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26 February 2009

MRT103076.E

Mauritania: Situation of black Mauritians (2006 - 2008)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

The ruling class in Mauritania is dominated by members of the *bidan* Moors (also known as White Moors, White Maure, *Beydan* or *Beydane*) who are of Arab or Berber origin (AASG n.d.; MRG n.d.a). In French, they are known as *Beydannes* (France 26 Oct. 2005). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) reports that statistics on the ethnic breakdown of Mauritania are "highly unreliable" (MRG n.d.a). The United States (US) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007* indicates that ethnic groups cannot be distinguished by skin colour (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 5).

Haratin

According to MRG, the Haratin [also spelled Haratine (MAR 31 Dec. 2003; MRG n.d.a)] population (who are also called "Black Moors") is ethnically African, but culturally Arab (MRG n.d.c). Sources indicate that Haratins, who are both slaves and descendents of slaves, make up approximately 40 percent of the population (MRG n.d.a; AASG n.d.; *World Defense Review* 13 Aug. 2008). *The Guardian* reports that approximately 20 percent of Mauritania's population are slaves and a further 15 percent are descendents of slaves (9 Aug. 2007).

Various sources report that slavery continues to exist in Mauritania despite periodic attempts to outlaw it (*The East African* 6 Sept. 2007; Islam Online 9 Aug. 2007; Anti-Slavery International 9 Aug. 2007). SOS Slavery (SOS Esclaves), a Mauritanian non-governmental organization (NGO) devoted to eradicating slavery, has reportedly estimated that as many as 600,000 people (about 15-20 percent of the population) are slaves in Mauritania (*The East African* 6 Sept. 2007; Slave Free Mauritania n.d.; MRG n.d.a). An article by the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG) indicates that estimates of the number of slaves in Mauritania range from 100,000 to one million people (n.d.). An article from *The Independent* cites data from Amnesty International (AI) indicating that as many as 90,000 people may be enslaved (28 June 2008).

Sources report that slaves "can be given as gifts, bought and sold, or presented to the poor as charity" (*The Guardian* 9 Aug. 2007; AASG n.d.). Furthermore, slaves must marry according to their master's wishes, and girls often suffer sexual abuse (ibid.; *The Guardian* 9 Aug. 2007). Sources indicate that slaves are harshly treated in Mauritania (AASG n.d.; MAR 31 Dec. 2003) and that Haratins, whether freed or not, face discrimination (ibid.; *The Guardian* 9 Aug. 2007). A 26 March 2008 article from the *Washington Post* reports that freed slaves suffer discrimination and that few go to school, vote or run for political office. The article indicates that at least 80 percent of slaves do not have access to formal education (*Washington Post* 26 Mar. 2008).

In 2007, the government of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, who had vowed to eradicate slavery (Islam Online 9 Aug. 2007), passed a law against slavery (US June 2008, 178; Slave Free Mauritania n.d.). The 2007 law defines slavery and prescribes penalties of five to ten years' imprisonment for slave owners (US June

2008, 178; Islam Online 9 Aug. 2007). Authorities who fail to act against slave owners could also face sanctions (ibid.). The law repeals a provision in a 1981 ordinance against slavery that had offered compensation to slave owners for the loss of their slaves (ibid.; US June 2008, 178).

In October 2007, the NGO Anti-Slavery International reported that two people had been arrested for allegedly using children as slaves (31 Oct. 2007); further details on this case could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. An article from the United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) in January 2009 cites data from the National Human Rights Commission indicating that 43 people have been freed since the new law was enacted, and hundreds more await their court case (UN 14 Jan. 2009).

The article from IRIN provides details on a community of 100 former slave families who left their masters (UN 14 Jan. 2009). The new community, called Sawap, faces difficulties, including a lack of water, inadequate access to medical care and minimal opportunities for paid employment; however, the former slaves interviewed in the article expressed satisfaction in being able to "enjoy [their] civic rights" (ibid.).

In 2007, the Mauritanian government pledged 7.5 million US dollars to combat slavery (US June 2008, 178). Some of these funds were meant to help reintegrate former slaves into society, providing shelter, food, limited medical care and training (ibid., 179). However, NGOs report that the new legislation places barriers before slaves who wish to file complaints and that local officials are not enforcing the legislation (ibid., 178). According to the US *Trafficking in Persons Report*, in February 2008, the Mauritanian government held a nationwide public awareness campaign intended to educate slaves on their rights (ibid., 179). A 14 January 2009 IRIN article indicates that the military government that deposed President Abdellahi in a coup d'état in August 2008 has budgeted more than 5 million US dollars to help former slaves (UN 14 Jan. 2009).

Afro-Mauritanians (Kewri)

According to several sources, black Mauritanians [sometimes collectively known as *Kewri* (MRG n.d.b) or *Kwar* (France 26 Oct. 2005)] who live in southern Mauritania and in urban areas (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 5) are ethnically and historically distinct from the Haratin population (*Mauritania Today* n.d.; *World Defense Review* 13 Aug. 2008). MRG's *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples* reports that "southern black Africans are closer to populations in Senegal and Mali than to other groups within their own national boundaries" (n.d.b). Sources indicate that Afro-Mauritanians make up approximately 30 (*World Defense Review* 13 Aug. 2008) to 45 percent of the population (MRG n.d.a). MRG reports that they are mostly of the Peulh and Toucouleur, Soninké, and Wolof ethnic groups (MRG n.d.a); however, the *World Defense Review* reports that they are primarily of the Bambara, Halpulaar, Soninké and Wolof ethnic groups (13 Aug. 2008).

Afro-Mauritanians are reportedly underrepresented in the military and security sectors (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 5). Afro-Mauritanian languages are not taught in schools or used as languages of instruction (ibid.). *Country Reports 2007* indicates that the democratic government of President Abdellahi named "a significant number" of Afro-Mauritanians to important positions (ibid.; see also *World Defense Review* 13 Aug. 2008).

In the late 1980s, ethnic conflicts primarily between the Arabic-speaking Berbers (bidan) and the Afro-Mauritanians resulted in violence and unrest (MRG n.d.b). In 1989, the Mauritanian government expelled large numbers of people (ibid. n.d.a). Approximately 30,000 of the 80,000 people who fled or were removed from Mauritania are thought to have been Afro-Mauritanians (MRG n.d.b). In 2007, Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Addellahi made a campaign promise to repatriate the refugees; after his election, he invited the remaining Mauritanians still living as refugees in Senegal and Mali to return (UN 2 Feb. 2009).

Organizations

MRG indicates that an anti-slavery group called El Hor (the Free) formed in 1974; it advocates for land reforms and seeks to address various social issues facing Haratins (MRG n.d.c). The NGO AASG describes El Hor as an underground movement that pressures the government and helps slaves who escape (n.d.). Minorities at Risk (MAR) reports that El Hor was strongest in the late 1970s (31 Dec. 2003).

The NGO SOS Slaves (SOS Esclaves) was founded in 1995 by a former slave (*Washington Post* 26 Mar. 2008). The French-language section of its website provides details on specific cases of slaves, examples of slave conditions and information on the authorities' reaction to allegations that certain people own slaves (SOS Esclaves n.d.).

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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