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Mauritania: Peaceful demonstrations demanding restoration of the rule of law violently repressed

Amnesty International is calling on the Mauritanian authorities to end violent repression of the peaceful demonstrations that have been organised in the capital Nouakchott since the military coup on 6 August 2008 when President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and his government were overthrown.

During two of these demonstrations, on 5 and 7 October 2008, several people, including Senator Youssouf Sylla, and a number of trade union leaders, including Abderahmane Ould Boubou and Mohamed Ould Saleck, were beaten with truncheons as they took part in a peaceful demonstration calling for a return to constitutional order and restoration of the rule of law. Tear gas grenades were used to break up the demonstrations.

Repression of these two latest demonstrations comes after a decision by the governor of Nouakchott on 30 September 2008 to suspend "*all demonstrations of a political nature on the public highway ... until further notice*". This decision infringes freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, contained in article 10 of the Constitution of Mauritania and enshrined in articles 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Mauritania ratified on 17 February 2005.

Amnesty International is also calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the president of Mauritania, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, and his prime minister, Yahya Ould Ahmed Waghf, who are being held arbitrarily without charge. Amnesty International considers the Mauritanian president and his prime minister to be prisoners of conscience. The former president of Mauritania has been under house arrest for more than 60 days. Neither his family nor his lawyers have been permitted to visit him. Furthermore, the former prime minister has also been placed under house arrest in Tagant, his native region, 500 kilometres east of Nouakchott.

BACKGROUND

On 6 August 2008, a group of army officers overthrew the Mauritanian government, in office since the presidential elections of March 2007. President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, his prime minister, the minister of the interior and two other senior State officials were arrested. All apart from the Head of State have been released.

A High State Council comprising eleven members of the armed forces was established by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who led the coup. The High State Council has undertaken to organise free and transparent elections "within the shortest time possible".

The international community has called for the release of the Head of State and a return to constitutional order. A number of countries, including France and the United States, have frozen their non-humanitarian aid to Mauritania. Moreover, the African Union (AU) suspended the

country's membership of its organization on 9 August 2008. On 22 September 2008, the AU's Peace and Security Council called for *"a return to constitutional order with the unconditional reinstatement of M. Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, by 6 October 2008 at the latest"* and warned those responsible for the coup d'état and their civilian supporters of the possibility of sanctions and isolation.