

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

17 December 2010
AI Index: AFR 38/004/2010

Mauritania: Call for the release of detained anti-slavery activists

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of eight anti-slavery activists arrested 13 December 2010 in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, after denouncing the case of two young girls who they believed were being held in slavery.

The activists are all members of the Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie (IRA, Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania), an NGO created and led by Biram Dah Ould Abeid, who is also a member of SOS Esclaves (SOS Slaves). The authorities do not recognize the IRA, although the organization has submitted an official application for registration.

Several days ago, the IRA was alerted of the case of two young girls, aged nine and fourteen, who were allegedly being held in slavery in the house of a female civil servant. Biram Dah Ould Abeid and other members of the NGO approached the prefect in the Nouakchott neighborhood of Arafat. The prefect transferred the case to Police Station Arafat 1, who had jurisdiction over the area.

The police superintendent asked two IRA members to accompany the police to the home of the person alleged to be holding the two young girls in slavery. Upon arrival, they learned that the nine-year-old girl had worked in the house as a servant for the past three years, while the fourteen-year-old had worked there for two and a half years.

The police took the two young girls to the police station for questioning, but refused to allow IRA members to be present at the hearing, as had previously been planned. In response to the reaction of members of the NGO, who insisted on being present when the police questioned the two alleged slaves and protested the decision to exclude them, which appeared arbitrary, the police superintendent accused IRA members of coming to “cause a disturbance” (*faire du tapage*). Some IRA members were beaten, including Biram Dah Ould Abeid, who sustained injuries to his head and knee.

Nine IRA members were initially taken into custody, where, according to information obtained by Amnesty International, they were subjected to ill-treatment. One of these members was released on 15 December 2010.

The remaining eight members were then charged with “assaulting agents” and “obstructing public order” and transferred to the Mixed Unit of the Gendarmerie (paramilitary police) for a follow-up investigation. The period for holding these individuals in police custody was extended 48 hours and expires Sunday, 19 December 2010. As of today, those detained had not been allowed any visits from family.

Based on this information, Amnesty International considers those detained to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely on the basis of their actions in defense of human rights, especially the struggle against slavery. Amnesty International calls for their immediate and unconditional release and also calls for the authorities to approve the IRA's application for registration.

As regards the two girls, the Prosecutor dropped their case on 15 December 2010 even though the Minors Police Unit, which had opened an investigation and heard testimony from the parents of the two young girls, had noted that the two girls were "exploited" as servants. The Prosecutor decided not to bring charges against the parents, who denied that their daughters were slaves, nor were charges brought against the woman in whose home they were found.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Although officially abolished in 1981, slavery only became a criminal offense in August 2007. According to the law, slavery is punishable by a maximum sentence of ten years in prison.

In spite of this law, slavery continues and is regularly denounced by NGOs like SOS Esclaves and the IRA. Since 2007, no cases of slavery have made it to court.