



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
14 June 2012

English only

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## Human Rights Council

Twentieth session

Agenda item 3

**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.

[4 June 2012]

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

## Arrested anti-slavery campaigners in Mauritania

On 30 May 2012, the prominent Mauritanian anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid and seven members of the organization Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionism (IRA) were charged with threatening state security and the founding of a non-recognised organization. At the end of April the human rights activists were arrested after they had burned religious texts which promoted the use of slavery. The human rights activists are devout Muslims and wanted to highlight that slavery still exists in Mauritania even though it was abolished in the country in 1981. According to estimates by Mauritanian human rights activists, there are still some 550,000 slaves in the country, forced to work for their "masters" as domestic servants or farm labourers for little or no money. Most of the slaves are Haratin from sub-Saharan Africa, who make up roughly 40% of the 3 million residents of Mauritania.

The controversial texts legitimize that children of slaves are not born "free", but inherit the status as a slave. Even if the mother became a free person some time before, her child is born a slave. Therefore, these writings are causing anger and rejection by the Haratin, the former slaves. The letter of apology by the IRA for the burning of religious texts was published several times at home and abroad, but -- significantly enough -- not in Mauritania's state-controlled media. No Koran texts were burned -- as all the pages containing verses of the Koran and words of prophet Mohammed had previously been removed from the documents.

The investigative authorities ignored internationally recognized standards of fair trials as well as Mauritanian law. The arrested were only handed over to the prosecution. The law states that the arrested have to be seen by the custodial judge within 15 days. In fact, the arrested were only shown to the custodial judge after four weeks. Their lawyers were not given the opportunity to speak to the accused before they were seen by the custodial judge. For weeks it was unknown where the arrested were held.

Instead of combating slavery, the rulers of Mauritania have those arrested who try to highlight the persistence of slavery in the country. For two years IRA was denied an official registration. It is bigotry to accuse the critics of slavery to have run an illegal organization.

The city of Weimar had honored Biram Dah Abeid with the Human Rights Prize on December 10, 2011, because he had fought for the release of some 500,000 black African slaves in Mauritania despite being in danger himself. Shortly before his award, it had become known that Mauritania's generals had planned to murder the uncomfortable admonisher.

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

- release the anti-slavery activists or at least ensure a fair trial;
- stop intimidating and arresting human rights activists;
- end impunity for slavery and to guarantee that complaints by anti-slavery activists will no longer be ignored by police, courts and state authorities;
- ensure the implementation of the 2007 law prohibiting slavery;
- stop denying the existence of slavery;
- eradicate slavery;
- provide more support for released former slaves.