

PUBLIC APPEAL

Press for the legal recognition of Mauritanian human rights organizations!

Several human rights organizations have difficulty operating in Mauritania, especially those working on slavery. *SOS Esclaves* is the sole human rights NGO to have made slavery its main focus, but others, such as the *Association Mauritanienne des Droits de l'Homme* (AMDH), Mauritanian Human Rights Association, are also active in this area. Although recognized by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and other international human rights bodies, these two organizations, plus several others, remain illegal as the government has failed to grant them official recognition. *SOS Esclaves* produces annual reports on its activities. It has intervened many times on behalf of former slaves who are seeking to be reunited with their children or other members of their families, to have access to land, or to inherit the belongings of their own relatives.

In early 1998 five human rights defenders, including Boubacar Messaoud, President of *SOS Esclaves*, Professor Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara and Maître Fatimata M'Baye, respectively President and Vice-President of the AMDH at the time, were convicted to a term of imprisonment for running unauthorized organizations. Although these human rights defenders were granted presidential clemency in March 1998 after almost three-months' detention, on the very day that the Appeal Court rejected their appeals and confirmed their 13-month prison sentences, their organizations still remain without official recognition by the Ministry of the Interior. They were all considered prisoners of conscience by AI. The defenders continue their activities to promote and protect human rights, but their lack of official recognition is a constant threat to their organizations' survival as well as their personal safety and effectively stifled debate on the necessary measures for eradicating slavery.

In May 2002, Boubacar Messaoud was arrested by Mauritanian security forces and briefly detained after the publication of a statement by *SOS Esclaves* in which it was alleged that a detainee had been tortured by the police. He was accused of defamation and the Nouakchott regional police director announced his intention to take him to court on these grounds.

More recently, in November 2004, during a press conference, the Minister of Communication reportedly accused AMDH and *SOS Esclaves* of being "enemies and plotters against the country in the pay of the outside world" ("ennemis et de comploteurs contre le pays à la solde de l'étranger"). They had been denouncing torture and ill-treatment against military officers arrested in connection with allegations of coup attempts. Public smear campaign is not new for these two organizations. In 2002 for instance, they were condemned by the press following the launch of AI's report "Mauritania: a future free from slavery?" in which they had participated.

The 1964 Mauritanian law on association, amended in 1973, provides for criminal sanctions of one to three years imprisonment and a fine to "those who, in any capacity, run or continue to run associations operating without authorization, associations which have been dissolved (...)." The power to give authorization belongs to the Minister of Interior.

Take action!

Please send appeals in French, Arabic or your own language:

- expressing concern that several human rights organizations are still not recognized which poses a constant threat to the organizations' survival as well as the personal safety of their representatives; urging the Mauritanian authorities to authorise these organizations so that they are able to operate freely;
- urging the Mauritanian Government to ensure that human rights defenders are not threatened, harassed and that their lives are not put at risk as a result of their legitimate activities;
- urging the Mauritanian Government to abide by its obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' rights, in particular the rights to freedom of expression and association, by allowing everyone in the country to enjoy these rights without undue interference;
- urging the Mauritanian authorities to respect the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998 which states in Article 1 that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels".

Please send your letters in French, Arabic or your own language to:

Minister for the Interior, Post and Telecommunications
Ministre de l'Intérieur, des Postes et Télécommunications
M. Mohamed Ghaly Ould Chérif Ahmed
B.P. 195
Nouakchott, Mauritania

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

President of the Republic
Président de la République
Maaouya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya
Présidence de la République
B.P. 184
Nouakchott, Mauritania

Salutation: Monsieur le Président / Dear Mr President

Please send copies to **AMDH**, BP 5012, Nouakchott, Mauritania, Fax +222 525 71 54 and **SOS Esclaves** BP 4302, Nouakchott, Mauritania, Email: afrique@sosesclaves.org

And to diplomatic representatives of Mauritania accredited to your country.