

May 31, 1991

## **MAURITANIA**

### **More Than 200 Black Political Detainees Executed or Tortured to Death**

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## Introduction

Details are beginning to emerge about the death of more than 200 black political detainees in Mauritania as a result of severe torture or because of extrajudicial executions by security forces. These detainees were arrested between November 1990 through February 1991 and were subjected to a savage cruelty that almost defies description. Unfortunately, these developments are merely the most recent in the government's open war against the country's black ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> The fact that more than 200 black detainees have died without generating an international outcry is a sobering measure of the silence that characterizes the dismal human rights situation facing black Mauritians.

The information about these deaths began to surface in late March, after the government declared an amnesty for political prisoners (all of whom were black) which included hundreds of people, mostly from the military and the civil service, who were arrested in late 1990 and held in incommunicado detention for allegedly plotting a coup d'etat. As the detainees were freed from the prisons and internment camps, it became clear that many of them had been tortured. As a result, scores had died. In addition, reports indicate that many who survived are now crippled or paralyzed from the effects of torture, and some may have died since their release. According to our information, almost all the deaths involved blacks in the military, and all belong to the Halpulaar ethnic group which the government regards as the most active in their opposition to the persecution of the country's black population. Estimates of the number of blacks arrested during this last wave range from 1,000 to 3,000.<sup>2</sup> The arrests took place throughout the country, but centered on Nouakchott, the capital, and Nouadhibou, the next largest city and principal port.

Further corroboration of the brutal treatment of the black detainees came in late March when Cheikh Fall, a black Mauritanian warrant officer in the Mauritanian army who was stationed at one of the detention camps, sought political asylum in France and released his story to the French press.<sup>3</sup> Fall's description of the conditions at the Jereida military camp include vicious interrogation methods aimed at extracting self-incriminating confessions.

Ironically, news of these deaths comes at a time when the Mauritanian government has announced a series of reforms. On April 16, President Maaouya ould Sid'Ahmed Taya stated that an Economic and Social Council would be appointed, a referendum on a new constitution would be held, and parliamentary elections would be scheduled. In addition, the government has appointed a

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<sup>1</sup> Though never on such a massive scale, this is not the first time that black political detainees have died in custody from deliberate ill-treatment. In August/September 1988, four black prisoners died from malnutrition and medical neglect at Walata, a remote maximum security prison.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of State, in its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1990*, cites the figure of between 1,000 and 2,000 arrests. Amnesty International, in its April 5, 1991 press release, claims that 3,000 were arrested. Some Mauritanian exiles believe that the number was as high as 5,000.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Smith, "L'Apartheid est Maure," *Liberation*, April 5, 1991.

commission of inquiry into these deaths. Unfortunately, the commission is comprised entirely of military officers, and even the pro-government Mauritanian League for Human Rights was not permitted to participate in the commission. The President's refusal to establish an independent commission does not offer great hope that a genuine effort will be made to expose the recent abuses, thereby increasing the likelihood that the same abuses will continue.

Independent observers believe that these initiatives were prompted by the government's concern at the diplomatic isolation and economic consequences of its pro-Iraq stance during the Gulf war. Anxious to repair the damage, the authorities have announced measures aimed at improving its international image. These promises are fine symbolic gestures but they do not address the violent, humiliating and discriminatory practices that are the fabric of everyday life for the country's black citizens. The prospect of elections is meaningless in a situation where hundreds of blacks who are not known to be politically active are routinely arrested, held incommunicado and tortured. If the government is serious about change, it must foster an atmosphere which will encourage black Mauritians to overcome their fear of political involvement. At a minimum, the government must investigate these deaths and the circumstances surrounding them and prosecute those responsible for gross human rights abuses. Most important of all, it must take immediate measures to change the system that has facilitated discrimination against Mauritania's black citizens for decades.

## **The Arrests**

From October 1990 through February 1991, the government launched a wave of arrests that initially targeted black Mauritians in the military, but was later extended to civil servants. The justification for the arrests was an alleged attempt by blacks, especially Halpulaars, to overthrow the government. Although no complete list of all those arrested is available, it is believed that between 1,000-3,000 blacks were held in incommunicado detention. Some were released after days or weeks in detention; others were due to be tried on charges of treason, but no trial ever took place. The Mauritanian government accused Senegal of backing the coup attempt, which Senegal denied. Among those arrested were black members of Mauritania's small navy, customs officials, members of the army, police officers, civil servants and hundreds of ordinary civilians.

The sweeping and arbitrary nature of the arrests seemed designed to keep all blacks in a state of nervous anxiety. The result was described by one Mauritanian refugee as creating "a psychosis of fear"<sup>4</sup> among blacks. The increased climate of fear in the black communities was tangible: not only were hundreds being arrested, but no one knew the reason for the arrests. It was only after the arrests were well underway that the government announced the alleged coup. A black Mauritanian who was in Nouakchott at the time of the arrests described the atmosphere:

During the arrests, there weren't any blacks who felt safe. Since many of the arrests took

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<sup>4</sup>Africa Watch interview in Dakar, February 17, 1991.

place in the middle of the night, people often went to bed with their clothes on. My cousin was arrested in his pajamas -- he didn't even have shoes on. When you left the house, everyone knew that if you didn't come back, you had been arrested.<sup>5</sup>

Ousmane (not his real name), a refugee in Senegal, had another explanation for the government's policies:

We weren't surprised by the arrests in 1990; it is part of a policy to exterminate the black Mauritians. In order to get rid of the blacks, those in the military and in the civil service had to be arrested. It was especially important to get the blacks out of the military, because that's the only institution that could take power.<sup>6</sup>

It is impossible to take the government's claim of a coup attempt seriously. In the first place, the charges were announced only in December, even though the arrests began in mid-October. Secondly, the number of black army officers and rank-and-file soldiers had been dramatically reduced since the last alleged coup attempt by black army officers in October 1987. Since then, blacks were gradually purged from the army, no new black recruits were hired and those blacks who remained were disarmed. In addition, black members of the army, police force, National Guard, various security services and customs service figured prominently among those who were deported in 1989-90. Finally, the government identified the navy -- a relatively insignificant force -- as the chief architect of the coup, again suggesting that the arrests were in fact part of the government's broader policy of discriminating against the country's black population.

At the time of the arrests, municipal elections were taking place. The authorities were clearly nervous that one of the candidates for mayor of Nouakchott -- Messaoud ould Boulkheir, a *Haratine* and former minister of rural development -- was galvanizing the black and *Haratine* populations against the ruling *Beydanes*<sup>7</sup>. Many observers believe that the government's motive was to depict blacks as "dangerous," as evidenced by their sudden attempt at a coup. The government did not have to resort to such extreme measures in order to undermine the potential of black power. It is almost impossible for blacks to get either new or updated identity cards, without which they cannot vote. According to some unofficial estimates, only 15-20 percent of the population voted. This was in part because blacks were not eligible to vote, and in part because of widespread skepticism that the elections would be free and fair.

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<sup>5</sup>Africa Watch telephone interview from New York, May 2, 1991.

<sup>6</sup>Africa Watch interview in Dakar, February 18, 1991.

<sup>7</sup>The *Haratines*, also known as black Moors, are former black slaves who remain economically and culturally linked to their old masters. Although the authorities have refused to publish the results of the census taken in 1977 and in 1988, it is widely believed that the blacks and *Haratines* significantly outnumber *Beydanes*. Successive governments have sought to keep the black ethnic groups separated from the *Haratines* out of fear that they would join forces against *Beydane* rule.

## Conditions of Imprisonment

Due to the great number of arrests, the government had to expand its capacity to hold detainees in custody. Accordingly, they were held in unofficial detention centers; military bases and police stations in various parts of the country were transformed into internment camps, and villas around the capital were turned into prisons. Reports indicate that the detainees were held in buildings belonging to the army, the National Guard and the police in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, and in military bases in Aleg, Neima, Rosso and Foumgleta.

One of the main detention centers was the military barracks at Jereida, about 30 kilometers north of Nouakchott. According to Cheikh Fall,<sup>8</sup> a black Mauritanian who was stationed there, Jereida began to be used as an internment center for the detainees in November 1990. Fall was responsible for registering the detainees; according to his figures, there were 424 detainees in February 1991 -- down from the original number in late 1990. The reduction was due in part to releases, and in part to deaths. Fall estimates that some 30 blacks died as a result of torture. Their families were never notified; the bodies were buried in scattered places three or four kilometers from the base.

Most, though not all, of the detainees at Jereida were tortured. The torture methods included beatings; stripping them naked and pouring cold water over them (especially when they first arrived in December, when it was cold); burying them in the sand up to their necks; and subjecting them to "jaguar," a common torture method in Mauritania which involves tying the victim's hands and feet and suspending him upside down from a bar, after which they are beaten, particularly on the soles of the feet.

Torture was not limited to detainees at Jereida. The detainees were apparently tortured or severely mistreated in all the detention centers. Amnesty International reported<sup>9</sup> that detainees were tortured in both military barracks and police stations. The torture included "jaguar," electric shocks applied to the prisoners' genitals and burning them all over their bodies.

The purpose of the torture, according to Fall, was to extract self-incriminating confessions and information about others. The detainees were told to sign a statement -- without having the right to read it -- which stated that they were part of a clandestine military organization set up to overthrow the government. In the past, during the trials of blacks suspected of political opposition to the government, the prosecution relied almost entirely on "confessions" obtained while they were in incommunicado detention, even after some of the defendants challenged their validity, claiming they were tortured into signing the relevant statements.

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<sup>8</sup>Africa Watch interview from New York, April 30, 1991.

<sup>9</sup>Amnesty International, "Mauritania: Amnesty International Calls for Investigation into Reported Deaths of over 200 Political Prisoners," April 5, 1991.

Alassane, a 30-year old black soldier, fled from Mauritania to Senegal in April 1991. In an interview in a hospital in N'dioum,<sup>10</sup> he described the conditions of his detention.

We were imprisoned first in Aslat for a while, then we were transferred to Haym, and then to Nema, where we were held in a building ... My life in prison was filled with constant tortures, beatings, hands tied behind my back, and feet chained. It was often in this position that the beatings would rain down on us. They came without warning, when the prisoners were sitting down or doing nothing. I don't think there was anything they didn't do to us ...

At the beginning, when they arrested us in Aleg, they tied our feet and hands, then they dragged us through the thorns and over the hot sand. In my case, for example, I was buried in sand up to my neck while two people hit me in the face and threw sand at my face. Others were subjected to the same treatment; some even died as a result. That's how Niokkane died.

The day of his arrest, Alassane witnessed the deaths of six other detainees. He added:

They died from being beaten. The guards took one and began to beat him with truncheons, and he screamed "I wasn't a part of it, I wasn't a part of it" until he finally died ... One of them was named Baal, from the Toro area. Another's name was Niokkane, from somewhere near Kaedi. Another was Sergeant Diop, also from someplace near Kaedi. Another's name was Niang, from Garalol.

## **Extrajudicial Executions**

In addition to those who died from torture, an unknown number of blacks were extrajudicially executed by security forces. Although information remains thin, Africa Watch has received details about the following incidents of executions of black detainees.

In the camp at Jereida, four soldiers and one sergeant -- Dia Abdoulaye, Sow Abdoulaye, Sy Moussa, Garly N'Diaye and Sy Hamadi Ali -- were forced to dig a grave in which they were buried, before they were executed.<sup>11</sup>

At Inal barracks, north of Nouadhibou, 33 soldiers who were detained at Inal barracks, north of Nouadhibou, were hanged on November 27.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Interview in N'dioum by a missionary working in the area and a Mauritanian refugee, April 13, 1991.

<sup>11</sup>Information from refugees in N'Dioum, April 1991.

<sup>12</sup>Amnesty International, "Mauritania: Amnesty International Calls for Investigation into Reported Deaths of over 200 Political Prisoners," April 5, 1991.

## Preliminary List of Those Who Died

The following is a preliminary list of those who reportedly died in detention. Although it is impossible to confirm all these names, Africa Watch is publishing the list in the hope that it can be used to solicit further information and can be updated in the future. We urge those with information about the fate of these individuals to contact Africa Watch.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Place of Origin</u> (Village/region)
1. M'baye Moussa Boubou	Boghe
2. N'gom Demba	"
3. Gueye Baidi (company warrant officer)	"
4. Bal Saidou	Bababe
5. Guisse Saidou	"
6. Ly Baidi	M'botto (Kaedi)
7. Abou Sow (lieutenant)	Djowol (Kaedi)
8. Amadou Sow	"
9. Abdoulaye Sow	"
10. Sow Samba	"
11. Ba Abdarahmane dit Diaydi	"
12. Coulibaly Samba Demba	"
13. Dia Abdoulaye Doro	Mbono Jeeri (Boghe)
14. Dia Mamadou Harouna	Tchide (Boghe)
15. Ba Mamadou Alassane	Toulde (Boghe)
16. Wagne Abdoulaye Idrissa	Tialgou (Boghe)
17. Diole Mamadou Ousmane (sergeant)	Dioude/Bababe (Boghe)
18. Niokane Harouna (1st class)	Nere (Kaedi)
19. Diop Mamadou Saada (corporal)	"
20. Bal Souleye	Rosso
21. Dia Abdourahmane	Djowol
22. Dia Mamadou Samba	"
23. Soumare Samba	"
24. Ly Moussa (businessman)	Nouadhibou
25. Ba Baidy (customs agent)	"
26. Ly Mamadou (noncommissioned officer)	M'bagne
27. Mamadou Tiowa N'dongo (soldier)	Kaedi
28. Dia Moussa Samba (noncommissioned officer)	Kaedi
29. Dia Amadou Sow (soldier)	"
30. Saada Sow (soldier)	"
31. Mamadou Samba Sow	"

32. Samba Damba (soldier)	"
33. Diop Harouna Beidary	"
34. Sall Alassane Kalidou	"
35. Diallo Amadou Simbaye (soldier)	Monguel
36. Diallo Abdoulaye Pollel (soldier)	"
37. Athie Dioumbary (soldier)	"
38. Hanne Ibrahima Samba (soldier)	Sorimale
39. Diop Bocar (noncommissioned officer)	"
40. Sarr Yaya (officer)	M'bagne
41. Lom Abdoulaye (navy officer)	Bababe
42. Guissa Mamadou (noncommissioned officer)	"
43. Bal Saidou (soldier)	"
44. Samba Thiam (soldier)	"
45. Nawel Thiam (soldier)	"
46. Baba Mignel Diallo (soldier)	"
47. Kome Ali Diba (soldier)	"
48. Younouss Diallo (soldier)	"
49. Sarr Amadou Tidjane (soldier)	"
50. Daouda Diop (soldier)	"
51. Diallo Ibrahima Abass (soldier)	"
52. Sall Mamadou Samba (soldier)	"
53. Sy Moussa Amadou (soldier)	"
54. Sy Hamadi Ali (noncommissioned officer)	"
55. Gawdel Diop (guard)	"
56. Samba Alhousseynou (soldier)	"
57. Alassane Sarr (soldier)	"
58. Djigo Abdoulaye Abou (noncommissioned officer)	Boghe (Dioulom)
59. Wagne Abdoulaye Demba (soldier)	"
60. Dia Abdoulaye Dore (soldier)	"
61. Dia Mohamed Elghali (soldier)	"
62. Dia Cheick (soldier)	"
63. Lo Alassane Mika (soldier)	"
64. N'Gaide Moussa Amadou (soldier)	"
65. Bass Amadou Mamadou (soldier)	"
66. Dia Tidjane Harouna (soldier)	"
67. N'gaide Amadou Adama (soldier)	"
68. Lo Djibril Alpha (soldier)	"
69. Lo Siradji (soldier)	"
70. Ba Mamadou Mamoudou (soldier)	"
71. Diop Abou Samba (soldier)	Boghe (Dioulom)
72. Sy Oumar Aliou (soldier)	"
73. Lam Ifra dit Bess (soldier)	"
74. Gadio Saidou (soldier)	"



75. Wane Alhoussaynou (soldier)	"
76. Djibril Baba (soldier)	"
77. Sy Adama (soldier)	"
78. Louty Sow (soldier)	"
79. Sy Mamadou Demba (soldier)	"
80. Ba Idy (customs official)	Darel Barka (Boghe)
81. Gaye Sileye (navy)	"
82. Aw Oumar (soldier)	"
83. Sow Amadou Saidou (soldier)	"
84. Natougou Mbodj (soldier)	Rosso
85. Laya Ba (soldier)	"
86. Diol Mamadou Ousame (sergeant)	Dioulde
87. Sow Ibrahima (sergeant)	"
88. Sow Mamadou Malick (1st class)	"
89. Dia Seydou (2nd class)	"
90. Demba Yero (2nd class)	"
91. Ba Demba (2nd class)	"
92. Abdellahi Fall (guard)	"
93. Sall Oumar (navy officer)	"
94. Kane Abdourahmane (meteorologist)	Nouadhibou
95. Kane Boubakar (soldier)	"
96. Saidou Sow (officer)	"
97. Kane Djibril (officer)	"
98. Kane Abdoulaye (noncommissioned officer in the gendarmerie)	"
99. Wane Kalidou Alhousseyni (soldier)	Diouloum (Boghe)
100. Mamadou Gayel M'Bodj (soldier)	Sarandogou-Boghe
101. Moustapha Bocar Sayda Sy (soldier)	Sarandogou-Boghe
102. Saidou M'Bodj (soldier)	Sarandogou-Boghe
103. Amadou Saidou (soldier)	Boghe
104. Saidou Ba	Toulde-Boghe
105. Seydi N'Diaye	Toulde-Boghe
106. Ba Thierno	Toulde-Boghe
107. Mamadou Oumar (soldier)	Toulde-Boghe
108. Mamadou Abdoulaye	Thienel-Boghe
109. Djigo Dialade	"
110. Dia Samba	"
111. Dia Samba	Walalde-Boghe
112. Diallo Moussa	"
113. Dia hamady Amadou	"
114. Lo Boubacar	"
115. Sall Abdoulaye	Aere Gollere-Bababe
116. Kebe Abdoulaye (sergeant major in the gendarmerie)	"
117. Diallo Mika (sergeant major in the army)	"

118. Diop Mouhamed (chief corporal)	"
119. Ba Mohamed Demba (soldier)	"
120. Ba Amadou Mody (soldier)	"
121. Ba Amadou Mody (soldier)	"
122. Aliou Abda (lieutenant)	Djingue
123. Baehuou Belal (soldier)	Auoynat
124. Bass Moussa (company warrant officer)	Abdalla-Bababe
125. Ly Mamadou Salif (customs lieutenant)	Thila-M'Bague
126. Lam Toro Camara (customs lieutenant)	Darel Barka
127. M'Bare Sidy Barry (customs lieutenant)	"
128. Demba Dieri Diop (customs lieutenant)	"
129. Ann Abdoulaye (soldier)	M'Botto
130. Younouss Gueye (soldier)	Sorimale
131. N'Diaye Hamady (sergeant)	"
132. N'Diaye Tileye Djibi	"
133. Bayal N'bodj	Ngorel
134. Djigo Mamoudou	Dioulom
135. Mamadou N'Diaye	Farandogou
136. Fileye Ngoureme	"
137. Famba Ndorel	Ehiene
138. Thiam Ousmane	Boghe
139. Fiyel Sy	Boghe
140. Wane Alhousseynou	Dioulom
141. Mamadou M'Bodj	Sarandogou
142. Demba Gaye	Ngorel
143. M'bodj Baba	Boghe
144. Sy Sada (gendarme)	Aire M'Bar
145. Sy Hamadi Racine	Seno
146. Mamdou Samba Dia (lieutenant)	Djeol
147. Sada Sow (sergeant)	"
148. Ousmane Abdalla Wele (navy sub-lieutenant)	"
149. Adama Fall (guard)	Foude Jeeri
150. Oumar N'Diaye (sergeant)	Nere walo
151. Samba Bocar Soumare (soldier)	Djeol
152. Ibrahima Fall (navy)	"
153. Amadou Tidiane Sarr (soldier)	Wothie
154. Aw Alpha Babo (soldier)	Wothie
155. Diallo Moussa N'Dairi (soldier)	Wothie
156. Kome Aboubacry (soldier)	"
157. Fall Abdoulaye Moussa (lieutenant)	Garalol
158. Ly Adama Yero (sergeant)	"
159. N'Dongo Faidou Abdoulaye (quarter master general)	"
160. N'Dongo Alassone Daouda (quarter master general)	"

161. Thiam Djiby Cire (soldier)	"
162. Dieye Ibrahima Mamadou (soldier)	"
163. Djioubairou Falel Ath (navy)	M'Botto
164. Anne Dahirou Racine (navy lieutenant)	"
165. Sileye Fayol	Sylla
166. Samba Mibe Sy (soldier)	Foundou
167. Mamadou Bachirou Sy	M'Bagodine
168. Amadou Oumar	"
169. Amadou Samba Dia	"
170. Sy Mamadou (soldier)	Dionde
171. Samba Tidjane N'Diaye (soldier)	"
172. Ismael Fall (soldier)	"
173. N'Dongo Amadou Samba (soldier)	Nere walo

### Some Individual Cases

**Ly Moussa**, a man in his late 40s, was from Dar el Barka in the Department of Boghe. For many years he had worked as a businessman in Nouadhibou, principally as a fish exporter. In 1986, he was among 21 blacks arrested and accused of being part of an opposition group, "Forces de Libération Africaine de Mauritanie", (FLAM). He was sent to Walata prison and later transferred to Aioun prison. He was freed in December 1989, and returned to his family and his business in Nouadhibou. In November 1990, he was arrested again, in connection with the alleged coup attempt. He died in detention.

**Kane Abdrahmane**, a meteorologist in his early 40s, is from Tekane, near Rosso. For the past 15 years, he lived in Nouadhibou and worked for the Association pour la Sécurité de la Navigation Aérienne (ASCNA). He was arrested in November 1990 in Nouadhibou.

**Sow Ibrahima**, an army sergeant in his early 30s, is from Medina Fanaye in the Department of Trarza. During the Sahara War in the mid-seventies, he was captured and taken prisoner by POLISARIO and finally released in 1981. He lived in Nouakchott with his two wives and three or four children. According to our information, he was never involved in politics. He was arrested in November 1990.

**Ball Souleye**, an army corporal in his early 30s, is originally from Medina Fanaye in the Department of Trarza, although his family lives in Rosso. His father, Ball Alhousseinou, was killed by security forces during the expulsions of 1989. Ball was serving in Aleg, where he was arrested in late September or early October.

**Sall Oumer**, a marine lieutenant in his early 40s, is from Niakwar, in the Department of Trarza. He was a religious man who was apparently not involved in politics, and lived in Nouadhibou with his wife and five children. He was arrested in November.

## **Public Protests about the Killings and Arrests**

In a rare show of public opposition to the killings, a series of open letters and tracts have been issued in Mauritania criticizing the government's role in the recent arrests and killings. Africa Watch has received the text of three of these documents, written by women relatives of the deceased, by trade unionists and intellectuals.

### **Women's Appeal**

In April, over 75 women -- mothers, wives, sisters and nieces of some of those arrested and presumed to be dead -- signed a petition to President Taya. In a moving letter that records their grief, their appeal is a powerful reminder of their desperate economic and emotional situation and a testimony of their determination to hold the government accountable for their loss.

The women called on the President to break the official silence surrounding their deaths and to help provide for the families left behind. They wrote:

The disappearance of our loved ones presents incalculable problems on many levels, especially socially. Some of these men were only sons, and were therefore the only joy and pride of their families; others provided the only means of support; and others still left behind several wives and many children without resources.

With the crumbling of our last hopes, we are living in a true tragedy. We have the bitter feeling that we are being left alone with our grief and its surrounding misery and finally, of being put in a situation that human conscience cannot accept. For all these reasons, we appeal to you as a last recourse that the silence be broken, that explanations be given to us and that humane treatment be accorded us in conformity with morality and with the rights to which we can lay claim ...

### **The Workers' Declaration**

On April 18, the Mauritanian Workers Union (UTM -- Union des Travailleurs de la Mauritanie) published a statement supporting the government's democratic opening and calling for: 1) the formation of an independent commission and an official inquiry into the deaths of the black civilians and military personnel arrested in November-December 1990, leading to the prosecution of those responsible; and 2) the holding of a national conference to discuss the democratic process to be instituted.

## **The Intellectuals' Letter**

On April 10, 50 prominent Mauritians -- including former ministers, lawyers, doctors and professors -- signed an open letter addressed to President Taya that denounced "the magnitude of the repression which was brought down upon the blacks, civilians and military in the last months of 1990." Among the forms of persecution suffered by blacks, they listed several hundred people who had suffered extrajudicial executions, as well as citing disappearances and other atrocities. The letter added:

These tragic and regrettable events are the logical consequence of a policy of blind repression that makes no distinction between the guilty and the innocent. They are even more the result of the absence of democratic freedoms.

In addition, the letter called for the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry in order to determine the identity of those responsible for these crimes and urged the President to take immediate steps to guarantee the rule of law.

## **Background to the Conflict**

Mauritania is situated geographically between the Maghreb and black Africa. However, with power held by the *Beydanes*, a policy of "arabization" has been in place since independence in 1960 which discriminates against the black ethnic communities. As far back as the late 1960s, but especially since the 1980s, "arabization" penetrated most aspects of Mauritanian life: the educational system; the language, with Arabic replacing French as the official language; the administration of justice, in both regular and religious courts; employment practices; and access to loans and credits.

Black anger about the injustices inherent in this system prompted protests in both 1966 and 1979, spearheaded by schoolchildren. Confrontation came to a head in 1986 when a group of 30 black intellectuals, most of them Halpulaars, issued *The Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian* which criticized racial discrimination; 21 of them were arrested, tortured and sentenced to long prison terms.<sup>13</sup> Since 1986, the government has treated the Halpulaar community with unrestrained ferocity. Halpulaars have been gradually weeded out of the army, various security forces and police service. In October 1987, accusing Halpulaar army officers of planning a coup plot, 51 people, 47 of them members of the armed forces, were arrested and given a summary trial by a special state security court. Three officers were condemned to death within three days of their sentence and the others were given long sentences ranging from life imprisonment to 20 years. They were initially held, together with the civilians arrested in 1986, at Walata prison, where four of the prisoners, two civilians and two army officers, died in August/September 1988 of

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<sup>13</sup> See *News from Africa Watch*, Persecution of Black Mauritians: Summary Executions, Deprivation of Citizenship, Illegal Expulsions and Arbitrary Arrests, September 7, 1989.

malnutrition and denial of medical care. The civilians were released in December 1989 and September 1990 and kept under close surveillance. The army officers were amnestied in March 1991. Many of the former detainees suffer from medical complications due to torture, forced labor, poor and inadequate food and water, denial of medical facilities and insufficient light and exercise.

Despite this history of persecution and inequality, no one was prepared for the mass expulsions of black Mauritians to Senegal that was sparked by a border dispute between Senegal and Mauritania in April 1989. Taking advantage of an agreement between the two countries to repatriate each other's citizens, the Mauritanian authorities launched a campaign to deport thousands of blacks, especially those in the south near the economically-important Senegal River Valley.

As of early 1991, official estimates put the number of Mauritanian refugees in Senegal at approximately 53,000. The real figures are substantially higher, since this number reflects only those who have formally registered with the local authorities, and does not take into account the thousands living with relatives on the Senegalese side of the river and in cities throughout Senegal. A smaller number of refugees have also fled into Mali; the official figure for those who have been registered is about 12,000 but again, the real number is much higher because of the ease of integration into the life of local communities in Mali.<sup>14</sup>

The large-scale expulsions of blacks from Mauritania finally tapered off by the second half of 1990, but another strategy was already underway. Concerned that blacks gathered in Senegal were now in a position to organize political resistance and publicize their plight, the authorities sought to neutralize black professionals -- especially civil servants, teachers, nurses and other health workers -- with economic sanctions. This strategy sometimes took the form of simply ceasing to pay their salaries, but often led to outright dismissals without explanations. In addition, their bank accounts were frozen. The cumulative effect of targeted deportations of black professionals and the wide-reaching dismissals left serious voids in certain professions, which were then filled by either *Beydanes* or *Haratines*.

Ironically, the mass deportations have politicized a growing number of blacks. Sanctuary abroad is giving them an opportunity to articulate pent-up grievances and to keep the politics of protest alive. Politically active groups operating from the Senegalese side of the Valley are engaged in military operations across the border. To discourage black villagers from extending any form of assistance, a substantial military presence along the Valley in Mauritania has become synonymous with violent abuses. Killings, rape, arrest, detention and torture, confiscation of property and the burning of homes are common occurrences for black herders and villagers.

## **Recommendations**

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<sup>14</sup> The government of former President Moussa Traore refused to extend the status of refugees to Mauritians, but the new government recognizes them as refugees which should facilitate international assistance.

Foreign countries, international and regional organizations, such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which have been trying to mediate the conflict between Mauritania and Senegal, have concentrated exclusively on the international aspects of the dispute. But it is ultimately self-defeating to regard the government's ill-treatment of its black citizens as an "internal matter." Even if the two governments come to an agreement under international auspices, there will be no peace in Mauritania as long as the government is at war with its black citizens. As people continue to flee across the border, the political tensions in Mauritania will inevitably spill over into Senegal, in light of the long-standing economic, social and family ties between the two countries, especially between the two communities living along the River Senegal Valley. The recent history of countries as diverse as Liberia, Somalia and Cambodia provide sobering proof that lasting internal peace can only be achieved when nations respect the human rights of their citizens.

Africa Watch is urging donor governments and agencies, in particular the United States, the European Economic Community and the international lending institutions, to use their considerable leverage to bring about real change in policy and practice in Mauritania. Further economic aid should be conditioned on a number of feasible measures. In light of the gravity of the situation in Mauritania, aid should be suspended unless the government has made good faith efforts to:

- \* Appoint an independent commission of inquiry to investigate the arrests, torture and killings detailed in this newsletter. The inquiry should be carried out by individuals whose impartiality, independence from the government and competence is beyond dispute. The findings should be made public as soon as the commission has submitted its report to the government.
- \* Take measures to ensure that military personnel and other officials implicated in incidents of physical and psychological abuse are held accountable for their actions, tried in legal proceedings and, if found guilty, punished appropriately.
- \* Allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit prisons and detention centers on a regular basis. The government need not fear any adverse publicity from such visits since the ICRC operates under rules of strict confidentiality.
- \* Permit representatives of international medical organizations to examine the recent detainees and to provide them with medical care.
- \* Give a public commitment to allow international human rights groups -- including Africa Watch -- to conduct fact-finding missions in Mauritania, without government escort and without fear that citizens who meet with such groups will suffer reprisals.
- \* Halt the campaign of murder and persecution of black Mauritians and bring an end to the discriminatory practices that have made black Mauritians second-class

citizens in their own country.

We encourage institutions and individuals to send telegrams and letters of protest condemning the government's excessive cruelty towards the country's black population and urging the authorities to implement the recommendations outlined above. Please send your letters or telegrams to:

Président le Colonel  
Maaouya ould Sid' Ahmed Taya  
Président du Comité Militaire de Salut National  
Chef de l'Etat, La Présidence  
Nouakchott, Mauritania  
(Telegrams: Pres. ould Taya, Nouakchott)  
(Telexes: 580 PRIM MIN)

Monsieur Hasni ould Didi  
Ministre des Affaires Etrangères et de la Coopération  
Ministère des Affaires Etrangères  
Nouakchott, Mauritania  
(Telegrams: Ministre Affaires Etrangères, Nouakchott)  
(Telexes: 585 MINAF MTN)

Please send copies to the Mauritanian embassy in your country and to the Mauritanian embassies in Washington DC and Paris:

Ambassador H. E. Abdallah ould Daddah  
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania  
2129 Leroy Place, NW  
Washington, DC 20008

Mohamed el Hanchi ould Mohamed Salah  
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania  
5 Rue de Montevideo  
Paris 16e  
France

### **Previous News From Africa Watch on Mauritania:**

*Persecution of Black Mauritians -- Summary Executions, Deprivations of Citizenship, Illegal Expulsions and Arbitrary Arrests, September 7, 1989.*



*Slavery: Alive and Well, 10 Years After it was Last Abolished, June 29, 1990.*

*Africa Watch is a nongovernmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. Its Chair is William Carmichael; its Vice Chair is Alice Brown; its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Associate Director is Alex de Waal; its Research Associates are Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen; its Associates are Ben Penglase and Jo Graham.*

*Africa Watch is part of Human Rights Watch, an organization that comprises Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chair of Human Rights Watch is Robert L. Bernstein and the Vice Chair is Adrian DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch; Ken Roth is Deputy Director; Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director; Susan Osnos is Press Director.*