

Written Statement by Society for Threatened Peoples

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Slavery in Mauritania

More than 500,000 Black African Haratin are still considered to be held as slaves in Mauritania. Approximately 90 percent of them are women and children who are forced to do housework or work on the fields free of charge. They live in serfdom that stems from their descent from a family of slaves. Many slaves are abused and raped. Ending slavery requires a comprehensive campaign to emancipate slaves and to help the many homeless children out of their de-facto slavery.

Slavery was officially abolished in Mauritania in 1981. A law to punish the holding of slaves with up to two years in jail was introduced in 2007. However, Mauritanian human rights workers estimate that approximately 20 percent of the population is forced to work for little to no wage either as domestic help or as agricultural laborers. Victims of slavery are mostly Haratins, an Arabized population of black African origin. The Haratins make up about 40 percent of the three million citizens of Mauritania. Like the IRA-Chairman Biram Dah Abeid, those who dare to denounce this scandal are,, subject to persecution and defamation. Biram Dah Abeid was sentenced to a year in prison by a Mauretanian court. After protests against his sentence in Mauritania and abroad he was released in the middle of February.

Since December 2010 there has been some movement in the discussion about slavery in Mauritania. Thousands of slaves were freed after human rights activists had campaigned for charging several slaveholders. House workers and former slaves are now protected by the law better than before. There was even a public discussion on the taboo subject of slavery on national television.

The Mauritanian human rights association IRA (Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement) opened criminal charges against the alleged slave keeper Aichetou Mint Saibott on 31st of July 2011. IRA accused her of enslaving the ten-year-old girl Ouaichita Mint Hamady. Both the neighbors and the child itself had reported of her being abused and exploited.

A cousin of the defendant – who worked at the local police station in Arafat – had informed the slaveholder and advised her to hide the girl and to contradict any accusations, so she claimed not to know the ten-year-old girl. Since the police took no attempt to free the enslaved child, human rights activists of IRA organized a peaceful sit-in in front of the police station – after which the slaveholder was finally arrested.

However, members of the slaveholder's influential family attacked the commissariat and the protesters during the night of August the 3rd 2011 and demanded her immediate release. The attackers – including Mahmoudi Ould Saibott, who is a close friend of the Mauritanian president – insulted the protesters as "dogs" and started to manhandle them. Finally, the slaveholder was released. The human rights activists kept up the sit-in until 4th of August, when the police arrested some of them and drove the group apart using batons and water cannons.

On 4 July 2011, 13 human rights activists were arrested in Mauritania for protesting against slavery and against impunity of the slaveholders. Nine protesters were injured during the police operation to end the protests in Arafat, a suburb of Noaukchott. The arbitrary arrest of the human rights activists shows that the Mauritanian authorities are not doing enough to fight this inhuman practice, despite of existing anti-slavery laws. The protection of slaveholders is more important to them than the safety of human rights activists. On 22 August 2011, five of the activists were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to twelve months. Some of the sentences were placed on probation. Nevertheless, the sentences must be called scandalous, since the human rights activists had peacefully protested for the implementation of existing laws. All convicts belong to IRA (Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement), a human rights organization campaigning for the end of slavery in Mauritania. Mr. Bilkheir Cheikh Dieng was sentenced to a year in prison; nine months of that period were placed on probation. Moulaye Abdel Kerim, Mokhtar Ould Mohamed Mahmoud, Cheikh Ould Ceyakh und Tourad Ould Zeid were sentenced to six months, their sentence was placed on probation. Four accused were acquitted. The prosecutor's office had demanded a three-year prison term without probation for all defendants.