

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Mauritania: Amnesty International calls for the release of the President of the Republic and respect for fundamental freedoms

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the President of the Republic, Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, who has been under arrest since the army took power on 6 August 2008. He is being held without charge at the Presidential Palace (*Palais des Congrès*) in the capital, Nouakchott, where his family have been prevented from visiting him.

The organization is also calling for respect for fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, which are guaranteed by the international standards to which Mauritania is a party and by the Mauritanian Constitution.

Since the coup d'état, a number of peaceful demonstrations organised by the Head of State's supporters have been forcibly broken up by the security forces, with tear gas being used against the demonstrators. On 8 August 2008, people who were attempting to attend a press conference organised in Nouakchott by the National Front for Democratic Defence (*Front national pour la défense de la démocratie*), a coalition of political parties condemning the military coup, were beaten by police officers using their bare fists and truncheons.

Background

On 6 August 2008, a group of army officers overthrew the Mauritanian government, in office since the presidential elections of March 2007. President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed Waghf, Minister of the Interior Mohamed Ould R'zeizim and two other senior State officials were arrested. All apart from the Head of State were released on 11 August 2008.

A High State Council comprising eleven members of the armed forces was established by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who led the coup. The High State Council has undertaken to organise free and transparent elections "within the shortest time possible".

The international community has called for the release of the Head of State and a return to constitutional order. A number of countries, including France and the United States, have frozen their non-humanitarian aid to Mauritania and the African Union has suspended the country's membership of its organization.

Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi won the presidential elections in March 2007. These elections represented the final stage in a process of restoring civilian government to a country that had been led by the military since Maaouiya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya was overthrown in a bloodless coup in August 2005.

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