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Mauritania: The situation of Blacks; the government's attitude toward Blacks in Mauritania (2003-2006)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

General background

According to the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the population of Mauritania was 3,086,859 in 2005 (United States 10 Jan. 2006). The country is composed predominantly of Beydanes or white Moors of Arab extraction and Haratines or black Moors of African extraction (*Freedom in the World* 2005; see also *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2004, Sec. 5). The following information on the two groups that make up the black population in Mauritania was provided in correspondence from a representative of SOS Esclaves Mauritanie:

[translation]

The Haratines or descendents of slaves (approximately 45 to 50 percent of the population) are Blacks of African origin; however, they are of Arab culture as a result of centuries of assimilation by their white Moor or Arab-Berber (also called Beydane) masters. Regardless of their skills and abilities, they are subject to material and symbolic discrimination throughout their lives. That discrimination stems mainly from caste traditions and is reinforced and perpetuated by the government, which is dominated by the masters' descendents and is the only supply of wealth. The Haratines are subject to virtually forced endogamy; they are denied access to government contracts and fishing licences; they do not have the right to work; they are poorly educated and few of them are registered on electoral lists; they have high infant mortality and birth rates; they have few university graduates; and they are cut off from senior positions in the public service as well as from the diplomatic service, judiciary and senior military positions.

As a distinct socio-ethnic group, the Haratines have not, however, been collectively repressed.

...

Black Africans consist of three language-based groups; these are, from smallest to largest, the Wolofs, the Soninkes and the Halpularens (also called Toucouleurs or Fulanis). They represent less than 25 percent of the population.

They were the second most powerful group at the time of independence in 1960, surpassed only by the Arab-Berbers; since then, Arabization policies have caused their numbers to dwindle. . . . After the massacres and mass deportations of 1989-1991, the black Africans of today suffer the same kinds of discrimination as the Haratines . . . and live in constant fear of new collective exactions (5 Feb. 2006).

Attitude of the Mauritanian government toward black citizens

Correspondence from a representative of SOS Esclaves Mauritanie indicated that [translation] "the situation of Blacks in Mauritania ... has not improved as far as their emancipation is concerned; the coup d'état on 3 August 2005 did not provide any specific solutions to the problem of racism" (5 Feb. 2006).

The document submitted in 2004 by the Forum of National Human Rights Organizations (Forum des organisations nationales de défense des droits de l'homme, FONADH) in response to the report presented by the Mauritanian government to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination indicated that ethnic minorities were still discriminated against in Mauritania (July 2004; see also *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 5). According to a report published in 2004 by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, children from minority groups still face discrimination. The FONADH report provided an overview of the situation of the black population in Mauritania. (July 2004). Below is an abridged list of the report's main points:

[translation]

Right to employment

... In the private sector, it is enough to look at the composition of sectoral federations (sort of trade corporations) that make up the National Confederation of Mauritanian Employers (Confédération nationale des employeurs de Mauritanie, CNEM): none is chaired by a Haratine or a black African. The head of management has always been Beydane. ... although workers in [the agriculture and fishing industries] are still massively recruited according to that historic rule, the largest cooperatives and companies are controlled by the Beydane, most of whom have origins in the arid regions of the North.

...

Mauritanians from the marginalized communities (Haratine and Black Africans) are barely given a second thought in the illegal distribution of resources. The same is true in the awarding of government contracts, the financing of development projects and the allocation and execution of community works (basic infrastructures and essential services, such as water, health, schools and housing)-non-Beydane recipients can be counted on one hand and serve, where applicable, as subcontractors to the companies supported by the system of discrimination described earlier. Even the rare members of these groups who get elected and the independent press cannot report on this phenomenon without risking being charged with threatening national security.

...

The right to labour unions and collective bargaining

...

Despite ratifying Convention 182, the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, Mauritania has taken no steps to remedy this serious problem. Domestic workers have no social safety net-even worse, they are exploited without any rules. Disputes with their employers often conclude with police intervention, as they are taken into custody on charges of theft and abused. It is also important to note that these kinds of particularly thankless and poorly paid activities are characteristic of an unskilled, Haratine or black African work force.

...

The right to education

...

The level of public school education can no longer satisfy anyone but Haratine, black African and poor Beydane children-the overwhelming majority of the population. Furthermore, in the rural areas where these groups live, the situation is further exacerbated by increasing numbers of children and an insufficient number of schools.

...

Pulaar, Haratine, Soninke and Wolof children are doubly handicapped, because extreme poverty is more common in their communities. Furthermore, the Arabization policy has been taken to

extremes in this multiracial and multicultural country, as a result of which these groups are excluded from both the public service and the service sector.

...

In the predominantly black African rural areas along the Senegal River, only 18 percent of the population is literate. The rate is even lower among women, only 9 percent of whom can read and write simple sentences.

...

Health [AIDS]

...

Due to their extreme poverty, Haratine and black Mauritians have the highest number of [AIDS] victims. Treatments that can lessen the effects of this disease are costly. The authorities' apathy, the inadequacy of information strategies and the lack of solidarity lead to patients being socially stigmatized. Severe discrimination exists in the distribution of the minimum treatment available, and the most impoverished communities are hit the hardest.

...

Decent housing

... the right to housing is not guaranteed to the poor, who suffer from financial discrimination. The groups that suffer most from lack of housing are the Haratines, Pulaars, Soninkes and Wolofs.

...

Cultural recognition

Mauritania, a country where Arab and African cultures intersect, is held together by a common religion, Islam. However, the African culture (whether Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof or Bambara) is not even recognized as a minority culture. Each time a Pulaar, Soninke or Wolof family celebrates a social event (such as a marriage, baptism or funeral), it must obtain authorization from the police, who can intervene at any moment during the ceremony. The cultural holidays of those three communities are authorized or not according to the whims of the prince (FONADH July 2004, 5, 8, 10, 12, 15, 17, 18)

Country Reports 2005 indicates that, in Mauritania, "the law provides for equality for all citizens regardless of race, national origin, sex, or social status" (8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 5). However, the governments "often favored individuals on the basis of racial and tribal affiliation, social status, and political ties" (*Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 5). The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed its concerns about [CERD English version] "allegations concerning the very low proportion of black Moors and black Africans in the army, the police, the administration, Government and other State institutions" (10 Dec. 2004).

On 17 July 2003, Mauritania adopted Bill No. 2003-025, which prohibits slavery and provides for the punishment of offenders (*La lettre du mois* Feb. 2004; *Freedom in the World* 2005). No information on the enforcement of that law could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. According to a report published by Freedom House in 2005, a number of Mauritanian Blacks still live in "conditions of servitude." A recent report published by Amnesty International indicates that slavery still exists in Mauritania (23 May 2006). According to the representative of SOS Esclaves Mauritanie,

[translation]

although prohibited by law and the international treaties ratified by Mauritania, slavery practices are tolerated to some degree by the authorities ... A slave who files a complaint against his masters is often freed under the protection of law enforcement authorities, but the masters are never even taken in for questioning or investigation, much less brought before the courts (5 Feb. 2006).

Information published on the Web sites of the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination indicates that the black Mauritanian refugees in Mali and Senegal who return to Mauritania frequently encounter

problems in getting back their jobs and their property (Nations Unies 22 Sept. 2005; *ibid.* 10 Dec. 2004). The exiles are [translation] "asking for a dignified return under the aegis of the UN and other international organisations" (UN 22 Sept. 2005). According to the representative of SOS Esclaves Mauritanie, [translation] "the Transitional Government is not preventing them from returning, but it is asking them to prove that they are Mauritanian; however, most lost their personal documents during their forced exodus in 1989-1991" (5 Feb. 2006).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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