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Mauritania: A future free from slavery

Despite the legal abolition of slavery in Mauritania twenty years ago, the government is yet to take practical steps ensure its abolition in practice, Amnesty International said today in its report *Mauritania: a future free from slavery*.

The report, published on the eve of the 21st anniversary of the decree which officially abolished slavery, shows that human rights abuses related to slavery persist in Mauritania, although the government denies their existence.

"The Mauritanian government must stop violating its own laws and urgently end slavery, which is an abominable attack on human dignity and freedom," Amnesty International said.

Mauritanian laws and international human rights obligations prohibit slavery, but anyone escaping slavery has no legal protection. There is considerable discrimination against former slaves. No government official is willing to take the necessary remedial action to fully eradicate slavery and put an end to impunity for the perpetrators.

In 2001, 17-year-old M'bareck ould Bilal ould Braïkat escaped from alleged slavery, leaving behind three younger brothers, a young sister and his mother, all apparently enslaved by four nomadic brothers. According to him, he spent his life caring for animals. He said that he fled because of the constant verbal insults he received and the relentless work, although he apparently had been frequently beaten with a stick in the past. It seems that he has not received any formal education. After M'bareck approached the Regional Governor for protection and release of his family, the gendarmerie only questioned him and the person who had offered him shelter about their links with *SOS Esclaves*.

"Not only has the government denied the existence of slavery and slavery-like practices and failed to respond to cases brought to its attention, it has hampered the activities of organizations which are working on the issue, including by refusing to grant such organizations official recognition," Amnesty International said.

Anti-slavery activists and other human rights defenders work under constant threat of arrest and imprisonment. In 1998, five human rights defenders, including Boubacar Messaoud, President of *SOS Esclaves* and Fatimata M'baye, Vice President of the *Association Mauritanienne des droits de l'homme* (AMDH, Mauritanian Association of Human Rights), were sentenced to 13 months' imprisonment for running unauthorized human rights organizations which have campaigned against slavery.

"Action against slavery and continuing human rights abuses based on slavery is long overdue. It is time for the government to approach the problem proactively, rather than denying its importance and hoping that a focus in education, literacy and agrarian reforms will be enough to eradicate the vestiges of slavery and address its consequences," the organization urged.

Amnesty International's report contains a series of detailed recommendations for the real and effective abolition of slavery directed to the Mauritanian government and the international community. These include that the government must acknowledge that slavery remains a problem in Mauritania. Accordingly, the Mauritanian government should establish an independent and impartial enquiry to investigate practices over the past 20 years and to consider steps to take towards complete eradication of slavery, slavery-like practices and related abuses and discrimination in the country. Special emphasis must be given to awareness raising, support of NGOs and civil society working on the issue, legal change and development of means of redress.

Amnesty International is also urging the international community to encourage the Mauritanian government to confront the issue openly. It should also openly support the work of human rights organizations working on slavery and slavery-like practices in Mauritania.

Background

The issue of slavery in 21st century Mauritania is contentious. In 1981 slavery was legally abolished following widespread public protests against the public sale of a woman. A period of optimism and relative openness towards dealing with the problem followed. Hopes that this signalled an imminent end to slavery proved unfounded, largely because of government inaction.

Slavery has been a long-standing social issue within all the ethnic communities of Mauritania. There are many shades of opinion even among those who acknowledge that slavery persists in Mauritania today. Often people deny that their own community practises slavery or discrimination, but believe that these problems exist in other communities. Others, such as the anti-slavery organization *SOS Esclaves*, believe that slavery is a problem across all of Mauritanian society. At the same time this community retains a substantial hold on political power which could be used to change the situation.

The government's lack of response to Amnesty International's numerous letters requesting dialogue and seeking permission to visit Mauritania in both 1998 and 2001 indicate how sensitive the issue of slavery remains in Mauritania. It also fits with the government's continued refusal to legalize non-governmental human rights groups, whose activities include demanding an end to impunity for massive human rights violations committed against the black Mauritanian population in 1989/1990 and campaigning against slavery and slavery-like practices. The government has also banned opposition parties and sentenced their leaders to terms of imprisonment after unfair trials.

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