



Covering events from January - December 2000

MAURITANIA

Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Head of state: Maaouiya Ould Sid 'Ahmed Taya

Head of government: Cheikh El Avia Ould Mohamed Khouna

Capital: Nouakchott

Population: 2.7 million

Official language: Arabic

Death penalty: retentionist



Dozens of political opponents of the government were arbitrarily detained; some were severely beaten by the security forces. Demonstrations were violently suppressed. The media and human rights organizations continued to be subjected to restrictions. No steps were taken by the authorities to investigate massive human rights violations committed during the late 1980s and early 1990s and to bring those responsible to justice.

Background

The government of President Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, which came to power in December 1984 following a military coup, has consistently prevented investigations into widespread human rights violations, including political killings, "disappearances" and torture, during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Attempts by the authorities to silence the opposition continued throughout the year. Political repression increased at the beginning of October, after the *Union des Forces Démocratiques-Ere Nouvelle* (UFD-EN), Union of Democratic Forces-New Era, urged the government to break off diplomatic ties with Israel in response to renewed conflict in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Several pro-Palestinian demonstrations were banned and violently suppressed. Scores of political opponents were arrested. Tension increased at the end of October when the government dissolved the UFD-EN.

Mauritanian anti-slavery organizations continued to express concern about the failure of the government to eradicate slavery. Local human rights organizations, including those campaigning against slavery, were forced to operate without government authorization, leaving human rights defenders liable to prosecution and imprisonment under Mauritanian law for "administer[ing] associations which are functioning without authorization". In 1998, four Mauritanian human rights

defenders including Boubacar Ould Messaoud, President of the anti-slavery organization *SOS-Esclaves*, were arrested after a television program on slavery featuring an interview with Boubacar Ould Messaoud was broadcast on a French language cable channel.

Arrests of political opponents

Scores of political opponents, including members of the UFD-EN, were arbitrarily detained and held incommunicado before being released without charge.

- In April opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah, Secretary General of the UFD-EN, was arrested and held incommunicado for five days before being released without charge. He was arrested after calling on the population to join a peaceful mass meeting in Nouakchott, organized by the UFD-EN, to protest against the government's failure to guarantee the rule of law in Mauritania and investigate the widespread political killings, "disappearances" and torture committed during the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- Ahmed Ould Lafdal, Ahmed Ould Wediaa, Ahmed Ould Bah and Sidi Ould Salem, all senior members of the UFD-EN, were arrested on 9 and 11 November following the government's decision to dissolve the UFD-EN. They were held incommunicado in a secret place of detention before being released without charge on 25 November.
- Mohamed El Hacem Ould Lebatt, Sidi Ould Yessa and Mouvid Ould Taleb, three students close to the UFD-EN, were arrested between 1 and 4 December, charged with "incitement to undermine the security of the state and belonging to a criminal organization", and transferred to Kaédi, in southern Mauritania. They were awaiting trial at the end of the year. Concerns were expressed by their defence lawyers and local human rights organizations about irregularities marring the legal proceedings.

Torture/ill-treatment

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There were consistent reports of beatings and ill-treatment of political opponents at the time of arrest and in custody. Scores of demonstrators were injured during attempts by the security forces to disperse protests.

- In June, dozens of black Mauritanian villagers belonging to the Haratines group were reportedly tortured by the security forces in Brakna district, southern Mauritania, following protests over land rights issues. The victims, including 29 women at least two of whom were pregnant, were severely beaten and many of them were forced to eat sand.
- On 27 April, Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ematt, a lawyer and leading member of the UFD-EN, Yedali Ould Cheikh, former Justice Minister, and Fatimetou Mint Haydala, were severely beaten by the security forces in front of the UFD-EN headquarters in Nouadhibou while protesting at the detention of opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah. The judicial authorities in Nouadhibou did not pursue the complaint lodged by two of the victims, despite evidence of the beatings, including photos and a medical certificate. Appeals filed with higher courts were not allowed to proceed.
- On 4 November Aminetou Mint Eleyat died after the security forces used tear gas to suppress a peaceful high-school student demonstration in Nouakchott. The authorities denied reports suggesting that her death was

related to the use of tear gas.

- In October and November some of those arrested in Nouakchott in the context of pro-Palestinian demonstrations were severely beaten.
- On 1 November Mohamed Ould Moloud, a leading member of the UFD-EN, and two other opposition supporters, Cheikh Ould Sidaty and Mohamed Ould Rabah, were arbitrarily detained. The three were hit with batons at the time of their arrest and then beaten while being taken to the regional police headquarters. They were released in the evening after being questioned about their political affiliation.

Impunity

In April, Captain Ely Ould Dah, a Mauritanian officer arrested in France in 1999 on suspicion of torturing at least two people in 1990 and 1991, fled France while on bail. In September 1999 a French court had ordered his provisional release, but required Ely Ould Dah to stay in the country until investigations were completed. Ely Ould Dah returned to Mauritania where he was reportedly allowed to remain in the army. On 7 April a French judge issued an international arrest warrant against him but no attempt to arrest him was known to have been made by the Mauritanian authorities.

The Mauritanian authorities failed to take any steps to investigate massive human rights violations committed during the late 1980s and early 1990s and to bring those responsible to justice.

Restrictions on press freedom

During 2000 several issues of weekly newspapers were seized under Article 11 of the 1991 Press Law which allows the government to censor arbitrarily publications which criticize government actions or policies. In August in one week alone, issues of four newspapers, including *La Tribune*, were seized. In December the weekly *Al Alam* was closed down by the authorities; no reason was given for the closure.

AI country statement

- Mauritania: As an opposition coalition is banned, growing political unrest could lead to further deaths, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment by the security forces (AI Index: [AFR 38/003/2000](#))
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