

# MAURITANIA

## ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA

**Head of state:** Maaouiya Ould Sid 'Ahmed Taya

**Head of government:** Cheikh El Avia Ould Mohamed Khouna

**Death penalty:** retentionist

**International Criminal Court:** not signed

Three prisoners of conscience remained in prison and others, including a human rights activist, were briefly detained during the year. Several people were detained, apparently arbitrarily, on suspicion of having links with an armed political group. At least one of the suspects was reportedly tortured. Suspects, particularly those in politically sensitive cases, were held incommunicado. Scores of demonstrators were ill-treated by the police as they broke up demonstrations. The government continued to deny the existence of slavery. Freedom of expression was again attacked. Human rights groups remained illegal. The independence of the judiciary was threatened. One man was sentenced to death; no executions were carried out.

### Background

In January, a political party, *Action pour le Changement*, Action for Change, which had spoken out strongly about discrimination, was banned on the grounds that it incited violence, racism and intolerance. The party reformed as the *Convention pour le Changement*, Convention for Change, but was refused recognition on the grounds that it was the same party with a different name.

Relations between Mauritania and the USA continued to strengthen. In September, the Mauritanian government signed an agreement with the USA undertaking not to surrender US nationals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes to the International Criminal Court. The agreement had not been ratified by the parliament by the end of the year.

Famine threatened several west African countries including Mauritania. By December, over 400,000 people in Mauritania were reportedly in need of emergency food aid. Crop production in 2002 was significantly down on previous years, pushing up prices dramatically.

### Slavery

In November, 21 years after slavery was officially abolished for the third time in Mauritania, AI published a report on slavery, slavery-like practices and related abuses and discrimination in the country, as well as analysis of government efforts to end the practice. A response addressed by a diplomatic representative of the Mauritanian government to AI's Secretary General denied the persistence of slavery but acknowledged that social discrimination remained a problem.

Mauritanian human rights activists who had campaigned actively against slavery were also condemned by the press

following publication of AI's report. The report had been made public at a press conference in Dakar, Senegal, held by AI and the activists.

### Ill-treatment and excessive use of force

In April, scores of demonstrators, many of them students, were beaten and otherwise ill-treated as police broke up demonstrations against Israeli military intervention in the Occupied Territories. Several people required urgent hospital treatment and one man suffered severe head injuries and remained in a coma for several days. No investigation was known to have taken place.

### Prisoners of conscience

Three prisoners of conscience – all members of the opposition *Front populaire mauritanien* (FPM), Popular Mauritanian Front – remained imprisoned throughout the year. They were held in Aioun prison, 800km from their homes in Nouakchott, where conditions were harsh. They had been convicted in 2001 on criminal charges of sabotage and "terrorism". In late 2002, the visiting rights of one of the prisoners of conscience, Mohammed Lemine Chbih Ould Cheikh Melainine, leader of the FPM, were severely restricted.

Human rights groups were obliged to operate without legal recognition, leaving them particularly vulnerable to harassment and arrest.

✉ In May, Boubacar Ould Messaoud, President of *SOS Esclaves*, was arrested by the State Security Service after speaking on *Radio France Internationale* (RFI). During the broadcast, he expressed concern that a man detained on suspicion of having links with an opposition group had been tortured in detention. Boubacar Messaoud was released without charge after two days.

### Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression came under attack throughout the year.

✉ In July, copies of the independent *Le Renouveur* newspaper were seized, reportedly because it contained an article on an increase in the price of essential goods.

✉ In August, the Arabic version of an independent newspaper, *Le Calame*, was censored, reportedly because it contained an article on demonstrations by Mauritanian opposition movements and French human rights organizations which had taken place in France during President Taya's visit there.

✉ In October, the Mauritanian authorities lifted a ban, imposed in April 2001, on the Mauritanian RFI correspondent. The authorities had accused RFI of only broadcasting negative images of Mauritania.

### Independence of the judiciary under threat

In June, the authorities reportedly tried to interfere with the elections of the Head of the Bar Association, apparently seeking the election of a pro-government lawyer. Several serious procedural irregularities were noted. Although the incumbent Head of the Bar Association was returned with an

absolute majority of votes, a second round of voting was organized and a pro-government Head appointed. In effect, by the end of the year, two bar associations were operating.

### **Intergovernmental organizations**

In June, at a conference of the International Labour Organisation, the Committee of Application of Standards noted with concern, as did the Committee of Experts, that workers' organizations continued to allege the existence of practices of forced labour, the absence of sanctions to punish those responsible and the ambiguity of the legal provisions with regard to the requisition of labour. The Committee noted that the government had agreed to a technical assistance mission visit by the International Labour Office to the country to examine the details of a study on forced labour and child labour.

### **AI country reports/visits**

#### **Report**

- Mauritania: A future free from slavery? (AI Index: AFR 38/003/2002)