 2003, the Mauritanian government has been undertaking a campaign of repression against all those described as "*extremists*" and recently denounced the "*creeping danger that hides behind Islam and which is, in reality, alien to our values and to our holy religion's spirit of tolerance*". On this occasion, more than sixty of the country's influential, and particularly religious, figures were arrested. Thirty-two people are currently accused of "*plotting against the constitutional regime and incitement to undermine the State's internal and external public order.*"

Following the attempted coup d'état of 8 and 9 July 2003, the Mauritanian authorities requested neighbouring countries such as Mali and Algeria to allow the Mauritanian security forces to pursue and capture those suspected of being involved in the attempted coup d'état within their territory.

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