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Mauritania urged to revoke anti-slavery activists' sentencing

The authorities in Mauritania must revoke jail sentences given to four anti-slavery activists who protested against the enslavement of a 10-year old girl, Amnesty International said today.

The four men, who belong to an anti-slavery NGO, were arrested on 4 August on charges of "unauthorized gathering" and "rebellion". They were yesterday given six-month suspended sentences by a Nouakchott court.

"Sentencing people for simply exercising their right to peaceful protest is a travesty of justice," said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International's Director for Africa.

"The draconian response to the work of these activists suggests that the Mauritanian authorities are trying to cover up the fact that slavery takes place in the country".

The four activists, all members of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA), are Tourad Ould Zeid, Cheikhna Ould Cheyakh, Moulay Abdel Karim Touré and Moctar Ould Mohamed.

The IRA is not recognized by the authorities despite its attempts to become officially registered.

After discovering last month that the 10-year old girl was being held in slavery by a woman in Nouakchott, the IRA reported the case to the police.

The protesters say the woman was arrested and charged with enslaving a minor but was then provisionally released, on condition that she reports to the police station every week. The child is reportedly still missing.

"It is deeply disturbing that Mauritanian authorities are punishing people who file cases against those suspected of slavery practice with suspended sentences, thereby risking imprisonment if they try to protest again. The Mauritanian authorities must immediately revoke these sentences," said Erwin van der Borgh.

Another IRA activist who took part in the 4 August protest told Amnesty International police had beaten him when they arrested him.

He was detained for five days at Nouakchott's Dar Naïm prison but acquitted by the court yesterday.

"They kicked me with their heavy boots and punched me, forcing me into a cell with teargas," said the activist.

"After 10 minutes, I fainted. The police called me a dog. My left hand was chained to my left leg and my diet consisted only of bread and water."

Slavery was officially abolished in Mauritania in 1981. It only became a criminal offence in August 2007 but no cases have since made it to court, despite NGOs including the IRA regularly documenting slavery-like practices.

IRA activists have frequently been targeted for their work on slavery in Mauritania.

In December 2010, eight anti-slavery activists were arrested after exposing a case of two young girls allegedly forced to work as servants.

In January 2011, three of the activists were sentenced to a year in prison, including six months suspended.