



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Mauritania

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2007](#)

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
March 11, 2008

Mauritania, with an estimated population of three million, is a highly centralized Islamic republic governed by President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, whose April 19 inauguration highlighted the country's first successful transition to democracy in its 50 years of independence. President Abdallahi replaced Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall, who had taken power in the August 2005 coup that ended the 23-year presidency of Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. The presidential elections were judged free and fair by international and national observers. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government's human rights record improved during the year; however, there were reports of mistreatment of detainees by security forces, harsh prison conditions, impunity, prolonged pretrial detention, executive branch influence on the judiciary, and restrictions on freedoms of press, assembly, and association. There was a widespread public perception of governmental corruption and a lack of access to government information. Discrimination against women, female genital mutilation (FGM), child labor, trafficking in persons, and the political marginalization of largely southern-based ethnic groups continued to be problems.

The new government acted quickly to address the country's most serious human rights problems, most significantly by passing legislation criminalizing the lingering practice of slavery and initiating preparations for the repatriation of thousands of Afro-Mauritians living as refugees in Senegal and Mali following their expulsion during ethnic tensions and violence in 1989-91.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

Although the constitution and law prohibit such practices, there were reports that police beat and abused prisoners and detainees; however, unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of the severe forms of torture previously used. According to reports, those who lacked money or influential family or tribal ties were the most likely to be mistreated. Authorities rarely took action against those responsible for such abuse.

In November a protestor was shot and killed by police lacking training who responded with deadly force during a demonstration.

On June 5, a court cited poor police evidence collection procedures in acquitting Ismael Issa, an Algerian Islamist who reportedly was tortured while in custody in 2005; the court acquitted on the same basis 24 of 25 codefendants accused of "acts against the state" for their alleged ties to the terrorist Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, now known as Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Overcrowding and harsh prison conditions persisted in spite of government efforts to relieve overcrowding by opening a new central prison in Nouakchott in June. Prisoners reported the theft of personal property during the transfer between facilities. The new prison, designed to house 800 prisoners, replaced the former Nouakchott prison that had a capacity of 250. At year's end approximately 650 prisoners were incarcerated in the new prison.

In March inmates at the Nouadhibou prison protested poor conditions. Guards reportedly fired warning shots into the air, but there were no injuries reported.

Serious overcrowding and inadequate sanitation facilities in some prisons reportedly contributed to diseases such as tuberculosis, diarrhea, and dermatological ailments. Medical supplies, mainly provided by an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), remained insufficient in all prisons. Budget allocations to improve prison conditions remained insufficient in all prisons. Prisoners with high-level connections and with families to bring them food, medicines, and reading material fared better than the less privileged and citizens of other countries.

Guard force management generally enforced regulations against beatings and torture; however, there continued to be credible reports of beatings and abuse in police detention centers and several prisons throughout the country.

Children of female prisoners either remained with their mothers or the Ministry of Justice gave temporary custody to other family members. The Noura Foundation, an NGO working in the women's prison, provided education and vocational training to female prisoners and partnered with the Catholic charity Caritas to provide education, sports, and vocational services in the juvenile detention center. Pretrial detainees in all detention facilities were frequently held with convicted prisoners as a result of overcrowding.

The government permitted prison visits by NGOs, diplomats, and international human rights observers. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had access to prisons and conducted multiple prison visits in accordance with its standard modalities.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that police arbitrarily arrested and detained citizens.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The National Police, under the Ministry of the Interior, is responsible for law enforcement and maintaining order in urban areas. The National Guard, under the Ministry of the Interior, performs security functions throughout the country in areas in which city police are not present. The gendarmerie, a specialized paramilitary group under the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for maintaining civil order in and outside metropolitan areas.

The police were viewed as unprofessional and unwilling to investigate minor complaints by persons who were not well connected. The police also lacked equipment and training. Corruption was a problem. Police in some regions rearrested former criminals and demanded bribes for their release. Some indicted detainees were released before trial without explanation. The government often did not hold security officials accountable or prosecute them for abuses. During the year there were reports of investigations and prosecutions of police on human rights grounds. In July the Internal Affairs Division was involved in a malfeasance investigation, which led to the arrest of the country's INTERPOL liaison officer on drug smuggling charges.

Arrest and Detention

The law requires duly authorized arrest warrants, but they were not commonly used. The law requires that courts review the legality of a person's detention within 48 hours of arrest; however, the police can extend the period for another 48 hours, and a prosecutor or court can detain persons for up to 15 workdays in national security cases. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the right to contact an attorney. Attorneys for the indigent are provided at state expense. While one article of the law provides detainees with the right to prompt judicial determination of the charges against them, an older law allows the government to detain persons for up to 30 days without a judicial determination. Unlike in the previous year, the new government generally respected the established timelines for pressing charges, with a significant drop reported in the number of detainees held without charge. There was no functional bail system.

In October the government arrested seven individuals for alleged ties to terrorist groups. Four of the seven were released without charge, and three were formally charged (one with the additional charge of possession of explosives) within the prescribed time.

One person was arrested during the year for proselytizing.

In November police shot and killed a protestor in the town of Kankossa after rioters set fire to the prefect's office and residence during a demonstration over increased food and energy costs.

Human rights groups reported a reduction in the length and frequency of pretrial detention, although approximately 30 cases of extended pretrial detention reportedly remained at year's end. In previous years there were credible reports of persons remaining in pretrial detention for months or, in some cases, years. The average amount of time that pretrial detainees were held during the year was two work days for normal cases and two work weeks for cases involving matters of national security.

Amnesty

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of amnesty being granted.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for judicial independence, and the judiciary exercised greater independence than in the previous year, particularly in acquitting persons charged with terrorism in light of alleged police abuses in the process of evidence collection. However, the executive branch continued to exercise significant influence over the judiciary through its ability to appoint and pressure judges. In addition poorly educated and poorly trained judges who were susceptible to social, financial, and tribal pressures limited the judicial system's fairness.

The government continued to work on judicial reform, including training judges, prosecutors, and police on procedures for applying laws, particularly those concerning human rights, antislavery, money laundering, and trafficking in persons. The government also worked to professionalize judges by calling for the hiring of judges from academic circles and by training prosecutors and judges to increase judicial efficiency.

There is a single system of courts consistent with modified principles of Shari'a law. Departmental, regional, and labor tribunals are the courts of first instance at the lower level. The 53 departmental tribunals, composed of a president and magistrates with traditional Islamic legal training, heard civil cases involving sums less than \$37 (10,000 ouguiya) and family issues, including domestic, divorce, and inheritance cases. A total of 13 regional tribunals accepted appeals in commercial and civil matters from the departmental tribunals and heard misdemeanor cases. At the middle level, three courts of appeal, each with seven chambers (civil, commercial, administrative, and penal chambers, as well as criminal, minors, and labor courts) heard appeals from the regional courts and have original jurisdiction for felonies.

The Supreme Court, whose members are appointed by the president and subject to annual review, was nominally independent and reviewed decisions and rulings made by the courts of appeal to determine their compliance with law and procedure. Constitutional review was within the purview of a six-member constitutional council. The Supreme Court undertook an annual review to determine whether lower courts applied the law correctly and followed proper procedures. Reviews also served as a basis for evaluating the reform process and reassigning judges based on their qualifications.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for due process. Defendants have a right to a public trial, but juries are not used. All defendants, regardless of the court or their ability to pay, have the legal right to representation by counsel during the proceedings. If defendants lacked the ability to pay, the court appointed an attorney from a list prepared by the National Order of Lawyers, which provided a defense free of charge. There is a presumption of innocence and the right to appeal. The foregoing rights generally were observed in practice.

Shari'a provides the legal principles upon which the law and legal procedure are based; the courts did not treat women as the equals of men in all cases.

A special court hears the cases of children under the age of 18. Children who appeared before the court received more lenient sentences than adults, and extenuating circumstances received greater consideration in juvenile cases. The minimum age for children to be tried was 12. Those between the ages of 12 and 18 were tried and, if convicted, sentenced to the juvenile detention center.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees during the year.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The administrative court has the competence to receive complaints of human rights violation. The court did not receive any

human rights cases during the year, and there were no reports of difficulty enforcing domestic court orders.

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

The law prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that the government surveilled opposition political activities.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights. In October the NGO Reporters without Borders noted the country's improvements in press freedom.

Individuals generally could criticize the government publicly or privately without reprisal.

The independent media were active and expressed a variety of views without restriction.

On August 16, bodyguards of the prime minister allegedly beat Radio Mauritanie reporter Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Moghdad after he attempted to bypass security checks. On August 24, Reporters without Borders called for Minister of Justice Limam Ould Teguedi to intervene to allow a complaint to be filed against the government. The prime minister's office conducted an internal investigation that concluded with a formal apology to Ould Moghdad, who then ended his efforts to file a complaint.

The High Authority for Press and Broadcast Media, which the transitional government created in October 2006, continued to play an advisory and mediating role on issues concerning the media. For example, the Authority worked to address the Ould Moghdad incident.

NGOs and the privately owned press openly criticized the government and its leaders. Some journalists practiced self-censorship in areas deemed sensitive, refraining from commenting on Shari'a law or directly criticizing foreign embassies.

In December the First Lady withdrew her October libel suit against a journalist who accused her of using state funds for personal use and for involvement in government contracts and concessions.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports that the government restricted the political opposition's ability to broadcast on government radio and television.

There were no developments in the case of two newspaper employees arrested in 2005 for publishing a story on a pornographic film reportedly made in Nouakchott's central prison. At year's end, the case had yet to go to trial, and the accused remained free.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. Internet access was available in urban areas throughout the country, with home access common among the affluent and cyber cafes serving the remainder of the population.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The law provides for freedom of assembly, and the government generally respected this right. The law requires that organizers apply to the local prefect ("hakem") for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies, and permission was generally granted.

In September a meeting of the national NGO Cyber Forum was blocked by the minister in charge of relations with parliament and civil society, reportedly because he had not been invited. The minister claimed to have ordered police to block access to the organization's headquarters because a faction of the NGO had complained it was being excluded from the meeting.

In October and November police forcibly dispersed multiple unsanctioned demonstrations against the perceived high cost of living when they posed a threat to property or public safety. One protestor was fatally wounded in the town of Kankossa, where the prefect's home and office were set on fire.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right; however, all political parties must register with the Ministry of the Interior, and the government continued to use laws that prohibit formation of racially or religious-based organizations. The government, however, authorized the establishment of an Islamist political party during the year, and the application of a second Islamic party was under review at year's end.

During the year the government recognized several human rights organizations, including those affiliated with Afro-Mauritanian refugees.

The government recognized 18 new political parties during the year, bringing to 53 the number of registered political parties. Political parties and numerous NGOs generally functioned openly, issued public statements, and chose their own leadership.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and decrees that Islam is the religion of its citizens and the state. The government limited freedom of religion. The government did not register religious groups. NGOs, including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, had to register with the Ministry of the Interior.

The government continued to prohibit proselytizing and the distribution of any material that "is against Islam or contradicts or otherwise threatens Islam." Bibles were neither printed nor publicly sold in the country; however, the possession of bibles and other Christian religious materials in private homes was not illegal, and bibles and other religious publications were available among the small Christian community.

In September Nouakchott police arrested a Christian convert on charges of proselytizing. After several days' detention, he was released with a verbal warning.

There were no developments in the closure of churches led by six West African Protestant pastors whom the government briefly detained in May 2006.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

A very small number of expatriates practiced Judaism. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2007 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law provides for freedom of movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and while the government generally respected these rights, persons lacking identity cards could not travel freely in some regions. Lack of identity documents particularly affected Afro-Mauritians in the southern provinces, many of whom were former refugees in Senegal who had independently decided to return to Mauritania. The government set up roadblocks where gendarmes, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers and often demanded bribes. During the year the government generally maintained fewer roadblocks and reduced the time taken in questioning and conducting vehicle searches; however, there were periodic reports of more stringent searches in the southern border areas and in the eastern regions where the terrorist group AQIM was believed to be active. The government launched extensive border security operations following the December 24 AQIM killings of four French tourists near Aleg.

The law does not prohibit forced exile, but there were no reports that the government used it.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that between 25,000 and 34,000 Mauritanian refugees from the 1989-91 crisis remained in Senegal, and was undertaking a repatriation program with the new Abdallahi

government and the governments of Senegal and Mali. In November the government held a three-day national dialogue concerning the return of refugees and, in December, established an interagency office to coordinate the returns scheduled to begin in 2008.

Protection of Refugees

The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 protocol, or the 1967 African Union Convention on the Status of Refugees, but the former government established a system for providing such protection. In practice the government provided protection against "refoulement," the return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe they feared persecution, and granted refugee status or asylum.

The government continued to provide temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees under the 1951 convention and the 1967 protocol and during the year provided it to approximately 800 persons.

The government cooperated with the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees or asylum seekers. The former government accepted the UNHCR's registration of approximately 800 asylum seekers, mostly from Sierra Leone and Liberia, and the government worked with the UNHCR during the year to provide continued assistance for these individuals.

During the year the government assisted the UNHCR, the European Commission, and the government of Spain in returning migrants attempting to enter the Canary Islands by sea to their countries of origin. The Spanish Technical Corporation operated a migrant reception center in Nouadhibou to process returned migrants and to ensure that they received nutritional and medical care. The government gave the UNHCR access to returned migrants to determine if they were eligible for refugee status. In light of freedom of movement agreements with members of the Economic Community of West African States, the government allowed West African migrants to remain in the northern region, deporting only those found in the act of attempting illegal travel to the Canary Islands.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution and law provide citizens the right to change their government, and during the year citizens enjoyed a peaceful transition to democratically elected government for the first time in the country's history. Two rounds of presidential elections culminated in the election of President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in March. The elections were judged by national and international observers to be generally free and fair. Despite some charges that the previous military transition government provided tacit support to the Abdallahi campaign, second-round opponent Ahmed Ould Dadda accepted the results of the election and assumed a cabinet-level position as the leader of the opposition.

Elections and Political Participation

To complete the process initiated by the transitional government of transition to a civilian-led government, citizens voted on March 11 to select a president from among 20 candidates, including 12 independents. When no candidate won a majority in the first round, voters returned to the polls on March 25 to choose between independent candidate Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and president of the Rally of Democratic Forces party Ahmed Ould Daddah. Abdallahi won the second round with 53 percent of the votes. Former central bank governor and third-place presidential vote-getter Zein Ould Zeidane was named prime minister.

The 95-person National Assembly included representatives from 12 of the 25 parties that contested the 2006 legislative elections, as well as 41 independents.

In October opposition parties protested President Abdallahi's decision to support the establishment of a new political party uniting the legislative majority. Opposition and civil society leaders feared the new party would revert to the "party of the state" politics of the past by drawing on state resources and depriving other parties of equal standing. Opposition parties criticized the role of the secretary general of the presidency, a cabinet-rank position, as the primary coordinator of the new party.

Following a July 2006 decree requiring all political parties to reserve 20 percent of positions on their legislative and municipal candidate lists for women, female candidates were elected to approximately that percentage of seats in the National Assembly. The government includes two female ministers, and in September the government appointed two female governors (walis) for the first time in the country's history. In October the government named several female vice governors and prefects.

The new government increased the number of Afro-Mauritians and Black Moors in key government positions, although they remained underrepresented as a percentage of population. Of the 30 cabinet members, there were three Black Moors and three Afro-Mauritians. Two of the 13 governors were Black Moors, and two were Afro-Mauritanian. Of the 53

prefects (hakems), there were three Black Moors and 11 Afro-Mauritanians.

Government Corruption and Transparency

Corrupt practices were widely believed to exist at all levels of government, although the government was seen as less corrupt than its predecessor. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a serious problem. Government officials reportedly received frequent favors from authorities, such as unauthorized exemption from taxes, special grants of land, and favorable treatment during bidding on government projects. Corruption was most pervasive in government procurement, bank loans, fishing license distribution, land distribution, and tax payments.

In an effort to curb high-level corruption, the government introduced an annual requirement for senior officials, including the president, to publicly declare their personal assets, although critics accused some officials of hiding assets in the names of family members. In December the government launched a nationwide anticorruption information campaign and established a Commission for Financial Transparency in Public Affairs to oversee corruption cases and to be the repository for the declarations. The nine-member commission is headed by the presidents of the Supreme Court, accounts court, and High Islamic Council.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.

The government cooperated with international governmental organizations on various issues, including prison conditions and refugee services, and permitted visits by the ICRC.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution and law provide for equality for all citizens regardless of race, national origin, sex, or social status, and prohibit racial or ethnic propaganda; however, the government often favored individuals on the basis of racial and tribal affiliation, social status, and political ties.

Women

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively, and NGOs reported that the incidence of unreported rape was high. In August the Nouakchott Criminal Court convicted seven rapists and sentenced them to five to 15 years of hard labor. Several cases were reported, however, that wealthy rape suspects avoided prosecution or, if prosecuted, prison time.

The trial for the 2005 alleged rape of M'barka, who was forced into domestic servitude and charged with sexual misconduct for being pregnant and unwed after she was allegedly raped by a member of the household, had not begun by year's end.

Domestic abuse and violence are illegal; however, the government did not always enforce the law effectively. Human rights monitors and lawyers reported few cases of domestic violence, which was believed to be underreported due to the stigma of victimization. Penalties included imprisonment, but convictions were very rare. The police and judiciary occasionally intervened in domestic abuse cases, but women in rural areas rarely sought legal redress, relying instead upon family and ethnic group members to resolve domestic disputes.

Although prostitution is illegal, NGOs indicated that it was a growing problem in some urban areas, particularly among Afro-Mauritanian and Black Moor women. In Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, there were reports that Chinese women were trafficked for sexual exploitation in brothels catering to foreigners, although there were no known cases of women seeking assistance.

Women have legal rights to property and child custody, and these rights were recognized among the more modern and urbanized population. By local tradition, a woman's first marriage requires parental consent. In accordance with Shari'a as applied in the country, marriage and divorce do not require the woman's consent, polygyny is allowed, and a woman does not have the right to refuse her husband's wish to marry additional women. In practice polygyny was very rare among Moors but was common among other ethnic groups. It was common in Moor society for a woman to obtain at the time of marriage a contractual agreement stipulating that her husband must agree to end their marriage if he chooses an additional wife. Arranged marriages were increasingly rare, particularly among the Moor population. Women frequently initiated the termination of a marriage, which most often was done by repudiation of husband or wife rather than formal divorce.

Women still faced legal discrimination. The testimony of two women was necessary to equal that of one man. The courts grant only half the amount of an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed that they award for a man's death. Formulas applied to property distribution varied widely from case to case and court to court. In addition the validity of and right to establish prenuptial agreements was not always respected. The personal status code, which was published and assumed force of law in August 2001, provides a framework for the consistent application of secular law and Shari'a-based family law.

Women did not face legal discrimination in areas not addressed specifically by Shari'a. The law provides that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. While not applied universally, the two largest employers--the civil service and the state mining company--observed this law. In the modern wage sector, women also received family benefits, including three months of maternity leave.

The government sought to open new employment opportunities for women in sectors that were traditionally filled by men, such as health care, communications, police, and customs services. All announcements for government jobs encouraged female applicants. Women became more involved in the fishing industry and established several women's fishing cooperatives.

The Secretariat for Women's Affairs worked with many NGOs and cooperatives to improve the status of women. The government, women's groups, and national and international NGOs organized meetings, seminars, and workshops throughout the year to publicize women's rights.

Children

The law makes provision for children's welfare, and there were government programs to care for abandoned children; however, inadequate funding hampered these programs.

School attendance is mandatory for six years, but the government was not able to provide universal access to primary education. The completion rate for primary school remained below 60 percent, and most students--particularly those in rural and semiurban areas--did not advance beyond primary school. Education was free through university level, although many families were unable to afford school supplies. Classes were fully integrated, including boys and girls from all social and ethnic groups. Almost all children, regardless of gender or ethnic group, attended Koranic school between the ages of five and seven and gained at least rudimentary skills in reading and writing Arabic.

Boys and girls have equal access to state-provided medical care. The government relied on foreign donors in such areas as child immunization.

FGM was practiced among all ethnic groups and most often on young girls, often on the seventh day after birth and almost always before the age of six months. There is no law explicitly prohibiting FGM; however, there is a law that "prohibits acts that could harm children," and some legal scholars believed this could be interpreted to outlaw FGM. According to the most recent internationally sponsored study (2001), three-fourths of all women between the ages of 15 and 49 had been subjected to FGM. National human rights organizations estimated the actual incidence rate to be even higher. Local experts agreed that the least severe form of excision was practiced and not infibulation, the most severe form. The practice of FGM has decreased in the modern urban sector. In September the government launched a national strategy against FGM; however, women's rights organizations criticized the government for not coordinating with civil society.

The government and international NGOs continued to coordinate anti-FGM efforts. These efforts focused on eradicating the practice in hospitals, discouraging midwives from practicing FGM, and educating populations. The High Islamic Council of Mauritania, the Islamic Scholar Association, and the National Forum for Women's Rights continued to emphasize that FGM carried serious health risks and was not a religious requirement. Government hospitals and licensed medical practitioners were barred from performing FGM, and several government agencies worked to prevent practitioners from continuing this custom. According to several women's rights experts, the campaign against FGM appeared to be changing attitudes. In October the National Assembly began a series of provincial meetings, supported by UNICEF, focusing on FGM.

Traditional forms of mistreatment of girls continued, mostly in isolated rural communities, but these practices appeared to be declining. One such custom was the forced feeding of adolescent girls ("gavage") prior to marriage, which was practiced only among White Moor tribal groups. Increased government and civil society attention to the problem appeared to have led to a greater awareness of the health risks associated with gavage, countering traditional views encouraging female obesity.

Local NGOs estimated that there were 400 street children, largely as a result of poverty and the urbanization of formerly nomadic families. The government and at least one NGO worked to assist families with street children and to encourage their school attendance.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons; however, there were reports that persons were trafficked to, from, and within the country. The government did not prosecute or sentence anyone for trafficking during the year.

The country was a source and destination for men, women, and children trafficked for forced labor. Numerous NGO reports suggested that forced labor took several forms. Slavery-related practices, and possibly slavery itself, persisted in isolated areas where a barter economy still prevailed. Several reports stated that young girls from remote regions, and possibly from western Mali, worked as unpaid housemaids in some wealthy urban homes. An unknown number of young boys ("talibes"), nearly all from Pulaar tribes, begged in the streets as part of a "work-study" arrangement with "marabouts," or religious teachers, in exchange for receiving religious instruction. There were reliable reports that a small number of marabouts forced their talibes to beg for over 12 hours a day and provided them with insufficient food and shelter.

The government continued a program to reduce the number of talibes and partnered with several NGOs to provide needy talibes with basic medical and nutritional care. However, government assistance and protection services for trafficking victims remained limited, with most resources going towards prevention, in the form of training for police, gendarmes, and legal officials to better identify, investigate, and convict traffickers. Human rights organizations criticized the special police unit established to protect the talibes for doing little to enforce laws.

The newly formed Commissariat for Social Protection and Food Security was responsible for addressing trafficking, but the office was inadequately staffed. During the year the government did not identify any trafficking victims.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities in education, employment, or the provision of other state services, and there were no reports of governmental or societal discrimination against persons with disabilities. The government did not mandate preference in employment or education or public accessibility for persons with disabilities, although it did provide some rehabilitation and other assistance for such persons. In October 2006 the government passed a law to increase protections and benefits for persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Racial and ethnic minorities faced governmental discrimination. The inconsistent issuance of national identification cards, which were required for voting, effectively disenfranchised numerous members of southern minority groups. Racial and cultural tension and discrimination occurred between Moors and Afro-Mauritians. The Moors were divided among numerous ethno-linguistic groups and further distinguished racially as either White Moor or Black Moor, although it often was difficult to distinguish between the two by skin color. White Moor tribes and clans dominated government and business. The Black Moor subgroup (also called Haratines or freed slaves) remained politically and economically weaker than the White Moor subgroup. Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups, comprising the Halpulaar, the Wolof, and the Soninke, were concentrated in the south and in urban areas. Afro-Mauritians were underrepresented in the military and security sectors. In October the government named a significant number of Afro-Mauritians to important vice governor and prefect positions.

The constitution designates Arabic as the official language and Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof as the country's national languages. The new government reversed previous efforts at "Arabization" of the school system, encouraging instead French and Arab bilingualism. Neither Afro-Mauritanian national languages nor the local Hassaniya Arabic dialect were used as languages of instruction.

Ethnic rivalry significantly contributed to political divisions and tensions. Some political parties had readily identifiable ethnic bases, although political coalitions were increasingly important. Black Moors and Afro-Mauritians were underrepresented in mid- to high-level public and private sector jobs. In October police in Nouadhibou responded with tear gas when Black Moor merchants briefly rioted after a group of White Moors beat a Black Moor butcher who had allegedly insulted the wife of a White Moor naval official. The butcher was hospitalized for a few days, but police took no action against the assailants.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There was no evidence of either societal violence or systematic government discrimination based on sexual orientation. Although Shari'a outlaws homosexuality under certain conditions, secular laws do not.

There was no evidence of systematic discrimination by either society or government against persons with HIV/AIDS; however, taboos and beliefs associated with the disease caused victims in some areas to face isolation or exclusion. The stigma related to the disease and the belief that victims are guilty of violating Islamic practices contributed to

underreporting of HIV infection, the incidence of which was likely significantly higher than the official figure of 1 percent.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers--except for members of the military, police, and judiciary--to form and join unions of their choice without authorization or excessive requirements, and workers exercised this right. Noncitizens did not have the right to serve as trade union officials unless they had worked in the country and in that trade for at least five years. The majority of the labor force was in the informal sector, with most workers engaged in subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry; only 25 percent were employed in regularly paid positions. Nearly 90 percent of industrial and commercial workers, however, were unionized.

To be legally recognized, a union must have the authorization of the public prosecutor, who can provisionally suspend a trade union at the request of the Ministry of the Interior if it believes that the union has not complied with the law. The government, however, has the power to decide whether to recognize a trade union.

Laws provide workers with protection against antiunion discrimination; however, national human rights groups reported that authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms owned by wealthy citizens. Labor courts were not allowed to reinstate workers who were arbitrarily dismissed; however, there were no reported cases of union-related dismissals.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides that unions may organize workers freely without government or employer interference, and workers exercised this right in practice. The law provides workers, except for executive and managerial staff, with the right to strike, and workers exercised this right during the year. Civil service unions were required to give one month's notice before holding a strike, and private sector unions were required to provide official notification that conciliation procedures had been exhausted before holding a strike. The government can dissolve a union for what it considered an illegal or politically motivated strike; however, no unions were disbanded during the year.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children, but the law only applies to relations between employers and workers; there were credible reports that such practices occurred. In August the National Assembly passed legislation criminalizing slavery, but the law had not come into force by year's end, and there were areas where slavery-related practices continued and the attitudes of master and slave prevailed. On December 10, the president launched a national antislavery campaign and allocated approximately \$7.5 million (2 billion ouguiya) for the eradication of all forms of slavery. The labor code includes criminal penalties for human trafficking and includes increased penalties for contracting to benefit from forced labor and for exploiting forced labor as part of an organized criminal network.

At year's end, the government had not taken action on the May 2005 recommendations of the International Labor Organization to allow an independent investigation into forced labor, reinforce the Ministry of Public records and Labor, and give labor inspectors greater resources and autonomy. Slavery-related practices, typically flowing from ancestral master-slave relationships, continued in isolated areas where a barter economy existed, education levels were generally low, and there was a high demand for persons to herd livestock, tend fields, and perform other manual labor. Some individuals considered themselves either slaves or masters and were unaware that slavery had been abolished. Human rights activists reported that many persons in these slavery-like relationships refused to report their "masters" to the authorities.

In September the government secured parliamentary passage of a law imposing tougher penalties on slave holders as well as penalties on officials who fail to apply the law; however, no cases were prosecuted during the year. Human rights groups welcomed the law but continued to call for increased government efforts to publicize the law, train prosecutors and judges, and ensure enforcement of the law. Human rights groups reported that persons in slave-like relationships were persuaded by their masters to deny the relationship to activists.

Voluntary servitude also persisted, with some former slaves and descendants of slaves continuing to work for former masters in exchange for some combination of money, lodging, food, or medical care. The reasons for the persistence of such practices varied widely among different ethnic groups; however, poverty, a barter economy, and persistent drought limited economic alternatives for many and left some former slaves and descendants of slaves vulnerable to exploitation by former masters. Adult females with children faced greater difficulties and could be compelled to remain in a condition of servitude.

There were reports that some former slaves continued to work for their former masters or others without remuneration to retain access to land they traditionally farmed. Although the law provides for distribution of land to the landless, including to former slaves, this law has been enforced in only a few cases. Deeply embedded psychological and tribal bonds also made it difficult for many individuals who had generations of forebears who were slaves to break bonds with former masters or tribes. Some persons continued to link themselves to former masters because they believed their slave status had been religiously ordained and they feared religious sanction if that bond were broken.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law provides that children cannot be employed before the age of 14 in the nonagricultural sector or under age 13 in the agricultural sector unless the minister of labor grants an exception due to local circumstances; however, child labor in the informal sector was a significant problem, particularly within poorer inner-city areas. The law states that employed children between the ages of 14 and 16 should receive 70 percent of the minimum wage and that those between the ages of 17 and 18 should receive 90 percent of the minimum wage.

The Ministry of Justice, working with UNICEF, worked to repatriate Mauritanian children who had been sent to work as camel jockeys in the United Arab Emirates. The ministry formally arranged the repatriation of 12 youths under the program and provided family counseling for the repatriated youths plus additional youth who had previously worked as camel jockeys.

Young rural children were commonly employed in herding, cultivation, fishing, and other labor to support their families. Young children in urban areas often drove donkey carts and delivered water and building materials. Some marabouts provided their talibes with insufficient food and shelter and forced them to beg for over 12 hours a day. In keeping with longstanding tradition, many children served apprenticeships in small industries and in the informal sector. Reporting by some NGOs, including SOS-Esclaves, strongly stated that domestic employment, often unpaid, of girls as young as seven in wealthier homes was a growing problem. There was no child labor in the modern industrial sector.

Several government offices have responsibility for enforcing child labor laws, including the ministries of labor; justice; women's, children's, and family affairs; and the Commission for Food Security and Social Protection. There was a labor inspectorate with the authority to refer violations to judicial authorities, but the eight regional inspectors and 30 inspector/controllers lacked the basic resources, such as transport and office equipment, needed to enforce existing child labor and other labor laws.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The nationally mandated minimum monthly wage for adults, which was not enforced, was \$77 (21,000 ouguiya), which did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard, legal, nonagricultural workweek could not exceed either 40 hours or six days without overtime compensation, which was paid at rates that were graduated according to the number of overtime hours worked. Domestic and certain other workers could work 56 hours per week. Employees are required to be given at least one 24-hour period of rest per week. The Labor Directorate of the Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcement of labor laws, but in practice inadequate funding limited the effectiveness of enforcement.

The government set health and safety standards, and the Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcing these standards, but did so inconsistently. In principle workers could remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment, but in practice they could not.

