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Mauritania: Situation of returnees who left Mauritania in 1989, especially those who returned from Senegal and those who returned since November 2007 (2007 - January 2009)

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In 1989, approximately 60,000 black Mauritians were forced out of their country after ethnic violence erupted over a border dispute between Mauritania and Senegal (UN 29 Jan. 2008; *ibid.* 26 Nov. 2008b).

In June 2007, Mauritania's newly elected president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, who had campaigned on a promise to repatriate the refugees (UN 2 Feb. 2009; *ibid.* 11 Aug. 2008; *L'International Magazine* 6 Jan. 2008), publicly invited the estimated 33,000 Mauritians still living in neighbouring Mali and Senegal to return (UN 2009, 234). In 2007, the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Senegalese authorities conducted a survey among Mauritians living in Senegal that showed that some 24,000 people wished to return to their homes in Mauritania (UN 13 Nov. 2007).

In November 2007, Mauritania, Senegal and the UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement providing a framework to repatriate and reintegrate Mauritians living in Senegal who wished to return to Mauritania (UN 13 Nov. 2007). Repatriation efforts began in January 2008 (UN 20 Oct. 2008; *ibid.* 29 Jan. 2008). The UNCHR expects to repatriate a total of 18,000 people by the time the program is completed in June 2009 (UN 2 Feb. 2009).

Organizations

In January 2008, the Mauritanian government created the National Agency to Assist and Integrate Refugees (Agence nationale d'appui et d'insertion des réfugiés, ANAIR), which is responsible for supporting returnees (*L'International Magazine* 6 Jan. 2008; UN 2009, 236) and for allocating funds from government and donor sources (*ibid.*). In addition, various UN organizations are involved in the repatriation effort: the UNHCR provides returnees with medical care, such as vaccinations, and an assistance package that contains a kitchen set, blankets, buckets, mosquito nets, soap and a sanitary kit (UN 14 Mar. 2008; see also UN 29 Jan. 2008); the World Food Programme (WFP) provides returnees with a three-month food ration (UN 29 Jan. 2008; *ibid.* 14 Mar. 2008); and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which provides emergency funds for humanitarian action, has allocated 850,000 US dollars to help the repatriation effort (UN 2007). Each household also receives some construction material and a tent (UN 14 Mar. 2008).

Coup d'état

In August 2008, the Mauritanian military arrested President Abdallahi and took over the government (UN 11 Aug. 2008). Also arrested but later released was the Director of ANAIR (UN 11 Aug. 2008). The leader of the coup d'état, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz has said that the new government will respect the continued repatriation and reintegration of the returnees (UN 11 Aug. 2008). However, a returnee who relocated to Mauritania only one month before the coup was quoted in a UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) article as saying that many people are "worried" because it was a military regime that forced them out

of Mauritania in 1989 (UN 11 Aug. 2008). A refugee leader quoted in several IRIN articles said that he would not send any more returnees to Mauritania until there were guarantees for their security (UN 11 Aug. 2008; *ibid.* 20 Oct. 2008). He indicated that the coup had "effectively stopped the repatriation" (*ibid.*). A January 2009 report by the UN indicates that the political situation remains uncertain since the coup and that the pace of repatriation is "minimal" (UN 2009, 234).

In contrast, Mauritania's ambassador to Senegal was cited in an IRIN article in October 2008 as saying that politics were having no effect on the repatriation (UN 20 Oct. 2008). According to the ambassador, the government is reintegrating thousands of people and providing them with food, shelter and education (*ibid.*).

Land

IRIN reports that even before the August 2008 coup, negotiations were on-going regarding land that was appropriated from Mauritians when they were expelled in 1989 (UN 21 July 2008). Some returnees have been resettled on new land; others have made land claims to recover their former territory (UN 21 July 2008). In Trarza, where many people have returned to their former communities, the problem of access to land is described as "acute" (UN 21 July 2008). In addition, there is a shortage of adequate housing, both temporary and permanent (UN 21 July 2008). The post coup Director of ANAIR told IRIN that each returnee family would be given 400 square meters of land; he indicated that the land distribution program would begin in Spring 2009 (UN 2 Feb. 2009).

The UNHCR indicates that returnee families are increasing pressure on scarce food and water resources in a country that already faces shortages (UN 2009, 234). CERF reports that people in the southern regions of Mauritania, including the resettlement areas, are dealing with problems such as deforestation, desertification and a lack of water, food, social services and infrastructure (UN 2007).

Identity documents

Some potential returnees living in Senegal have reportedly been reluctant to go back to Mauritania due to reports that many people have faced long delays in obtaining national identity documents, which guarantee full rights of citizenship, including access to education and health care (UN 26 Nov. 2008b). The tripartite agreement stipulates that returnees should receive their citizenship documents within three months of their arrival in Mauritania; however, IRIN reported in November 2008 that some returnees had been waiting almost a year (UN 26 Nov. 2008a). The chief of one of the "tent communities" where returnees have been settled is quoted in an IRIN article as saying that without papers, he cannot leave the camp; another returnee notes that without the freedom to move about, he cannot look for work (UN 26 Nov. 2008a). The Director of ANAIR told IRIN that returnees should have their documents by "no later than the end of the year [2008]" (UN 26 Nov. 2008a). A government official in Rosso [a major city in the south-western region of Trarza] is cited as saying that the government "was committed to easing the reintegration of the returnees" (UN 26 Nov. 2008b). In November 2008, the government issued birth certificates to two young children born in Senegal and an official stated that Mauritians born abroad would be given birth certificates (*ibid.*).

In January 2009, media sources reported that a ceremony was held in Rosso to mark the issuance of identity documents to Mauritanian returnees living in and around Trarza (*Le Quotidien de Nouakchott* 19 Jan. 2009). During the ceremony, the post-coup leader Aziz pledged to improve living conditions so that the returnees would no longer be [translation] "refugees in their own country" (*ibid.*). According to a January 2009 article, 6,965 returnees (some born in Mauritania, others in Senegal) who had resettled in Trarza and Brakna were still waiting for their national identity documents (*Journal Authentique* 18 Jan. 2009). A local media source quotes the Minister of the Interior as saying that every returnee would henceforth have his or her identity documents (*ibid.*). In February 2009, an IRIN article highlighted efforts by ANAIR to speed up the process of distributing documents (UN 2 Feb. 2009).

Education

In October 2008, IRIN reported that some young Mauritanian returnees were going back to Senegal in order to continue their education as Mauritanian schools were not ready for them (UN 20 Oct. 2008). The refugee leader quoted in other IRIN articles was cited as saying that authorities in Brakna, a primary resettlement area in southern Mauritania, had started building schools only one month before the school year began (UN 20 Oct. 2008). However, the Mauritanian High Commissioner of Human Rights and Civil Society denied such claims, saying that he had not heard of any delays or problems that would prevent repatriated youth from being accommodated (UN 20 Oct. 2008). In another IRIN article, the village chief of a community in Boyingel Thille, 300 kilometres east of the capital, indicated that no school had yet been built for returnee children even though the materials for the building had already been delivered (UN 26 Nov. 2008a). In the

same article, the Director of ANAIR denied reports that education was unavailable, saying that teachers had been sent to camps to work with repatriated youth; he was unaware that the community did not yet have a school (*ibid.*).

In September 2008, the village of Boghé [in the region of Brakna] hosted a week-long vacation camp for returnee children and their classmates, which was organized by regional authorities and ANAIR to allow the children to enjoy sports and trade stories in an effort to promote better understanding (*Le Calame* 23 Sept. 2008).

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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