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U.S. Department of State

Mauritania Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998

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MAURITANIA

Mauritania is a highly centralized Islamic Republic dominated by a strong presidency. The 1991 Constitution provides for a civilian government composed of a dominant executive branch, a senate, and a national assembly. President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya has governed since 1984, first as head of a military junta, and since the 1992 multiparty election as head of a civilian government. In December 1997, Taya was reelected President, receiving over 90 percent of the vote. The election, contested by four opposition candidates but boycotted by the five-party Opposition Front coalition, was widely regarded as fraudulent. Most opposition parties also boycotted earlier parliamentary elections but participated in senate elections in 1994 and 1996; they gained only one seat. In the country's first multiparty elections to the 79-member National Assembly held in 1996, 1 opposition and 6 independent candidates were elected; candidates of the ruling Republican, Democratic and Social Party (PRDS) won 72 seats. The outcome of these elections was marred by fraud on all sides and pervasive government intervention. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, the judiciary is subject to significant pressure from the executive through its ability to influence judges.

The Government maintains order with regular armed forces, the National Guard, the Gendarmerie, and the police. The Ministry of Defense directs the armed forces and Gendarmerie; the Ministry of Interior directs the National Guard and police. The armed forces are responsible for national defense. The National Guard performs police functions throughout the country in areas in which city police are not present. The Gendarmerie is a specialized paramilitary group responsible for maintenance of civil order in and outside metropolitan areas. Security forces are under the full control of the Government and are responsible to it. Some members of the security forces committed human rights abuses.

Mauritania, with a population of 2.4 million, has a generally market-oriented economy based on fishing, mining, subsistence farming, herding, and a small commercial sector. Fish and iron ore are the country's main export-earners. Drought, desertification, and insect infestation have contributed to rapid urbanization, extensive unemployment, pervasive poverty, and a burdensome foreign debt. Continued drought in 1997-98 fueled urbanization, further straining government finances. The concentration of much of the country's wealth in the hands of a small elite, including the President's tribe and related Moor tribes, as well as a lack of transparency and accountability in certain areas of governance, also impedes economic growth. Annual per capita national income has increased by 1.5 percent in recent years and is estimated at \$443 (1997 figure). Mauritania receives foreign assistance from bilateral and multilateral sources.

The Government's human rights record remained poor, and problems remain in certain areas, although there was some improvement in a few areas. Democratic institutions remain rudimentary and the Government circumscribes citizens' ability to change their government. Police at times used excessive force, beat or otherwise abused detainees, and used arbitrary arrest, and detention, incommunicado prearrest detention, and illegal searches. The Government failed to bring to justice officials who commit abuses. Prison conditions remained harsh and unhealthy, despite recent improvements. Pretrial detention is often very lengthy. Although the Government instituted judicial programs and training, the executive continued to exercise significant pressure on the judiciary, and in practice the right to a fair trial was restricted. At times the Government restricted freedom of speech; in January the Government arrested human rights activists who allegedly collaborated in making a film clip that purported to show that slavery persists in the country. While the Government tolerates a critical independent press, it continued to censor individual editions without official explanation other than to cite the Constitution, which prohibits material that undermines national sovereignty, territorial integrity, or national unity; however, there were no reports that the Government censored or seized any newspapers in the second half of the year. The Government at times restricts freedom of assembly and association. The Government arrested and detained the leader and other officials of a major opposition party, who remained in detention in a remote area at year's end. The Government limits freedom of religion. The Government's refusal to recognize officially some nongovernmental organizations somewhat circumscribed their efforts. In May the Government signed a headquarters agreement with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) establishing the terms under which the UNHCR could help resettle returning refugees and created a ministry-level High Commission for human rights, poverty alleviation, and integration. Societal discrimination against women continued, and female genital mutilation remained a serious problem despite government efforts to halt the practice. Ethnic tensions continued to ease, but the largely southern-based ethnic groups, including the Halpulaar (also called Fulani or Peuhl), Soninke, and Wolof ethnic groups, remained underrepresented in political life and some of their members feel excluded from effective political representation. In April the Government recognized a third trade union confederation. Child labor is common.

The Government continued efforts to resolve a serious abuse from the 1989-91 period, in which approximately 70,000 members of southern ethnic groups were expelled or fled, by facilitating cooperation between the Mauritanian Red Crescent Association and the UNHCR to assist returnees from Senegal and Mali. Informed observers estimate that 40,000 to 65,000 have returned; the UNHCR documented 33,248 returnees to 4 southern provinces along the Senegal River, but believes, like the Government, that the total number of returnees nationwide is significantly higher. However, some of these returnees have failed to regain access to the homes they had occupied and the land they had farmed before their expulsion, and there were varying reports about their success in obtaining other homes and land from the Government. There were also a number of unconfirmed reports that the Government confiscated the farmland of members of southern ethnic groups in or near the Senegal River valley and redistributed them to members of the dominant White Moor ethnic group--reportedly leaving some southerners landless. A net redistribution of land from southerners to both Black Moors and White

Moors displaced from the northern and central regions by desertification since the 1970's may have occurred under a Government land reform program in place since the early 1980's; however, this program is designed specifically to avoid leaving any rural family landless, and provides land to landless persons from all ethnic groups.

The Government failed to address fully another major abuse from the 1989-91 period, when 503 members of the military, almost entirely from the Halpulaar and Soninke ethnic groups of the south, were killed, tortured, and maimed. The Government in earlier years gave pensions to the documented widows of those killed, but not to undocumented individuals claiming to be additional wives. In 1996 the Government extended pension benefits to some of those who survived the purge. There were no indications of further action on alleged wives who lack documentation. A 1993 amnesty law precludes legal pursuit of those responsible for the killings, and the Government does not acknowledge responsibility or wrongdoing nor has it provided honorable discharge papers to survivors or other compensation to families of those killed.

A system of officially sanctioned slavery in which government and society join to force individuals to serve masters does not exist; however, there continued to be unconfirmed reports that slavery in the form of forced and involuntary servitude persists in some isolated areas. Unofficial, voluntary servitude persists with many former slaves continuing to work for former masters for food, shelter, and clothing, although they were under no legal compulsion to do so. Many persons including some persons from all ethnic groups still use the caste designation of slave.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of political killings.

There was one known extrajudicial killing by the security forces--a smaller number than in past years. Toward the end of the year, police in an antidrug brigade arrested a young man and beat him severely. The judge before whom he was brought to be charged released him to his family, but he died a few days later. The two police officers responsible were fired, but had not been prosecuted as of year's end.

Extrajudicial killings from past years remained unresolved, principally the 1990-91 deaths while in military custody of 503 largely Halpulaar and Soninke military personnel and civilians detained in the investigation of an alleged coup attempt. In 1993 the Government began to provide pension benefits to some of the widows and families of those killed, and in 1996 the Government recognized the prior government service of some of the civilian survivors and began to pay them pensions. The military has not released the results of its 1991 internal investigation, and in 1993 Parliament passed an amnesty bill to preclude legal pursuit of those responsible. The Government has not acknowledged responsibility or wrongdoing nor has it provided honorable discharge papers to survivors to facilitate alternative employment and their reintegration into society.

The gendarmes who shot a man crossing the Senegal River from Senegal to Mauritania in April 1997 (who later died of his wounds) were brought to court and removed from their jobs. There was no punishment of the Coast Guard officials who fired on Senegalese fishermen in Mauritanian waters in November 1997. Coast Guard officials determined that the men were fishing illegally and fled when ordered to stop.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits torture and other forms of cruel or inhuman punishment, but the police reportedly continue on occasion to beat criminal suspects while in custody. However, one prominent human rights advocate arrested in January and held in prison for 2 months under conditions that enabled him to interact with other prisoners said that he neither observed nor heard reports of any torture. Police in some instances used force to break up peaceful demonstrations or disperse crowds (see Section 2.b.). Military forces along the Senegal River used excessive force against individuals suspected of committing such abuses, which has contributed to the widespread belief that security officials are a force apart from government authority and not subject to legal restraints.

On April 23, gendarmes in the area of Boghe shot and seriously injured a man attempting to escape after he was caught burning illegally cut trees to make charcoal. The Government evacuated him to the Nouakchott hospital, where he survived.

In early May, an official in Abdel Bagrou was beaten severely by several policemen in retaliation for having hit a police brigade chief who was attempting to commandeer his car to provide security for a presidential visit. The police brigade chief filed a complaint, but when his supervisors did nothing, he and members of his brigade beat the man unconscious. The official was being evacuated for medical reasons to Nouakchott by a military aircraft when the plane crashed, killing him and his wife. The Government dismissed the district chief because of the incident.

Prison conditions remained harsh and still do not meet minimum international standards, although there was some improvement during the year. The Prime Minister visited the Nouakchott central prison in May to highlight better prison conditions. Human rights activists agree that a new prison administration instituted in August 1997 has improved tangibly the conditions of prisoner food, health, hygiene, and family contacts. A decrease in the prison population from over 650 in 1997 to 496 this year and the completion of a new cellblock eased overcrowding at the central prison, which originally was built to house 300 men. However, a new prison reportedly planned for Akjoujt did not open. Sanitation facilities remain inadequate and reportedly have contributed to diseases such as tuberculosis, diarrhea, and dermatological ailments. The infirmary is understaffed but now contains a sufficient supply of medicine provided by an international NGO. Some prisoners receive special treatment based on family and position. Prisoners with high-level connections and families to bring them food, medicines, and reading material fare better than the less privileged or Africans from other countries. Witnesses have claimed that prisoners occasionally are beaten, but human rights activists indicate that beatings have become infrequent and could not cite any recent instances. New guard force management has enforced instructions against beatings and torture. Observers report that conditions at the women's prison and children's detention center in Nouakchott continued to be better than in the men's prisons. An NGO supervises a literacy program and a mechanic's workshop at the children's detention center. There have been no reported cases of persons dying in custody during the year.

The Government permits prison visits by diplomats and human rights monitors.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution stipulates that authorities cannot arrest, detain, prosecute, or punish anyone except as provided for under the law; however, at times police arbitrarily arrested and detained citizens. The actual application of the constitutional safeguards continued to vary widely from case to case.

The law requires that courts review the legality of a person's detention within 48 hours of arrest. The police may extend the period for another 48 hours, and a prosecutor or court may detain persons for up to 30 days in national security cases. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the right to contact an attorney.

Human rights activists report that police showed greater respect for legally mandated procedures and that prison administration improved considerably. However, pretrial detention after arraignment is often prolonged. According to a 1997 appeal written by prisoners in the Nouakchott prison, only 130 of the inmates had received a sentence, and 450 had not received a trial, but observers believe the actual number to be lower.

Some indicted detainees are released before trial without explanation; familial, tribal, or political connections may explain some of these cases. There is a provision for granting bail, but it is used rarely.

On January 17, the Government arrested three prominent human rights activists who allegedly collaborated in making a short film for a French television network, which sought to document assertions that slavery persists in Mauritania. Arrest occurred 2 days after the film clip was broadcast. Two of the three persons arrested were charged formally with acting on behalf of organizations not officially recognized by the Government, an act that is prohibited by law. All three were denied contact with lawyers and family for 4 days. A fourth individual, living in France, was charged in absentia. One of the defense lawyers, another leading human rights activist, also was arrested. On February 5, all five were convicted for acting on behalf of nonauthorized organizations, and on February 12, they were sentenced to 13 months' imprisonment. On March 24, after an appellate court had confirmed the convictions, President Taya pardoned all five, and the four individuals in the country were released.

On February 5, eight persons were arrested and detained during a demonstration organized by the Action pour le Changement (AC) opposition party to protest the January arrests of the human rights activists (see Section 2.b.). Those arrested and detained included AC executive bureau member Professor Oumar Ould Yadi and Samory Ould Beye, secretary-general of the Free Confederation of Mauritanian Workers, a trade union confederation with close ties to the AC (see Section 2.b.), as well as the lawyer for the human rights activists arrested on January 17. Except for the lawyer, all were released under a form of house arrest.

On January 29, the former high commissioner of the Senegal River Valley Authority (OMVS), Baba Ould Sidi Abdallah, was arrested for treason and accused of betraying Mauritania's economic interests by supporting and concealing a Senegalese irrigation project and by sanctioning the elimination of six high-level OMVS positions occupied by Mauritians in a World Bank-mandated restructuring. However, many observers viewed him as a political scapegoat and attributed his arrest to tribal retribution. Amnesty International concluded that he was being detained for political reasons. Abdallah's lawyers argued that he enjoyed diplomatic immunity as head of the OMVS. The judge ruled that the charges were not substantiated, and he was acquitted on August 6.

On December 16, the Government arrested Ahmed Ould Daddah, leader of the opposition party Union of Democratic Forces-New Era/Ahmed Ould Daddah Faction (UFD-A), and two UFD-A members, Mohameden Ould Babah and Mohameden Ould Ichedou, ostensibly because Ould Daddah had repeated at political rallies and to French radio charges of unknown foreign origin that the Government

had agreed with the Government of Israel to bury Israeli nuclear waste on Mauritanian soil. The Government made no formal charges but kept the three men in detention in an isolated village in the country's interior. They remained in detention at year's end.

Occasional reports of arbitrary arrests and intimidation committed by security forces continued, particularly among returned refugees in communities in the south along the Senegal River. There were unconfirmed reports that the security forces physically abused or detained some members of southern ethnic groups when they tried to reoccupy their former land and homes after returning from other countries to which they had been forcibly expelled or fled in 1989-91. However, the extent of abuses among returnees continued to decline, as the Government, in conjunction with the UNHCR and Mauritanian Red Crescent society, resettled many returnees (see Section 2.d.). Local authorities often detained local residents involved in land disputes, or in disputes between farmers and nomads along the river. There were a number of unconfirmed reports that security forces physically abused or detained southerners in the course of confiscating their farmland for redistribution to White Moors (see Section 1.f.). There were also some unconfirmed reports that members of the security forces detained or physically abused southerners, who reportedly tried to use the legal system to regain from White Moors farmland confiscated from them either recently or in the expulsions of 1989-91.

The Government no longer employs forced exile. The Government continued efforts to encourage the return of southerners who had been expelled or who had fled during 1989-91.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the Constitution provides for the independence of the judiciary, in practice the executive branch exercises significant pressure on the judiciary through its ability to appoint and influence judges. In addition poorly educated and poorly trained judges who are susceptible to social, financial, tribal, and personal pressures limit the judicial system's fairness. However, the Government is carrying out a program to improve judicial performance and independence.

There is a single system of courts with a modernized legal system that conforms with the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law). The judicial system includes lower-, middle-, and upper-level courts, each with specific jurisdictions. Departmental, regional, and labor tribunals are the principal instances at the lower level. The 53 departmental tribunals, composed of a president and magistrates with traditional Islamic legal training, hear civil cases involving sums less than \$49 (10,000 UM) and family issues, for example, domestic, divorce, and inheritance cases. Thirteen regional tribunals accept appeals in commercial and civil matters from the departmental tribunals and hear misdemeanors. Three labor tribunals, composed of a president and two assessors (one who represents labor and one who represents employers), serve as final arbiters for labor disputes. At the middle level, three courts of appeal, each with two chambers (a civil and commercial chamber, and a mixed chamber) hear appeals from the regional courts and have original jurisdiction for felonies. Nominally independent, the Supreme Court is headed by a magistrate appointed to a 5-year term by the President. The Supreme Court reviews decisions and rulings made by the courts of appeal to determine their compliance with the law and procedure. Constitutional review is the purview of a six-member Constitutional Council, composed of three members named by the President, two by the National Assembly President, and one by the Senate President. Annual review of judicial decisions is undertaken by the Supreme Council of the Magistrature, over which the President presides; the president and senior vice president of the Supreme Court, the Minister of Justice, three magistrates, and representatives from the Senate and National Assembly are members of this Council. The annual review is intended to determine whether courts applied the law correctly and followed proper procedures.

The Constitution provides for due process and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty by an

established tribunal. All defendants, regardless of the court or their ability to pay, have the legal right to representation by counsel during the proceedings, which are open to the public. If defendants lack the ability to pay for counsel, the court appoints an attorney, from a list prepared by the National Order of Lawyers, who provides defense free of charge. The law provides that defendants may confront witnesses, present evidence, and appeal their sentences, and these rights generally are observed in practice.

Because Shari'a provides the legal principles upon which the law and legal procedure are based, courts do not in all cases treat women as equals of men. For example, the testimony of two women is necessary to equal that of one man. In addition, in awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed, the courts grant only half the amount that they would award for a man's death. There are no female magistrates. However, for commercial and other modern issues not specifically addressed by Shari'a, the law and courts treat women and men equally.

With international assistance, the Government continued a program to improve judicial performance and independence, which consists of organizing all laws and statutes into a single reference text and training officials throughout the justice system. The Government has instituted a program to improve the skills magistrates, under which magistrates receive 6 months' training abroad, then return to train other magistrates in Nouakchott and in regional capitals. Within President Taya's current term, the investment, administration, commercial, civil, and arbitration banking codes are to be updated and made cohesive. Popular dissatisfaction with the judicial system and the belief that security officials can commit abuses with impunity persisted.

On May 4, the Government suspended two magistrates for a period of 6 months for lack of professionalism. The two magistrates improperly released a man on bail while the original magistrate handling the case was on vacation.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law requires judicial warrants in order to execute home searches, but the authorities reportedly often ignore this requirement.

Government surveillance of dissidents and the political opposition is believed to continue, although the extent to which the Government used informants is unknown.

There were a number of unconfirmed reports that the Government confiscated the farmland of members of southern ethnic groups in or near the Senegal River valley and redistributed it to members of the dominant White Moor ethnic group, leaving southern farmers landless, forcing a number of them into the cities, and impelling some to flee the country. Since 1983 the Government has been engaged in a land reform officially aimed at providing land for landless persons, including victims of desertification in the northern and central regions (both White Moors and Black Moors) and also, in recent years, for returning southerners who had been expelled in 1989-91. These reports may reflect abuses in the program's implementation; the proper implementation of the land reform does not leave families landless, and the program is not explicitly discriminatory. However, there may have been a net redistribution of land from southerners to Moors under that program, since the south has been less affected by desertification than the more northerly regions historically inhabited by the Moors. There were also some reports that some southerners who had been expelled or fled from the country during 1989-91 were unable either to regain possession of the land they had farmed before 1989 or to gain

possession of other land from the Government.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, but the Government continues to restrict these rights through prepublication press censorship by the Interior Ministry. NGO's and the privately owned press openly criticized the Government and its leaders. Antigovernment tracts, newsletters, and petitions circulated widely in Nouakchott and other towns. On April 25, the Government began issuing press cards to journalists and requiring this identification for participation in official events.

The Press Law requires publishers to submit copies of newspapers to the Ministries of Interior and Justice before distributing them. The Ministry of the Interior reviews all newspaper copy prior to publication and usually authorizes sales and distribution within 2 to 3 days. However, the Press Law provides that the Minister of the Interior can stop publication of material that discredits Islam or threatens national security. Although the Ministry did not excise material from journals or otherwise censor individual articles, it did censor entire issues by seizing them. The authorities seized 19 individual issues of various journals; by comparison, in 1997, 17 individual issues were seized. The Government provided no specific reason for the seizures other than to cite Article 11 of the Constitution, which prohibits materials that undermine national sovereignty, territorial integrity, or national unity. The Government did not censor or seize any newspapers in the second half of the year, following the creation of the High Commission for Human Rights in May.

All newspapers and political parties must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Although the Government did not refuse to register any journal, it suspended publication of *Mauritanie Nouvelles*, an independent weekly, for 3 months on January 12. *Mauritanie Nouvelles* had just resumed publication after the expiration of a previous 3-month suspension that prevented it from covering the 1997 election. As a result of the January suspension, the journal decided to close permanently.

There are more than 20 privately owned newspapers, including 5 new French language newspapers, 5 new Arabic publications and 1 bilingual publication that appeared fairly regularly during the year. These journals are weeklies and reach limited audiences. Private journals reported openly and critically on both the opposition and the Government and published party declarations and tracts without government censure or restraint. In December the Government announced that it would exempt from all taxes any materials used to produce newspapers, journals, or books for the private press.

All broadcast media (radio and television) and two daily newspapers, *Horizons* and *Chaab*, are government-owned and operated. Radio is the most important medium in reaching the public, and the official media strongly support government policies. During the 1997 presidential election campaign, Government gave all five candidates equal access to its two newspapers and to the electronic media; for the first time, citizens heard or read criticisms of both the Government and the President in these media and not just in the private newspapers. Opposition parties' access to government radio broadcast facilities at other times is limited. Citizens can receive foreign television broadcasts including from France and other Arab countries. The Government continued to deny private applications to establish domestic radio stations. However, the Government allowed domestic FM rebroadcasting of Radio France International programming, including news about the country that often covers opposition parties.

In January the Government arrested three human rights activists who allegedly collaborated in making a short film for a French television network, which sought to document assertions that slavery persists in Mauritania (see Section 1.d.).

There are five domestic Internet servers, which operate without governmental restrictions.

Academic freedom generally is respected, and there were no cases when the Government prevented research or publication or censored lectures. The one university is government funded and operated.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of assembly, and the Government generally respects this right, although there were occasions when it restricted public gatherings. The law requires that all recognized political parties and NGO's apply to the local prefect for permission for large meetings or assemblies. Permission generally is granted freely.

On February 5, police clashed with protesters during a demonstration organized by a political opposition party to protest the January 17 arrest of three human right activists. The protesters applied in advance for a permit to hold the demonstration but the Government denied the request. When demonstrators began gathering as originally planned, police charged into the crowd, injuring at least 2 persons, and perhaps as many as 20, as claimed by the opposition party. The protesters were dispersed, and the demonstration was never effectively held. Eight individuals were detained, but with one exception all were released quickly (see Section 1.d.).

On February 8, police again clashed with demonstrators who had gathered to protest the arrest of the human rights activists. Carrying batons and shields, police charged into small groups of protesters, injuring some and prevented them from forming a large demonstration. The protesters eventually were dispersed.

The Constitution provides for freedom of association; however, the Government circumscribes the efforts of some groups by denying them official recognition. The number of political parties, labor unions, and NGO's continued to increase. Some 22 political parties and a wide array of NGO's, many of them highly critical of the Government, functioned openly, issued public statements, and chose their own leadership. Two new political parties, the Popular Front and the National Union for Democracy and Development, were recognized officially in January and February respectively. The Government has not yet granted some NGO's official standing but did not prevent them from functioning. Among these are the Mauritanian Association for Human Rights (AMDH) and SOS-Eslaves (an antislavery NGO), which the Government claims are potentially divisive in that they appeal to specific ethnic groups, namely the Southern and Black Moor communities respectively. However, in January the Government used the pretext that the two NGO's were not registered to prosecute their leaders for allegedly having collaborated in making a short film that sought to document assertions that slavery persists in Mauritania (see Sections 1.d. and 2.a.). Following widespread criticism of the arrests, President Taya pardoned the two NGO leaders in March. The Government continued to allow these and other NGO's to function without registration.

The Government officially registered a third trade union confederation, the Free Confederation of Mauritanian Workers (CLTM), on April 30. The CLTM is associated with the opposition party Action pour le Changement.

At the end of the year, the Government announced that it recognized 155 new NGO's and associations

during the year, bringing the total of such organizations to 577.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution established Mauritania as an Islamic republic and decrees that Islam is the religion of its citizens and the State, and the Government limits freedom of religion.

All but a small number of citizens are Sunni Muslims and are prohibited by their religion from converting to another religion. Shari'a law, proclaimed under a previous government in 1983, includes the Koranic prohibition against apostasy, but it has never been enforced. The small number of known apostates from Islam suffered no social ostracism, and there were no reports of societal or governmental attempts to punish apostates.

Although there is no legal codification of a prohibition against proselytizing by non-Muslims, in practice the Government prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims. The Government views any attempts by Christians to convert Muslims as undermining Mauritanian society. There are no known non-Muslim groups engaged in proselytizing; foreign Christian NGO's limit their activities to humanitarian and development assistance.

Christian churches have been established in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. The expatriate community of Christians and the few citizens who are considered Christians from birth practice their religion openly and freely in these churches. The possession of Bibles and other Christian religious materials in private homes is not illegal.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for freedom of movement and residence within all parts of the territory, and provides for the freedom to enter and leave. Historically there were few restrictions on travel in Mauritania's nomadic society. With urbanization and automobile travel, the Government set up regular road checkpoints where the Gendarmerie checks the papers of travelers, and often reportedly solicit bribes. The Government imposed no nighttime curfews.

Of the approximately 70,000 largely southern-based ethnic groups who were expelled by Mauritania or fled to Senegal and Mali during the 1989-91 crisis, and of those born abroad since then, the UNHCR documented 33,248 returnees to four provinces along the Senegal River. Both the UNHCR and the Government agree that many others have returned on their own to the larger towns and cities. Many more returnees among nomads, who are difficult to document, and urban dwellers are not included in UNHCR's figures. Informed observers estimate that the actual number of returnees ranges between 40,000 and 65,000. Many entire villages as well as almost all Peulh (nomadic herders of the Halpulaar ethnic group) have re