



Mauritania must immediately release jailed anti-slavery activists and human rights defenders

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On 15 January 2015, the court of Rosso, a town in southern Mauritania, sentenced three anti-slavery activists and human rights defenders to two years in prison for belonging to and managing an unrecognised organisation, participation in an unauthorised assembly and offenses against the forces of law and order.

Brahim Bilal Ramdane, Djiby Sow and Biram Dah Abeid, a former presidential candidate and President of the anti-slavery organisation, Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA), were arrested on 11 November 2014 whilst leading a peaceful campaign against slavery and raising awareness amongst the local population about the land rights of people of slave descent.

The practice of slavery persists in Mauritania. Organisations, such as SOS-Esclaves and IRA, regularly condemn cases of slavery. In addition, many people of slave descent continue to work on lands to which they have been given no rights and so are forced to give part of their crops to their would-be traditional masters.

Slavery was officially abolished in Mauritania in 1981 and this practice has been recognized as a crime under national law since 2007. The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Mauritania is a state party, also proscribes slavery. Even though, since 2010 at least 32 cases of slavery have been brought to the Public Prosecutor, most investigations are subject to long delays. In 2011, the only slave-owner ever prosecuted for the criminal offence of "slavery-like practices against a minor", received a two-year prison sentence. After only a few months in prison, the convicted person was then granted provisional release pending the appeal hearing. This appeal has still not been held and he remains at liberty to this day.

The Mauritanian authorities often restrict the freedom of expression of human rights defenders and

organisations that are campaigning against slavery. Yet, article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Mauritania is a state party, protects freedom of expression, which includes the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds." The sentencing of these human rights defenders for awareness-raising activities about land slavery also goes against the commitments made by this government in its roadmap for the fight against the legacy of slavery adopted in March 2014, in particular, the promise to "create the conditions for equal access to land."

The signatory organisations believe that Brahim Bilal Ramdane, Djiby Sow and Biram Dah Abeid are prisoners of conscience, detained solely because of their peaceful activities aiming to combat slavery.

We call upon the Mauritanian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release these convicted anti-slavery human rights defenders who are being arbitrarily detained in violation of national Mauritanian law and the international instruments ratified by Mauritania.

LIST OF SIGNATORY ORGANISATIONS :

Action des Chrétiens pour l'abolition de la Torture (ACATBF) – Burkina Faso ; Action des Chrétiens pour l'abolition de la Torture (ACAT) – France ; Africtivistes– Senegal ; Agir Ensemble pour les Droits de l'Homme – France ; Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille- Mauritania ; Association Mauritanienne Droits de l'Homme – Mauritania ; Association SEMFILMS- Burkina Faso ; Association des victimes de la torture au Togo- Togo ; Amnesty International ; Anti Slavery International- Great Britain ; Balai Citoyen- Burkina Faso ; Centre d'information et de formation en matière des droits humains en Afrique ; Comité National pour la Mémoire et l'Histoire de l'Esclavage- France ; Comité de Solidarité avec les Victimes des Violations des Droits Humains – Mauritania ; Forum des Organisations Nationales des Droits de l'Homme en Mauritanie - Mauritania ; Free the Slaves- USA ; Front Line Defenders – Ireland ; Human Rights defender, Writer and academic ; IRA – Mauritania ; IRA – USA ; Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa- Gambia ; International Trade Union Confederation ; Ligue pour la Défense de la Justice et de la Liberté – Burkina Faso ; Minority Rights Group International- Great Britain ; Mouvement burkinabè des droits humains et des peuples – Burkina Faso ; Mouvement Y en a marre- Sénégal ; Quilliam Foundation- Great Britain ; Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme – Senegal ; SOS-Esclaves- Mauritania ; Society for Threatened Peoples- Germany ; The Abolition Institute – USA ; The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization Walk Free- The Hague