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Mauritania Urged To Turn Pledges Into Deeds In Fight Against Slavery

27 February 2014

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on slavery, Gulnara Shahinian, today hailed Mauritania's commitment and progress in the fight against slavery, but called on the authorities "to take more vigorous measures to eliminate slavery and to fully implement the laws and policies."

Ms. Shahinian's call comes at the end of a follow-up official visit to the country to assess new developments and the initiatives taken by the Mauritanian authorities in response to her previous recommendations.

"I commend the Government of Mauritania for the measures taken since my last mission in 2009 and for its commitment to ending slavery in the country," said the independent expert designated by the United Nations Human Rights Council to monitor, report and advise on the use of contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences in the world.

"However," she stressed, "the Government still has to turn its pledges into deeds, and to take more

vigorous measures with a view to eliminating slavery and to fully implement the laws and policies”.

“The passing of the law criminalizing slavery in 2007 had been a milestone for the eradication of slavery practices in Mauritania, but still needs to be fully implemented to result in concrete changes in practice,” she said. The expert reiterated her concerns at the very low number of prosecutions under the Act, and stressed the need to amend it in order to ensure better protection for victims recognized as slaves.

“The fact that slavery has now officially been designated a crime constitutes a major achievement in the fight against slavery,” Ms. Shahinian said. Under the constitutional reform introduced in 2012, persons convicted of slavery can be sentenced to up to ten years in prison.

The Special Rapporteur welcomed the recent announcement of the establishment of a special Tribunal to prosecute crimes of slavery: “I believe that the setting-up of the Tribunal will bring the Mauritania one step closer to effectively ending the practice of slavery and call on the Government to deploy all necessary efforts to making this a reality.”

Ms. Shahinian noted that a number of legislative efforts launched in 2011 towards securing the rights of housemaids and domestic workers are an important element in the fight against slavery, but highlighted that “concerted action is required to fully realize their human rights.”

“The adoption of the road map for the implementation of my previous recommendations is a clear sign that Mauritania is on its way to eradicate slavery and its remnants once and for all,” she said. “I am sure that the 6 of March 2014, when the Government will adopt formally the road map, this will mark a turning point in the fight against slavery in country.”

The human rights expert welcomed the setting-up of ‘Tadamoun,’ the government agency charged explicitly with helping former slaves in Mauritania. “This is an important step towards more holistic and sustained approach in addressing all forms of discrimination together with poverty at all levels of society, which is essential to eradicate the legacy of slavery,” she said.

However, the Special Rapporteur stressed the need to ensure targeted and tailored solutions for former slaves in order to avoid that the eradication of the vestiges of slavery become incorporated in more general programmes on poverty alleviation.

“A prerequisite for the efficiency of these programmes is reliable information which is currently lacking, and that is why an urgent need exists to provide detailed and precise data, statistics and a thorough study,” she noted.

The Special Rapporteur also stressed the need to publish the anti-slavery conventions it ratified in Mauritania’s Official Gazette as soon as possible also in order to raise awareness that all work should be entered into freely and respect the fundamental rights of the human person.

During her four-day visit to Nouakchott, Ms. Shahinian met with various Government authorities, international organizations as well as non-governmental organizations, trade unions, community members and others working in the area of combating all forms of slavery.

“Civil society has a tremendously important role in eradicating slavery, raising awareness,

collecting materials, bringing cases before the court and in assisting victims of slavery,” she underscored.

The Special Rapporteur will present her findings and recommendations at a forthcoming session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in September 2014.

Gulnara Shahinian was appointed as the first Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, its causes and consequences in May 2008. She is a lawyer with extensive experience as an expert consultant for various United Nations, European Union, Council of Europe, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and government bodies on children’s rights, gender, migration and trafficking. Ms Shahinian is also a former trustee of the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on contemporary forms of Slavery. Learn more, log on to:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Slavery/SRSlavery/Pages/SRSlaveryIndex.aspx>

Check the 2010 report on Mauritania by the Special Rapporteur Gulnara Shahinian:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Slavery/SRSlavery/Pages/CountryVisits.aspx>

UN Human Rights, Country page – Mauritania:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/MENARegion/Pages/MRIndex.aspx>

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