

UPR Pre-Session Mauritania Speech

October 14, 2020

- The UNPO is an international membership-based organization, whose members include the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Mauritanian Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania). With IRA we have been working for years to highlight the situation of the Haratin, the most vulnerable and largest single ethnic group in Mauritania, and those who have for generations been subjected to slavery and slave-like practices in the country.
- The last UPR cycle showed clear concern for the Haratin and the ending of slavery and slave-like practices. Many recommendations were made related to ending all forms of slavery and the endemic problem of gender-based violence against Haratin women in slavery or slave-like conditions, including the effective prosecution of these crimes.
- Unfortunately, all of these issues remain to be resolved today. While slavery has been outlawed, slavery and slave-like practices continue to be in wide existence in Mauritania, with recent estimates of around 90,000 people, or 2% of the population, people still in formal slavery, with a much larger number (potentially up to 600,000 people according to some sources) still in some form of bondage.
- Women and children are the largest victims, constituting some 90% of the slave population, and gender-based violence against Haratin women remains rampant.
- There are very few convictions, both for slavery and for gender-based violence, and those convictions typically lead to light sentences after long delays.
- Put simply, the concerns expressed and recommendations made by the international community in 2015 on these issues remain valid today and the UNPO encourages you to repeat and strengthen your statements from 2015.
- However, those statements are not sufficient. We, of course, welcome and encourage recommendations to strengthen the legal and policy framework related directly to slavery and gender-based violence. The systems for providing support to victims, and for investigating and prosecuting perpetrators need to be improved urgently and we have made some specific recommendations in this regard.
- But merely changing those systems will not eradicate slavery or the legacies of slavery in Mauritania. Unless there is urgent change in Mauritania which enables the Haratin to participate in governance as full and equal citizens, slavery and the harmful legacies of slavery will continue, with ever-increasing marginalization of the Haratin.

- The Haratin are discriminated against at all levels of Mauritanian society.
- In terms of land ownership, rates are very low and those who do own land have only ever been able to access land of the lowest quality. Many former slaves are now bonded laborers or tenants on land they worked as formal slaves, a condition not dissimilar to slavery itself.
- Participation in governance, whether in the civil service, in politics or in civil society, is heavily restricted with widespread repression of the Haratin and antislavery activists.
- It is instructive to note, for example, that between 2015 and 2016 more antislavery activists were imprisoned and sentenced than slave masters.
- Our member, IRA-Mauritania, continues to be refused registration and its members and leadership are regularly arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured.
- And the situation is getting worse, not better since the 2019 elections and the formation of a new government.
- Since that time, tentative reforms to enable more Haratin in the civil service have been overturned. The pace of arrests and detentions of those seeking to exercise their rights to freedom of expression has been increasing.
- And a new law, the Non-Discrimination and Criminalization of Hate Speech Act of 2018 has been turned against human rights defenders, particularly those from the Haratin community, under a provision that criminalizes any person “who makes infamous statements contrary to the official doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.”
- As a result, we are asking you not only to reinforce the technical recommendations that you made in 2015, but also to strongly condemn the increased repression we are seeing today in Mauritania and ask for urgent reforms that allow truly equality in the country.
- Thank you.