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SLAVERY IN MAURITANIA: The “ROADMAP TO COMBAT THE VESTIGES OF SLAVERY” is not being implemented convincingly

On March 6, 2014, the Mauritanian government published a “Roadmap to Combat the Vestiges of Slavery”. Two years after the adoption of the Roadmap – which was welcomed by the international community – this report examines the extent to which the proposed projects were actually implemented. The Roadmap consists of 29 points focusing on legal, economic, and social measures to combat the effects of slavery.

In August of 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery had sent the Mauritanian government a list of recommendations on combating modern forms of slavery. In response, the government published the “Roadmap to Combat the Vestiges of Slavery” on March 6, 2014. The UN Human Rights Council is currently reviewing the human rights situation in Mauritania as part of the UPR process (Universal Periodic Review). The results of the Human Rights Council’s investigations are to be presented in Geneva on March 16, 2016. Prior to this, we think it is very important to critically assess the Roadmap and to examine the implementation of the measures announced by the Mauritanian government two years ago.

Slavery was officially abolished in Mauritania in 1981, but it still continues to exist. It is mostly the so-called Haratin, the descendants of slaves, who are affected. The status as a “slave” is passed on from a mother to her child.

The Mauritanian government has taken a number of measures to eliminate slavery. However, they don’t have the desired effect. Mauritania has ratified all international human rights treaties that prohibit slavery – but this report accounts for ever new cases of slavery. In 2007, the country adopted Law 2007-048, according to which slavery is punishable. In 2014, the NGO “Walk Free” accused Mauritania of having the highest percentage of slaves worldwide, with 4 percent of the population. Other human rights organizations have estimated that about 20 percent of the population are still enslaved. The different figures reflect the fact that there are no comprehensive or independent data on the actual extent of slavery, as the state continues to deny the existence of slavery until today.

The Roadmap provides for many reasonable initiatives to combat the consequences of slavery, but most of the projects were not implemented – or not convincingly. Thus, it is very

likely that the roadmap was adopted to appease the international public as well as the international community, which has repeatedly expressed its deep concern about the persistence of slavery.

With some delay, a new law was adopted on August 13, 2015, as an attempt to improve the protection of slaves and to ensure that slaveholders will be prosecuted. The new law served to update and expand the definition of slavery, allowing non-governmental organizations to join an action in slavery cases if they have been officially recognized by the authorities for more than five years. However, the best laws are not worth much if they are not applied in everyday life.

Nine years after Mauritania introduced penal provisions for slavery, there are still enormous problems regarding the prosecution of slaveholders. Despite the harsh penal code, most of the few criminal proceedings tend to take a different course. Thus, the judges often see existing cases as minor offences – even if the victim was treated as a slave since birth – resulting either in no punishment at all or in very lenient sentences. In fact, only two slavery-trials have taken place since the Anti-Slavery Law 2007-048 came into effect nine years ago. Also, those who were accused of slavery spent only a few weeks in custody. Former slaves and people who are still living in slavery today have the impression the slaveholders will continue to go unpunished, despite the new laws.

The former slaves are not only complaining about impunity, but also about a lack of social, economic, and education-related support from the authorities – despite the founding of the agency TADAMOUN, which is supposed to provide help for former slaves and to further their integration into society and the economy in the scope of the Roadmap. However, the agency tends to initiate projects to combat poverty in general, instead of focusing on the former slaves and helping them with their specific problems. The government of Mauritania does not help the juvenile victims of slavery to visit schools, nor does it provide integration support for former slaves to help them find work. As many schools were privatized in the last few years, former slaves find it even more difficult to get access to educational institutions. The agency TADAMOUN has not developed any sustainable projects to enable former slaves to become and stay economically independent. The fact that dozens of new mosques were built – which, according to the government, is a success due to the Roadmap – will not help to improve education or social status in the longer run.

Despite the announcements in the scope of the Roadmap, no credible measures to put an end to the discrimination and exclusion of the Haratin have yet been taken. Also, there are no special programs to help former slaves to find jobs in administration, in the army, in banks or the media. Compared to their share of the total population, the Haratin are still massively underrepresented in areas that are important for the development of the state and its civil society – despite announcements to the contrary in the Roadmap. There are even cases in which free radio stations, with programs that are mainly produced for the Haratin and other black African listeners, are denied broadcasting licenses.

In the Roadmap, it is mentioned that the situation of the women is especially problematic, but there have been no tangible initiatives to improve the situation of the Haratin women during the last two years. In 2015, when it became known that hundreds of Haratin women had been lured to work as house-slaves in Saudi Arabia by false promises of employment contracts, the authorities had at first tried to cover up the scandal. It was not until the public protests of Mauritanian NGOs grew larger and louder that the authorities could not deny the case any longer. Many of the women were allowed to return. However, the victims of trafficking did not receive any legal assistance in their efforts to defend themselves against the property claims made by the Saudi Arabian slaveholders. Also, there is no legal, medical, psychological, or social assistance for the many women who were raped while being enslaved in Mauritania. If they try to bring an action to court, they are often charged with adultery and punished severely.

The education programs provided for in the Roadmap either didn't get implemented at all, or they missed their target of informing the general public about slavery and the Haratin about their rights. The few campaigns that were actually launched failed to reach the Haratin audience as they were based on the wrong type of media or the wrong language. March 6 was declared as the Day against Slavery, but the activities scheduled for this day are by far not sufficient to lay the basis for adequate reconnaissance work. The self-help organizations of the Haratin were mostly not considered in the scope of the education and information work, although they are especially familiar with the concerns and needs of those who are actually affected. They are the only organizations that can provide credible information on the remaining challenges in the struggle against slavery, because that is what they are concerned with in their everyday work.

Finally, the state does not provide support for civil society organizations that are committed to human rights or to the abolishment of slavery. Thus, the authorities refused to officially recognize the human rights organization IRA-Mauritanie as a non-governmental organization for four years, because the organization had drawn too much public attention to the slavery issue. Further proof is to be found in the ruthless crackdowns of the security forces on demonstrations of slavery critics and the detentions and trials of Biram Dah Abeid (President of IRA-Mauritanie) and of Birahim Bilal Ramdane (Vice-President of IRA-Mauritanie) and Djiby Sow (President of Kawtal) in December 2014 and January 2015. The fact that supporters of the detainees were arrested as well clearly shows that the government is trying to silence slavery critics at any price.

The Roadmap describes several problematic aspects and provides important impetus in the struggle against slavery. So far, however, it is to be seen as completely inadequate. In the attempts to curb slavery, the initiatives of the state and its institutions, such as the agency TADAMOUN, must also become much more transparent. This would be the only way to ensure that those who are actually affected can become involved. Further, there have to be new projects that do not only focus on fighting poverty in general, but that are tailored to the special needs of the Haratin. The Mauritanian state must finally admit that slavery still

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persists. Effective initiatives to combat slavery can only be developed on the basis of a realistic assessment of the actual situation.