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[Africa](#)[Americas](#)[Asia](#)[Europe](#)[Oceania](#)

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[Country Information](#)[Legal Information](#)[Policy Documents](#)[Reference Documents](#)

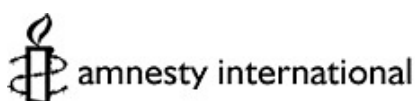
Browse by

[A-Z Index](#)[Topics](#)[Publishers](#)[Document Types](#)

Resources

[Special Features](#)[Standards and Training](#)[Information Alerts](#)[Protection Starter Kit](#)[Library](#)[News](#)[Refworld Personalization](#)[External Links](#)

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Amnesty International Report 2010 - Mauritania

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA

Head of state: General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz**Head of government:** Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf**Death penalty:** abolitionist in practice**Population:** 3.3 million**Life expectancy:** 56.6 years**Under-5 mortality (m/f):** 128/112 per 1,000**Adult literacy:** 55.8 per cent

Security forces used excessive force against peaceful demonstrators, human rights defenders and members of parliament. Torture and other ill-treatment were frequently reported. Prison conditions remained harsh. Dozens of people suspected of belonging to armed groups were detained without trial. Hundreds of migrants were held and expelled with no opportunity to challenge the legality of their detention or collective expulsion. No executions were reported, but at least one person was under sentence of death.

Background

General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who became President in August 2008 after a coup against the democratically elected President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, resigned in April from the army to stand in the July presidential elections. His victory was confirmed by the Constitutional Court, although the president of the Independent National Electoral Commission threw doubts on the reliability of the results and resigned.

Mauritania, suspended from the AU after the 2008 coup, was readmitted in June before the presidential elections.

Torture, other ill-treatment and prison conditions

Torture and other ill-treatment were widespread. In September, in a telephone conversation with a journalist, a detainee complained about the systematic use of torture on most inmates.

Despite the release of 68 detainees in September from Dar Naïm, prisons remained overcrowded. Harsh and arbitrary punishments continued to be reported. In Nouadhibou and Dar Naïm prisons, detainees were crammed together in stifling heat. Only old and sick detainees were occasionally allowed to leave their cells. Detainees went on hunger strike to protest against food shortages. Families of detainees staged a sit-in to protest against torture of prisoners suspected of terrorism.

- Cheikhani Ould Sidina, arrested in 2008 and sentenced to one year in prison for helping his brother to escape from a court, died in Nouakchott prison in April. The Justice Department subsequently announced that it would investigate conditions of detention there.

Excessive use of force

In the first six months of 2009, the security forces regularly used excessive force to prevent demonstrators from protesting against the electoral timetable.

- In April, two demonstrations were violently repressed. The protests were attended by political parties and civil society organizations, including the Coordination of Democratic Forces – a coalition formed by the National Front for the Defence of Democracy and comprising trade union federations, human rights activists and civil society.
- On 2 April, police beat human rights defender Boubacar Messaoud, president of SOS Esclaves, an NGO that campaigns against slavery, and several members of parliament, including Kobade Ould Cheick and Mohamed Moustapha Ould Bedredine, and fired tear gas at them as they staged a peaceful protest against the August 2008 coup.
- On 19 April, many women, including former ministers, members of parliament and human rights defenders, were kicked or beaten with batons and belts by security forces. The women were staging a sit-in in front of the UN headquarters in Nouakchott. Nebghouha Mint Mohamed Vall, former Education Minister, and her daughter were beaten by the police. Another woman lost consciousness and had to be hospitalized after she too was beaten by the police.

Prisoners of conscience – releases

Isselmou Ould Abdelkader Isselmou, a former Minister of Health detained since September 2008 for criticizing the coup against President Sidi, was provisionally released in February. In June, four other detainees, including the former Prime Minister and the Minister of Public Administration, were released on bail.

Counter-terror and security

At least 12 people, among them Malian nationals suspected of belonging to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), were arrested in different parts of the country, including the capital Nouakchott and in the border area with Mali. Among them was a man suspected of involvement in a bombing outside the French Embassy in Nouakchott in August. At the end of the year, more than 60 people suspected or convicted of terrorism offences were in prison.

Abuses by armed groups

Three Spanish aid workers were abducted by AQIM in November, and two Italian tourists were taken hostage in December. All were reportedly transferred to Mali.

Refugees

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, announced in October that more than 14,000 Mauritanian refugees, comprising over 3,500 families, had returned from Senegal since the start of the year. Since the beginning of the return of refugees in January 2008, nearly 20,000 Mauritians had come back to Mauritania from neighbouring countries. Out of 12,000 refugees still living in Mali, around 8,000 had expressed a wish to return to Mauritania. Between 1989 and 1991, thousands of Mauritians fled to neighbouring countries in the aftermath of repression against the black Mauritanian population.

Migrants' rights

More than 1,750 people suspected of trying to migrate to Europe were arbitrarily arrested and held at a detention centre in Nouadhibou for a few days before being expelled. This policy of arrests and collective expulsions by the Mauritanian authorities was the result of intense pressure by the EU, and Spain in particular, in an attempt to combat migration to Europe.

Discrimination and slavery

The report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism was released in March. He noted that the government had taken positive steps to combat discrimination, but expressed concern about the ongoing marginalization of black Mauritanian people in the political, economic and social spheres. He stressed that despite the adoption of laws, notably against slavery, there

was still a gap between the legal framework and its application, and that no complaints were being brought before the domestic courts. The Special Rapporteur recommended amending the Constitution to reflect the cultural diversity of the country, and establishing a Commission to examine the root causes of discrimination.

The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, visited Mauritania in October and November. She acknowledged the efforts made by the government and civil society to fight slavery, but considered that "a more a holistic, collaborative and sustained approach addressing all forms of discrimination together with poverty at all levels of society is required".

- The case of a couple arrested for slave practices on a 10-year-old girl was dismissed in April after the prosecutor concluded it was a family matter. SOS Esclaves, which filed the case, complained that the 2007 law criminalizing slavery had not been enforced.

Death penalty

Courts continued to impose the death penalty, although no executions were reported. At the end of the year, at least one person was under sentence of death.

Amnesty International report

- Mauritanie: Nouvelle répression par la force de manifestations pacifiques (AFR 38/001/2009)

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