



SENEGAL

“Off the Backs of the Children”

Forced Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

Summary and Recommendations



A group of talibés walk through a neighborhood on their way to beg. Talibés beg on average for seven hours a day.

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“OFF THE BACKS OF THE CHILDREN”

Forced Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal

I have to bring money, rice, and sugar each day. When I can't bring everything, the marabout beats me. He beats me other times too, even when I do bring the sum... I want to stop this, but I can't. I can't leave, I have nowhere to go.

MODOU S., 12-YEAR-OLD TALIBÉ IN SAINT-LOUIS

The teachings of Islam are completely contrary to sending children on the street and forcing them to beg.... Certain marabouts have ignored this—they love the comfort, the money they receive from living off the backs of the children

ALIOU SEYDI, MARABOUT IN KOLDA

At least 50,000 children attending hundreds of residential Quranic schools, or daaras, in Senegal are subjected to conditions akin to slavery and forced to endure often extreme forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation by the teachers, or marabouts, who serve as their de facto guardians. By no means do all Quranic schools run such regimes, but many marabouts force the children, known as talibés, to beg on the streets for long hours—a practice that meets the International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition of a worst form of child labor—and subject them to often brutal physical and psychological abuse. The marabouts are also grossly negligent in fulfilling the children's basic needs, including food, shelter, and healthcare, despite adequate resources in most urban daaras, brought in primarily by the children themselves.



In hundreds of urban daaras in Senegal, it is the children who provide for the marabout. While talibés live in complete deprivation, marabouts in many daaras demand considerable daily sums from dozens of children in their care, through

which some marabouts enjoy relative affluence. In thousands of cases where the marabout transports or receives talibés for the purpose of exploitation, the child is also a victim of trafficking.



The Senegalese and Bissau-Guinean governments, Islamic authorities under whose auspices the schools allegedly operate, and parents have all failed miserably to protect tens

A talibé begs for money from a taxi driver. Talibés often beg on busy streets and intersections to improve their odds of obtaining the daily quota, leaving them vulnerable to car accidents and other dangers. Further exacerbating the difficult conditions on the street, more than 40 percent of talibés interviewed by Human Rights Watch did not have a single pair of shoes.

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(above) Because of overcrowding, many talibés are forced to sleep outside with minimal, if any, cover to protect them from cold nights during Senegal's winter, as is the case in this daara in a Dakar suburb.

(left) Scores of talibés await the opportunity to receive alms outside a mosque in Dakar.

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The children routinely sleep 30 to a small room, crammed so tight that, particularly during the hot season, they choose to brave the elements outside.

of thousands of these children from abuse, and have not made any significant effort to hold the perpetrators accountable. Conditions in the daaras, including the treatment of children within them, remain essentially unregulated by the authorities. Well-intentioned aid agencies attempting to fill the protection gap have too often emboldened the perpetrators by giving aid directly to the marabouts who abuse talibés, insufficiently monitoring the impact or use of such aid, and failing to report abuse.

Moved from their villages in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau to cities in Senegal, talibés are forced to beg for up to 10 hours a day. Morning to night, the landscape of Senegal's cities is dotted with the sight of the boys—the vast majority under 12 years old and many as young as four—shuffling in small groups through the streets; weaving in and out of traffic; and waiting outside shopping centers, marketplaces, banks, and restaurants. Dressed in filthy, torn, and oversized shirts, and

often barefoot, they hold out a small plastic bowl or empty can hoping for alms. On the street they are exposed to disease, the risk of injury or death from car accidents, and physical and sometimes sexual abuse by adults.

In a typical urban daara, the teacher requires his talibés to bring a sum of money, rice, and sugar every day, but little of this benefits the children. Many children are terrified about what will happen to them if they fail to meet the quota, for the punishment—physical abuse meted out by the marabout or his assistant—is generally swift and severe, involving beatings with electric cable, a club, or a cane. Some are bound or chained while beaten, or are forced into stress positions. Those captured after a failed attempt to run away suffer the most severe abuse. Weeks or months after having escaped the daara, some 20 boys showed Human Rights Watch scars and welts on their backs that were left by a teacher's beatings.

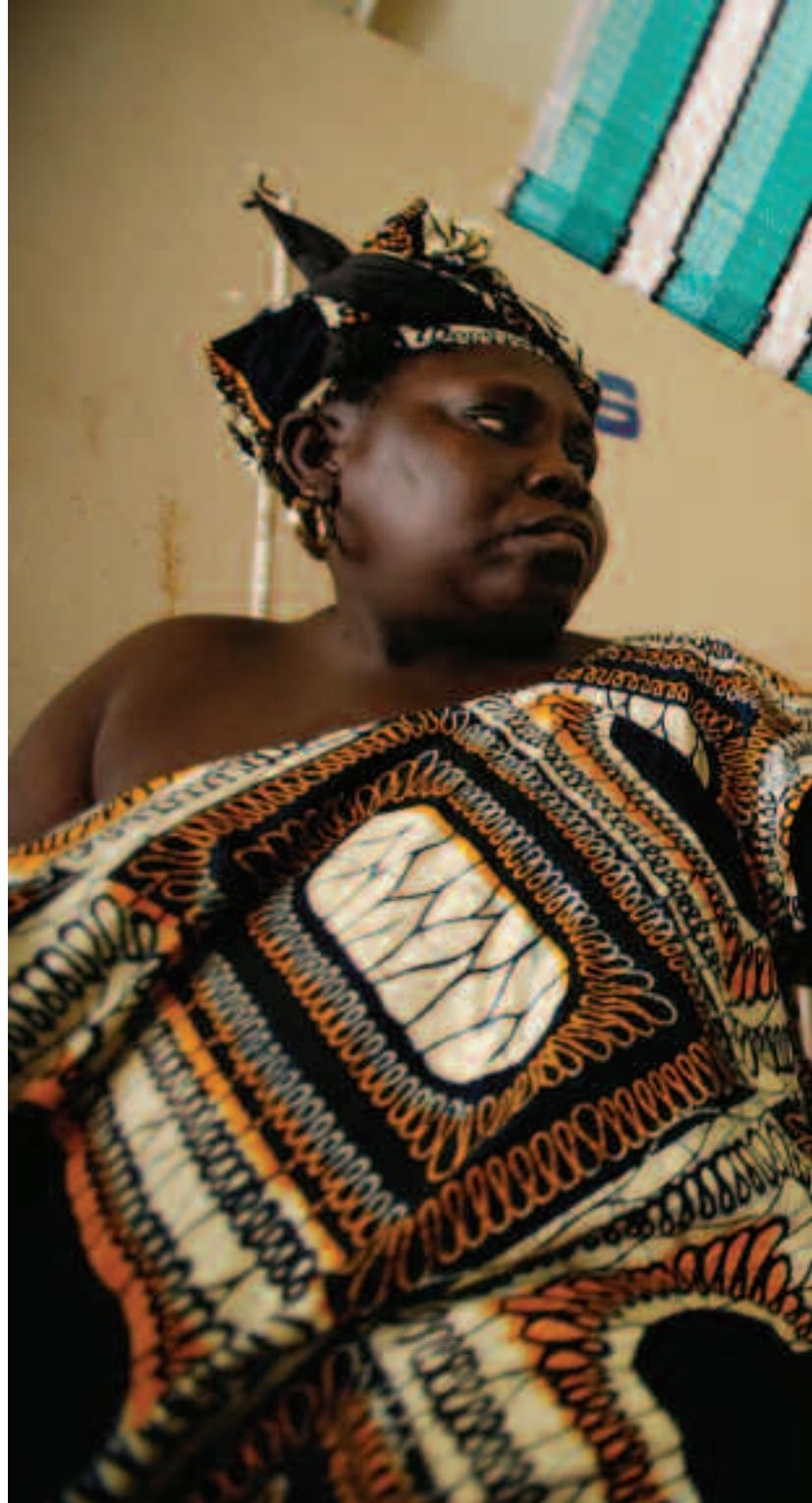
Daily life for these children is one of extreme deprivation. Despite bringing money and rice to the daara, the children are forced to beg for their meals on the street. Some steal or dig through trash in order to find something to eat. The majority suffer from constant hunger and mild to severe malnutrition. When a child falls ill, which happens often with long hours on the street and poor sanitary conditions in the daara, the teacher seldom offers healthcare assistance. The children are forced to spend even longer begging to purchase medicines to treat the stomach parasites, malaria, and skin diseases that run rampant through the daaras. Most of the urban daaras are situated in abandoned, partially constructed structures or makeshift thatched compounds. The children routinely sleep 30 to a small room, crammed so tight that, particularly during the hot season, they choose to brave the elements outside. During Senegal's four-month winter, the talibés suffer the cold with little or no cover, and, in some cases, even a mat to sleep on.

Unfed by the marabout, untreated when sick, forced to work for long hours only to turn over money and rice to someone who uses almost none of it for their benefit—and then beaten whenever they fail to reach the quota—hundreds, likely thousands, of talibés run away from daaras each year.

Many marabouts leave their daara for weeks at a time to return to their villages or to recruit more children, placing talibés as young as four in the care of teenage assistants who often brutalize the youngest and sometimes subject them to sexual abuse.

In hundreds of urban daaras, the marabouts appear to prioritize forced begging over Quranic learning. With their days generally consumed with required activity from the pre-dawn prayer until late into the evening, the talibés rarely have time to access forms of education that would equip them with basic skills, or for normal childhood activities and recreation, including the otherwise ubiquitous game of football. In some cases, they are even beaten for taking time to play, by marabouts who see it as a distraction from begging.

Marabouts who exploit children make little to no effort to facilitate even periodic contact between the talibés and their parents. The proliferation of mobile phones and network coverage into even the most isolated villages in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau should make contact easy, but the vast majority of talibés never speak with their families. In many cases, preventing contact appears to be a strategy employed by the marabout.



Unfed by the marabout, untreated when sick, forced to work for long hours only to turn over money and rice to someone who uses almost none of it for their benefit—and then beaten whenever they fail to reach the quota—hundreds, likely thousands, of talibés run away from daaras each year. Many talibés plan their escape, knowing the exact location of runaway shelters. Others choose life on the streets over the conditions in the daara. As a result, a defining legacy of the present-day urban daara is the growing problem of street



children, who are thrust into a life often marked by drugs, abuse, and violence.

The exploitation and abuse of the talibés occurs within a context of traditional religious education, migration, and poverty. For centuries, the daara has been a central institution of learning in Senegal. Parents have long sent their children to a marabout—frequently a relative or someone from the same village—with whom they resided until completing their Quranic studies. Traditionally, children focused on their

A seven-year-old talibé, who was severely beaten by his Quranic teacher, is fanned by a relative in a hospital in Kaolack, Senegal.

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Yet for at least 50,000 children, including many brought from neighboring countries, marabouts have profited from the absence of government regulation by twisting religious education into economic exploitation.



A group of talibés study the Quran in their daara.

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Rather than hold marabouts accountable for forced begging, gross neglect, or, in all but the rarest of cases, severe physical abuse, Senegalese authorities have chosen to avoid any challenge to the country’s powerful religious leaders, including individual marabouts.

studies while assisting with cultivation in the marabout’s fields. Begging, if performed at all, was rather a collection of meals from community families. Today, hundreds of thousands of talibés in Senegal attend Quranic schools, many in combination with state schools, and the practice often remains centered on religious and moral education. Yet for at least 50,000 children, including many brought from neighboring countries, marabouts have profited from the absence of government regulation by twisting religious education into economic exploitation.

The forced begging, physical abuse, and dangerous daily living conditions endured by these talibés violate domestic

and international law. Senegal has applicable laws on the books, but they are scant enforced. Senegal is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and all major international and regional treaties on child labor and trafficking, which provide clear prohibitions against the worst forms of child labor, physical violence, and trafficking. International law also affords children the rights to health, physical development, education, and recreation, obligating the state, parents, and those in whose care a child finds himself to fulfill these rights.

The state is the primary entity responsible for protecting the rights of children within its borders, something which the government of Senegal has failed to do. With the exception of a few modern daaras—which are supported by the government and combine Quranic and state school curricula—not one of the Quranic schools in Senegal is subject to any form of government regulation. In the last decade, the government has notably defined forced begging as a worst form of child labor and criminalized forcing another into begging for economic gain, but this adequate legislation has so far led to little concrete action. Rather than hold marabouts accountable for forced begging, gross neglect, or, in all but the rarest of cases, severe physical abuse, Senegalese authorities have chosen to avoid any challenge to the country’s powerful religious leaders, including individual marabouts.



Countries from which a large number of talibés are sent to Senegal, particularly Guinea-Bissau, have likewise failed to protect their children from the abuse and exploitation that await them in many urban Quranic schools in Senegal. The Bissau-Guinean government has yet to formally criminalize child trafficking and, even under existing legal standards, has been unwilling to hold marabouts accountable for the illegal cross-border movement of children. Guinea-Bissau has also failed domestically to fulfill the right to education—around 60 percent of children are not in its school system—forcing many parents to view Quranic schools in Senegal as the only viable option for their children’s education.

Parents and families, for their part, often send children to daaras without providing any financial assistance. After informally relinquishing parental rights to the marabout, some then turn a blind eye to the abuses their child endures. Many talibés who run away and make it home are returned to the marabout by their parents, who are fully aware that the child will suffer further from forced begging and often extreme corporal punishment. For these children, home is no longer a refuge, compounding the abuse they endure in the daara and leading them to plan their next escapes to a shelter or the street.

A woman working in a small shop hands a talibé sugar cubes to contribute toward the daily quota that he must bring to his Quranic teacher. Like many other talibés who lack adequate medical care inside the daaras, this child visibly suffers from a skin disease.

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Dozens of Senegalese and international aid organizations have worked admirably to fill the protection gap left by state authorities. Organizations provide tens of centers for runaway talibés; work to sensitize parents on the difficult conditions in the daara; and administer food, healthcare, and other basic services to talibés. Yet in some cases, they have actually made the problem worse. By focusing assistance largely on urban daaras, some aid organizations have incentivized marabouts to leave villages for the cities, where they force talibés to beg. By failing to adequately monitor how marabouts use assistance, some organizations have made the practice even more profitable—while marabouts receive aid agency money with one hand, they push their talibés to continue begging with the other. And by treading delicately in their effort to maintain relations with marabouts, many aid organizations have ceased demanding accountability and have failed to report obvious abuse.

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child the state is obliged to ensure that children have access to a compulsory, holistic primary education that will equip them with the basic skills they need to participate fully and actively in society.

The government of Senegal has launched an initiative to create and subject to regulation 100 modern daaras between 2010 and 2012. While the regulation requirement in these new schools is a long-overdue measure, the limited number of daaras affected means that the plan will have little impact on the tens of thousands of talibés who are already living in exploitative daaras. The government must therefore couple efforts to introduce modern daaras with efforts, thus far entirely absent, to hold marabouts accountable for exploitation and abuse.

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child the state is obliged to ensure that children have access to a compulsory, holistic primary education that will equip them with the basic skills they need to participate fully and actively in society. In addition to supporting the introduction of modern daaras, the government of Senegal should therefore ensure that children have the choice of access to free primary education through state schools or other means.

Without enforced regulation of daaras and success on accountability, the phenomenon of forced child begging will continue its decades-long pattern of growth. If the Senegalese government wants to retain its place as a leading rights-respecting democracy in West Africa, it must take immediate steps to protect these children who have been neglected by their parents and exploited and abused in the supposed name of religion.





A group of talibés share porridge that one of the boys bought from a small food stall. Despite returning each day to the daara with money, rice, and sugar, the vast majority of talibés must beg or pay for their own food, leaving many malnourished.

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Young talibés sleep on thin mats on the dirt floor in their daara. Because of overcrowding and poor sanitation in many daaras, diseases spread quickly.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF SENEGAL

- Enforce current domestic law that criminalizes forcing another into begging for economic gain—specifically, article 3 of Law No. 2005-06—including by investigating and holding accountable in accordance with fair trial standards marabouts and others who force children to beg.
 - Consider amending the law to provide for a greater range of penalties, reducing the range of punishment to include only non-custodial sentences and prison sentences under two years, from the present mandatory two to five years, so that punishments can be better apportioned to the severity of exploitation.
 - Create a registry of marabouts who are documented by authorities to have forced children to beg for money, or who are convicted for physical abuse or for being grossly negligent in a child’s care.
- Enforce article 298 of the penal code that criminalizes the physical abuse of children, with the exception of “minor assaults,” including by investigating and holding accountable in accordance with fair trial standards marabouts and others who physically abuse talibés.
 - Amend the law to include specific reference to all forms of corporal punishment in schools, in accordance with international law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.
 - Amend the law to ensure that it holds responsible a marabout who oversees, orders, or fails to prevent or punish an assistant teacher who inflicts physical abuse on a talibé.
- Enforce anti-trafficking provisions under Law No. 2005-06, which criminalizes child trafficking in accordance with the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol.
 - Provide additional resources to civil and border police units, particularly in the regions of Ziguinchor and Kolda, to enhance their capacity to deter child trafficking.
 - Improve and require periodic training for police units to ensure that they know the laws governing movements of children across borders.
- Express support, from the highest levels of government, for the prosecution of marabouts who violate laws against forced begging, abuse, and trafficking.
- Relevant authorities within the Ministries of Interior and Justice should monitor, investigate, and, where there is evidence, discipline police, investigating judges, and prosecutors who persistently fail to act on allegations of abuse and exploitation by marabouts.
- Issue clear directives to the *Brigade des mineurs* (Juvenile Police) to proactively investigate abuse and exploitation, including during street patrols.
- Increase police capacity, particularly within the Juvenile Police, including through increased staffing and equipment, in order to better enforce existing laws against forced begging and physical abuse.
 - Provide adequate training to the Juvenile Police on methods for interviewing children, and for protecting and assisting victims of severe physical and psychological trauma, including sexual abuse.
- Ensure that children, aid workers, and others have a safe and accessible means of reporting abuse or exploitation, including by better publicizing the state’s child-protection hotline managed by the Centre Ginddi in Dakar, and by extending availability of hotlines and assistance elsewhere in Senegal.

- Introduce a law requiring humanitarian workers to report to the police incidents of abuse, exploitation, and violations of relevant laws governing the treatment of children, including the law on forced begging.
- Require all daaras to be registered and periodically inspected by state officials.
 - Enact legislation setting minimum standards under which daaras must operate, with particular attention to daaras that operate as residential schools.
 - Encourage child protection authorities to collaborate with Islamic authorities on the development of these standards, which should include: minimum hours of study; promotion and development of the child's talent and abilities to their fullest potential, either within the daaras or in another educational establishment; minimum living conditions; the maximum number of children per Quranic teacher; qualifications for opening a residential daara; and registration of the daara for state inspection.
 - Expand the capacity and mandate of state daara inspectors in order to improve the monitoring of daaras throughout Senegal; empower inspectors to sanction or close daaras that do not meet standards that protect the best interests of the child.
- Direct the Juvenile Police to investigate the extent to which sexual abuse exists in daaras throughout Senegal. Engage talibés, marabouts, the police, parents, community authorities, and Islamic and humanitarian organizations in establishing and publicizing adequate protection mechanisms for children who are victims of sexual abuse.
- Task a minister with coordinating the state response from the various ministries.
- Improve statistic-keeping on the number of talibés and Quranic teachers who come into contact with state authorities, including: talibés who are in conflict with the law; talibés who run away and are recovered by state authorities; and Quranic teachers who are arrested and prosecuted for forcing another into begging, physical abuse, or other abuses against children.
- Ensure the elimination of informal fees and other barriers to children accessing primary education in state schools.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF GUINEA-BISSAU

- Enact and enforce legislation that criminalizes child trafficking, including sanctions for those who hire, employ, or encourage others to traffic children on their behalf, and for those who aid and abet trafficking either in the country of origin or country of destination.
- Enact and enforce legislation that criminalizes forced child begging for economic gain.
- Publicly declare that forced child begging is a worst form of child labor; follow with appropriate legislation.
- Increase the capacity of civil and border police units, particularly in the regions of Bafatá and Gabú, to deter child trafficking and other illegal cross-border movements of children.
 - Improve and require periodic training for border units to ensure that they know the laws governing movements of children across borders.
- Continue progress on the regulation of religious schools. Work closely with religious leaders to devise appropriate curricula, teacher standards, and registration and enrollment requirements.
- Ensure the elimination of informal fees and other barriers to children accessing primary education, in an effort to better progressively realize the right to education for the 60 percent of Bissau-Guinean children currently outside the state school system.

TO THE GOVERNMENTS OF SENEGAL AND GUINEA-BISSAU

- Improve collaboration to deter the illegal cross-border migration and trafficking of children from Guinea-Bissau into Senegal, including through additional joint training of border and civil police.
- Enter into a bilateral agreement to:
 - formally harmonize legal definitions for what constitutes the illegal cross-border movement of children;
 - coordinate strategies to deter the illegal cross-border movement of children; and
 - facilitate the return of children who have been trafficked, and ensure that they receive minimum standards of care and supervision.
- Collaborate with religious leaders, traditional leaders, and nongovernmental organizations to raise awareness in communities on the rights of the child under international and domestic law, as well as within Islam.

TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS, INCLUDING CALIPHS OF THE BROTHERHOODS, IMAMS, AND GRAND MARABOUTS

- Denounce marabouts who engage in the exploitation and abuse of children within daaras.
- Introduce, including during the Friday prayer (*jumu'ah*), discussion of children's rights in Islam.

TO INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

- Explicitly condition funding for marabouts and daaras on the elimination of forced begging and physical abuse, and on minimum living and health conditions within the daara.
 - Improve monitoring to determine if marabouts who receive funds are using them to achieve the prescribed goals.
 - Cease funding for marabouts who demonstrate a lack of progress toward eliminating child begging, particularly those who continue to demand a quota from their talibés or who continue to physically abuse or neglect them.
- Implement organizational policies and codes of conduct requiring humanitarian workers to report to state authorities incidents of abuse and violations of relevant laws governing the treatment of children whom they directly encounter, including the 2005 law on trafficking and forced begging.
- Stop returning runaway talibés who have been victims of physical abuse or economic exploitation to the marabout. Bring the child to state authorities so that the Ministry of Justice can perform a thorough review of the child's situation and determine what environment will protect the child's best interests.
- Focus greater efforts on supporting initiatives in village daaras and state schools to enable children in rural areas to access an education that equips them with the basic skills they will need to participate fully and actively in society, so that children do not need to move to towns and cities to access quality education.
- Increase pressure on the government of Senegal to enforce its laws on forced begging, child abuse, and child trafficking.



A magistrate restores custody of five boys who fled from Quranic teachers that forced them to beg on the streets of Dakar, Senegal, to their relatives in Gabú, Guinea-Bissau. Hundreds of talibés run away from their daaras each year, tired of the abuse and exploitation.

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TO THE UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPporteur ON CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF SLAVERY

- Consider an investigation into the situation of the tens of thousands of children in Senegal who are forced to beg by their Quranic teachers, which appears to qualify as a practice akin to child slavery.

TO THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES

- Work with governments in the region to improve collective response to child trafficking.

TO THE ORGANISATION OF THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE

- Denounce the practice of forced begging and physical abuse in Quranic schools as in conflict with the Cairo Declaration and other international human rights obligations.



Talibés beg at night around a gas station in Dakar. Afraid of the beatings that frequently await them if they fail to return to the daara with the daily quota, many talibés beg on the streets late into the night.

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HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH
350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10118-3299

www.hrw.org

(front cover) Three talibés ask a taxi driver for money on a street in the Senegalese capital, Dakar. They each carry a tomato can to collect money, rice, and sugar to bring back to their Quranic teacher.

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(below) A talibé sits on the concrete floor of his daara in a Dakar suburb, where he also sleeps. All of a talibé's possessions are often kept in a small backpack hung in the daara.

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**H U M A N
R I G H T S
W A T C H**

Tens of thousands of children attending residential Quranic schools, or daaras, in Senegal are subjected to conditions that meet the international definition of being akin to slavery, and are forced to endure often extreme forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation by the teachers, or marabouts, who serve as their de facto guardians. The vast majority of these children, known as talibés, are under 12 years old, though many are as young as four. By no means do all Quranic schools run such regimes, but many teachers force the children to beg on the streets for long hours—a practice that meets the international definition of a worst form of child labor. The marabouts are also grossly negligent in fulfilling the children's basic needs, including food, shelter, and healthcare. In thousands of cases, children, including many from Guinea-Bissau, are victims of trafficking.

The Senegalese and Bissau-Guinean governments, Islamic authorities under whose auspices the schools operate, and parents have all failed to protect these children. The Senegalese authorities have made next to no effort to hold perpetrators accountable, despite applicable laws that criminalize forced begging, and have balked at regulating the vast majority of daaras, apparently allowing fear of political backlash from religious authorities to trump the children's welfare. Well-intentioned aid agencies attempting to fill the protection gap have too often emboldened the perpetrators by giving aid directly to marabouts who abuse talibés, insufficiently monitoring the use of such aid, and failing to report abuse.

This Human Rights Watch report concludes that without state regulation and a commitment to hold accountable those that abuse and exploit these boys, the widespread problem of forced child begging in Senegal will worsen. Its findings are based on interviews with 175 current and former talibés, as well as some 120 others, including marabouts, families who sent children to residential Quranic schools, religious historians, government officials, and humanitarian officials.

