

# Submission by Society for Threatened Peoples

a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

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## Mauritania

Since the August 2008 coup d'état against former President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi the human rights situation sharply deteriorated in Mauritania. Press freedom was severely restricted. On June 17, 2009, Hanevi Ould Dehah, the director of the news-website Taqadoumy ([www.taqadoumy.com](http://www.taqadoumy.com)), was arrested. Mauritanian human rights organisations protested against his arrest and the denial of due process. Mauritanian journalists, protesting against his arrest, were beaten by police officers and dispersed by tear gas. After having terminated a first prison term of six months, his liberation was denied by the authorities and on February 4, 2010, the journalist was sentenced to another two years imprisonment. After international protests he was pardoned on February 26, 2010, and finally freed. A wave of harassment against journalists has significantly reduced press freedom.

### Harassment of human rights defenders

In April 2009, two demonstrations organized by political parties and human rights organizations were violently repressed. Both peaceful protests had been organized to denounce the controversial presidential elections on June 6, 2009. The President of the non-governmental organization "SOS Slaves", Boubacar Ould Messaoud, was severely beaten by four police officers during a public protest. Mr. Messaoud, a well known human rights defender who was imprisoned for several years for his commitment to fight slavery, was forced by police officers to kneel down. Afterwards the security officers tried to throw him in the boot of a civilian police van. Only due to the intervention of two people passing by the planned abduction could be prevented.

On February 6, 2010, the authorities refused to renew the passport of Mr. Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid, a well-known leading representative of the human rights organization "SOS Slaves", fighting against slavery in Mauritania. He is member of the "National Commission of Human Rights". Two friends of the human rights defender were informed by the authorities that the refusal was a warning with regards to critical declarations he had publicly made on the slavery issue and the human rights situation in Mauritania in general. Since his participation at a conference in Paris on "Slavery in Muslim countries" on February 17, 2009, a campaign of intimidation and threats has been launched against the human rights defender. In November 2009, an anonymous article blamed him to cooperate with the Secret Service of Israel. An unknown individual tried to force his way into his home. On November 23, 2009, the Home Minister informed him that the President of the Republic had ordered the launching of an inquiry in his case. Biram was urged to discontinue any public statement or activity on the slavery issue. Threats grew after a press conference by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Ms. Gulnara Shahinian, on November 3, 2009, in Nouakchott, during which she expressed concern about persisting slavery activities in Mauritania. The situation further escalated after public attacks by three Imams on February 19, 2010, blaming the human rights defender for "blasphemy" and calling him "a threat to Muslim religion". Since his last voyage to Europe and his participation at the Film Festival of human rights films in Geneva in March 2010, a campaign of defamation has been launched against Biram Ould Dah. In many articles, published on official websites, he was blamed for "blasphemy" or "treason", criticized the Paris-based "International Federation of Human Rights Leagues" (FIDH) and the Geneva-based "Worldwide Organisation against Torture" (OMCT) in April 2010. In some articles he was

presented as “mentally ill”, referring to a fake medical assessment by the University Hospital Centre in Dakar (Senegal). Officially he was dismissed from his position as expert of the National Human Rights Commission on April 1, 2010.

## **Slavery persists**

Despite some efforts by the former democratically elected government under President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (2007 - 2008), slavery has yet to be rooted out in Mauritania. In August 2007, an anti-slavery bill was approved by the government and serious efforts were made to assist remaining slaves to obtain freedom.

Mauritanian human rights organizations estimate that 18 per cent of the country's population of about 3 million people still live in slavery, that is historically rooted in the ownership by a ruling Arab-Berber elite of the indigenous black population. The local human rights organization “SOS Slaves” recently has presented several cases of slavery and child abuse, involving minors Vatimetou Mint Mata Moulana and Hana Mint Maria and the young mother Moulkheir and her 15 year-old daughter Selekha. In December 2007 “SOS Slaves” for the first time was informed about the plight of Moulkheir's family which had been abused for several years by a camel herder. As she refused to continue to work as a slave, her “master” abducted her girls to force her to work without any pay. Her daughter Selekha has been raped by the “master” who later tried to marry her with a herder to cover up the rape.

All forms of slavery are still persistent in Mauritania: human trafficking, child marriages, domestic labour and child labour. Several human rights organizations criticized that the Mauritanian authorities didn't insist on the implementation of the anti-slavery bill. Without implementation and enforcement the bill simply is a meaningless piece of paper. Since the 2008 coup, civil society again has been limited in its freedom and the military government has shown little interest in enforcing the ban of slavery and assisting former slaves who are searching for protection from their “masters”. The latest campaign of intimidation against the human rights defender Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid documents a lack of commitment of the authorities to fight slavery. During her visit to Mauritania in October/November 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Ms. Gulnara Shahinian, has urged the government in Nouakchott to do more to address slavery.

## **Discrimination of non Arab / Berber minorities**

Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about latest public declarations of leading Mauritanian politicians on the importance of Arabic in education and culture. Prime Minister Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf and the Minister of Culture, Ms. Cissé Mint Boide, have urged in public speeches in March 2010, that Arabic should be the unique national language. Non-Arab or Non-Berber groups massively criticized the statements, fearing new attempts of “Arabization”. They were insisting on the multi-ethnic and –lingual character of the country which is both an Arab and an African state.

Literary Arabic is the official language in Mauritania. Hassaniya is the local and oral form of Arabic, spoken by some 77 per cent of the population. Some 4 per cent of Berbers speak Tamasheq, the language of the Amazigh indigenous population of North Africa. But beyond these Arabs, arabized Berbers and traditional Berbers, several African ethnic groups still are populating especially the south of the country. Once again these ethnic minorities fear that their traditional languages (Wolof, Soninké, Poular) could be eradicated in a new campaign of “Arabization”. Such an attempt would destabilize the country and its relationship with neighbouring Senegal. Between 1989 and 1991 some 100,000 African Mauritians have been expelled and searched for protection in Senegal. The former democratic government of President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi has been very much committed to overcome inter-tribal tensions and has facilitated the return of 24,000 of the expelled to Mauritania. The government of

Mauritania should refrain from inciting ethnic hatred and violence by ignoring the multi-ethnic character of the country.