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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Human Rights defenders in Mauritania

Case of blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M’Kheir

The Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M’Kheir was arrested on January 2, 2014, after publishing a Facebook-post under the title “Religion, Religiosity and the Blacksmiths” in which he criticized the exclusion of the caste of the Blacksmiths and the strict caste system in Mauritania. M’Kheir – who belongs to the oppressed caste of the Blacksmiths – had emphasized that discrimination is not God-given, but is caused by human actions. In the trial, the blogger stressed that he had not wanted to defame the Prophet Mohamed, but only to draw attention to the problematic situation. He was sentenced to death on 24 December 2014.

Article 306 of the Criminal Code allows the court to accept the apology and to revoke the death sentence. The 34-year-old was accused of apostasy after he had posted a blog-entry criticizing the discriminatory caste system and the way religion is used as a basis to exclude members of minority groups. Nobody has been executed based on charges of apostasy since the state became independent in 1960 – and the last time the death penalty was carried out was in 1987. Leading Human Rights Organizations in Mauritania, human rights activists from all over the world, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had demanded the blogger to be acquitted.

On February 1, 2017, the Mauritanian Supreme Court to commute the blogger’s death sentence, referring the case to a court of appeal, different from the one that sentenced him to a death sentence.

Persecution of abolitionists

According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, there are more than 155,000 people enslaved in Mauritania. Those who have been campaigning for years against slavery, e.g. Biram Dah Abeid, have been repeatedly sentenced to prison term. Though Biram Dah Abeid was released from prison after 555 days in May 2016, the government continues to criminalize those who peacefully fight against the ongoing practice of slavery.

On 18 August 2016, thirteen members of the Mauritanian human rights organisation Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste (IRA-Mauritania) were sentenced to 3 to 15 years in prison. All in all 23 people were accused of instigating slum dwellers to protest against the impending evacuation of their homes on June 29, 2016 – and of organizing a partly violent demonstration. This was interpreted as “rebellion”, a “breach of the peace” and “armed resistance”. In addition, they were accused of resistance against the police. Only three of the defendants were acquitted, 20 others were sentenced to prison terms of three to eight years. In addition, the convicts will have to pay 94,000 Euros in damages to the riot police and the state. 13 leading members of the human rights organization IRA-Mauritanie were among the convicts. They claimed to be innocent and accused the police of torture in custody as a means to get “confessions”. The other defendants were people who live in the slums. Despite great efforts – involving examinations of the cell phones and computers of the defendants – the investigators did not manage to find evidence that they had actually taken part in the protests or committed any other crime. Even the owner of the land that has been occupied by slum dwellers for many years did not recognize the IRA-representatives as accomplices – and he also disagreed with the statement of the police. In court, he reiterated that the slum dwellers had protested spontaneously, without instigations. The imprisoned IRA members pressed charges against ten police officers, accusing them of abuse and torture, but the court did not question the presented results of the controversial police investigation.

On 18 November 2016, an appeals court acquitted and ordered the freeing of three IRA members. The prison sentence of ten more IRA members was reduced, which meant that seven were released from prison as well since they had served their sentence. Abdellahi Abu Diop, one of the three remaining IRA members still in prison, was released on 12 January, 2017. It is even more egregious that two abolitionists, Moussa Biram, and Abdallahi Seck, remain in prison, keeping in mind that they were probably tortured in prison.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the government of Mauritania to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Moussa Biram and Abdallahi Seck from prison,

- Release the innocent blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'Kheir,
 - Enforce existing anti-slavery laws in order to end the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of slaves in the country of whom 90 per cent are women and children.
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