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2009 Human Rights Report: Mauritania

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR
2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices
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Mauritania, with an estimated population of 3.4 million, is a highly centralized Islamic republic governed by President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, whose election on July 18 ended the 11-month political crisis caused by the August 2008 coup d'etat against former President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. President Aziz had served as head of state and head of the governing junta, the High State Council (HSC), until he resigned from the military on April 22 to formally run for office. The presidential election, declared free and fair by international observers, followed the June 4 Dakar Accord, a consensual agreement brokered by Senegalese President Wade and the international community to end the country's political stalemate. In compliance with the Dakar Accord, deposed President Abdallahi returned on June 27 to form a Transitional Government of National Unity and voluntarily resigned from office. Following the election, civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

During the year there was deterioration in the human rights situation. Citizens did not have the right to choose their government until the July 18 election. Other problems included mistreatment and torture of detainees and prisoners; security force impunity; lengthy pretrial detention; harsh prison conditions; arbitrary arrests and political detention; limits on freedom of the press and assembly, including police beating of demonstrators and arrests of journalists; restrictions on freedom of religion; and corruption. Other problems included slavery and slavery-like practices, discrimination against women, female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, political marginalization of southern-based ethnic groups, and child labor.

During the year the HSC and President Aziz's administration continued the national reconciliation program for the repatriation of Afro-Mauritanian refugees from Senegal and Mali, in coordination with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). On December 31, repatriation operations were successfully ended with the arrival of the last group from Senegal. On March 25, the HSC signed a framework agreement to compensate 244 widows of Afro-Mauritanian military personnel killed during the 1989-91 expulsion of Afro-Mauritanians and held a memorial for the victims on the same day. The agreement and memorial represented the authorities' first public acknowledgement of the government's role in the ethnic killings and expulsions of 1989-91. During the year President Aziz' government also conducted a census of former teachers among returnees in order to reinstate them in their former positions with the Ministry of Education.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and law prohibit such practices, there were credible reports that police beat and mistreated detainees and prisoners. Those who lacked money or influential family or tribal ties reportedly were most likely to be mistreated. The May and November reports of the Mauritanian National Bar Association (ONA) maintained torture was a common practice in prisons. As in the previous year, security forces used torture as a method of investigation and repression, and perpetrators acted with impunity. Security forces tortured detainees to extract confessions. Torture methods included electric shocks, burnings, beatings, pulling out of hair, and sexual violence. According to Amnesty International, there were no known cases where authorities investigated reports of torture or abuse or took action against perpetrators.

On August 28, imprisoned terrorist suspect Taher Ould Biye called on authorities to end the mistreatment of himself and other Salafist prisoners at the Nouakchott Central Prison. There was no government response by year's end.

On September 27, Al Jazeera television showed images of national guardsmen at the Nouakchott Central Prison beating and water boarding convicted terrorist suspect Khadim Ould Semane. Al Jazeera also aired a telephone interview with Semane, who stated that he was subjected to electric shocks and degrading treatment. Authorities said the images and interview were staged, and no government investigation occurred by year's end.

On April 8, suspected terrorist Cheikhani Ould Sidina died in prison. A spokesman for the families of imprisoned Islamists told the press that Cheikhani had been tortured while in prison and reportedly was denied medical treatment. There was no government response to the torture allegation by year's end.

In August authorities arrested Mohamed Ould Zeidane for questioning allegedly related to his brother's suicide bomb attack near the French embassy on August 8. Zeidane's father told the press that Zeidane was tortured during his detention. There was no government response by year's end.

During the year there were no reports that authorities investigated the May 2008 case in which police tortured suspected terrorists Abdel Kerim Ben Veraz El Baraoui, Ahmed El Moutar Ould Semane, and Cheikh Ould Salem. The suspects' lawyers had claimed that police tortured their clients by hanging them by their feet and using cigarettes to burn their bodies.

There were no further developments in the May 2008 reported torture of 39 terrorist suspects involved in the 2007 killings of four French citizens and the February 2008 attack against the Israeli embassy.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh, and the government's capacity to administer detention facilities remained poor. Funds to improve prison conditions remained inadequate. The November ONA report denounced overcrowding, violence among inmates, and poor medical care in prisons. The Dar Naim Prison, for example, was designed for 300 prisoners, but held 899. Serious overcrowding contributed to the spread of diseases. Prisoners with health conditions received little or no care and medical supplies remained insufficient. Due to poor security conditions and the fact that dangerous prisoners coexisted with nondangerous ones, prisoners lived in a climate of violence and some had to pay bribes to other prisoners to avoid being brutalized and harassed. On September 24, the local press reported malnutrition, poor health, and hygiene conditions at the Dar Naim Prison. Conditions reportedly worsened further during Ramadan, and soaring food prices and shortages resulted in a daily diet of a can of sardines and a piece of bread for each of the 899 inmates.

During the year there were reports on the poor prison conditions of terrorist suspects. For example, on August 28, the local press reported that Amar Ould Saleh, a terrorist suspect, was dying from tuberculosis and was not receiving medical treatment or medication. That same day suspect Tahere Ould Biye denounced the poor conditions and long detention periods at Nouakchott Central Prison. On September 14, families of Salafist detainees protested poor detention conditions in front of the Central Prison. The wife of detainee El Mami Ould Othman stated he was in declining health with deficient medical attention. There was no government response or investigation of these cases during the year.

The ONA's August report criticized "the nonrespect of human lives in prisons," and highlighted the April 8 death of terrorist suspect Chikhani Ould Sidina, reportedly due to negligence and denial of medical treatment. The report also highlighted the August 6 death, under mysterious circumstances, of Dar Naim Prison inmate Sidi Ould Samba. There was no government response to the report's findings or investigations of these deaths by year's end.

There were credible reports of torture, beatings, and abuse in police detention centers, several prisons throughout the country, and gendarmerie and military facilities.

Women and minors under 18 years of age were held in two separate facilities. Sexual violence reportedly occurred in the women's prison, which employed both male and female guards. Children of female prisoners remained with their mothers, or the Ministry of Justice gave temporary custody of the children to another family member. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Noura Foundation, Caritas, and Terre des Hommes provided educational and economic opportunities for current and former juvenile and female detainees. Prison overcrowding was reportedly due to the high number of pretrial detainees.

Many prisoners were unable to leave their extremely crowded cells or breathe fresh air for months or years at a time. As a result pretrial detainees were frequently held with convicted and dangerous prisoners. Pretrial terrorist suspects were held in separate areas from the general prison population in Nouakchott Central Prison.

The government permitted prison visits by NGOs, diplomats, and international human rights observers. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had access to prisons and conducted multiple prison visits in accordance with its standard modalities, including visits to terrorism suspects.

On September 15, the fourth district judge visited the Dar Naim Prison to study the situation of incarcerated minors. No statements or reports were issued following the visit. On September 15, the Ministry of Justice's inspector general and the prison director visited the Central Prison and heard demands from Salafist detainees in response to continuing protests by their families. The government made no statements or efforts to improve the detention conditions by year's end.

During the year the Commission of Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Relations with Civil Society distributed food, hygiene kits, and recreational items to detention centers in Nouadhibou on April and in Nouakchott on September 1. On April 26, the government opened a Center for the Re-education of Minors in Conflict with the Law in partnership with a local NGO, Terre des Hommes.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, but the authorities did not observe these prohibitions.

Under the HSC, the military arrested a number of political figures and journalists without charge or hearings.

The ONA reports during the year highlighted multiple cases of arbitrary detentions and of individuals kept in prison without ever being charged, tried, or released despite court orders for their release.

For example, on April 20, Moustapha Ould Mohamed Ahmed, was acquitted by the Supreme Court of all charges against him, but remained in prison until May 31.

On March 3, Yahya Ould Mohamedou Nagi, the son of a well-known opposition leader, received a suspended sentence, but remained in prison until March 23.

On December 24, Hanewy Ould Dehah, director of the news Web site Taqadoumy, was scheduled to be released after serving his sentence for crimes against Islam (see section 2.a.) and after paying all imposed fines and legal fees. In protest for his continued detention, Dehah began a hunger strike on December 28; however, he remained imprisoned without official public explanation at year's end. On December 31, Reporters Without Borders called for Dehah's release, stating that "keeping him in jail after having served a completely disproportionate prison sentence constitutes a serious violation of existing laws."

The children's penal code states that a minor's preventive detention cannot exceed six months. However, the ONA also reported a high number of individuals, including minors, who remained in preventive detention for extended periods of time due to judicial ineptitude.

Police reportedly held suspects involved in the 2007 Aleg murders and the February 2008 attack against the Israeli Embassy in incommunicado military detention for a period of time. These individuals had not been tried by year's end.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The National Police, under the Ministry of the Interior, is responsible for law enforcement and maintaining order in urban areas. The National Guard, also under the Ministry of Interior, performs limited police functions in keeping with their peacetime role as security support at government facilities. The National Guard may also be called on by regional authorities to restore civil order due to large-scale disturbances such as rioting. The gendarmerie, a specialized paramilitary group under the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for maintaining civil order in and outside metropolitan areas, as well as providing law enforcement services in rural areas.

The police were poorly paid, trained, and ill-equipped. Corruption and impunity were serious problems. Police regularly demanded bribes at nightly roadblocks in Nouakchott and at checkpoints between cities. While having a notable effect in increasing security, there were numerous reports of police arbitrarily detaining individuals for a few hours or overnight at roadblocks in Nouakchott or nearby towns. According to these reports, police detained motorists or passengers without asking for identity papers, vehicle registration, or without searching the vehicles. Police in some regions arrested former criminals and demanded bribes for their release, and some indicted detainees were released before trial without explanation. The government rarely held security officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment While in Detention

The application of constitutional safeguards continued to vary widely from case to case. The law requires duly authorized arrest warrants, but they were not commonly used. The law requires that courts review the legality of a person's detention within 48 hours of arrest; however, the police can extend the period for an additional 48 hours, and a prosecutor or court can detain persons for up to 15 days in national security cases. Authorities generally respected the two-week detention period for terrorism suspects to be formally arraigned or released in national security cases. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the right to contact an attorney. By law attorneys for the indigent are provided at state expense, but in practice this did not occur. Lawyers highlighted the lengthy incarceration of detainees and delays in organizing court hearings. There is a bail system, but sometimes judges refused lawyers' requests for bail or set inordinately high bail amounts.

According to ONA, 60 percent of detainees in the Dar Naim Prison were on preventive detention under judicial order to prevent them from fleeing from prosecution or committing criminal offenses. ONA reported that most preventive detentions were in violation of the penal code since individual cases have never been tried. The Dar Naim Prison director regularly informed court authorities of the number of prisoners in preventive detention, but judicial actions were rarely taken. ONA's November report stated that some detainees had been in preventive detention since 2002, and highlighted six detainees in preventive detention since 2006, two since 2007, and eight since 2008. Some were detained for minor offenses such as stealing cell phones or complicity in theft.

On April 8, General Aziz pardoned *Al Aqsa* newspaper director Abdel Fettah Ould Abeidna who was sentenced to one year in November 2007 for falsely accusing a prominent businessman of involvement in a drug scandal. Ould Abeidna had been in prison since November 2008 following his extradition from Dubai. According to the Mauritanian Human Rights Commission, 118 detainees received presidential pardons during the year.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary; however, it was not independent in practice. The executive branch continued to exercise significant influence over the judiciary through its ability to appoint and pressure judges. In addition, poorly educated and trained judges were susceptible to social, financial, and tribal pressures, which limited judicial fairness. International donors funded training for prosecutors and judges during the year to increase judicial efficiency.

There is a single system of courts consistent with modified principles of Shari'a law. Departmental, regional, and labor tribunals are the courts of first instance at the lower level. The 53 departmental tribunals, composed of a president and

magistrates with traditional Islamic legal training, heard civil cases involving sums less than 10,000 ouguiya (approximately \$37) and family issues, including domestic, divorce, and inheritance cases. A total of 13 regional tribunals accepted appeals in commercial and civil matters from the departmental tribunals and heard misdemeanor cases. At the middle level, three courts of appeal, each with seven chambers (civil, commercial, administrative, and penal chambers, as well as criminal, minors, and labor courts) heard appeals from the regional courts and have original jurisdiction for felonies.

The High Court of Justice (HCJ) also lacked independence because its members are elected from both parliamentary houses. The HCJ reviews decisions and rulings made by the courts of appeal to determine their compliance with law and procedure. It also has jurisdiction to hear cases of abuse or corruption by high government officials.

Constitutional review is within the purview of a six-member High Constitutional Council. The annual review is intended to determine whether courts applied the law correctly and followed proper procedures. Reviews also serve as a basis for evaluating the reform process and reassigning judges based on their qualifications. No reviews took place during the year.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for due process. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence. They have a right to a public trial, but juries are not used. Defendants have the right to consult with an attorney and to be present during their trial. By law all defendants, regardless of the court or their ability to pay, have the legal right to representation by counsel during the proceedings. If defendants lack the ability to pay for counsel, the court should appoint an attorney from a list prepared by ONA, which provides a defense free of charge. However, this measure was not efficiently enforced during the year. Defendants have the right to appeal. Defendants can confront or question witnesses and present witnesses and evidence in both civil and criminal cases. In theory, defendants have access to government-held evidence, but access has proven difficult in practice. These rights were also extended to minorities. The foregoing rights generally were observed in practice, but did not extend equally to women.

Shari'a provides the legal principles upon which the law and legal procedure are based; the courts did not treat women equally in all cases. Lawyers also reported that in some cases the unequal treatment of women was based on considerations such as a woman's caste or nationality.

A special court hears cases involving minors under the age of 18. Children who appeared before the court received more lenient sentences than adults, and extenuating circumstances received greater consideration in juvenile cases. The minimum age for children to be tried is 12. Those between the ages of 12 and 18 are tried and, if convicted, sentenced to the detention center for minors.

During the year, ONA denounced violations of the legal code and procedural rules for political purposes, particularly in high-profile cases. For example, authorities arrested the director of the Agency for the Promotion of Popular Savings and Credit Accounts, Ahmend Ould Khattiri, before the Mauritanian Central Bank launched an investigation into allegations of mismanagement, and before a judge had reviewed the case.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

During the year ONA denounced the case of former prime minister Waghef whom junta authorities had arrested and charged for embezzlement by a civil court in November 2008 following his initial arrest during the August 2008 coup. On June 4, Waghef was released on bail as an opposition precondition for signing the Dakar Accord.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The Administrative Court has the jurisdiction to hear complaints of human rights violations. NGO representatives stated they collaborated with the court but that it was not impartial in practice.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government usually respected these rights in practice. Individuals could criticize the government publicly or privately; however, police questioned and detained members of the press on several occasions.

For example, journalists for the Web site Taqadoumy were arrested or detained on numerous occasions due to their online articles or comments criticizing the junta. On March 15, police arrested Taqadoumy editor Abou al-Abbas Ould Braham on charges of defamation and intent to destabilize the country for publishing articles about the junta. Following international and domestic protests, Braham was released on March 18.

On June 18, Hanevy Ould Dehah, Taqadoumy's director, was arrested on charges of defamation against presidential candidate Ibrahima Sarr for publishing an article stating that Sarr bought a house with campaign money from General Aziz Dehah, who was kept in prison despite the expiration and nonrenewal of his arrest warrant on July 26, was sentenced in August 19 to six months in prison and fined 30,000 ouguiya (\$111) for committing acts contrary to Islam and decency, charges unrelated to those leading to his arrest. The sentencing judge accused Dehah of creating a space allowing individuals to express anti-Islamic and indecent views due to a female reader's comments made on the Taqadoumy site calling for increased sexual freedom. On August 19, the NGO Reporters Without Borders condemned the decision as disproportionate.

On September 12, police arrested Taqadoumy journalist Djibil Diallo after his article criticizing Libyan President Qadhafi was posted. Diallo was released without explanation or charge on September 15.

Previous cases of journalist detention include the March 2008 detention of *Assiraje* newspaper journalist Mohamed Salem Ould Mohamedou for unknown reasons. Mohamedou was released after a few days and was never charged.

The trials of journalists Mohamed Nema Oumar and Mohamed Ould Abdellatif had not begun by year's end. Oumar and Abdellatif were detained and charged with defamation in June and July 2008 following the publication of an *Al-hurriya* newspaper article accusing three judges of corruption.

There were no developments in the October 2008 case of trade union activists' assault on *Al Jazeera* cameraman Mohamed Ould Moustafa due to his film coverage of post-coup opposition activities.

The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with limited restrictions. However, some journalists practiced self-censorship in covering areas deemed sensitive, including the military, foreign diplomatic missions, corruption, and Shari'a and there were reports of intimidation of journalists who covered sensitive issues.

There were approximately 30 privately owned newspapers that were published on a regular basis in both French and Arabic. NGOs and the privately owned press openly criticized the government and its leaders. Two daily newspapers, *Horizons* (in French) and *Chaab* (in Arabic), were government owned and generally focused on official news. On December 10, the government announced it would reopen official media to the opposition; but by year's end only some opposition views were released in official outlets.

On August 6, immediately following the coup, military authorities blocked the road to the presidential palace. This action prevented several newspapers from publishing that day since the country's only printing press is located on the same road. There were no reports that the government restricted opposition access to the printing press during the year.

All local broadcast media remained state owned. Radio France International was rebroadcast locally, and citizens could receive worldwide television broadcasts through satellite receivers and dish antennas. Nevertheless, despite the lack of deregulation laws, the private television channel DAVA continued to operate during the year following its 2008 launch. The June 2008 suspension of the privately owned Radio Citoyenne's broadcasts, plus other radio and television programs devoted to civic education, continued during the year.

Internet Freedom

There were occasional government restrictions on access to the Internet. On March 16, the general prosecutor ordered the two main Internet providers to block online access to the Taqadoumy site. Due to local and international protests, access was restored on March 19.

On June 25, Mauritel, the leading Internet provider, blocked access to the Taqadoumy site for the day.

Individuals and groups could generally engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. Nevertheless, Taqadoumy director Hanevy Ould Dehah was sentenced on August 19 for "acts contrary to decent behavior" for contributing to the creation of a space where a female user made comments calling for increased sexual freedom in the country.

Internet access was available in urban areas throughout the country, with home access common among the affluent, and cyber cafes serving the remainder of the population. According to International Telecommunication Union statistics for 2008, approximately 1.4 percent of the country's inhabitants used the Internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events. However, on May 24, customs police arrested singer and Senator Malouma Mint Elmeida upon her return to the country. The police seized 200 CDs and 1,000 cassettes of Elmeida's new album, which featured anti-coup songs.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly. The law requires that organizers apply to the local prefect (hakim) for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies. Permission was generally approved, but on numerous occasions the authorities denied permission to hold demonstrations. Public demonstrations with varying levels of violence, both supporting and opposing the coup, were reported around the country. There were a number of incidents in which security forces forcefully dispersed opposition demonstrations.

For example, on March 16, police violently dispersed a journalist demonstration in support of freedom of speech and Taqadoumy journalist Abbas Braham who had been arrested on defamation charges the day before. Several of the journalists were beaten and injured.

On April 2, police used tear gas and batons to violently disperse hundreds of anti-coup activists who attempted to march from the National Union for Democratic Alternatives party headquarters to the Capital Stadium. Several people, including political leaders were injured. Boubacar Messaoud, president of the NGO SOS Esclaves received neck injuries after reportedly being targeted by police during the march.

On April 3, police used tear gas and batons to disperse a group of female activists from the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD), who were attempting to march outside of the Peoples Progressive Alliance headquarters.

On April 19, police used batons to disband a peaceful protest by female politicians from the FNDD and Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) parties who were protesting against the coup in front of the UN building. Some women were injured and taken to the hospital.

On May 25, police attempted to enter the Union of The Forces for Progress (UFP) party headquarters in Nouadhibou during a peaceful UFP, RFD, and Tawassoul sit-in calling for a return to constitutional order. Police beat several demonstrators with batons.

On December 16, police used tear gas and batons to break up a protest in support of arrested businessmen Mohamed Ould Noueigueh, Cherif Ould Abdellahi, and Abdou Maham.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right.

All political parties and local NGOs must register with the Ministry of the Interior, while all international NGOs must register with the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development. The government encouraged local NGOs to join the Civil Society Platform, a government-sponsored entity implemented in January. NGOs that are members of the platform do not receive government funding.

The country has approximately 74 registered political parties and numerous NGOs, which generally functioned openly, issued public statements, and chose their own leadership. The government did not prevent unrecognized political parties or NGOs from functioning.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and decrees that Islam is the religion of its citizens and the state. The government continued to prohibit proselytizing by non-Muslims and the printing and distribution of bibles and other non-Islamic religious materials. However, the possession of bibles and other Christian religious materials in private homes was not illegal. Bibles and other religious publications were available among the small Christian community, which was composed almost entirely of expatriates. There was a multid denominational church in Nouakchott with a regular schedule of services.

The government did not register religious groups, although NGOs--including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups--had to register with the Ministry of the Interior. The government continued to restrict Protestant groups from meeting in members' homes until they received official permits. On September 14, Police Commissioner Abdel Vettah Ould Hababa shut down three churches frequented by West Africans in the Sebkhia district of Nouakchott. According to press reports, the police confiscated bibles and furniture and briefly arrested 81 persons, including the pastor.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

A very small number of expatriates practiced Judaism.

Prior to the June 18 election, tracts showing a demon-like depiction of President Abdallahi's face inside a Star of David and surrounded by anti-coup leaders were distributed widely in Nouakchott during the period leading up to the June 6 elections. The designer of the tracts remained unknown.

On June 23, a foreign NGO worker, Christopher Leggett, was killed by two gunmen upon arriving at his workplace in Nouakchott. Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for the murder, stating Leggett had been targeted for his Christian proselytizing activities. Government authorities and civil society condemned the killing. Two suspects were arrested on July 17 and a third on July 24. They remained in custody and awaited trial at the end of the year.

In February 2008 terrorists affiliated with AQIM shot at the Israeli Embassy and adjacent buildings. The government publicly condemned the attack. Five persons were reportedly injured. The nine suspects who were arrested remained in prison at year's end without trial.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2009 International Religious Freedom Report](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf) at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights, but persons lacking identity cards could not travel freely in some regions. During the year HSC authorities reportedly restricted international travel of some opposition members.

During the year the government, in response to an increased terrorist threat, set up roadblocks where gendarmerie, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers and often demanded bribes.

The law does not prohibit forced exile, and there were no reports that the government used it.

The government cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern; however, the government lacked resources to effectively support these persons. However, reintegration of returnees into communities was challenging due to deficient sanitation, health, and education infrastructure, as well as land disputes. The majority of Afro-Mauritanian returnees were unable to obtain identity cards. According to UNHCR, the deficiencies stemmed from bureaucratic delays rather than policy. The National Agency for the Welcome and Reintegration of Refugees (ANAIR) oversees the reintegration of repatriated refugees, provides administration and

identification support, and contributes to social and economic development of resettlement areas. During the year ANAIR offered reintegration programs such as summer camps for refugee children and training sessions for women. President Aziz's government also conducted a census of former teachers among returnees in order to reinstate them in their positions with the Ministry of Education. According to UNHCR, approximately 17,130 Afro-Mauritanian refugees returned during the year as part of a national repatriation program. These were among the estimated 25,000 to 34,000 Afro-Mauritanians who took refuge in Senegal and Mali during the 1989-91 expulsion.

The contents of the settlement agreement between the HSC and the widows of 1989-91 victims on March 25 remained secret, and some victims complained they were not fully aware of the terms and conditions of the settlement when they accepted it. Some victims favorable to the settlement described it as a first step, but not a final resolution.

Protection of Refugees

The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 protocol, or the 1969 African Union Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa. However, there is a system for providing such protection. In practice the government provided protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedoms would be threatened. The government provided protection to approximately 790 refugees during the year.

During the year the government worked to assist UNHCR, the European Commission, and the government of Spain in returning migrants to their countries of origin after attempts to reach the Canary Islands by sea. The government operated a migrant reception center in the Dahklet Nouadhibou region, with the assistance of the Mauritanian Red Crescent and Spanish Red Cross, to process returned migrants and to provide nutritional and medical care. International NGOs criticized overcrowding and poor detention conditions at the Nouadhibou migrant reception center. During the year there was no government response to a Spanish NGO's July 2008 report that recommended the center's closure based on its operation outside legal frameworks.

UNHCR determined that conditions at the Nouadhibou migrant reception center were acceptable. During the year local human rights organizations denounced police abuses of foreigners in the Nouadhibou region based on reports of police picking up immigrants indiscriminately in order to fill quotas or to request bribes in return for their release. The government did not respond to these reports by year's end.

The government gave UNHCR access to returned migrants to determine if they were eligible for refugee status. In view of freedom of movement agreements with the Economic Community of West African States, the government allowed West African migrants to remain, deporting only those found in the act of attempting illegal travel to the Canary Islands.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution provides for universal direct and indirect suffrage, a republican government, and the regular election of the president and legislature. However, prior to the July 18 election, the HSC, led by General Aziz, remained in power due to the August 2008 coup which supplanted the office of the president while retaining the parliament and appointing a new prime minister. The HSC also reserved the right to exercise legislative authority as well if it deemed the legislature ineffective. The country returned to constitutional rule on June 27 following the voluntary resignation of then president Abdallahi and the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity. The election was boycotted by the opposition, and Aziz won with 53 percent of the vote. The results were recognized by the international community.

Elections and Political Participation

The country enjoyed a peaceful transition from military rule to a democratically elected government with the July 18 election as president of former HSC leader General Aziz, who won 53 percent of the vote. Although opposition groups claimed the election was fraudulent and requested an investigation, national and international observers judged the election to be free and fair, and the Constitutional Council certified the election results on July 23.

The 95-person National Assembly includes representatives from 12 of the 25 parties that contested the 2006 legislative elections as well as 41 independents. Senate elections held on November 8 resulted in the ruling UPR party winning 14 of 17 seats. The Islamic party Tawassoul and independent candidates won the remaining seats. The opposition RFD party lost a seat. The opposition and independent candidates denounced strong pressures from the authorities on municipal advisors to vote for majority party candidates and to convince independent candidates to step down. No investigations were launched by year's end.

There were 15 women in the National Assembly and nine women in the Senate. The 29-member cabinet included six women, two Black Moors, and seven Afro-Mauritanians.

The electoral law requires that women make up at least 20 percent of candidates on legislative candidate lists.

Section 4 Official Corruption and Government Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Corrupt practices were widely believed to exist at all levels of government, and the World Bank's most recent Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a severe problem. Government officials reportedly received frequent favors from authorities, such as unauthorized exemption from taxes, special grants of land, and preferential treatment during bidding on government projects. Corruption was most pervasive in government procurement, bank loans, fishing license distribution, land distribution, and tax payments. The Brigade of Economic Crimes and the Office of the Inspector General were responsible for investigating corruption. President Aziz's government placed fighting corruption at the top of its agenda and made high-profile arrests during the year; however, corruption and impunity were serious problems in the police force, and the

government rarely held security officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses. Judicial corruption was also a problem.

On November 11, the former governor of the Central Bank, Sidel Mokhtar Ould Nagi, and his deputy, Mahomed Ould Oumarou, were arrested for mismanagement and diversion of approximately 24 billion ouguiya (\$88 million) in 2000-01. On December 3, they were charged with treason, forgery, diversion, and waste of public funds; their trial did not begin by year's end.

On December 3, authorities arrested Mohamed Ould Noueiguedh, chairman and chief executive officer of the National Bank of Mauritania; Crif Ould Abdallahi, chairman of the board of the Islamic Bank of Mauritania; and businessman Abdou Maham. On December 10, the public prosecutor charged them with conspiracy in defrauding the Central Bank of 14 billion ouguiyas (\$52 million). The government claimed the charges were part of an anticorruption investigation, but the opposition claimed the arrests and charges were in retaliation for the men's support of the opposition and their tribal affiliation.

On September 3, a Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria investigation uncovered widespread corruption in the management of the fund's grant to the country. The Economic Crimes Brigade arrested the country program coordinator, his executive secretary, and two other individuals on October 3 in connection with the fraud scheme. The suspects were not tried by year's end.

The government did not enforce the requirement for senior officials, including the president, to file a declaration of their personal assets. Members of the HSC did not declare their personal wealth during the year.

Section 5 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Several domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.

Major local human rights organizations included the Mauritanian Association of Human Rights (AMDH), the Mauritanian League of Human Rights (LMDH), SOS Slaves, and the Mauritanian Association for Maternal and Child Health, all of which were independent NGOs. These NGOs were also members of several networks or coalitions such as the National Forum of Organizations for Human Rights (FONADH) and the National Commission of Human Rights (CNDH). Since the CNDH included government members, it was not fully independent.

The government met with local NGO monitors during the year and cooperated during visits by the UN and ICRC. UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery Gulnara Shahinian visited from October 24 to November 4 to study actions taken by the government to end slavery. No report was released by year's end.

Section 6 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution and law provide for equality for all citizens regardless of race, national origin, sex, or social status, and prohibits racial or ethnic propaganda; however, the government often favored individuals on the basis of racial and tribal affiliation, social status, and political ties. Societal discrimination against women, trafficking in persons, and racial and ethnic discrimination were problems.

Women

According to NGOs, the incidence of both reported and unreported rape continued to be high, and rape was considered a serious problem. Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively. According to the penal code, rapists who are single men faced forced labor and flagellation. Married rapists could be subject to the death penalty. However, rape cases rarely went to trial. Several cases were reported of wealthy rape suspects avoiding prosecution or, if prosecuted, avoiding prison time. Families of the victim commonly reached an agreement with the rapist for monetary compensation. National statistics on arrests, prosecutions, and convictions for rape were unavailable. Human rights activists and lawyers highlighted that rape victims were stigmatized, persecuted, and even imprisoned. Since rape was tied to the concept of Zina or sinful sexual relations outside marriage, judges may hold the victims responsible for the rape.

Domestic violence was considered a serious problem. Spousal abuse and domestic violence are illegal; however, the government did not usually enforce the law effectively and most cases went unreported. There are no specific penalties for domestic violence, and convictions were very rare. There were no reliable government statistics on prosecutions, convictions, and sentences for domestic violence, but the Association Femmes Chefs de Familles (AFCF) provided legal assistance to 1,152 domestic violence victims during the year.

The police and judiciary occasionally intervened in domestic abuse cases, but women rarely sought legal redress, relying instead on family, NGOs, and community leaders to resolve domestic disputes. NGOs reported that in certain cases they had sought help from the police for victims of domestic violence, but the police declined to intervene. AFCF and other women's NGOs provided psychologists and shelter to victims.

Although prostitution is illegal, NGO reporting indicated that it was a growing problem in some urban areas, particularly among Afro-Mauritanian and Black Moor women. Trafficking of Chinese women for brothels catering to foreigners in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou was reported.

Traditional forms of mistreatment of women appeared to decline during the year. One form of such mistreatment was the forced feeding of adolescent girls (gavage) prior to marriage, which was practiced only among White Moor tribal groups. Increased government, media, and civil society attention to the problem led to a marked decline in traditional

views encouraging female obesity despite the health risks. Nevertheless, overeating to conform to cultural standards remained an issue in rural and urban areas. Many urban women endangered their health by taking pills to gain weight or increase their appetite.

The government recognized the right of individuals and couples to make reproductive health choices on their own without violence or coercion. Men and women had equal access to diagnosis and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Reproductive issues were a sensitive topic. Some women's NGOs such as the Mauritanian Association for the Health of Women and Child (AMSME) and AFCF focussed on reproductive rights. AFCF stressed that poor women and women from traditionally lower castes such as slaves and former slaves had insufficient access to contraception, obstetric and postpartum care, skilled attendance during childbirth, and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. AMSME, which operated a center for rape victims, provided emergency contraception to victims.

Women's NGOs reported sexual harassment was a common problem at the workplace, but there are no laws or penalties against it.

Women have legal rights to property and child custody, and, among the more modern and urbanized population these rights were recognized. Nevertheless, divorced women could potentially lose child custody if they remarried. By local tradition, a woman's first marriage requires parental consent. In accordance with the personal status code, men can marry up to four women but are required to request spousal consent before marrying again. Women were encouraged by government awareness programs to obtain a contractual agreement at the time of marriage stipulating that the marriage ends if the husband marries a second wife. This practice was common in Moor society. Nevertheless, women who did not establish a solid contract remained unprotected. In practice, polygamy continued to be rare among Moors but was gaining in popularity. It was common among other ethnic groups. Arranged marriages were increasingly rare, particularly among the Moor population. In theory, the legal marriage age in the country is 18 but the law was rarely enforced, and there were widespread reports of child marriages. Also, there was cultural resistance to marriages among members of different castes, and NGOs reported powerful individuals used the judicial system to intimidate and persecute members of their families who married below their social rank.

Women still faced legal discrimination, and they were considered minors in the eyes of the law. According to Shari'a, the testimony of two women was necessary to equal that of one man. The courts granted only half as large an indemnity to the family of a woman who was killed as was awarded for a man's death. Formulas applied to property distribution varied widely from case to case. In addition the validity of and right to establish prenuptial agreements was not always respected. The personal status code provides a framework for the consistent application of secular law and Shari'a-based family law, but the code had yet to be implemented. Human rights lawyers reported judges treated differently cases concerning White Moor women and those concerning slave or lower-caste women. Foreign women and Mauritanian women also received different treatment by judges.

Women did not face legal discrimination in areas not addressed specifically by Shari'a. The law provides that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. While not applied universally in practice, the two largest employers, the civil service and the state mining company, observed this law. In the modern wage sector, women also received family benefits, including three months of maternity leave.

The government sought to open new employment opportunities for women in areas that were traditionally filled by men, such as health care, communications, police, and customs services. Women continued to become more involved in the fishing industry and established several women's fishing cooperatives.

On February 25, the Ministry of Social, Child, and Family Affairs launched a two-year program in cooperation with the UN Population Fund to promote a socio-cultural and legislative environment that favors gender equality and reduces gender violence. The Secretariat for Women's Affairs worked with many NGOs and cooperatives to improve the status of women. Women's groups and national and international NGOs organized meetings, seminars, and workshops throughout the year to publicize women's rights. The secretariat, in collaboration with the German NGO GTZ, publicized women's rights and organized workshops regarding their rights.

Children

According to a new law adopted on December 25, citizenship is derived from one's father. Citizenship can be derived from one's mother under the following two conditions: if the mother is a citizen and the father's nationality is unknown and if the child was born in country to a citizen mother and repudiates the father's nationality a year before reaching majority. Children born abroad to citizen parents can obtain the country's citizenship one year before reaching majority. Minor children of parents who acquire Mauritanian nationality are also eligible for Mauritanian citizenship.

In general, the government registered births immediately; however, in the South, many citizens reported not having birth certificates or national identity papers. In addition, some slaves did not have birth certificates. There were no official data on the number of births that go unregistered.

The law makes special provision for children's welfare, and there were government programs to care for abandoned children; however, inadequate funding hampered these programs.

School attendance is mandatory for six years of universal primary education. However, the law was not effectively enforced. Public education was free through university level. Classes were fully integrated, including boys and girls from all social and ethnic groups. Children of slave caste families were allowed to attend school, but many did not receive an education. There were no legal restrictions on the education of girls. Almost all children, regardless of gender or ethnic group, attended Koranic school between the ages of five and seven and gained at least rudimentary skills in reading and writing Arabic.

FGM was practiced by all ethnic groups and performed on young girls, often on the seventh day after birth and almost always before the age of six months. The child protection penal code states that any act or attempt to damage a female child's sexual organs is punishable by imprisonment and a 120,000 to 300,000 ouguiya (\$460 to \$1,153) penalty. The most recent statistics on FGM indicated a decrease in incidence from 71 percent in 2001 to 65 percent in 2007, mainly due to a decrease in the urban sector. Local experts agreed that the least severe form of excision was practiced and not infibulation, the most severe form.

The government and international NGOs continued to coordinate anti-FGM efforts focused on eradicating the practice in hospitals, discouraging midwives from practicing FGM, and educating the population. The government, the UN Population Fund, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the national Imams' Association joined other civil society members to emphasize the serious health risks of FGM and that FGM was not a religious requirement. Government hospitals and licensed medical practitioners were barred from performing FGM, and several government agencies worked to prevent others from performing the practice. According to several women's rights experts, the campaign against FGM appeared to be changing attitudes towards the practice. On February 6, the government and civil society organized a Zero Tolerance day to raise awareness about FGM.

Local NGOs estimated that there were approximately 1,000 street children, largely as a result of poverty and the urbanization of formerly nomadic families. There was limited government assistance to street children.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons; however, persons were trafficked to, from, and within the country. Trafficking in persons was a serious problem. There were no available estimates on prosecutions or sentencing of traffickers during the year.

Young boys known as talibes were trafficked within the country and from Mali and Senegal for forced begging by religious teachers called marabouts. Children were trafficked within the country by street gang leaders, who forced them to steal, beg, and sell drugs. Girls were trafficked internally and from Senegal and Mali for domestic servitude.

There were reports that children were trafficked for forced labor in agriculture, construction, fishing, and cattle herding.

Local NGOs reported trafficking of young girls to the Gulf States. Often, the girls were married off to wealthy Gulf men in exchange for bride price payments to their families, and the girls reportedly were held as sex slaves, or prostitutes.

UNICEF, the Ministry of Justice, and the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continued collaborative efforts to compensate children trafficked to the UAE as camel jockeys. According to UNICEF, the UAE compensated 497 child jockeys between 260,000 and 1,560,000 ouguiyas (\$1,000 to \$6,000) per child. The UAE also provided 260 million ouguiyas (\$1 million) towards a social reinsertion and poverty reduction program for the children and their communities.

Despite the antislavery law, NGOs reported that slavery-related practices and slavery itself persisted in isolated areas of the country where a barter economy still prevailed (see section 7.c.) and also in urban centers like Nouakchott. In March and April, local antislavery organization SOS Esclaves reported two slavery and child abuse cases involving minors Hana Mint Maria and Vatinetou Mint Mata Moulana. According to SOS Esclaves and human rights lawyers, the court system failed to remove the children from their abusive households or to prosecute the alleged slave owners under either antislavery or child abuse laws.

Government assistance and protection services for trafficking victims remained limited, with most resources going towards prevention in the form of training for police, gendarmes, and legal officials to better identify, investigate, and convict traffickers. In addition human rights organizations criticized the special police unit established to protect talibes for not enforcing the laws. On October 23, the government announced the creation of a new security agency to monitor all forms of trafficking via roads; but, at year's end, the agency had not been established.

The labor code includes criminal penalties for human trafficking in all of its recognized forms.

The State Department's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* can be found at www.state.gov/g/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical disabilities in education, employment, or the provision of other state services, and there were no reports of governmental or societal discrimination against persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities generally did not have access to buildings, and there were no government programs to provide such access. The government did not mandate preference in employment or education or public accessibility for persons with disabilities, although it did provide some rehabilitation and other assistance for such persons. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Children, and Family oversaw social reinsertion programs for people with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities faced governmental discrimination. The inconsistent issuance of national identification cards, which were required for voting, effectively disenfranchised numerous members of southern minority groups. Racial and cultural tension and discrimination also arose from the geographic and cultural divides between Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. The Moors are divided among numerous ethnolinguistic tribal and clan groups and further distinguished as either White Moor or Black Moor, although it was often difficult to distinguish between the two by skin color. White Moor tribes and clans, many of whom are dark-skinned after centuries of intermarriage with Berbers and sub-Saharan African groups, dominated positions in government and business. The Black Moors (also called

Haratines or freed slaves) remain politically and economically weaker than White Moors. Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups, which include the Halpulaar (the largest non-Moor group), Wolof, and Soninke, are concentrated in the south and urban areas. Afro-Mauritanians were underrepresented in the government and military.

The constitution designates Arabic as the official language and Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof as the country's national languages. The government continued to encourage French and Arabic bilingualism within the school system, as opposed to previous efforts at "Arabization." Neither the Afro-Mauritanian national languages nor the local Hassaniya Arabic dialect were used as languages of instruction.

Ethnic rivalry contributed to political divisions and tensions. Some political parties tended to have readily identifiable ethnic bases, although political coalitions among parties were increasingly important. Black Moors and Afro-Mauritanians continued to be underrepresented in mid to high-level public and private sector jobs.

There were numerous reports of land disputes between former slaves, Afro-Mauritanians, and Moors. According to human rights activists and press reports, local authorities allowed Moors to expropriate land occupied by former slaves and Afro-Mauritanians or obstruct access to water and pastures. On August 23, according to human rights activists, members of the Jaavra tribe physically attacked the former slave family Ehel Brahim in Kifa following a land dispute. Fatimetou Mint Brahim and her children were wounded. The attack was reportedly instigated by Brou Ould Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Cheikh. The perpetrators remained unpunished by year's end.

Human rights NGOs reported numerous cases of heritage disputes between slaves or former slaves and their masters. Traditionally, slave masters inherited their slaves' possessions. In March human rights groups reported the case of Salma Mint Jiddou, a Nouakchott widow, whose inheritance was claimed by her husband's owners. In another case in Hodh El Gharby, the family of Zeinabou Mint Brahim was deprived of its inheritance by Cheikh Mohamedou Ould Cheikh Hamadoullah, who claimed Mint Brahim was his slave. Despite a court ruling establishing Mint Brahim's brothers and sister as the rightful heirs, the authorities did not enforce the ruling by year's end.

On March 21, the government launched the 1 billion ouguiya (\$3.7 million) Program to Eradicate the Effects of Slavery. The program's goals were to reduce poverty among 44,750 former slaves in the Assaba, Brakna, Gorgol, and Hodh Chargui regions and improve access to water, health, education, and income-generating opportunities. On March 9, the government, in conjunction with the UN and a foreign donor, launched a three-year 1.3 billion ouguiya (\$5 million) conflict prevention program aimed at promoting democratic values and the rights of marginalized populations, including former slaves.

Societal Abuses, Discrimination, and Acts of Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Under Shari'a homosexual acts between males are punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals; however, there was no evidence of either societal violence or systematic government discrimination based on sexual orientation, and there were no criminal prosecutions during the year. There were no organizations advocating for sexual orientation or gender-identity rights, but there were no legal impediments to the operation of such groups.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

There was no evidence of systematic discrimination by either society or the government against persons with HIV/AIDS; however, taboos and beliefs associated with the disease caused victims in some areas to face isolation or exclusion. Although the official HIV-positive rate was estimated at less than 1 percent, it was likely to be significantly higher because of the stigma related to the disease, the lack of viable health statistics, and the impression that victims were guilty of violating Islamic practices.

Section 7 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join unions of their choice without authorization or excessive requirements, and workers exercised this right. The law also provides for freedom of association, and workers exercised this right in practice. All workers except members of the military and police were free to associate in and establish unions at the local and national levels. The majority of the labor force was in the informal sector, with most workers engaged in subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry; only 25 percent were employed in regularly paid positions. Nearly 90 percent of industrial and commercial workers, however, were unionized.

To be legally recognized, a union must have the authorization of the public prosecutor, who can provisionally suspend a trade union at the request of the Ministry of the Interior if it believes that the union has not complied with the law. The government has the discretion to decide whether to recognize a trade union.

The law provides workers with the right to strike, and workers exercised this right during the year. The government can dissolve a union for what it considered an illegal or politically motivated strike; however, no unions were disbanded during the year. Workers must provide advance notice of at least 10 working days for any strike. Workers are not allowed to hold sit-ins or to block nonstriking workers from entering work premises.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides that unions may organize workers freely without government or employer interference, and workers exercised this right in practice.

Laws provide workers with protection against antiunion discrimination; however, national human rights groups reported that authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms owned by very wealthy citizens.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, men, women, and children were trafficked for purposes of forced labor. The antislavery law criminalizes the practice of slavery and imposes penalties on government officials who do not take action on reported cases; however, no cases were prosecuted during the year. The labor code also includes criminal penalties for contracting to benefit from forced labor and for exploiting forced labor as part of an organized criminal network. Slavery-related practices, typically flowing from ancestral master-slave relationships, continued in rural areas where education levels were generally low and a need existed for herding livestock, tending fields, and other manual labor. Slavery also occurred in urban centers where young children were retained as unpaid household servants. Some individuals considered themselves either slaves or masters and were unaware that slavery had been abolished. Human rights groups reported that persons in slave-like relationships were persuaded by their masters to deny the relationship to activists.

Voluntary servitude continued, with some former slaves and descendants of slaves continuing to work for former masters in exchange for some combination of money, lodging, food, or medical care. The reasons for the persistence of such practices varied widely among the different ethnic groups; however, a barter economy, poverty, and persistent drought provided few economic alternatives for many and left some former slaves and descendants of slaves vulnerable to exploitation by former masters. Adult females with children faced greater difficulties and could be compelled to remain in a condition of servitude, performing domestic duties, tending fields, or herding animals.

There were reports that some former slaves continued to work for their former masters or others without remuneration to retain access to land they traditionally farmed. Although the law provides for distribution of land to the landless, including to former slaves, it has been enforced in only a few cases. Deeply embedded psychological and tribal bonds also made it difficult for many individuals, who had generations of forebears who were slaves, to break their bonds with former masters or their tribes. Some persons continued to link themselves to former masters because they believed their slave status had been divinely ordained and they feared religious sanction if that bond were broken. Former slaves often performed manual labor in markets, airports, and ports.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law provides that children cannot be employed before the age of 14 in the nonagricultural sector or under age 13 in the agricultural sector unless the minister of labor grants an exception due to local circumstances; however, child labor in some parts of the informal sector was common and a significant problem, particularly within poorer inner city areas. The law states that employed children between the ages of 14 and 16 should receive 70 percent of the minimum wage and that those between the ages of 17 and 18 should receive 90 percent of the minimum wage. They should not work over eight hours a day and should have one or several one-hour breaks.

The law prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons; however, children were trafficked to, from, and within the country for the purpose of forced labor.

Several reports suggested that young girls from remote regions, and possibly from western Mali, were forced to work as unpaid housemaids in some wealthy urban homes.

An unknown number of young talibes, nearly all from Halpulaar tribes, begged in the streets as part of an arrangement with marabouts for receiving religious instruction. There were reliable reports that a small number of marabouts forced their talibes to beg for over 12 hours a day and provided them with insufficient food and shelter. The government continued a program to reduce the number of talibes and partnered with NGOs to provide talibes with basic medical and nutritional care.

Street gang leaders forced children to steal, beg, and sell drugs. There were reports that children were forced to work in agriculture, construction, fishing, and cattle herding. NGOs reported that slavery-related practices and slavery itself persisted in isolated areas of the country where a barter economy still prevailed, and also in urban centers like Nouakchott.

Young children in the countryside were commonly employed in herding, cultivation of subsistence crops, such as rice, millet, and sorghum, fishing, and other significant labor in support of their families' activities. Young children in urban areas often drove donkey carts and delivered water and building materials. In keeping with longstanding tradition, many children served apprenticeships in small industries, such as metalworking, carpentry, vehicle repair, masonry, and in the informal sector. Reporting by some human rights NGOs, including SOS Esclaves, strongly suggested that domestic employment of girls as young as seven, often unpaid, continued to be a problem. There was no child labor in the modern industrial sector.

There was a labor inspectorate with the authority to refer violations directly to the appropriate judicial authorities, but the eight regional inspectors and 30 inspector/controllers lacked the basic resources, such as transport and office equipment, needed to enforce existing child labor and other labor laws.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The nationally mandated minimum monthly wage for adults, which was not enforced, was 21,150 ouguiya (approximately \$81), which did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. All workers are covered by the minimum wage law. Many labor unions denounced modern slavery conditions in several formal sectors such as the food-processing industry. In these sectors workers do not have contracts or pay stubs. Their salaries were below the guaranteed minimum wage and they worked in very unfavorable conditions. Sometimes they were not paid for several months.

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The standard legal nonagricultural workweek could not exceed either 40 hours or six days without overtime compensation, which was paid at rates that were graduated according to the number of supplemental hours worked. Domestic workers and certain other categories could work 56 hours per week. All employees must be given at least one 24-hour period of rest per week. There are no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime.

The Labor Directorate of the Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcement of the labor laws, but there was a lack of effective enforcement due to inadequate funding.

The government set health and safety standards. The Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcing these standards, but did so inconsistently due to inadequate funding. In principle, workers could remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment, but in practice they could not.

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