

MAURITANIA

Trial of four human rights defenders

Boubacar Ould Messaoud, President of *SOS-Esclaves*, a non-governmental organization called SOS Slaves,

Maître Brahim Ould Ebetty, *Secrétaire général du Conseil de l'ordre des avocats*, Secretary General of the Bar Association Council, member of *SOS-Esclaves* and member of *Groupe d'études et de recherche sur la démocratie et le développement économique et social en Afrique*, GERDDES-MAURITANIE

Professeur Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, President of the *Association mauritanienne des droits de l'homme* (AMDH), Mauritanian Human Rights Association, and Trustee of the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Contemporary Forms of Slavery

Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, *Secrétaire aux relations extérieures*, Secretary for Foreign Relations for SOS Slaves

Boubacar Ould Messaoud, Maître Brahim Ould Ebetty and Professeur Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, all prominent human rights defenders were arrested at their homes in the capital, Nouakchott, in the afternoon of Saturday, 17 January 1998. They were held incommunicado without access to families or lawyers for four days and now face charges relating to their work in defence of human rights. A fourth person, Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, who is based in France, has been charged *in absentia*. Their trial was due to start on 31 January 1998, but has been postponed. It is expected to take place in early February 1998. They face the possibility of a prison sentence up to three years solely on account of their non-violent activities defending human rights. Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the three human rights activists currently in custody.

They were arrested by the security police and detained at the *Direction générale de la Sécurité nationale*, the security police headquarters, in Nouakchott. Since their appearance before the judicial authorities on Tuesday 20 January 1998 the three human rights defenders have been held at the *Prison centrale*, central prison, in Nouakchott where their families have been allowed to visit. At first Boubacar Ould Messaoud was denied access to a lawyer, but since 27 January 1998, he too has been able to consult his lawyer.

Their arrests, reportedly carried out without any warrant, appear to have been prompted by a television program on slavery broadcast on 15 January 1998 on a French language cable channel, which featured an interview with Boubacar Ould Messaoud.

They have all been charged with creating “*une association fonctionnant sans autorisation*”, a non-authorized association. In addition, Boubacar Ould Messaoud faces charges directly connected with the television documentary, including one under Article 23 of the 1991 law on press freedom concerning the use of “false information”. This law acknowledges the government’s responsibility to guarantee respect for the rights to freedom of information and expression. The fourth person, Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, faces the same charges as Boubacar Ould Messaoud and will be tried *in absentia*.

Although the AMDH and SOS-Slaves are affiliated to the Organization of African Unity’s African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, their applications for registration in Mauritania have never been processed. Both organizations have nevertheless maintained a high level of activity both within Mauritania and internationally.

None of those arrested are known to have advocated or used violence and Amnesty International believes that they are prisoners of conscience solely detained because of their human rights work including their campaigning work against slavery. Slavery has become a sensitive political issue in Mauritania. Although abolished in legislation in 1905, 1960 and 1980, slavery practices are reported to be continuing. In the last four years there has been a concerted effort by some opposition politicians, trade unionists, students and human rights activists to expose these practices to the international community. Their campaign has been forcefully condemned by the Mauritanian government. In a speech delivered on 10 January 1997, the President of Mauritania, Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, stated that those who campaign against slavery are enemies of his government who want to tarnish the image of the country.

These recent developments also appear to be a further attack on freedom of expression in Mauritania. In mid-January 1998 a new three months’ ban was ordered against *Mauritanie-Nouvelles* an independent weekly which had just been allowed to reopen upon the expiry of a previous three months’ ban which prevented it from covering the election period. The same week another independent newspaper *Le Calame* had all copies of its 12 January 1998 edition seized by the authorities.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Publicize the cases of **Boubacar Ould Messaoud, Maître Brahim Ould Ebetty, Professeur Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara and Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane** in your national and local news media.

2. Please send faxes or airmail letters in French, Arabic or in your own language to the addresses below:

- ◆ expressing concern at the arrest of Boubacar Ould Messaoud, Maître Brahim Ould Ebetty and Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara on 17 January 1998 ;
- ◆ explaining that Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned for the non-violent expression of their views, in particular their advocacy of human and political rights, and calling for their immediate and unconditional release;
- ◆ expressing concern that they, and Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, face charges on account of these activities;
- ◆ reminding the government that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (articles 19 and 20 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and that these rights are also recognized by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (articles 9 and 10).

APPEALS TO:

President

Son Excellence Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya
Président de la République
La Présidence - BP 184
Nouakchott, MAURITANIA
Telegrams: Le President, Nouakchott, Mauritania
Telexes: 5580 PRIM MTN - Fax: +222 2 56890
Salutation: Monsieur le President/Dear Mr President

Minister of Justice

Monsieur Mohamed Lemine Ould Ahmed
Ministre de la Justice
Ministère de la Justice
Nouakchott, MAURITANIA
Telegrams: Ministre de la Justice, Nouakchott, Mauritania

Faxes: +222 2 52860

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre, Dear Minister

Please send a copy of your letter to one of the following media outlets:

Monsieur le Rédacteur en chef, *Le Calame*, BP 1059, Nouakchott, Mauritania. Tel/fax: +222 2 58544

Agence Mauritanienne d'information, BP 371, Nouakchott, Mauritania

Monsieur le Rédacteur en chef, *Eveil-Hebdo*, BP 587, Nouakchott, Mauritania

Monsieur le Rédacteur en chef, *Sud Quotidien*, Immeuble Fahd, BP 4130, Dakar, Senegal

Monsieur le Rédacteur en chef, Wal Fadjiri, BP 576, Dakar, Senegal

KEYWORDS: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS1 / INCOMMUNICADO
DETENTION / CENSORSHIP