

August 26, 2015

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Mark P. Lagon
President

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are deeply troubled by the August 20th court ruling in Mauritania upholding a two-year prison sentence for anti-slavery activists Biram dah Abeid (recipient of the 2013 UN Human Rights Prize), Brahim Bilal, and Djiby Sow. The Mauritanian government has demonstrated a complete disregard for rule of law and basic human rights by imprisoning human rights defenders for exercising their right to freedom of assembly and expression and by circumventing the judicial process for appeal.

When arrested in November 2014, the human rights organizations that Abeid, Bilal and Sow represent were leading a peaceful sensitization “caravan” along the Senegal River – as the biggest obstacle to the struggle against slavery in Mauritania is the lack of awareness about the problem. On January 15, 2015, the Mauritanian government sentenced Abeid, Bilal and Sow to two years imprisonment for inciting rebellion and membership in an ‘illegal’ organization. In an attempt to diffuse popular support for the prisoners and make it difficult for their family and lawyers to visit, within 24 hours of being sentenced, all three were arbitrarily moved to the remote location of Aleg. In light of these events, **we urge you to publicly condemn this injustice; encourage the government of Mauritania to enforce its anti-slavery laws; and seriously reconsider Mauritania’s eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).**

Freedom House has documented Mauritania’s deteriorating human rights record in its annual *Freedom in the World* report. In 2009, Mauritania was downgraded from ‘Partly Free’ to ‘Not Free’ status, due to the military’s ouster of the democratically elected president. Under President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, political power is highly centralized in the hands of the executive and the scale of slavery has not diminished. According to the Global Slavery Index, Mauritania has the highest prevalence of modern slavery in the world at an estimated 4% of the population - although many local human rights organizations put the number close to 20%.

Abeid’s organization, the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), among others, have been instrumental in raising the issue of slavery to the forefront, exposing abuses and mobilizing Mauritanian citizens to demand basic rights. Since the November arrests, the organization’s resources have been funneled into legal proceedings and drawn away from their ultimate mission to eliminate slavery in Mauritania.

We urge the United States to publically condemn the decision by the appeal court in Aleg against Abeid, Bilal and Sow. The United States provides over \$40 million in security assistance to Mauritania. This aid offers a significant amount of leverage to engage the Mauritanian government on issues of human rights. Also, as you made clear in your remarks at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism earlier this year, civil society groups and human rights defenders like Abeid, Bilal and Sow are essential in the struggle against violent extremism as they promote social and political inclusion, diminishing the appeal of extremist groups.

The United States should press the government of Mauritania to enforce its anti-slavery laws. We welcomed the enactment of tougher laws against slavery earlier this month, especially provisions which allow non-profit organizations to file complaints on the behalf of victims; however, the Mauritanian government's commitment to implement these laws is in doubt. Since Mauritania criminalized slavery in 2007, the government has not provided adequate resources for the special tribunal dedicated to slavery prosecutions - as noted in the recent report issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery - and only one perpetrator has been brought to justice. Weakening local human rights organizations will make the enforcement of anti-slavery laws even less likely.

Finally, the United States should reconsider Mauritania's AGOA eligibility on human rights grounds. During the upcoming AGOA eligibility review of Mauritania, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative should consult with Mauritanian human rights organizations regarding the restrictions on political rights and civil liberties as well as the trend lines in the incidence of slavery that exist in the country.

As one of Mauritania's closest allies and key partner in the fight against terrorism, the United States is in a strong position to encourage President Aziz's government to stop persecuting anti-slavery activists and live up to its own commitments to end slavery. These efforts would help make Mauritania more pluralistic and resilient and decrease terrorism and instability.

Sincerely,

Mark P. Lagon
President, Freedom House

Co-Signers:

The Abolition Institute
Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT – Germany)
Agir Ensemble pour les Droits de l'Homme (AEDH)
Anti-Slavery International
Article 19
Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille
Free the Slaves

Human Rights First
IRA – Mauritanie
IRA – USA
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
SOS-Esclaves
Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization (UNPO)
Vivere