

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 38/007/2003

UA 158/03

Fear of torture or ill-treatment/
Possible Prisoners of Conscience (POCs)

02 June 2003

MAURITANIA Mohamed El-Hacen Ould Dedew (m)
Mohamed Lemine Ould Moustapha (m)
Mohamed Lemine Ould Ismail (m)
Sidina Ould Radhy (m)
Mohamed Ould Doua (m)
Hamoud Ould Dhou Nourayene (m)
Khaled Ould Isselmou (m)
Abdarrahmane Ould Sabar (m)
Sidi Amar Ould Cheikhna (m)
And at least 40 others

The imams named above were arrested by the security forces between 5 and 6 May in the capital Nouakchott and in the town of Nouadhibou, in the North of the country. Forty other people have also been arrested in various parts of the country. They are being held at various locations, in incommunicado detention, where they are at risk of torture or ill-treatment.

Amnesty International considers the detainees to be possible prisoners of conscience as they may have been arrested solely for the peaceful expression of their religious beliefs. The detainees have not been formally charged with a recognizably criminal offence nor have they appeared before a judge. They have also been denied access to lawyers and their families. According to the Director of the Security Police, the imams were arrested for "using mosques to indoctrinate young people for subversive activities". The former Minister for Islamic Guidance had asked the imams to be the eyes and ears of the government and not to stir up political turmoil. His statements were condemned by the detained imams in their sermons.

The arrests appear to be part of a veiled campaign of threats and intimidation against religious figures and the opposition party in Mauritania. Since 30 April, more than sixty people have been arrested by the authorities for their suspected links to religious groups that the government considers to be "extremist". Several members of an opposition party *Parti de la renaissance nationale* (PRN) National Renaissance Party were arrested at the beginning of May. They were tried and sentenced to suspended prison terms for forming an unauthorized association and reorganizing a party after it has been disbanded. On 22 May, four women who used to meet to study the Koran were arrested and then released after a short period of detention.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the beginning of 2003, numerous peaceful demonstrations have been organised by the opposition parties to protest against the war in Iraq and to condemn the position of the Mauritanian authorities in the conflict. There has been particular criticism of the participation of Mauritanian officers, who are telecommunications and topography experts, in the war in Iraq.

Political repression in Mauritania is widespread. Political opponents are often detained because of their political activities and membership of opposition parties. In addition, organizations for the defence of human rights and the independent media often find it difficult to work without restriction.

As far back as 1994, at least 60 Islamic militants were arrested and held in incommunicado for up to two weeks, during which some were tortured and allegedly beaten. On the day of the arrests, the Mauritanian

authorities stated, that they had just uncovered secret organizations, operating under the cover of Islam, who were training and arming militants with a view to destabilising Mauritania.

Three prisoners of conscience, all members of the opposition party *Front populaire Mauritanian* (FPM) Mauritanian Popular Front are still being held in prison in Aïoun, approximately 800 km from the capital Nouakchott, where prison conditions are very harsh. In 2001, they were sentenced to five years in prison for "criminal association with a view to committing acts of sabotage and terrorism".

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in French, Arabic or your own language:

- expressing concern at the incommunicado detention of the imams named above and the 40 other detainees;
- seeking assurances that they are not being tortured or ill-treated and they are given regular access to family, lawyers and medical attention if necessary ;
- urging the authorities to release the detainees immediately, unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence;
- if they are not released, asking for details of the charges against them and for information on any subsequent trial proceedings.

APPEALS TO: (It may be very difficult to send faxes to Mauritania.)

President of the Republic

Président de la République
Maaouya Ould Sidi Mohammed Taya
Présidence de la République
B.P. 184
Nouakchott, Mauritania

Telegram: President de la Republique, Nouakchott, Mauritania
Salutation: Monsieur le Président / Dear Mr President

Minister for the Interior, Post and Telecommunications

Lemrabet Sidi Mahmoud Ould Cheikh Ahmed
Ministre de l'Intérieur, des Postes et Télécommunications
B.P. 195
Nouakchott, Mauritania

Telegram: Ministre de l'Interieur, des Postes et Telecommunications, Nouakchott, Mauritania
Fax : + 222 525 36 61
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Minister of Justice

Ministre de la Justice
Sghair Ould M'Bareck
B.P. 350
Nouakchott, Mauritania

Telegram: Ministre de la Justice, Nouakchott, Mauritania
Fax: + 222 525 70 02 (when someone answers, say "je voudrais envoyer un fax, s'il vous plaît I'd like to send a fax, please")
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of MAURITANIA accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 14 July 2003.