

@CHAPTER = MAURITANIA

Since April 1989, some 40,000 to 50,000 black Mauritians -- members of the Peul, Wolof, Soninke and Bambara ethnic groups -- have been expelled from their own country on orders of their government. Most now live in squalid conditions in refugee camps in northern Senegal. The Bush administration issued no public criticism of these abuses.

The expulsions took place in the context of an April dispute between Mauritania and Senegal over grazing rights at the border, which erupted into communal violence in the capitals of Dakar and Nouakchott. Despite efforts by the Mauritanian government to present the conflict as a purely international affair, there is abundant evidence that the resulting exile and violence suffered by black Mauritians are only the latest and most serious example of the repression long directed against the country's black population by an Arab- and Berber-dominated government. The tension dates from the colonial era, when blacks who led a more settled life were able to take greater advantage of educational opportunities and thus dominated the administrative structure. Since independence, political power has remained in the hands of Arab and Berber Mauritians, called "beydanes," who have sought to purge blacks from major institutions and to effect the arabization of the country.

The current crisis erupted over the question of land in the fertile Senegal River valley. The Mauritanian government has sought to dispossess blacks of their land in the valley by instituting policies that favor the purchase of land by beydanes, in conflict with the traditional system of tenure. Blacks who spoke out against these practices have been jailed and savagely tortured.

The expulsion of black Mauritians began immediately after clashes in early April between Mauritanian herders and Senegalese farmers, which brought the two countries to the brink of war. Each country then agreed to repatriate the other's citizens as a precaution against further bloodshed. The Mauritanian government took advantage of the repatriation process to begin a systematic expulsion of thousands of black Mauritanian citizens to Senegal, with the aim of minimizing the political significance and clout of Mauritania's black population.

Among those targeted for expulsion were black civil servants, employees of private institutions, trade unionists, former political prisoners and, in some instances, the wives of political prisoners. Many were summoned by the police, interrogated, forced to relinquish their identity cards and then transported in trucks, with or without their families, to the edge of the Senegal River, where canoes discharged them to Senegal. Two people are said to have died when they suffocated in a small van carrying 30 people -- twice its proper capacity -- for deportation from Nouakchott to Rosso on the border.

The expulsions have torn apart families and separated parents from their children. Anguished parents fear that their children may have been sold into slavery -- a real possibility since slavery, despite officially having been abolished many times (most recently in 1980), continues to be a fact of life in many parts of Mauritania. In a statement submitted to an expert of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1984, representatives of the "El Hor" (freedom) movement testified that there were "still slaves who are held in total servitude and who have never heard of the abolition of slavery." Even emancipated slaves, or "haratines," often remain economically and culturally dependent on their former masters.

Prior to expelling black Mauritians, security forces are reported to have beaten many until they lost consciousness and to have denied food to others for several days. Bands of "haratines," organized by the authorities, massacred hundreds of mostly Senegalese blacks in cities such as Nouakchott and

Nouadhibou. Security forces intervened as a rule only when blacks sought to defend themselves.

Although the expulsions now have ceased, thousands of Mauritians are languishing in refugee camps in Senegal. And the Mauritanian government has taken no steps to end the pattern of discrimination or to ensure a more secure environment for its black citizens.

The U.S. ambassadors to both Senegal and Mauritania have conducted high-level discussions with government officials, but their private remarks have not been publicly revealed. And despite the magnitude of the crisis, the administration has yet to issue a public protest. At an October press conference in Senegal, Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen maintained a position of neutrality without assigning responsibility for the abuses. He said:

"I wish to emphasize that we have had friendly relations with both countries for a long time. We are very sad to witness the conflict and above all, to see the human suffering on both sides.

In fiscal year 1989, the U.S. provided \$5.8 million in food aid to Mauritania and \$2.2 million in development assistance. Another \$150,000 was provided for Mauritania's coastal-security program and \$100,000 under the International Military and Education Training Program. Aid figures for fiscal year 1990 had not been finalized by the end of 1989.

We urge the administration to protest publicly the Mauritanian authorities' policies and practices of racial discrimination and to call on the Mauritanian government to allow independent human rights organizations to gather information and monitor compliance with international agreements and standards. We also call upon the administration to correlate financial assistance to Mauritania with a marked improvement in the human rights climate and the return, with guaranteed safety, of those citizens expelled during the conflict.