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Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Forty-ninth session

Summary record of the 38th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Friday, 16 November 2012, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. Pillay

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Consideration of reports

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant *(continued)*

Initial report of Mauritania (continued) ((E/C.12/MRT/1); list of issues (E/C.12/MRT/Q/1); written replies of the Government of Mauritania to the list of issues (E/C.12/MRT/Q/1/Add.1))

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Mauritania took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 10 to 12 of the Covenant (continued)

2. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim** said that it was essential to find a balance between the universal nature of human rights and a society's fundamental values. The religious aspect, of which much had been said during the discussion with the delegation of Mauritania, was not the only aspect to be taken into account when examining the situation in the country. Anthropological or geographical factors were also important for nomadic communities, which were still numerous in Mauritania, and sources of drinking water and transport were key issues for those communities. Improving their access to water and the transportation network could contribute to their economic development and thus to the universal exercise of human rights in the country.

3. **Ms. Shin Heisoo** pointed out that the 8 per cent contraceptive prevalence rate she had mentioned in a previous meeting, based on figures from the United Nations Population Fund, applied to married women only.

4. **Mr. Ould Zahaf** (Mauritania) said that his replies to the Committee members, notably on religious issues, had been based on a desire to communicate as many aspects as possible of the nature and complexity of the difficulties faced when implementing the Covenant in the country. Mauritania respected Islamic values, but was also a party to the Covenant and intended to come as close as possible to the universal values it enshrined. The Government was working to change attitudes in order to achieve that purpose, but doing so was a slow process. Each Muslim country had its own distinctive features and its own interpretation of Islam. With regard to the situation of women, his delegation had explained the interpretation of Islam followed by part of the population, but the Government itself had not taken any measures opposed to women's freedoms. The Family Code reflected the complexity of Mauritanian society. It was the result of a consensus reached between the State, civil society, religious leaders and women's representatives. It was the Government's policy to move towards equality between men and women on all issues on which the various stakeholders could reach consensus. Women represented more than 50 per cent of society, and their empowerment was essential to the country's socioeconomic development.

5. **Mr. Ould Khattr**a (Mauritania) said that the type of Islam practised in Mauritania was regarded as a model of tolerance in the region. In recent years, the public authorities had made a strategic choice to promote human rights. Mauritania had recently ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It had undergone a universal periodic review and had accepted more than 90 per cent of the recommendations made during that procedure. Mauritania was committed to respecting the spirit of the Covenant, and the delays in its implementation were mainly due to the economic situation in the country.

6. Settlement was a recent strategic choice; more than 40 per cent of Mauritians were still nomadic, but they had been encouraged to gather into larger groups so that the State could concentrate its resources in a limited number of populated areas. Settlement promoted respect for economic, social and cultural rights.

Articles 13 to 15 of the Covenant

7. **Mr. Kerdoun** asked the delegation whether the objectives of the National Programme for Educational Development for the decade 2001–2010 had been achieved, particularly with regard to compulsory basic education. The law on public education made education compulsory only if there were places available in schools, which constituted de facto exclusion of a proportion of school-age children. He wished to know what measures the State party had planned to ensure that all children had access to education, including in isolated areas. He asked if the Government had the necessary financial and human resources to achieve that aim.

8. He wished to know whether the instruction provided in high schools, universities and technical schools enabled students to find a job easily at the end of their studies. He asked whether descendants of slaves enjoyed the same access to public education as others. He wished to know what percentage of the State budget was allocated to education, and the size of the Ministry of Education's budget compared with that of other ministries. He requested more detailed information about the admission criteria for the various branches of higher education and about the choices available to students.

9. **Mr. Marchán Romero** asked how the right to self-determination and the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation were guaranteed under the policy on settling nomads, as some groups preferred to maintain their nomadic way of life, and their wishes should be respected. He wished to know whether Mauritania planned to set up an intercultural health system that took traditional medicine into account.

10. **Mr. Kedzia** asked the delegation to provide updated data on illiteracy, indicate the results of the measures taken to ensure equal access to all levels of education, and clarify the Government's priorities for the next five years, particularly with regard to access to education for disadvantaged and marginalized groups or for persons living in remote areas. He requested clarification on the role of private institutions in the school system, the impact of private education on equality of opportunity, and the type of control that public authorities exercised over those establishments. He also asked what percentage of the population had access to the Internet.

11. **Mr. Sadi** asked what mechanisms had been established to ensure that parents and legal guardians in rural areas were punished if they did not send their children to primary school, as required by law. He enquired about the dropout rate, particularly in rural areas. He also asked whether Mauritania planned to make secondary education compulsory, whether education was mixed, whether there were plans to gradually introduce free higher education and whether there was any conflict between religion and science in the education system.

12. **The Chairperson**, speaking as Country Rapporteur for Mauritania, wished to know whether the cultural rights of the Peuhl, Soninkés and Wolofs were promoted and respected.

13. **Mr. Ould Zahaf** (Mauritania) said that Arabic was the language of communication because it was the language of Islam, the common religion of the various groups in the country. Since independence, Mauritania had respected its cultural plurality as reflected in its Constitution, which recognized the Islamic and multicultural nature of the country, particularly through its recent amendments. Arabic was the language of instruction, while French was used for communication with the rest of the world. There were radio and

television programmes broadcast in all languages and also several regional festivals that celebrated local cultures.

14. At the end of 2012, Mauritania would hold national consultations on education to review the whole education system. The law on compulsory education stipulated that children must be allowed to enrol in the school closest to their place of residence. The location of schools was based on the number of inhabitants in the villages, except in the case of former slaves, whose villages were given educational priority. Since 2009, the Government had been working to open up remote areas by building roads that would enable it not only to provide education and health services but also to supply water and electricity.

15. As the qualifications awarded in Mauritania were not necessarily suited to the country's needs, the authorities were currently focusing their efforts on vocational training centres, which helped to combat failure at school and to train young people to work in the most sought after trades, such as plumbers, electricians or mechanics. In addition, the Government was conducting an awareness-raising campaign to combat the primary impediment to schooling for children of slaves, which was that their parents did not see the value in sending their children to school.

16. Due to desertification and drought and their environmental impact, fewer and fewer people were attracted to the nomadic way of life. Moreover, settlement provided many advantages, such as access to various services — particularly health services — and to living conditions that opened the way to social advancement. Traditional medicine, although widespread in the country, was not part of the public health system and was therefore not regulated by the Government. Nevertheless, it did not involve any practices that violated human rights.

17. The National Statistical Office could undertake to conduct sectoral surveys in the lead-up to the upcoming national consultations on education, but such surveys were expensive and required significant financial, technical and logistical resources. The fundamental objective of the national consultations was to review the whole education system, which had reached its limits, and to design and implement an education policy that opened up opportunities for graduates.

18. The public authorities did not interfere with the education provided in Koranic schools, because the Koranic teachers were part of a long tradition and were universally respected. The State exercised indirect control over private schools, insofar as that the national education authorities decided the content of school curricula, and the subjects covered in the examinations for certificates of lower and higher secondary education were the same for all students throughout the country, whether they were enrolled in public or in private schools.

19. Access to new information and communication technologies and the Internet was still reserved for an elite, even though more and more high school students used computers. Education was compulsory throughout the country, but, due to the huge extent of the territory and the distances between villages, schooling for children remained a problem in rural areas. Girls and boys shared the same classes, as the type of Islam practised in Mauritania was very open and tolerant. There was no conflict between religion and science, since traditionally Mauritania had been advanced in fields such as the earth sciences, astronomy and medicine.

The meeting was suspended at 5.10 p.m. and resumed at 5.25 p.m.

20. **Mr. Ould Khattra** (Mauritania) said that the Government had adopted a law giving access to health insurance to all individuals, whether they were civil servants, private sector employees or self-employed workers (such as farmers or herders), which constituted a step towards universal health-care coverage. In addition, an anti-smoking bill would soon be

submitted to parliament. The percentage of the State budget allocated to health, which had stood at 4 per cent in 2011, would rise to 13 per cent in 2013. In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals relating to health, the Government had created a national health development plan for the period 2011–2020, based on a budget of 19 billion ouguiyas and focused on combating maternal and infant mortality and communicable diseases. In addition, in 2012 the President had established a special unit responsible for speeding up progress towards those goals.

21. With regard to mental health, the Government had established three branch centres in Nouâdhibou, Nouakchott and Kaédi offering community care for patients with mental disorders. It had also adopted a national pharmaceutical law establishing procedures for the manufacture, sale, import, and distribution of medicines. In application of that law, several repositories and pharmacies that had failed to meet the required standards had been shut down in 2011. In addition, the establishment of the National Drug Control Laboratory had helped to reduce the quantity of counterfeit drugs entering the country.

22. In the fight against HIV/AIDS, Government efforts with regard to coordination, awareness-raising, screening and care had helped to maintain a 0.07 per cent prevalence rate. The State was also committed to funding the activities of the National Executive Secretariat to Combat HIV/AIDS and the purchase of antiretroviral drugs in 2013.

23. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim** said he believed that education should not just meet the needs of the market but also ensure that everyone could find self-fulfilment and take an active part in promoting a free society.

24. **Mr. Ould Zahaf** (Mauritania) said that the objective of the national consultations on education was to find ways of reversing the decline in the general level of education and to ensure that the education system produced more skilled workers than arts scholars, even though it was true the sole purpose of education was not merely to supply the labour market.

25. **Mr. Ould Khattra** (Mauritania) recalled that the President placed strategic importance on the promotion of human rights, even though in practice the Government faced obstacles related to the poor economic situation. Mauritania had ratified the major international human rights instruments and had submitted the required reports on time.

26. **The Chairperson**, speaking as Country Rapporteur for Mauritania, said that he welcomed the frank and useful dialogue begun with the delegation of Mauritania and emphasized the fact that, as far as the Committee was concerned, States parties were free to choose the legal system that best suited them, provided they took care to enforce all Covenant rights, including the rights of women, the right to non-discrimination and the right to equal treatment. The Committee had completed its consideration of the initial report of Mauritania and would be issuing its concluding observations at the end of its forty-ninth session on Friday, 30 November 2012.

The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.