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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 August 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Prison sentences for anti-slavery campaigners in Mauritania

Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about a massive wave of new arrests and prison sentences of human rights defenders in Mauritania.

There were new arrests of anti-slavery campaigners starting on 30 June, 2016. They occurred at the same moment than Biram Dah Abeid and Brahim Ramdhane were awarded in the US Department of State in Washington D.C. as “Heroes in the Combat against Human Trafficking” by U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry. It was the sixth international award for these courageous human rights defenders.

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid, the President of the association, had been awarded the UN Human Rights Prize 2013 for his commitment to fight against slavery. He and his Vice-President Brahim Ramdhane only were released on May 17, 2016, after 555 days of imprisonment after intervention of the High Court of Mauritania. The Court decided that their continued imprisonment for alleged participation in a public protest against slavery was illegal.

The two of them were arrested on November 11, 2014, and sentenced to two years imprisonment on January 15, 2015, based on charges of participating in an unauthorized demonstration against slavery, for having founded a non-registered organization, and for resistance to state violence. Ever since, numerous non-governmental organizations, representatives of foreign governments and the United Nations had advocated for their release.

The new wave of arrests started after on June 29, former slaves (Haratin) who have been living in a slum on the outskirts of Mauritania’s capital Nouakchott for 20 years, had protested against their imminent forced relocation.

In the following trial, 23 defendants were accused of instigating slum dwellers to protest against the impending evacuation of their homes on June 29, 2016 – and of organizing a partly violent demonstration. This was interpreted as “rebellion”, a “breach of the peace” and “armed resistance”. In addition, they were accused of resistance against the police.

On 19 August, 2016, 13 slavery-critics and seven protesters were sentenced to long prison sentences as a result of an unfair trial. Clearly, the biased judgements are to be seen as an attempt to silence human rights activists. The process was an attempt to give the impression of a rule of law, but aimed to lock away unwanted human rights activists for as long as possible.

Only three of the defendants were acquitted. 20 others were sentenced to prison terms of three to eight years. In addition, the convicts will have to pay 94,000 Euros in damages to the riot police and the state.

There are 13 leading members of the human rights organization IRA-Mauritanie among the convicts. They claimed to be innocent and accused the police of torture in custody as a means to get “confessions”. The other defendants were people who live in the slums.

Despite great efforts – involving examinations of the cell phones and computers of the defendants – the investigators did not manage to find evidence that they had actually taken part in the protests or committed any other crime.

Even the owner of the land that had been occupied by slum dwellers for many years did not recognize the IRA-representatives as accomplices – and he also disagreed with the statement of the police. In court, he reiterated that the slum dwellers had protested spontaneously, without instigations. The imprisoned IRA members pressed charges against ten police officers, accusing them of abuse and torture, but the court did not question the presented results of the controversial police investigation.

More than 30 local and international human rights organizations had demanded the immediate release of the 13 IRA-representatives who had been arrested in late June 2016. According to Amnesty International, they are to be seen as nonviolent prisoners of conscience.

The Mauritanian authorities are trying to destroy the whole human rights organization IRA and to push their leading activists into exile. This would be a catastrophe for Mauritania and the worldwide combat against human trafficking and slavery. And it would be a huge blow to civil society activities in Mauritania and documenting the shrinking spaces of NGOs in Mauritania.

IRA-Mauritania still is not legally registered as NGO because Mauritanian authorities steadily refuse to register the human rights organization as an NGO.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the government of Mauritania:

- To allow for the freedom of expression and to stop the silencing of human rights defenders,
- To officially recognize the anti-slavery organization IRA-Mauritania as a Non-Governmental Organization,
- To release the imprisoned anti-slavery campaigners from prison or allow for a fair re-trial,
- To enforce the existing anti-slavery laws.