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Mauritania

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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May 31, 1991

The Honorable Carla Hills
U.S. Trade Representative
600 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Ambassador Hills:

Africa Watch hereby petitions the U.S. Trade Representative pursuant to Section 502(b) of the Trade Act, requesting review of worker rights in Mauritania during the upcoming 1991-92 review process. We request this review because Mauritania is not in compliance with the worker rights standards set forth in the law. Following your review, Mauritania's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits should be removed, as mandated by law, if that country is found to be in non-compliance with U.S. law.

As you know, the Trade Act states that the President shall not designate any country a beneficiary developing country under this section "if such country has not taken or is not taking steps to afford internationally recognized workers rights...."¹ By allowing slavery, Mauritania is clearly in violation of the prohibition on the use of any form of forced or compulsory labor and is also violating each of the other four criteria set forth in the law.

As you can see from the attached newsletter, Slavery: Alive and Well, 10 Years After it was Last Abolished, Mauritania is currently practicing forced labor in its most dramatic and indefensible form -- slavery. Although slavery was abolished, for the third time, on July 5, 1980, and Mauritania is a party to the two International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions abolishing forced labor, President Maoyia Ould Sid 'Ahmed Taya continues to allow slavery and to persecute those who are attempting to bring about an end to this racist practice. (In 1981, the London-based Anti-Slavery Society estimated that there were a minimum of

Free

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¹ Sec. 502 (b) (8) of the Trade Act of 1974, as amended.

The Hon. Carla Hills
May 31, 1991
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100,000 slaves in Mauritania. It is impossible to know an exact figure at this time because Mauritians have been too fearful to speak about their experiences with the few human rights groups that have been allowed to investigate this problem.)

In Mauritania today, particularly in the countryside, black slaves remain the property of their master. They work long hours for no remuneration, have no access to education and no other basic freedoms such as the right to marry, associate freely with other blacks, or practice their own religion.

Slaves are also frequently tortured physically. They suffer "routine" mistreatment such as beatings with a wet cord while naked, denial of food and drink, prolonged exposure to the sun with hands and feet tied together. Male slaves who disobey the master's order, attempt to escape or appear to be planning an escape, or who have sexual relations with a member of the master's family are subjected to more severe torture. In one example of the severe torture endured by the slaves, insects are stuffed into the ears of the victim and small stones are used to ensure that the insects remain in the ear, and then a headscarf is tied tightly around the head. The victim's hands and feet are also tied up to prevent movement. After several days the scarf and stones are removed, the insects having destroyed the victim's mind. Other examples are included in the attached newsletter.

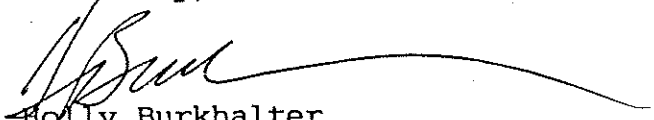
Witness

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crap.*

Africa Watch believes that the Mauritanian government must back up its words with action. While the government did issue a decree to abolish slavery, the government must work to end this abhorrent practice that continues unabated. Until the practice of forced labor is terminated in Mauritania, Mauritania should not receive any benefits under the GSP program. (The attached newsletter contains several recommendations to the Mauritanian government to abolish the practice of slavery.)

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,



Holly Burkhalter
Washington Director
Human Rights Watch

June 29, 1990

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MAURITANIA

SLAVERY:

Alive and Well, 10 Years After it was Last Abolished

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Of course slavery still exists today in Mauritania. The reason is simple. Whatever emancipations there have been, we continue to work for the same master, we continue to do the same kind of work for no pay and to live under the same conditions. Nothing has changed, except in words. We have not been given either the education or the economic means to become aware of our rights and to take advantage of them. The worst is the countryside, where most of the slaves live. There, it is ancient Mauritania; slaves don't even know they have rights, and they don't know anything about emancipation. I had heard of the abolition, but it had no practical effect on my life.

— Moustapha, 48, a recently escaped slave, interview with Africa Watch, River Senegal valley, June 1, 1990.

It's only the semantics that have changed. People hesitate a little more now in using the word slave, except in anger or as an insult. Depending on the region, different euphemisms exist, especially in the cities. Sometimes you hear "my student". Every Mauritanian knows when the word is being used to describe a slave and when it refers to a student in school. Others say my "domestic", that is domestics who work 24 hours a day for no pay, who have no rights at all. The master's family treat them as they have always treated their slaves, and they still think of themselves as slaves, because no one has told them anything different.

— Moussa, a black former official of the Mauritanian government, interview with Africa Watch, Dakar, May 21, 1990

INTRODUCTION:

On July 5, 1980, the government of president Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah passed a decree abolishing slavery for the third time in Mauritania's history. In November 1981, the government issued an ordinance encouraging judicial authorities to enforce the provisions of the 1980 Decree. The ordinance declared that "slavery is definitely abolished throughout the national territory" and added that former slaves hold all the rights previously denied to them. Developments in the last ten years do not justify the government's optimistic assessment. The abolition was essentially a public-relations exercise prompted by external considerations. It was never intended as a well thought out policy aimed at eradicating the age-old practice of slavery.

In spite of these pronouncements it is clear, based on interviews with recently escaped slaves and other Mauritanians, that the institution is still strong, especially in the countryside. There are tens of thousands of black slaves who remain the property of their master, subject entirely to his will, working long hours for no remuneration, with no access to education and no freedom to marry or to associate freely with other blacks. They escape servitude not by exercising their "legal" rights, but mainly through escape. Ignorance of their rights, fear of

recapture, knowledge of the savage torture meted out to slaves who attempt to leave, and the lack of marketable skills in an otherwise impoverished country, discourage a substantial number of slaves from trying to escape. Slavery is said to be particularly widespread in the eastern part of the country, especially in Atar, but also in Kiffa, Ashram and Aleg, where there are very few blacks other than slaves.

In making these observations, Africa Watch recognizes that abolishing slavery, which is deeply rooted in Mauritania, is a difficult and long-term problem. Our criticism is not that the Mauritanian government has tried to eradicate slavery and failed, but that it has not tried at all. We are not aware of any significant practical steps taken by successive governments to fulfil the important responsibilities Mauritania undertook when it passed laws and ratified international agreements prohibiting slavery. Its persistence is largely explained by the fact that legislative enactments have not been accompanied by initiatives in the economic and social field.

Government literature refers only to "*haratines*", or freed slaves, creating the myth that slavery is a problem of the past. What there has been is largely a revolution in semantics. In the cities, the term "*abd*" (arabic for slave), has been abandoned in favour of "the blue ones" (*les bleus*) or the "Sudanese" (*les Sudanais*). Other terms include "pupil" or "domestic", domestics who are not paid, have no rights and are entirely at the mercy of their employer – in other words, slaves.

A representative of Africa Watch spent a month in Senegal in May/June and interviewed a wide range of black Mauritians about racial discrimination in Mauritania, including the question of slavery. Among those who spoke with Africa Watch were a number of slaves who escaped from Mauritania, even as recently as March 1990, and many *haratines* who were deported from Mauritania. In addition, many slaves who came to live in Senegal with their masters years ago, chose to remain in Senegal for fear that if they returned to Mauritania, they would be forced to live as slaves. Consequently, there are substantial slave and *haratine* populations living in St. Louis, Rosso, Richard Toll and many of the towns and villages along the valley.

Africa Watch is not in a position to confirm the number of people living as slaves in Mauritania. Repeated requests by Africa Watch to visit Mauritania have been unsuccessful. In 1981, after a visit to Mauritania, the London-based Anti-Slavery Society calculated that "...the country probably holds a minimum of 100,000 total slaves with a further 300,000 part-slaves and ex-slaves".* The great exodus of slaves fleeing the countryside for the cities had taken place by 1981. There were two major events which facilitated their departure. The first was the severe drought of 1969-74 which led to hundreds of thousands of people, including many masters, coming to towns in search of better economic opportunities; in addition, many masters sent their slaves to work in the cities and the mines near Zouerate. The second event was the 1975-78 war over the Western Sahara during which there were massive recruitment drives. It is therefore

* *Slavery in Mauritania Today*, John Mercer, at p.1.

possible that there has not been a dramatic change in the estimates given by the Anti-Slavery Society, but Africa Watch cannot confirm this.

For the most part, the names of *haratines*, former slaves, the identity of their masters and their current whereabouts in Senegal have been changed in order to protect their identity.

N.B. The term slave is used here to draw a distinction between those who are still the property of their master and a haratine, who is no longer in the service of a master.

Mauritania's legal obligations to end slavery

Slavery is expressly prohibited by international law and by a number of international treaties to which Mauritania is a party. Article 4 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifically outlaws slavery:

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Several other articles of the Declaration prohibit the characteristic features of slavery, such as the denial of freedom, of dignity and of equal protection before the law. Other articles protect many of the fundamental rights which slaves, by definition, do not enjoy, such as the right to freedom of movement, the unfettered right to marry and found a family, and the right to remuneration for the work they do.

Five other conventions ratified by Mauritania address the question of slavery.

On June 6, 1986, Mauritania acceded to the 1951 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. On the same date, Mauritania acceded to the 1957 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery.

Mauritania is also party to the 1930 Forced Labour Convention and the 1957 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Mauritania has also ratified the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which affirms individual equality before the law and rights to liberty, property and equal pay for equal work, while prohibiting the domination of one people by another.

The Historic Roots of Slavery in Mauritania

Slavery has existed in Mauritania for many centuries. Blacks were brought north after being captured by raiding Arab/Berber tribes. The descendants of Berber and Arab warriors/invaders, are known as "*beydanes*", meaning "white" in *hassaniya*, the dialect of arabic

spoken by *beydanes*. The possession of slaves was considered a symbol of the status of the individual and the tribe, but there were also important economic considerations. The slave who lived and travelled with the nomadic household looked after the needs of the family. Traditional sources of income, such as animal husbandry and agriculture, relied on slave labor. The farmers who remained behind to cultivate the land had the responsibility of maintaining a food supply. The master usually returned for the harvest, taking most of the crop and leaving the minimum for the slaves.

Slaves were not permitted to marry, and their children belonged to their master. They were considered so much the property of their master that they could be killed with absolute impunity. Even when they were killed for insignificant reasons, which happened frequently, their murders went unnoticed by the authorities.

Haratines whose children did not belong to the former master, had the legal right to own property and enter into contracts. Traditionally, *haratines* became emancipated through several different routes. Most of the educated *haratines* are the sons and grandsons of slaves who were "given" to the French colonial army by their masters. The French sought recruits for the army among both the blacks living in the south, and the *beydanes*. The overwhelming majority of *beydanes* preferred to "contribute" a slave instead. This subsequently led to the emancipation of those slaves. Others sought jobs and later purchased their freedom and that of their family. *Haratines* have kept the language and customs of the *beydanes*.

In spite of their freedom, there are still profound links between the two communities. We received many accounts of the descendants of *haratines* who still pay a financial tribute to the original master's family, even in cases where the *haratine* in question is himself educated and has become a successful businessman or professional. We were also told of many *haratines* who work in neighbouring countries and even in France, using a substantial part of their earnings to buy their emancipation and that of their family, highlighting the inadequacy of the legal prohibition in force. Even though no longer slaves, *haratines* continue to suffer discrimination, both on account of their colour and their historical origins.

The Inadequacy of Previous Attempts to Abolish Slavery

By the turn of the century, France was the administering power in Mauritania and in 1905, France adopted a decree abolishing slavery. It was abolished again, in the 1961 constitution. The constitution guaranteed all citizens equality before the law without distinction of race, religion, or social status. Neither measure succeeded in putting an end to the system because no practical measures were taken to enforce the abolition. The inadequacy of these provisions was underlined by the fact that *haratines* who tried to exercise their new-found freedom were returned to their masters by local authorities, including magistrates and policemen. Many of them owned slaves themselves and regarded the abolition as a threat to their self-interest. Prior to 1980 and since then, slaves became emancipated usually by purchasing their own freedom, or more commonly,

through escape.

Seeking Emancipation: the El Hor Movement

In 1974, *haratines* founded El Hor as a pressure group to advance the interests of *haratines* and slaves. El Hor derives from the arabic word meaning "freedom". Hoping to raise consciousness among the slave and *haratine* communities, the creation of El Hor gave voice to deep-seated grievances. They distributed tracts and organized demonstrations. El Hor argued that emancipation was impossible without practical measures to enforce anti-slavery laws and provide former slaves with the means to gain economic independence. To this end, it called for land reform and encouraged *haratines* to set up agricultural cooperatives.

The controversial sale of a slave woman, Mbarka, in Atar in February 1980 brought the brewing crisis to a head. There was nothing uncommon about such sales. What distinguished this case was that a well-educated *haratine*, Lt. Barakould Barek, wanted to marry the slave in question. As she was apparently particularly beautiful, her master decided he could sell her for a great deal of money on the open market. At the market place, two *beydanes* fought over her and the case came to attract national attention. The incident released pent-up expressions of broader grievances. El Hor organized demonstrations in Nouakchott, Rosso, Nouadhibou and other towns. Barek himself was arrested, imprisoned and demoted. (He was subsequently released and his military rank restored when a new government came to power.)

El Hor's emphasis on social issues and demands for redress and justice inevitably brought it into confrontation with the government. Frightened about the possible consequences of El Hor's activities, the government's initial strategy was repression. The authorities clamped down with a special ferocity. A substantial number of the movement's leaders and members were arrested, severely tortured and many of them exiled in 1979/80, signalling the government's unwillingness to allow El Hor to become an independent forum agitating for the rights of *haratines*.

In January 1980, a military coup brought President Haidallah to power. The new government embarked on a policy of undermining the movement by appearing to satisfy its demands. On July 5, 1980, the "abolition" of slavery was proclaimed. The move was also prompted by President Haidallah's desire to forestall any possible political links between the opposition, led by former president Moktar Ould Daddah, and black opposition groups. In addition, the government sought to divide the organization by co-opting some of its spokesmen, offering them high government posts, promotions and economic opportunities.

El Hor still exists today but does not constitute a significant political force. It was at its strongest in 1978-82. According to many *haratines* who spoke with Africa Watch, active members do not dare meet openly or discuss their affairs publicly for fear of violent reprisals. If slavery has "ended", it is difficult to understand why an organization whose objectives are to improve the life of former slaves should be forced into secrecy.

SLAVERY IN MAURITANIA TODAY

General Comments

According to many sources, it is common to find even *haratines* in high government positions who have brothers and sisters working in the house of a master. Either most slaves, living in isolated regions of the country inhabited exclusively by *beydanes* and slaves, did not have a chance to learn of the abolition or could not believe that it was true. In an interview with Africa Watch on June 1, Moustapha, a shepherd who escaped from his master in March 1990, summed up the situation:

Slavery is intact today in Mauritania. I never heard the abolition discussed in my master's house. I learned of it from some Halpulaar villagers living near us. I don't know of any slave who got to know about the abolition in his master's home. All the ones I have met who have heard of it learned from other black communities, which is why masters are so sensitive to any contact between slaves on the one hand, and free *haratines* and other blacks, on the other hand. If the master suspects that you are visiting free blacks, severe punishments await you. The first time I heard of the abolition, I was indifferent because I did not believe it. Then I began thinking about it and I became more curious. I returned to the same Halpulaar neighbours to seek an explanation. My master became suspicious when I came back late and he found out that I had seen our Halpulaar neighbours. In order to show his displeasure, I was undressed, my hands and feet tied up and I was made to lie flat on my stomach in the burning sun. I was then whipped with a whip made of cowhide and during the night, when the temperature was cold, they kept pouring cold water all over my body.

The Buying and Selling of Slaves

The government argues that the sale of slaves ended in the 1960s, but the extensive interviews conducted by Africa Watch contradict these claims. While the public sale of slaves in the open market has disappeared, former slaves told Africa Watch that in the countryside, the system has been merely refined and disguised. Frequently, the slave himself is not aware what kind of agreement has been reached. According to Moustapha:

Slaves are still bought and sold. The last sale I remember happened during the last winter season [November 1989 to February 1990] when a boy of two was sold by his master, Mohamed ould Mbarak to Naji ould Rouej. The mother had just stopped suckling the boy. The sale took place in a village called Drajni in the region of Trarza.

Several independent sources reported a 1983 case in which a black officer in the military police was transferred to Boghe after he protested the sale of a slave at the market in Boutilimit.

Diop is a black health worker who was married to a *haratine* and lived in Atar for the past twelve years, before his expulsion in May 1989. Atar is a region inhabited primarily by *beydanes*.

Slaves are still bought and sold but with a difference, that is without the publicity that was previously considered so distasteful. Nowadays, *beydane* tribes make discreet arrangements among themselves. A slave is given in exchange for something else. Then there are the "presents". I recall the case of a young woman who had a child. The child, who was eight months, was given to a cousin of the master, as a "present", for life. It was agreed not to transfer the child to his new owner until the mother had stopped breast-feeding him.

The Life of Slaves:

Constraints on Practicing Religion

Religion has been used by masters as an important instrument to perpetuate slavery. Relying on the fact that Islam recognizes the practice of slavery, they have misinterpreted it to justify current practices. However, Islam only permits treating as slaves non-Islamic captives caught after holy wars, on condition that they are released as soon as they convert to Islam. People living as slaves in Mauritania long before the first abolition in 1905 were all Moslems, but this did not lead to their emancipation. We received numerous complaints about the extent to which *qadis* (judges in Islamic courts) continue to exercise their judicial functions to protect the institution of slavery, rather than to ensure its eradication.

Diop gave an example:

The father of a friend of mine was a slave. My friend was a *haratine*. In 1983, the father who had worked all his life for the same master, with whom he had good relations, died. Because of the close relations he had enjoyed with his master, he had been given some land to work himself and he left behind a house and a small plot. After his death, the master proceeded to sell his assets. My friend went to the police to lodge a complaint and he was arrested for two days. The case was taken before the *qadi* who immediately decided in favour of the master.

A black religious leader from Aleg commented that:

Slaves are not permitted to practice Islam freely. It is extremely rare to see a slave in the mosque; a slave must have a special status in the hierarchy of the household

to be allowed to attend the mosque. As a general rule, those engaged in domestic work do not go to the mosque. Islam requires that only "free" people attend the mosque and *haratines* working in practice as slaves are not perceived by their masters as "free" beings.

All those who spoke with Africa Watch emphasized the extent to which slaves are conditioned, both by their masters and religious leaders, to regard serving their masters as a religious duty. We were told of many local expressions used to teach slaves to accept their subordinate position as a reward for going to heaven. Mawliid, who is fluent in hassaniya, was a student at the University of Nouakchott. His family had lived in various towns in the north. He said that the phrase, "the way to heaven is underneath the sole of your master's foot" is commonly used to sum up the attitude towards slaves and religion.

Another religious leader, also from Aleg, added:

It is difficult for a slave to go to the mosque to pray because they have not been taught what to recite. After the last abolition, the masters intimidated their slaves by telling them that their choice was to follow them or to go to hell. Given the culture they had lived in all their lives, it is easy to understand why so many believe this.

Education

Unlike *haratines*, slaves do not have opportunities to attend modern schools. Some slave children are permitted to attend Koranic schools, (religious schools) but only if their labor is not required by their household.

A number of black religious leaders interviewed by Africa Watch all commented that they never had a slave as a pupil in their Koranic schools. The following was a typical comment:

I never had a slave as a student in Koranic school. They are not permitted to attend. I only had as pupils a few whose parents had escaped to the city. Otherwise, no slaves came as students. Once at school, if they are regarded as having developed a "disrespectful" attitude, they are sent to the countryside to tend the animals.

All the former slaves who spoke with Africa Watch saw education and training as the basic tools for emancipation. Bilal, a *haratine*, is a 27 year-old fisherman from Nouakchott.

If slaves are ever going to be free, education is their most fundamental weapon. The master knows this too; that is why he resists educating his slaves; he knows this will eventually lead to freedom. In order to maintain their servitude, if there is any possibility that the slave is having contact with free blacks, the master

promptly despatches him to the bush.

Marriage and Family Life

Traditionally, slaves have no right to marry or found a family, and the children born to a slave woman are the property of her master. Parents do not have any rights over their children. Slaves living in the cities enjoy, perhaps, some degree of family life – such as a tent to themselves – but in the countryside there are no formalities governing marriage. With exceptions, the two masters make the necessary arrangements. Even if the woman is allowed to join her husband's household, her master can call her back to his house at anytime and the husband can not say anything.

The Economy of Slavery

Nowhere is the failure to confront the reality of slavery more apparent than in the economic field. A former slave, a butcher working in a village along the valley, summarized the situation in the following terms:

There is physical slavery and there is economic slavery. Even though physical slavery has been abolished, nothing has been done about economic slavery which is the best way to guarantee both physical and psychological slavery.

There was unanimous agreement between former slaves and other black Mauritians that all work continues to be the exclusive responsibility of slaves, whether it is to look after the animals, cultivate the land, collect the water or take care of domestic chores. None of them said they had ever seen a *beydane* undertake these tasks.

Moussa Ndiaye (not his real name), was a teacher in Tagant region from 1984 until he was deported in May 1989.

No one can tell me that slavery is dead in Mauritania. I found an old and well-established social order in which everyone had their place, clearly marked. After five years of seeing for myself the life of slaves, it is clear to me that it is meaningless to draw a distinction between the "*haratine* of X" and the "slave of X". The different exists only in the language, not in reality. The center of the social order is the white master who has the right to do nothing while the blacks do all the work. When the master goes to the fields, he usually sits in the shade of a tree and is served tea while the blacks do all the work. No white woman does any domestic work. All household tasks are done by slave women who have grown up in the household. Although she grows up together with the white children, she is made to understand, from a tender age, that she is at the service

of her companion and is taught to make tea, prepare meals and attend to all their needs and whims. It is the same with the young boys. They are taught to cultivate the land, draw water from the well, guard the herds for their white masters and to wash their clothes. This system exists throughout Mauritania where the *beydanes* live. I know this sounds extreme, but in fact, compared to other regions in the north, the region I lived in was relatively moderate.

Abdoulaye is a former government employee who had previously worked in a private enterprise. A black Mauritanian, he grew up among *beydanes* in the north.

Slavery exists throughout Mauritania at this very moment. If merely announcing its abolition is sufficient, they need not have abolished it three times. The economic reality in the United States that forced so many slaves to stay with their former masters after Emancipation is the same reality that is responsible for the persistence of slavery in Mauritania today. No economic measures were adopted to help former slaves – none. On the contrary, many masters did everything in their power to prevent their slaves from obtaining jobs and therefore a measure of economic independence. In the first place, *haratines* have severe problems finding work, and when they get a job, they are constantly intimidated by their former masters. A few years ago, I was working in a private company. I had hired two former slaves. Their former master came to see me and said that these were his former slaves and he regarded their current attitude towards him "disrespectful"; therefore, I should fire them. I refused. From that moment on, I had problems at work because of him.

In every *beydane* household, all the domestic work is done by what the government calls *haratines*, but they are not remunerated. They work as they have always done – for free. Sometimes, the slave, because that is what he or she is, is "shared" by 3–4 families.

Many former residents of Nouakchott spoke of the "gardens" of Nouakchott, a large tract of vegetable plots, which are looked after by slaves. At sunset, the masters come by to see how the work is proceeding; the slaves are not paid for their labor.

The spectre of unemployment looms before slaves who contemplate leaving their masters. The authorities have done nothing to prepare the community for the economic and psychological dislocation that would confront slaves who try to exercise their new rights. They have not had any training and have nowhere to go. Although some well educated *haratines* have succeeded financially, or have been appointed to senior government posts, they are the exception. These senior government positions were regarded cynically by those we spoke to, who saw the move as the government's effort to show foreigners that blacks enjoy equality in Mauritania. For the majority, there are few employment opportunities. In 1981, John Mercer, who visited Mauritania for the Anti-Slavery Society wrote:

The hartani has trouble finding employment: the men only get the worst jobs, such as rubbish disposal in its various forms, the women will sell cooked couscous, perhaps even open tiny restaurants, often drift into prostitution.*

Our own research corroborates Mercer's findings. The existing difficulties have been exacerbated by the drought which devastated Mauritania in the early seventies and forced hundreds of thousands of people to come to Nouakchott, Nouadhibou and other cities, competing for employment. (The drought is estimated to have killed 75% of the country's livestock.)

Mokhtar was working as a carpenter in Nouakchott until mid 1989. His family are *haratines*. In an interview with Africa Watch, his grandmother, mother and sister agreed with Mokhtar that economic factors explain the continuation of slavery.

In 1985, I was working in a construction company in Nouakchott which employed many *haratines* who had recently come from the countryside. They never received a salary. They were given occasional hand-outs to pay for their shacks etc..

Embarrassed by the publicity generated by the report of the Anti-Slavery Society and by a 1982 BBC film, the government invited the United Nations to send an investigative mission to Mauritania. The visit took place in January 1984, and was led by Marc Bossuyt, a member of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. Peter Davies, then Director of the Anti-Slavery Society, accompanied the team. Bossuyt submitted his report to the Sub-Commission in July 1984.

Among other suggestions, Bossuyt recommended that the government give loans to former slaves to purchase livestock, that it facilitate financial assistance for small enterprises and that it establish new schools, especially in the agricultural sector where most slaves live. In a separate report, Peter Davies highlighted the need for land reform, of educating the overwhelmingly illiterate slave population, as well as recommending a number of practical steps, such as creating a new system of labor.

In 1987, a final report was issued by the Sub-Commission to assess the action taken by United Nations bodies and the Mauritanian government to implement the 1984 recommendations. In its reply, the government stated that it had already implemented the necessary land reform measures in 1983. This is a disingenuous reply, for the land reform of June 1983 had nothing to do with assisting former slaves and they have not been the beneficiaries. The principal objective of the 1983 reform was to dispossess black peasants in the River Senegal valley, so that *beydane* businessmen and civil servants could invest in the economic potential of the fertile valley, which they had come to value after the drought and the plans to construct dams had made the valley a more attractive investment opportunity. Secondly, the reform does not extend to the north of the country, where the cultivation of oases has always depended, and continues to depend, on the

* John Mercer, *Slavery in Mauritania Today*, at p.8.

exploitation of slave labor. Slaves have never owned a part of that land; nor do they have any access to it now, except as unpaid agricultural laborers. They are given a part of the harvest as subsistence, but only enough to survive on. The *haratines* who spoke to Mercer and later to the UN team spoke of land reform as an essential key to their emancipation; they are still waiting for that reform.

The Psychology of Slavery

Most former slaves and *haratines*, as well as other blacks familiar with the life of slaves, underlined the fact that for most *beydanes*, it is difficult to conceive of blacks other than as slaves, whether they are free blacks, free *haratines* or those working in their household. They also spoke of the inter-dependence between master and slave, even when the slave is no longer working for the master. Sometimes there is a sense of affinity, but usually it is a dependence that makes the slave feel that he cannot do much without his master.

Yousseuf, a former teacher who worked in the north commented:

Most *beydanes* can not conceive of former slaves as independent beings. They talk of "our *haratines*", even when they talk of those emancipated many years ago. It is common for the master to ask former slaves for help, especially when the family needs extra hands to help with a harvest or wedding preparations. When asked, most *haratines* feel a strong sense of obligation.

Binta recalled the impact of her experience as a slave:

If your former master follows you to Senegal, you treat him like a prince, so powerful are the habits and the memory of having been a slave. But it stops there, because in Senegal he has no right to impose himself on you. On the Mauritanian side, it is different. About five years ago, an old woman, a former slave who had escaped to Senegal, crossed the river and went to sell the french beans she grew in the marketplace in Rosso, Mauritania. Her former master recognized her and wanted to take her back. Luckily for her, she managed to dodge him.

A very old woman, a former slave whose relatives believe is at least 90, added:

We hear of abolition, but for most slaves it does not mean much. It is hard to ignore what they have been told all their lives, that without their master they cannot survive, that only he can ennoble them, give meaning to their life and lead them to heaven. They believe this; so how can they also believe that they must escape the situation that promises to give them so much?

Tokossel was a secondary-school student at Kaedi.

The interdependence is still profound. I remember when I was at boarding school in Kaedi only a few years ago, the *haratine* students made the tea for the *beydane* students, did their shopping and ran all their errands. Whenever a black student and a *beydane* had a fight, often about the demeaning tasks they demanded of the *haratines*, *beydane* students threatened to bring "their" slave to pay us back. "Their" slave would be any of the *haratines* at the school.

The south of the country is inhabited by black ethnic groups, principally the Pulaars, Soninke, Wolof and Bambara, who have historically cultivated the fertile region in the River Senegal valley. Mauritania was a French colony from 1920 until 1960, when it became independent. Mauritania's political history is characterized by persistent tensions between the two communities, tension which has been complicated by the existence of slavery and the established practice of successive *beydane*-dominated governments to exacerbate black divisions by using *haratines* and slaves whenever there are confrontations with blacks from the south. In February 1966, armed *haratines* were employed to quell riots in Nouakchott, led by black students. In the clashes in April 1989, slaves and *haratines* living in the countryside, who have had the least contact with other blacks, were used to kill, wound and facilitate the deportation to Senegal of thousands of black Mauritians.

There are other reasons for keeping the two black communities apart and encouraging mutual animosity. It is difficult to state with any degree of precision what percentage of Mauritania's population *beydanes* constitute, for governments have refused to make the information available, and are extremely sensitive to public discussion of the subject. The results of a census taken in 1977, and again in 1988, remain a secret. Blacks see the reluctance to publish the findings as a confirmation of their belief that the results recorded a dramatic increase in the country's black population, with the *beydanes* presently constituting no more than 25 to 30%. Slaves/*haratines* are estimated at about 30 to 35% of the total population, which is estimated at two million. Potentially, this makes them a formidable political ally for either the *beydanes* or blacks from the south. Making sure that blacks do not join forces, which would place them in a strong position to challenge *beydane* monopoly of economic and political power, explains the need to ensure that slaves and *haratines* depend on and identify with *beydanes*. Apparently, a number of *haratines* who criticized the government's policies towards blacks, such as the killings and deportations that followed the border clash with Senegal last April, have been the targets of reprisals, including expulsion from Mauritania.

TORTURE: EXTRAORDINARILY CRUEL PUNISHMENTS TO ENFORCE THE MASTER'S WILL:

The brutal punishments suffered by slaves is a central theme in any discussion of slavery. Apart from the "routine" punishments of beatings with a wet cord while naked, denial of food and drink, prolonged exposure to the sun with hands and feet tied together, there are several unique methods, of appalling cruelty, reserved for "serious" infringements of the master's law,

such as disobeying the master's orders, attempting to escape or even the mere suspicion of wanting to escape, being in contact with free blacks, inciting other slaves to escape and sexual relations with the master's family. The punishment is intended both to punish the individual, but also to serve as an example to others.

Some of these methods, which are only administered to men, include:

The Camel Treatment

The slave's legs are tied to the sides of a camel who has deliberately been denied water for up to two weeks. The camel is then taken to drink and as the camel's stomach expands, the slave's legs, thighs and groin, are slowly dislocated. He is tied to the camel for up to four or five days and is subsequently not given any medical treatment.

Slaves who left Mauritania in the course of the last few years told Africa Watch that all these punishments are still current in the interior of the country. Moustapha gave recent examples of some of these punishments:

A slave I know suffered the camel treatment in 1988 in Sharat, west of Boghe. His master suspected him of wanting to escape, because they found him on the road when he was not meant to be there. In addition, he was an outspoken young man who tended to reply back to the master and his family and made it clear that he did not like the life of a slave. He was recaptured and put through the camel method. He was 16 at the time. He is still living with the master's family but is so handicapped that he is not capable of performing any tasks.

The Insect Treatment

Tiny insects* are stuffed into the ears of the victim and small stones are used to ensure that the insects remain inside the ear. A headscarf is then tied tightly around the head. The victim's hands and feet are also tied up to prevent movement. The scarf and stones are removed after several days, by which time the victim's mind is destroyed.

Moustapha recalled two recent cases:

In 1986, Mohamed ould Berek went to a neighbouring Halpulaar village and was absent for a day or two. His master went to look for him as he was afraid that he had escaped. When he found him, he tied a rope around his neck and dragged him along on the road, as he rode his camel. When they arrived home, he immediately subjected him to the insect treatment. He has become completely mindless; this

* Interviewees spoke of minute "grey" insects, but Africa Watch has not been able to identify what type of insect this refers to.

treatment literally makes morons out of people.

Salek ould Sualik wanted to marry another slave, a certain Jereikhaye, who belonged to another master. He asked for permission to marry her, although he promised to continue working for his master. His master would not hear of it, fearing he would have to share his services with another household. Both masters refused to let them live together in either household or to set up their own independent home, while continuing to work for their respective masters. Salek insisted and every evening, he went to visit Jereikhaye and therefore, was not available at night and in the evenings to milk the cows. After a while, the master decided that he had enough of this. To put an end to the problem, he subjected him to the insect treatment. He is now a robot; he does what he is told but he no longer has the capacity to use his own reason.

Mohamed, 23, is a former student at the University of Nouakchott. He was born near Zouerate and lived in the north until the age of 18.

In 1986, I saw in the village of Gidahar where my family comes from, a slave, a shepherd who could not say anything except "There is only God". He was deaf. He looked normal but was in fact completely deranged. I learned from another *haratine* in the village that he had been subjected to the insect treatment. He did everything his master asked him to do, in a mechanical way that was not human. It was clear that he was in fact no longer a human being.

Burning Coals

The victim is seated flat, with his legs spread out. He is then buried in sand up to his waist, until he cannot move. Coals are placed between his legs and are burnt slowly. After awhile, the legs, thighs and sex of the victim are burnt.

Moustapha gave another example:

About three years ago, a 20 year-old slave man was caught in bed with the master's daughter. The girl's name was Tiendalaqo and the boy's name was Mawliid. The master paid him back through the treatment we call the "burning coals". He now resembles an animal, more than a human being. Still a slave, he spends all his time with the herd. He does not talk and has practically no relations with people; instead of eating with the other slaves, he prefers to come back for the leftovers. Of course, nothing happened to the daughter; she was sent away for a short period to stay with relatives.

A black health worker described another treatment meted out to a slave who slept with the master's daughter and who had sought medical care at a hospital in Atar:

The boy, who was 17, had a piece of wire tied tightly around his genitals and the wire was in turn attached, for two days, to a rope. He was then beaten and water poured all over him. I saw him myself. He had become so handicapped that the master could not use him at all; so he "emancipated" him.

One of the primary objectives of these torture techniques is to ensure that the victim is incapable of enjoying normal sexual relations with women. Women are spared these perverse methods of torture, but only because the primary value of the female slave is her reproductive capacity.

CONCLUSION:

On paper, the government remains an enthusiastic supporter of the eradication of slavery; unfortunately, matching words with deeds has proved difficult. Mercer's assessment in 1981 of the government's motives for the last abolition still remains true today. He wrote that:

Since the decree, no practical action has been announced by the government. The haratin consider the announcement to have aimed at restoring Mauritania's international image, following the general press coverage of the continuance of slavery in the country, and at keeping the slave community calm until the government has ready its plans for permanently stifling the anti-slavery movement.*

Except for ratifying certain international instruments in 1986 (see above), the government has failed to implement the recommendations submitted by the United Nations and the Anti-Slavery Society. Apart from the economic suggestions discussed above, they also called on the government to disseminate to the public information about the abolition. In its reply in 1987, the government stated it had launched information campaigns and that news about abolition had been broadcast "in all the local languages". Yet, all former slaves from the interior of the country interviewed by Africa Watch either had never heard of the abolition, or had learned of it from other members of Mauritania's black community. They also urged the authorities to undertake sociological research and, amongst other issues, to involve former slaves in the search for solutions. Apart from efforts to co-opt the members of El Hor, we are not aware of any initiatives to create broad-based participation among former slaves and *haratines* in the search for an end to slavery.

Abolishing a social and economic practice which has existed for centuries is a difficult task. The basic problem however, is the government's own lack of political will. The government of President Haidallah criticized the Anti-Slavery Society for what it called their unrealistic expectations. Shortly after the Society's report was published, the Mauritanian Embassy in Paris commented that "we are aware that the weight of psychological and individual relations, resulting

* Mercer, *op cited*, at p.12.

from a thousand-year social practice, cannot be removed at the stroke of a pen".* During the last ten years, the previous government of President Haidallah and the current government of President Taya have had many opportunities to demonstrate their professed concern for the welfare of slaves and *haratines*. Both regimes failed to make concerted efforts to improve the lives of slaves in any meaningful sense.

Prospects for the immediate future are grim. It is clear that internal opposition to slavery cannot overcome the problem, given the lack of political opportunities within Mauritania which makes it impossible to mobilize public opinion. There are no legal channels for independent political activity; a one-party state was institutionalized in 1964, only three years after independence, and remained in place until 1978 when civilian government was overthrown by a military coup. Since then, the country has been ruled by a succession of intolerant military regimes; strict controls curtail freedom of association and expression, and tight censorship ensures that the media reflects the policies of the government.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Absent concerted pressure from the international community, the next ten years will be another long and fruitless wait. Governments, including the European Community, particularly France, the U.S., Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states, which all provide Mauritania with substantive levels of aid, and in some cases, diplomatic support, should make it clear that high-sounding pronouncements will not suffice to convince the world that slavery has in practice been abolished.

Further aid should in part be conditioned on concrete steps towards the abolition of slavery. In particular, the relevant donor governments should call on the Mauritanian government to:

- * Make the practice of slavery an offense punishable by law;
- * Allow El Hor to organize and operate publicly without fear of violent reprisals, and without government efforts to weaken and divide the organization. If El Hor can resume its activities, more slaves will become aware of their rights and will know that an organization devoted to furthering their interests exists. This will also have the effect of encouraging slaves to escape, knowing they have somewhere to turn to when they arrive in an unknown city, afraid of recapture, devoid of resources and unable to find employment;
- * Create a labor inspection unit whose responsibility would be to monitor the employment practices of masters who continue to "employ" their former slaves;

* "Mauritania - Slavery Still Widespread", *Africa Research Bulletin*, December 15, 1981.

- * Fulfil its commitment to end slavery by taking the necessary practical measures, such as establishing schools, creating employment opportunities, undertaking land reform that specifically addresses the needs of slaves and publicizing the abolition of slavery in ways that are intended to reach the slave population;
- * Discourage the holding of slaves by drawing up, and implementing, laws that make it a criminal offense, punishable by stiff sentences, to try to recapture an escaped slave, or to assist in the recapture of an escaped slave. There should also be tough laws to prosecute those who torture slaves. The government should set up a body, which works closely with El Hor as a source of information, to document these cases and inform the relevant ministry of their findings;
- * Encourage the government to allow international humanitarian and human rights organizations, as well as foreign journalists, to visit the country and to conduct their own independent investigations about the persistence of slavery and slave-like practices.
- * Put an end to its practice of trying to divide the two black communities by deliberately using slaves and *haratines* in its war against other black citizens.

Previous Africa Watch Publications on Mauritania: Newsletters

Mauritania: Persecution of Black Mauritians; Summary Executions, Deprivation of Citizenship, Illegal Expulsions and Arbitrary Arrests, September 7, 1989.

Africa Watch is a non-governmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. Its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Research Director is Richard Carver; Alex de Waal is Research Consultant; and Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen are Research Associates; Jo Graham and Ben Penglase are Associates.

Africa Watch is part of Human Rights Watch, an organization that also comprises Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chairman of Human Rights Watch is Robert L Bernstein and the Vice-Chairman is Adrian DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch; the Deputy Director is Kenneth Roth; Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director; Susan Osnos is Press Director and Joyce Mends-Cole is Counsel to Human Rights Watch.