

6 November 2000

AI Index AFR 38/003/2000 - News Service Nr. 211

Mauritania: As an opposition coalition is banned, growing political unrest could lead to further deaths, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment by the security forces

Amnesty International condemns what appears to be excessive use of force by the security forces and is concerned for the safety of those taking part in further demonstrations anticipated in the coming days.

Several people have been injured and one woman has died after security forces used tear gas and batons to break up opposition demonstrations in the past week in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. Scores of opponents have been briefly detained and many beaten and kicked while held at the *Direction de la Sûreté de l'Etat*, State Security Headquarters.

Amnesty International urges the Mauritanian authorities to immediately end the use of arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment to suppress political opposition and to order an independent and impartial investigation into the death of Aminetou Mint Eleyat and allegations of beatings of opponents.

Since the beginning of October, political tension has increased in Mauritania as a result of the renewed fighting in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Several opposition demonstrations in support of the Palestinians have been forbidden and violently suppressed. Peaceful opponents have been arbitrarily arrested. Tension has been exacerbated by the government's decision on 28 October to dissolve *l'Union des forces démocratiques/Ere nouvelle* (UFD/EN), Union of Democratic Forces-New Era, a coalition of opposition parties.

On 4 November Aminetou Mint Eleyat died after the security forces used tear gas to suppress a peaceful high school student demonstration in Teyaret-arrêt bis, on the outskirts of Nouakchott. She was on her way to the market when she was caught up in the demonstration. Reports suggest that her death was related to the use of tear gas.

Three days earlier on 1 November scores of opponents were arrested by the police and briefly detained in the capital. Mohamed Ould Moloud, a leading member of the UFD/EN, was arbitrarily arrested with two other opposition supporters, Cheikh Ould Sidaty and Mohamed Ould Rabah. The three were hit with batons at the time of the arrest. Beatings continued while they were being taken to the *Direction de la Sûreté de l'Etat* in a police vehicle. The three were released in the evening after being questioned about their political affiliation. Scores of other people were arrested and taken to the *Direction de la Sûreté de l'Etat* the same day. Many of them appeared to have been ill-treated. All those arrested were reported to have been released at the end of the day.

Also on 1 November, a student demonstration in Nouakchott involving hundreds of people went ahead despite the deployment of security forces in the capital to prevent it. Although initially

peaceful, the demonstrators responded by throwing stones and burning tyres when the security forces threw tear gas and used batons to disperse them. Clashes between the security forces and the demonstrators went on for several hours and resulted in many people being injured, including by tear gas.

Background

As a result of the deepening crisis in Israel and the Occupied Territories, the Mauritanian opposition coalition UFD/EN urged the government to break off diplomatic ties with the Israeli government which had been established in 1999. On 28 October the UFD/EN, accused of "inciting violence", was dissolved by government decree. Ahmed Ould Daddah, the UFD/EN Secretary General, rejected the accusations and described the government's decision as void and illegitimate. Earlier on 24 April 2000 Ahmed Ould Daddah had been arrested for 'inciting violence' after he called for a peaceful mass protest against the government's failure to uphold the rule of law and investigate the widespread political killings, "disappearances" and torture committed during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Amnesty International called for his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience. He was released without charge on 29 April.

Human rights organizations, the media and opposition parties continue to operate with great difficulty in Mauritania. Press freedom is severely curtailed and human rights organizations are 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".

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>