

MAURITANIA Mohamed Lemine Chbih Ould Cheikh Melainine, president of the *Front populaire mauritanien* (FPM)
Mokhtar Ould Haïbetna
Bouba Ould Hassena

Opposition leader Mohamed Lemine Chbih Ould Cheikh Melainine was arrested at his home in the capital, Nouakchott, on 8 April, and is now imprisoned in very harsh conditions. He has a heart condition which requires constant medication, and Amnesty International is seriously concerned for his health.

Mr Chbih, the president of the *Front populaire mauritanien* (FPM), Mauritanian Popular Front, was charged with conspiracy to form an armed group with the intent of carrying out acts of terrorism, six days after he was arrested. Two other men who were arrested with him, Mokhtar Ould Haïbetna and Bouba Ould Hassena, are facing the same charges. Amnesty International believes these charges are without foundation, intended solely to stifle political opposition, and considers all three men to be prisoners of conscience.

After his arrest, Mr Chbih was held incommunicado by the police until 12 April, when he was transferred to Nouakchott civilian prison. He was brought before Nouakchott criminal court on 10 May, but the case was adjourned to allow time for witnesses to be summoned.

Following demonstrations in support of Mr Chbih by FPM supporters, the Supreme Court ruled on 13 May that the case should be transferred to a court in the provincial town of Aioun, some 800 km east of Nouakchott, near the border with Mali.

All three men are now detained in Aioun prison, where conditions are reported to be particularly harsh.

They are due to appear in court in Aioun on 28 May. However, their lawyers have withdrawn in protest at procedural irregularities, saying they are convinced Mr Chbih will not receive a fair trial. None of the three will therefore have any legal representation in court.

Government officials have already stated publicly that they believe Mr Chbih to be guilty, undermining the principle that a prisoner be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

The main evidence against Mr Chbih appears to be the statements of two prosecution witnesses, who were also arrested at Mr Chbih's home on 8 April. Mr Chbih denies knowing the two men, who claim they had been trying to meet him, at his request, to discuss forming an armed group.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There is widespread political repression in Mauritania, where opposition politicians are frequently detained because of their political activities, and opposition parties, human rights organizations and the independent media operate with great difficulty.

In 1999 the government established diplomatic ties with Israel, despite protest from the opposition. In late 2000 the renewed fighting in Israel and the Occupied

Territories led to calls for the government to break off diplomatic relations again, leading to increased political tension. There was a series of demonstrations, and a number of opposition politicians were briefly detained, some of whom were beaten at the time of their arrest and in custody. The government banned two other political parties, accusing them of subversive activities and actions contrary to the interests of the nation. Local and legislative elections are scheduled for October 2001.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in French, Arabic or your own language:

- urging the authorities to guarantee the safety of Mohamed Lemine Chbih Ould Cheikh Melainine, Mokhtar Ould Haïbetna and Bouba Ould Hassena, and to ensure that they are treated in accordance with international standards, including being provided with adequate medical care;
- expressing concern that the charges against them are without foundation, arising solely from their opposition political activities;
- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally.

APPEALS TO:

Please note that you may experience problems in sending faxes.

President of the Republic

Son Excellence

Monsieur le Président Maaouiya Ould Sid 'Ahmed Taya

Président de la République

La Présidence

BP 184 Nouakchott

Mauritania

Faxes:+ 222 2 52636 (attention of Président de la République)

Salutation:Son Excellence / Your Excellency

Minister of the Interior

Monsieur Dah Ould Abdel Jelil

Ministre de l'Intérieur, des Postes et des Télécommunications

Ministère de l'Intérieur, des Postes et des Télécommunications

BP 195 Nouakchott

Mauritania

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Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Minister of Justice

Monsieur Lemrabott Sidi Mahmoud Ould Cheikh Ahmed

Ministre de la Justice

Ministère de la Justice

BP 350 Nouakchott

Mauritania

Faxes:+ 222 2 57002

Salutation:Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Public Prosecutor

Mohamed Yeslem Ould Jidimou

Procureur de la République

Palais de Justice

Nouakchott, Mauritania

Telegrams:Procureur République, Nouakchott, Mauritania

Salutation: Monsieur le Procureur de la République / Dear Mr Ould Jidimou

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La Tribune

BP 6227 Nouakchott

Mauritania

and 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 6 July 2001.