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2010 Human Rights Report: Mauritania

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

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Mauritania, with an estimated population of 3.2 million, is a highly centralized Islamic republic governed by President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, whose election in July 2009 ended the 11-month political crisis caused by the 2008 coup d'état against former president Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. The presidential election, declared generally free and fair by international observers, followed the June 2009 Dakar Accord, a consensual agreement brokered by Senegalese President Wade and the international community to end the country's political stalemate. Following the election, the political situation stabilized, although the new authorities have been slow to respond to opposition calls for an inclusive political dialogue agreed under the Dakar Accord. The majority party Union for the Republic (UPR) overwhelmingly won the November 2009 senatorial elections, which the opposition denounced as tainted by political influence and tribal pressures. Security forces reported to civilian authorities.

Human rights abuses included mistreatment of detainees and prisoners; security force impunity; lengthy pretrial detention; harsh prison conditions; arbitrary arrests; limits on freedom of the press and assembly; corruption; discrimination against women; female genital mutilation (FGM); child marriage; political marginalization of southern-based ethnic groups; racial and ethnic discrimination; slavery and slavery-related practices; and child labor.

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

The constitution and law prohibit torture; however, security forces allegedly tortured detainees to extract confessions. Torture methods reportedly included electric shocks, burnings, beatings, pulling out of hair, and sexual violence. However, according to the Mauritanian Human Rights Association, there were no documented cases of torture this year.

There was no government response to the April 2009 alleged torture of and denial of medical treatment for suspected terrorist Cheikhani Ould Sidina. The allegation was made by a spokesman for the families of imprisoned Islamists following Sidina's death in prison.

There was no government response to the August 2009 alleged torture of Mohamed Ould Zeidane after he was arrested and detained for questioning related to his brothers suicide bomb attack near the French embassy.

There were no reports that the government investigated the September 2009 case in which Nouakchott Prison guards tortured convicted terrorist suspect Khadim Ould Semane. Al Jazeera Television had broadcast images of guards beating and water boarding Semane and aired a telephone interview with Semane in which he stated that he was subjected to electric shocks and degrading treatment.

There were no reports that authorities investigated the 2008 case in which police tortured suspected terrorists Abdel Kerim Ben Veraz El Baraoui, Ahmed El Moctar Ould Semane, and Cheikh Ould Salem. The suspects' lawyers had claimed that police tortured their clients by hanging them by their feet and using cigarettes to burn their bodies.

There were no further developments in the 2008 reported torture of 39 terrorist suspects involved in the 2007 killings of four French citizens and the 2008 attack on the Israeli embassy.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh, and the government's capacity to administer detention facilities remained poor. There were credible reports of torture, beatings, and abuse in police detention centers, several prisons throughout the country, and gendarmerie and military facilities.

Funds to improve prison conditions remained inadequate. The situation of overcrowding, violence among inmates, and poor medical care in prisons remained the same. Many prisoners were unable to leave their extremely crowded cells or breathe fresh air for months or years at a time.

Serious overcrowding contributed to the spread of diseases, prisoners with health conditions received little or no care, and medical supplies remained insufficient. For example, the Dar Naim Prison held approximately 1,200 prisoners, although it was designed to hold 300. Reports of malnutrition, poor health, and deficient hygiene conditions at the Dar Naim Prison continued. There were reports of four deaths due to illness and unsanitary conditions at the prison. There was no reported investigation of the deaths by year's end.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Association of Female Heads of Family (AFCF) continued to denounce overcrowding and long preventive detentions. Prison overcrowding was exacerbated by the high number of pretrial detainees.

During the year the government began construction in Nouadhibou of a new prison with capacity for 300 prisoners. The prison was not completed by year end.

Pretrial detainees were frequently held with convicted and dangerous prisoners. Pretrial terrorist suspects were held in separate areas from the general prison population in Nouakchott Central Prison.

Due to poor security conditions and the fact that dangerous prisoners shared cells with nondangerous ones, prisoners also lived in a climate of violence, and some had to pay bribes to other prisoners to avoid being brutalized and harassed.

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According to Ministry of Justice statistics, there was a total of 1,700 prisoners with 955 serving sentences and 700 in preventive detention. There were 62 female prisoners with 13 serving sentences and 49 in preventive detention.

As in the previous year, there were reports on the poor prison conditions of terrorist suspects. On April 5, Salafist prisoners issued a press release stating they were giving up family visits for one day to protest prison conditions and they also threatened to start a hunger strike if their right to a speedy trial was not respected. The hunger strike did not occur during the year.

According to media sources, prisoner Mohamed Ould Elhoudrami was transferred from Dar Enaim prison to a hospital after commencing a hunger strike on November 8. However, the Web site Tawary reported he was transferred to the hospital because he was in critical condition with cancer and needed daily treatment. Elhoudrami was arrested on October 7 after being accused of fraud by President Aziz, who described him as dangerous in a televised interview with the media.

In August 2009 local press reported that Amar Ould Saleh, a terrorist suspect, was dying from tuberculosis and was not receiving medical treatment or medication. Ould Saleh was tried and sentenced to 10 years in prison on October 22; subsequently, he received continuing treatment at the prison health unit.

The Mauritanian Bar Association's (ONA) August 2009 report criticized "the nonrespect of human lives in prisons" and highlighted the April 2009 death of terrorist suspect Chikhani Ould Sidina, reportedly due to negligence and denial of medical treatment. The report also highlighted the August 2009 death, under mysterious circumstances, of Dar Naim Prison inmate Sidi Ould Samba. There was no government response to the report's findings or investigations of these deaths by year's end.

The government responded to the August 2009 denunciation of poor prison conditions and long detention periods for Salafist prisoners by terrorist suspect Taher Ould Biye, imprisoned in Nouakchott Central Prison, by conducting terrorism trials in May. These trials led to the conviction of 56 Salafist terrorist suspects, including Taher Ould Biye who received an eight-year prison sentence.

In September 2009 families of Salafist detainees protested poor detention conditions in front of the Nouakchott Central Prison. The wife of detainee El Mami Ould Othman stated he was in declining health with deficient medical attention. El Mami Ould Othman was tried and received a sentence of five years on October 22, then received a presidential pardon on November 16.

Women and minors under 18 years of age were held in two separate facilities. Sexual violence reportedly occurred in the women's prison, which employed both male and female guards. Children of female prisoners remained with their mothers, or the Ministry of Justice gave temporary custody of the children to another family member. International NGOs, such as the Noura Foundation, Caritas, and Terre des Hommes provided educational and economic opportunities for current and former juvenile and female detainees.

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, including visits to terrorism suspects, and distributed hygiene items and books.

The Center for the Reeducation of Minors in Conflict with the Law, whose goal is to provide a space for the social reintegration of children and youth, held a total of 29 children during the year.

In response to widespread criticism and as a follow up to 2009 visits by the fourth district judge and the Ministry of Justice's inspector general, Minister of Justice Abidine Ould El Kheir visited all prisons in April and May and met with inmates to discuss their grievances. On April 21, the Ministry of Justice issued a statement on its commitment to improving prison conditions, particularly nutrition and health, as well as assuring speedy trials. The statement included the following measures: hiring of 18 health care professionals, including a dermatologist, a dentist, and a psychiatrist; signing of an agreement with a pharmaceutical distributor to provide medicine to prisoners; and hiring of a company to clean septic tanks. During the year the Ministry of Justice and the Commission for Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Relations with Civil Society provided a medical unit and ambulance, hired an agency responsible for sanitation, and improved the quantity and the quality of food. The Ministry of Justice also stated that new food stocks were acquired for prisoners and would be renewed quarterly.

During the year the total number of detainees was reduced through conditional release and parole.

In September 2009 the fourth district judge visited the Dar Naim Prison to study the situation of incarcerated minors. No statements or reports on the visit were issued during the year. Also in September 2009, the Ministry of Justice's inspector general and the prison director visited the Central Prison and heard demands from Salafist detainees in response to continuing protests by their families. The government made no statements or efforts to improve the detention conditions during the year.

As in the previous year, the Commission of Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Relations with Civil Society distributed food, hygiene kits, and recreational items to detention centers in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, but the authorities did not observe these prohibitions.

There were cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists (see section 2.a.). Under the previous military junta known as the High State Council (HSC), the military arrested a number of political figures and journalists without charge or hearings. These individuals were released by the end of the year with the exception of Ahmed Ould Khattri, former director of the Agency for the Promotion of Popular Savings and Credit Accounts.

In response to the 2009 Mauritanian National Bar Association (ONA) reports which highlighted multiple cases of arbitrary detentions and individuals kept in prison without being charged, tried, or released despite court orders for their release, three teams of inspectors from the Ministry of Justice clarified the status of the detainees and brought their cases to trial during the year. ONA stated that the government also formally responded to its report during the year.

The Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) members responsible for the 2007 Aleg murders of French tourists were tried and sentenced to death in May.

Police reportedly held suspects involved in the February 2008 attack against the Israeli Embassy in incommunicado military detention for a period of time. These individuals had not been tried by year's end.

The children's penal code states that a minor's preventive detention cannot exceed six months. However, the ONA also reported a high number of individuals, including minors, who remained in preventive detention for extended periods of time due to judicial ineptitude.

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, also under the Ministry of Interior, performs limited police functions in keeping with their peacetime role as security support at government facilities. The National Guard may also be called on by regional authorities to restore civil order during large-scale disturbances such as rioting. The gendarmerie, a specialized paramilitary group under the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for maintaining civil order in and outside metropolitan areas, as well as providing law enforcement services in rural areas.

The police were poorly paid, trained, and ill-equipped. Corruption and impunity were serious problems. Police regularly demanded bribes at nightly roadblocks in Nouakchott and at checkpoints between cities. While having a notable effect in increasing security, there were numerous reports of police arbitrarily detaining individuals for a few hours or overnight at roadblocks in Nouakchott or other towns. According to these reports, police detained motorists or passengers without asking for identity papers, vehicle registration, or without searching the vehicles. Police in some regions arrested former criminals and demanded bribes for their release, and some indicted detainees were released before trial without explanation. The government rarely held security officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment While in Detention

The application of constitutional safeguards continued to vary widely from case to case. 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 an additional 48 hours, and a prosecutor or court can detain persons for up to 15 days in national security cases. Authorities generally respected the two-week detention period for terrorism suspects to be formally arraigned or released in national security cases. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the right to contact an attorney. By law attorneys for the indigent are provided at state expense, but in practice this did not occur. Lawyers highlighted the lengthy incarceration of detainees and delays in organizing court hearings. There was a bail system, but sometimes judges refused lawyers' requests for bail or set inordinately high bail amounts.

Preventive detention continued to be a problem. According to a November 2009 ONA report, 60 percent of detainees in the Dar Naim Prison were held in preventive detention under judicial order to prevent them from fleeing from prosecution or committing crimes. The ONA reported that most preventive detentions were in violation of the penal code since individual cases have never been tried. The Dar Naim Prison director regularly informed court authorities of the number of prisoners in preventive detention, but judicial actions were rarely taken. The ONA's August 2009 report stated that some detainees had been in preventive detention since 2002 and highlighted six detainees in preventive detention since 2006, two since 2007, and eight since 2008. Some were detained for minor offenses such as stealing cell phones or complicity in theft. According to the Ministry of Justice, all these cases were sent to trial following the report produced by ministry inspection teams. The ONA also reported that the government did respond to their report.

On July 18, police arrested Arabic daily *Al Hayat* journalist Mohamed Ould Abdel Latif when he was interviewing merchants for an article. Latif remained in custody for two weeks without charges and was released without explanation.

Amnesty

On September 9 and November 16, President Aziz pardoned a total of 52 prisoners who were accused of collusion with AQIM.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary; however, it was not independent in practice. The executive branch continued to exercise significant influence over the judiciary through its ability to appoint and pressure judges. In addition poorly educated and trained judges were susceptible to social, financial, and tribal pressures, which limited judicial fairness. International donors funded training for prosecutors and judges during the year to increase judicial efficiency. The ONA released reports in February and March criticizing the lack of independent judges and the court system. On September 8, the government announced an overhaul of judges and the justice system; however, this initiative was not implemented by year's end.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for due process. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence. They have a right to a public trial, but juries are not used. Defendants have the right to consult with an attorney and to be present during their trial. However, the ONA's February report stated that lawyers had been denied access to their clients. By law, all defendants, regardless of the court or their ability to pay, have the legal right to representation by counsel during proceedings. If defendants lack the ability to pay for counsel, the court should appoint an attorney from a list prepared by ONA, which provides a defense free of charge. However, this measure was rarely enforced during the year. Defendants have the right to appeal. Defendants can confront or question witnesses and present witnesses and evidence in both civil and criminal cases. In theory defendants have access to government-held evidence, but access was difficult in practice. These rights were also extended to minorities. The foregoing rights generally were observed in practice, but did not extend equally to women.

Sharia provides the legal principles upon which the law and legal procedure are based; the courts did not treat women equally in all cases. Lawyers also reported that, in some cases, the unequal treatment of women was based on considerations such as a woman's caste or nationality.

A special court hears cases involving minors 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 is 12 years old. Those between the ages of 12 and 18 are tried and, if convicted, sentenced to detention centers for minors.

During the year there was no government response to the ONA's 2009 findings that denounced violations of the legal code and procedural rules for political purposes, particularly in high-profile cases.

There were no developments in the case of Ahmed Ould Khattri, former director of the Agency for the Promotion of Popular Savings and Credit Accounts, who was arrested in January 2009 for alleged mismanagement before the Mauritanian Central bank launched an investigation and before a judge reviewed the case. Ould Khattri was not charged or tried by year's end.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The Administrative Court has the jurisdiction to hear complaints of human rights violations. NGO representatives stated they collaborated with the court, but the court was not impartial in practice. There are administrative and judiciary remedies through the social chamber of the Court of Appeals and through the Supreme Court.

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

The constitution prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights in practice. Individuals could criticize the government publicly or privately, and independent media were active and generally expressed a wide variety of views with limited restrictions. There were no reports of police questioning and detaining journalists during the year. However, some journalists practiced self-censorship in covering areas deemed sensitive, including the military, corruption, and Sharia, and there were reports of intimidation of journalists who covered sensitive issues. Government media--including TV Mauritania, Radio Mauritania, and daily newspapers *Horizons* (in French) and *Chaab* (in Arabic)-- mostly focused on official news, but provided limited coverage of opposition activities and views through the year. TV Mauritania occasionally broadcast programs covering some opposition activities.

On February 25, Ahmed Ould Cheikh, president of the Rally of Press Editors and editor of the weekly newspaper *Le Calame* stated that the independent press refused to participate in the TV Mauritania program *Press Club* to protest previous censorship. According to the Mauritanian Press Association, which represents the journalists' union, TV Mauritania censored statements on national unity, toxic waste generated by foreign companies, and other sensitive topics by journalist Kissima Diagana, editor of weekly newspaper *La Tribune*.

On February 26, Hanevy Ould Dehah, director of the news Web site Taqadoumy, received a presidential pardon after being detained since December 2009 despite having served his sentence for crimes against Islam and paying all imposed fines and legal fees. Dehah, who was originally arrested in June 2009 on charges of defamation of presidential candidate Ibrahima Sarr for publishing an article stating that Sarr bought a house with campaign money from General Aziz. Dehah, was sentenced in August 2009 to six months in prison and fined 30,000 ouguiya (\$111) for committing acts contrary to Islam and decency. The sentencing judge accused Dehah of creating a space allowing individuals to express anti-Islamic and indecent views, based on a female reader's comments made on the Taqadoumy site calling for increased sexual freedom.

On April 24, gendarmes confiscated a video filmed by Al Jazeera in the Tagant Region. According to Al Jazeera, the video contained images of alleged toxic waste landfills. Sources close to the government argued these landfills contained chemicals used as pesticides in the 1970s by the African Agriculture Organization.

On July 2, the National Assembly passed a law to liberalize the audiovisual sector, which has been traditionally state-owned. The law allows for the creation of private radio stations and television channels. There were no private stations or channels launched during the year.

On September 15, the Mauritanian Press Rally (RPM) announced there would be a press blackout on September 19 to protest "the deplorable situation of the press sector." However, the blackout did not occur. The RPM was protesting the rise in the cost of printing newspapers, the lack of government support, and the press' exclusion from coverage of some major events.

Unlike the previous year, journalists for the Web site Taqadoumy were not arrested or detained due to their online articles or comments.

The 2008 suspension of privately owned Radio Citoyenne's broadcasts and other radio and television programs devoted to civic education continued during the year.

The charges against journalists Mohamed Nema Oumar and Mohamed Ould Abdellatif were dropped during the year. Oumar and Abdellatif were detained and charged with defamation in 2008 following the publication of an *AL-hurriya* newspaper article accusing three judges of corruption.

There were no developments in the 2008 case of trade union activists' assault on Al Jazeera cameraman Mohamed Ould Moustafa due to his film coverage of postcoup opposition activities.

Internet Freedom

Unlike the previous year, there were no reports of government restrictions on Internet access.

Individuals and groups could generally 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. According to International Telecommunication Union statistics for 2009, approximately 2.28 percent of the country's inhabitants used the Internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

Unlike the previous year, there were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly. The law requires that organizers apply to the local prefect (hakim) for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies. Permission was generally approved, but on some occasions the authorities denied permission to hold demonstrations.

Unlike the previous year, numerous incidents of security forces forcefully dispersing opposition demonstrations did not occur. However, on May 5, antiriot police brutally repressed a demonstration by employees of the municipality of Ksar. The event was led by the local collectivities National Union to demand payment of wage arrears and contributions to the national social security system.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right.

All political parties and local NGOs must register with the Ministry of the Interior. The government encouraged local NGOs to join the government-sponsored Civil Society Platform during the year. NGOs that are members of the platform do not receive government funding.

The country has approximately 77 registered political parties and numerous NGOs, which generally functioned openly, issued public statements, and chose their own leadership. The government generally did not prevent unrecognized political parties or NGOs from functioning. However, on July 5, the Ministry of the Interior ordered the international NGO National Democratic Institute (NDI) to suspend its operations because it lacked formal accreditation, although NDI had attempted to obtain accreditation since 2005. The ministry stated NDI had been operating illegally for years. There were no developments, and NDI remained suspended at year's end.

c. Freedom of Religion

For a complete description of religious freedom, please see the Department of State's *2010 International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/rpt/.

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

The law provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights, but persons lacking identity cards could not travel freely in some regions. Unlike the previous year, authorities did not restrict international travel of some opposition members.

During the year the government, in response to an increased terrorist threat, set up mobile roadblocks where gendarmerie, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers and often demanded bribes.

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

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern; however, the government lacked resources to support these persons effectively. The National Agency for the Welcome and Reintegration of Refugees (ANAI) oversees the reintegration of repatriated refugees, provides administration and identification support, and contributes to social and economic development of resettlement areas. However, reintegration of returnees into communities was challenging due to deficient sanitation, health, and education infrastructure, as well as land disputes. The majority of Afro-Mauritanian returnees were unable to obtain identity cards, and birth certificates.

During the year ANAI offered reintegration programs such as summer camps for refugee children and training sessions for women. President Aziz's government also conducted a census of former teachers among returnees to reinstate them in their positions with the Ministry of Education. However, returnee associations complained that reintegration efforts as well as settlement of land disputes were slow.

There were 19,000 Afro-Mauritanian refugees returned from Senegal as part of the official repatriation program that ended in December 2009. However some 7,000 repatriation requests were stalled at various stages of processing and not completed by the program's end. On July 13, the government, UNHCR, and Senegal agreed to resume the limited repatriation of up to 2,400 individuals whose cases had been approved previously, but not acted upon. According to ANAI, 1,385 refugees were repatriated during the year.

Protection of Refugees

Decree 2005/022, which sets forth the procedures for implementation of International Refugee Conventions, adopts the principles set forth in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 African Union Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa. However, according to the National Forum of Organizations for Human Rights, legal implementation of the conventions did not occur during the year.

The country's laws provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The National Consultative Commission for Refugees (CNCR) is the national body for the determination of refugee status. UNHCR carries out refugee status determinations under its mandate and presents cases to the CNCR for recognition. The government granted refugee status and accepted refugees recognized by UNHCR. In practice the government provided protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedoms would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. The government provided protection to approximately 717 refugees during the year.

During the year the government worked with the European Commission and the government of Spain to return migrants to their countries of origin after attempts to reach the Canary Islands by sea. The government operated a migrant reception center in the Nouadhibou region with the assistance of the Mauritanian Red Crescent and Spanish Red Cross to process returned migrants and to provide nutritional and medical care. International NGOs criticized overcrowding and poor detention conditions at the Nouadhibou migrant reception center. During the year there was no government response to a Spanish NGO's 2008 report that recommended the center's closure based on its alleged operations outside of legal frameworks.

The government gave UNHCR access to returned migrants to determine if they were eligible for refugee status. In view of freedom of movement agreements with the Economic Community of West African States, the government allowed West African migrants to remain, deporting only those found illegally seeking to reach the Canary Islands.

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

The constitution provides citizens the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through periodic generally free and fair elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

The country returned to constitutional rule in June 2009 following the voluntary resignation of then president Abdallahi and the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity.

The country enjoyed a peaceful transition from military rule under the HSC to a democratically elected government with the July 2009 presidential election in which former HSC leader General Aziz won 53 percent of the vote. Although some opposition groups claimed the election was fraudulent and requested an investigation, other national and international observers judged the election to be generally free and fair, and the Constitutional Council certified the election.

The 95-person National Assembly includes representatives from 12 of the 25 parties that contested the 2006 legislative elections as well as 41 independents. Senate elections held in November 2009 resulted in the ruling UPR party winning 13 of 16 seats. The Islamic party Tawassoul and independent candidates won the remaining seats. The opposition Rally of Democratic Forces party lost a seat. The opposition and independent candidates denounced strong pressures from the authorities on municipal advisors to vote for majority party candidates and to convince independent candidates to step down. No investigations were launched by year's end.

Political parties operated without restrictions, and there were no reports of restrictions on opposition opponents.

There were 15 women in the National Assembly and nine women in the 56-seat Senate. The 28-member cabinet included five women, three Black Moors, and six Afro-Mauritanians.

The electoral law requires that women make up at least 20 percent of candidates on legislative candidate lists.

Section 4 Official Corruption and Government Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Corrupt practices were widely believed to exist at all levels of government, and the World Bank's most recent Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a severe problem. Government officials reportedly received frequent favors from authorities, such as unauthorized exemption from taxes, special grants of land, and preferential treatment during bidding on government projects. Corruption was most pervasive in government procurement, bank loans, fishing license distribution, land distribution, and tax payments. The

Ministry of the Interior's Economic Crimes Brigade and the Office of the Inspector General were responsible for investigating corruption. President Aziz's government placed fighting corruption at the top of its agenda and made high-profile arrests during the year. Corruption and impunity were also serious problems in the police force, and the government rarely held security officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses. Judicial corruption was also a problem.

The government implemented anticorruption measures such as a census of government officials that resulted in the identification of 5,000 "ghost" employees. Additionally, it enforced laws prohibiting the use of government vehicles outside working hours and eliminated benefits such as free housing for high-level government officials.

On April 28, the Accounts Court ordered the former minister of finance during the 2009 Transitional Government, Sidi Ould Salem, to reimburse 417 million ouguiya (\$1.6 million) to the state treasury. The court accused Salem of making unjustified expenditures while he was general manager of The Society of Construction and Real Estate Management.

On May 13, former prime minister Yahya Ould Ahmed El Waghef was summoned to court to answer charges related to the "tainted rice scandal" for which he was held in jail for a few weeks after the 2008 coup d'etat. Waghef allegedly approved the purchase of tainted rice that was planned for free distribution. His court appearance was later postponed, without a new appearance date specified, and there was no development in the case by year's end.

On May 15, the Economic Crimes Brigade arrested three Mauritanian Gas Company managers for alleged invoice falsification totaling 35 million ouguiya (\$132,000). The managers were ordered to repay the money, which they reportedly did during the year.

On June 14, Nouakchott Port Tax Inspector Cheikh Ould Maouloud was arrested for misappropriating approximately two billion ouguiya (seven million dollars). His case remained pending at year's end.

In June the Internal Revenue Office launched a tax collection campaign and ordered the main banks to pay back taxes totaling between 400 million and 1.8 billion ouguiya each (\$1.4 to \$6.2 million). The banks contested the amounts and contacted the Ministry of Finance to resolve the crisis, which threatened the solvency of the national bank system. The issue was resolved through an agreement between the Central Bank and the primary banks.

On June 6, former wali (governor) of Nouakchott, Sidi Brahim Ould Maouloud, was arrested for illegally transferring 1,700 plots of land in Toujounine to Oumar Ould M'Haiham, a former government official. Maouloud was released the same day. M'Haiham and 12 other persons accused of selling the illegally acquired plots were arrested June 7 and later convicted. Their sentences were pending at year's end.

On August 26, Human Rights Commissioner Mohamed Lemine Ould Daddeh was fired for mismanagement, following an audit by the Office of the Inspector General, and ordered to reimburse 271 million ouguiya (\$934,482) within 15 days or face incarceration. Daddeh requested an extension of the payment deadline, but failed to submit reimbursement and was arrested on September 20. He was awaiting trial at year's end.

In September 2009 a Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria investigation uncovered widespread corruption in the management of the fund's grant to the country. In October 2009 the Economic Crimes Brigade arrested the country program coordinator, his executive secretary, and two other individuals; however, their trial had not begun by year's end.

The former central bank governor, Sidel Mokhtar Ould Nagi, and his deputy, Mahomed Ould Oumarou, were released without trial during the year. They were charged in December 2009 with treason, forgery, mismanagement, and diversion of approximately 24 billion ouguiya (\$88 million) in 2000-01.

On January 4, Mohamed Ould Noueiguedh, former chairman and chief executive officer of the National Bank of Mauritania; Crif Ould Abdallahi, chairman of the board of the Islamic Bank of Mauritania; and businessman Abdou Maham were released after a mediation effort led by El Hacem Ould Dedew. The public prosecutor had charged them in December 2009 with conspiracy to defraud the Central Bank of 14 billion ouguiya (\$52 million).

The government did not enforce the requirement for senior officials, including the president, to file a declaration of their personal assets. However, President Aziz publicly declared his assets in October due to public pressure.

The law provides for public access to government information, and the government granted such access to citizens and noncitizens, including foreign media during the year.

Section 5 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Several 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 met with local NGO monitors during the year and cooperated during visits by the UN, ICRC, and Amnesty International. UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Gulnara Shahinian, visited the country from October to November 2009 to study actions taken by the government to end slavery. The special rapporteur's report was released in August, and the government provided its response during the September Human Rights Council session in Geneva.

Section 6 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 prohibits racial or ethnic propaganda; however, the government often favored individuals on the basis of racial and tribal affiliation, social status, and political ties. Societal discrimination against women, trafficking in persons, and racial and ethnic discrimination were problems.

Women

According to NGOs, the incidence of both reported and unreported rape continued to be high, and rape was considered a serious problem. Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively. According to the penal code, rapists who are single men faced penalties of forced labor and flagellation. Married rapists could be subject to the death penalty. However, rape cases rarely went to trial. Several cases were reported of wealthy rape suspects avoiding prosecution or, if prosecuted, avoiding prison. Families of the victim commonly reached an agreement with the rapist for monetary compensation. National statistics on arrests, prosecutions, and convictions for rape were unavailable. Human rights activists and lawyers reported that rape victims were stigmatized, persecuted, and even imprisoned. Since rape was tied to the concept of "Zina" or sinful sexual relations outside marriage, judges may hold the victim responsible for the rape.

Domestic violence was considered a serious problem. Spousal abuse and domestic violence are illegal; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively, and most cases went unreported. There are no specific penalties for domestic violence, and convictions were very rare. There were no reliable government statistics on prosecutions, convictions, and sentences for domestic violence. According to 2009 statistics, the AFCF provided legal assistance to 1,152 domestic violence victims.

Police and the judiciary occasionally intervened in domestic abuse cases, but women rarely sought legal redress, relying instead on family, NGOs, and community leaders to resolve domestic disputes. NGOs reported that in certain cases they had sought help from the police for victims of domestic violence, but the police declined to intervene. AFCF and other women's NGOs provided psychologists and shelter to some victims.

Traditional forms of mistreatment of women appeared to decline during the year. One form of such mistreatment was the forced feeding of adolescent girls (gavage) prior to marriage, which was practiced only among White Moor tribal groups. Increased government, media, and civil society attention to the problem led to a marked decline in traditional views encouraging female obesity despite the health risks. Nevertheless, overeating to conform to cultural standards remained an issue, mostly in rural areas. Many urban women endangered their health by taking pills to gain weight or increase their appetite.

Women's NGOs reported sexual harassment was a common problem at the workplace, but there are no laws or penalties against it.

Men and women had equal access to diagnosis and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. The government recognized the right of individuals and couples to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so free from discrimination, violence or coercion. However, reproductive issues were a sensitive topic. Some women's NGOs, such as the Mauritanian Association for the Health of Women and Child (AMSME) and AFCF, focused on reproductive rights. The incidence of infant mortality under five years old is 122 deaths per 1,000 live births.

AFCF stressed that poor women and women from traditionally lower castes such as slaves and former slaves had insufficient access to contraception, obstetric and postpartum care, skilled attendance during childbirth, and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. AMSME, which operated a center for rape victims, provided emergency contraception to victims.

Women have legal rights to property and child custody and, among the more modern and urbanized population, these rights were recognized. Nevertheless, divorced women could potentially lose child custody if they remarried. By local tradition, a woman's first marriage requires parental consent. In accordance with the personal status code, men can marry up to four women but are required to request spousal consent before marrying again. Women were encouraged by government awareness programs to obtain a contractual agreement at the time of marriage stipulating that the marriage ends if the husband marries a second wife. This practice was common in Moor society. Nevertheless, women who did not establish a solid contract remained unprotected. In addition the validity of and right to establish prenuptial agreements was not always respected.

In practice polygamy continued to be rare among Moors but was gaining in popularity. It was common among other ethnic groups. Arranged marriages were increasingly rare, particularly among the Moor population. Also there was cultural resistance to marriages among members of different castes, and NGOs reported powerful individuals used the judicial system to intimidate and persecute members of their families who married below their social rank.

Women still faced legal discrimination, and they were considered minors in the eyes of the law. According to Sharia, the testimony of two women was necessary to equal that of one man. The courts granted only half as large an indemnity to the family of a woman who was killed as was awarded for a man's death. Formulas applied to property distribution varied widely from case to case. The personal status code provides a framework for the consistent application of secular law and Sharia-based family law, but the code had yet to be implemented. Human rights lawyers reported that judges treated differently cases concerning White Moor women, slave, or lower-caste women, and foreign women.

Women did not face legal discrimination in areas not addressed specifically by Sharia. The law provides that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. The two largest employers, the civil service and the state mining company, observed this law, although it was not universally applied in practice. 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 areas that were traditionally filled by men, such as diplomacy, health care, communications, police, and customs services. Women continued to become more involved in the fishing industry and established several women's fishing cooperatives.

The Ministry of Social, Child, and Family Affairs (MASEF) continued its two-year program in cooperation with the UN Population Fund to promote a sociocultural and legislative environment that favors gender equality and reduces gender violence. The Secretariat for Women's Affairs worked with many NGOs and cooperatives to improve the status of women. Women's groups and national and international NGOs organized meetings, seminars, and workshops throughout the year to publicize women's rights. The secretariat, in collaboration with the German Society for Technical Development (GTZ), publicized women's rights and organized workshops regarding their rights.

Children

By law citizenship is derived from one's father. Citizenship can be derived from one's mother under the following two conditions: if the mother is a citizen and the father's nationality is unknown and if the child was born in country to a citizen mother and repudiates the father's nationality a year before reaching majority. Children born abroad to citizen parents can acquire the country's citizenship one year before reaching majority. Minor children of parents who have become naturalized citizens are also eligible for citizenship.

In general the government registered births immediately; however, in the South, many citizens reported not having birth certificates or national identity papers. In addition some slaves did not have birth certificates. There was no official data on the number of births that went unregistered.

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

School attendance is mandatory for six years of universal primary education. However, the law was not effectively enforced.

Public education was free through university level. Classes were fully integrated, including boys and girls from all social and ethnic groups. Children of slave caste families were allowed to attend school, but many did not receive an education. There were no legal restrictions on the education of girls. Almost all children, regardless of gender or ethnic group, attended Koranic school between the ages of five and seven years old and gained at least rudimentary skills in reading and writing Arabic.

FGM was practiced by all ethnic groups and performed on young girls, often on the seventh day after birth and almost always before the age of six months. The child protection penal code states that any act or attempt to damage a female child's sexual organs is punishable by imprisonment and a 120,000 to 300,000 ouguiya (\$460 to \$1,153) penalty. The most recent statistics on FGM indicated a decrease in incidence from 71 percent in 2001 to 65 percent in 2007, mainly due to a decrease in the urban sector. Infibulation, the most severe form of excision, was not practiced.

The government and international NGOs continued to coordinate anti-FGM efforts focused on eradicating the practice in hospitals, discouraging midwives from practicing FGM, and educating the population. The government, the UN Population Fund, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the national Imams' Association joined other civil society members to

emphasize the serious health risks of FGM and that FGM was not a religious requirement. Government hospitals and licensed medical practitioners were barred from performing FGM, and several government agencies worked to prevent others from perpetrating it. According to several women's rights experts, the campaign against FGM appeared to be changing attitudes towards the practice. On January 11, 30 religious leaders declared a fatwa (Islamic ruling) against FGM following a two-day round table organized by the Forum of Islamic Thought and Dialogue Between Cultures. The government and civil society organized a Zero Tolerance Day on February 6 to raise awareness about FGM.

Events focusing on raising women's awareness of FGM were organized in Hodh El Ghabri on February 2 by MASEF and the GTZ. On May 24, communities in the Brakna region renounced FGM at events organized by UNICEF, the NGO Tostan, and the MASEF.

In theory the legal marriage age is 18 years old, but the law rarely was enforced, and there were widespread reports of child marriages. Since consensual sex outside of marriage is illegal, a "weli" (tutor) can present a case to local authorities requesting permission be granted to a woman younger than 18 years old to marry. In practice this permission is granted frequently.

There is a law prohibiting adult sexual relations with a child with penalties of six months to two years of imprisonment and a 120,000 to 180,000 ouguiya (\$414 to \$620) fine.

There is a law prohibiting child pornography with penalties of two months to one year imprisonment and a 160,000 to 300,000 ouguiya (\$550 to \$1,034) fine.

Local NGOs estimated that there were 1,000 street children, largely as a result of poverty and the urbanization of formerly nomadic families. There was limited government assistance to street children.

The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information on international parental child abduction, please see the Department of State's annual report on compliance at http://travel.state.gov/abduction/resources/congressreport/congressreport_4308.html.

Anti-Semitism

A very small number of expatriates practiced Judaism.

Trafficking in Persons

For information on trafficking in persons, please see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/g/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical 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. Persons with disabilities generally did not have access to buildings, and there were no government programs to provide such access. The government did not mandate preference in employment, education, or public accessibility for persons with disabilities, although it did provide some rehabilitation and other assistance for such persons. The MASEF oversees social reinsertion programs for persons with disabilities. On June 10, the Council of Ministers approved a decree on the organization and function of the National Multisectoral Commission for the Promotion of Handicapped People. The commission was not operational by year's end.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities faced governmental discrimination. The inconsistent issuance of national identification cards, which were required for voting, effectively disenfranchised many members of southern minority groups. Racial and cultural tension and discrimination also arose from the geographic and cultural divides between Moors and Afro-Mauritians. The Moors are divided among numerous ethno-linguistic tribal and clan groups and further distinguished as either White Moor or Black Moor, although it was often difficult to distinguish between the two by skin color. White Moor tribes and clans, many of whom are dark-skinned after centuries of intermarriage with Berbers and sub-Saharan African groups, dominated positions in government and business. The Black Moors (also called Haratines or freed slaves) remain politically and economically weaker than White Moors. Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups, which include the Halpulaar (the largest non-Moor group), Wolof, and Soninke, are concentrated in the south and urban areas. Afro-Mauritians were underrepresented in the government and military.

The constitution designates Arabic as the official language and Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof as the country's national languages. The government continued to encourage French and Arabic bilingualism within the school system, as opposed to previous efforts at "Arabization." Neither the Afro-Mauritanian national languages nor the local Hassaniya Arabic dialect were used as languages of instruction. In February university riots between French-speaking Afro-Mauritanian and Arabic-speaking Moor students broke out after Prime Minister Laghdaf and the minister of culture made public comments stressing that Arabic is the state's official language. The controversy came to an end after government officials met with students to dispel fears about the "Arabization" of the educational system.

Ethnic rivalry contributed to political divisions and tensions. Some political parties tended to have readily identifiable ethnic bases, although political coalitions among parties were increasingly important. Black Moors and Afro-Mauritians continued to be underrepresented in mid- to high-level public and private sector jobs.

There were numerous reports of land disputes between former slaves, Afro-Mauritians, and Moors. According to human rights activists and press reports, local authorities allowed Moors to expropriate land occupied by former slaves and Afro-Mauritians or obstruct access to water and pastures.

The perpetrators in Kifa, who physically attacked the former slave family Ehel Brahim and wounded Fatimetou Mint Brahim and her children following a land dispute in August 2009, remained unpunished by year's end.

Human rights NGOs reported numerous cases of heritage disputes between slaves or former slaves and their masters. Traditionally, slave masters inherited their slaves' possessions. There were no developments in the case of Salma Mint Jiddou, a Nouakchott widow, whose inheritance was claimed by her husband's owners in March 2009.

There were no developments regarding the family of Zeinabou Mint Brahim, which was deprived of its inheritance by Cheikh Mohamedou Ould Cheikh Hamadoullah, who claimed Mint Brahim was his slave. Despite a 2009 court ruling establishing Mint Brahim's brothers and sister as the rightful heirs, the authorities did not enforce the ruling by year's end.

The government's 2009 Program to Eradicate the Effects of Slavery continued during the year. The program's goals were to reduce poverty among 44,750 former slaves in the Assaba, Brakna, Gorgol, and Hodh Chargui regions and improve access to water, health, education, and income-generating opportunities. The government also continued its collaborative program with the UN and a foreign donor on conflict prevention program aimed at promoting democratic values and the rights of marginalized populations, including former slaves. According to the NGO SOS Esclaves, these programs focused on fighting poverty and the effects of slavery rather than the practice of slavery itself.

Societal Abuses, Discrimination, and Acts of Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Under Sharia homosexual acts between males are punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals; however, there was no evidence of either societal violence or systematic government discrimination based on sexual orientation, and there were no criminal prosecutions during the year. There were no organizations advocating for sexual orientation or gender-identity rights, but there were no legal impediments to the operation of such groups.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

There was no evidence of systematic discrimination by either society or the government against persons with HIV/AIDS; however, taboos and beliefs associated with the disease caused victims in some areas to face isolation or exclusion.

Section 7 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join unions of their choice without authorization or excessive requirements, and workers exercised this right. The law also provides for freedom of association, and workers exercised this right in practice. All workers except members of the armed forces and police were free to associate in and establish unions at the local and national levels. 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 has the discretion to decide whether to recognize a trade union.

The law provides workers with the right to strike, and workers exercised this right during the year. However, long and complex procedures must be followed before a legal strike can be called. The General Confederation of Mauritanian Workers (CGTM) led a strike of government employees for three days in March. According to the CGTM, neither the Ministry of Health nor the Ministry of Education referred the matter to the Ministry for the Civil Service and Labor for negotiation. Therefore, the CGTM grievance remained unresolved at year's end.

According to the CGTM, the government funded the participation of several trade union participants at the International Labor Organization (ILO) conference in June, but refused to fund the participation of CGTM and did not provide a reason for this action. CGTM submitted a complaint to the ILO citing discrimination due to the fact that the confederation was against the 2008 August coup.

The government can dissolve a union for what it considered an illegal or politically motivated strike; however, no unions were disbanded during the year. Workers must provide advance notice of at least 10 working days for any strike. Workers are not allowed to hold sit-ins or to block nonstriking workers from entering work premises.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides that unions may organize workers freely without government or employer interference, and workers generally exercised this right in practice. However, the head of government decides how negotiations are conducted once the Ministry for the Civil Service agrees on negotiations.

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 very wealthy citizens.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, men, women, and children were trafficked for domestic service, street begging for unscrupulous religious teachers, and slave-like relationships as a domestic servant or herder. The antislavery law criminalizes the practice of slavery and imposes penalties on government officials who do not take action on reported cases; however, no cases were prosecuted during the year. The government organized training workshops about the law for administrative authorities and judges. Also the Program to Eradicate the Consequences of Slavery provides one billion ouguiya (\$3.4 million) in development assistance to communities of former slaves. However, this is economically focused development assistance rather than social and legal enforcement of the anti-slavery law.

Government efforts were not sufficient to enforce the antislavery law. No cases have been successfully prosecuted under the antislavery law despite the fact that de facto slavery exists in Mauritania.

The labor code also includes criminal penalties for contracting to benefit from forced labor and for exploiting forced labor as part of an organized criminal network. Slavery-like practices, typically flowing from ancestral master-slave relationships and involving adults and children, continued in rural areas where education levels were generally low and a need existed for herding livestock, tending fields, and other manual labor.

Forced labor also occurred in urban centers where young children, often girls, were retained as unpaid household servants. Some individuals self-identified as slaves or masters and were unaware that slavery had been abolished. Human rights groups reported that persons in slave-like relationships were persuaded by their masters to deny the relationship to activists.

Voluntary servitude continued with some former slaves and descendants of slaves, who were victims of social discrimination and lacked professional skills needed for economic advancement, continued 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 the different ethnic groups; however, a barter economy, poverty, and persistent drought provided few 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, performing domestic duties, tending fields, or herding animals.

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, it has been enforced in only a few cases. NGO observers suggest that deeply embedded psychological and tribal bonds also made it difficult for many individuals, who had generations of forebearers who were slaves, to break their bonds with former masters or their tribes. Some persons continued to link themselves to former masters because they believed their slave status had been divinely ordained and they feared religious sanction if that bond were broken. Former slaves were subjected often to social discrimination and were limited professionally to performing manual labor in markets, airports, and water ports.

Also see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/g/tip.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law provides that children under the age of 12 cannot be employed for light work; cannot be employed in the nonagricultural sector if under the age of 14; and cannot be employed if under the age of 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 common and 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. They should not work over eight hours a day and should have one or several one-hour breaks. Children are also prohibited from engaging in night work.

Several reports suggested that young girls from remote regions, and possibly from western Mali, were forced to work as unpaid housemaids in some wealthy urban homes.

An unknown number of "talibes" (young students), nearly all from Halpulaar tribes, begged in the streets as part of an arrangement with their "marabouts" (religious teachers) 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 NGOs to provide talibes with basic medical and nutritional care.

Street gang leaders forced children to steal, beg, and sell drugs. There were reports that children were forced to work in agriculture, construction, fishing, and cattle herding. NGOs reported that slavery-related practices and slavery itself persisted in isolated areas of the country where a barter economy still prevailed and also in urban centers including Nouakchott.

Young children in the countryside were commonly employed in herding; cultivation of subsistence crops, such as rice, millet, and sorghum; fishing; and other significant labor in support of their families' activities. Young children in urban areas often drove donkey carts and delivered water and building materials. In keeping with longstanding tradition, many children served apprenticeships in small industries, such as metalworking, carpentry, vehicle repair, masonry, and in the informal sector. Reporting by some human rights NGOs, including SOS Esclaves, strongly suggested that domestic employment of girls as young as the age of seven, often unpaid, continued to be a problem. There was no child labor in the modern industrial sector.

According to the joint report for the year by the Ministry of Social Affairs and UNICEF, the greatest obstacle to the national strategy and three-year plan of action for the protection of children was the absence of coordination mechanisms and the lack of human and technical resources in the Ministry of Social Affairs, which is the principal agency in charge of the promotion and protection of children's rights.

In addition according to the evaluation report of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy, the protection of children was not explicitly addressed within the general strategy to fight poverty, and a lack of financial resources hampered significant efforts.

There was a labor inspectorate with the authority to refer violations directly to the appropriate 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.

See also the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/g/tip.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The nationally mandated minimum monthly wage for adults, which was not enforced, was 21,150 ouguiya (\$81), and it did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. All workers are covered by the minimum wage law. Many labor unions denounced modern slavery conditions in several formal sectors such as the food-processing industry. In these sectors, workers do not have contracts or pay stubs. Their salaries were below the official minimum wage, and they

worked in very unfavorable conditions. Sometimes they were not paid for several months. The CGTM reported that the government did not give aid or compensation to these workers during the year.

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 supplemental hours worked. Domestic workers and certain other categories could work 56 hours per week. All employees must be given at least one 24-hour period of rest per week. There are no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime.

The Labor Directorate of the Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcement of the labor laws, but there was a lack of effective enforcement due to inadequate funding.

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

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