Anti-slavery activists in Mauritania face violent clampdown, rights groups warn

January 20, 2016

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The Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jan/20/anti-slavery-activists-in-mauritania-face-violent-clampdown-rights-groups-warn>

Protestors marking the one-year anniversary of the conviction and imprisonment of Mauritania’s leading anti-slavery activists are facing an increasingly violent clampdown by security forces, according to human rights groups.

[Biram Ould Abeid](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/17/mauritania-anti-slavery-activists-jailed-biram-ould-abeid), runner-up in the 2014 presidential elections and head of the [Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement](https://www.facebook.com/InitiativefortheResurgentAbolitionMovement/) (IRA), and his assistant Brahim Bilal Ramdane, were jailed last January with two other activists for belonging to an illegal organisation and for violence against the police.

Seven anti-slavery activists were reportedly arrested last week at protests arranged to mark the anniversary of the conviction. All were later released.

Abidine Merzough, head of IRA-Europe, said the arrests are part of a wider programme of intimidation of anti-slavery activists in the country.

“There is an increase in violence against those trying to end the illegal practice of slavery in [Mauritania](https://www.theguardian.com/world/mauritania). Police use tear gas at peaceful demonstrations – protestors are being beaten and intimidated,” said Merzough.

Slavery is deeply rooted in Mauritania’s caste-based society. [Mauritania was the last country in the world to abolish slavery, in 1981](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/14/slavery-still-shackles-mauritania). The [Haratine people](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/17/mauritania-anti-slavery-activists-jailed-biram-ould-abeid), one of Mauritania’s [largest ethnic groups](http://minorityrights.org/law-and-legal-cases/mauritania-challenging-slavery-of-haratine-women/), are still considered a slave caste in many parts of the country, with human rights campaigners estimating that [4% of the population live in conditions of domestic or agricultural slavery](http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/mauritania/). The [Walk Free Foundation](http://www.walkfreefoundation.org/), an Australian NGO that produces an annual global slavery index, estimates there are up to 156,000 people in Mauritania still trapped in caste-based slavery.

Merzough said that despite the government introducing tougher laws to punish those continuing to practise slavery last year, there is a concerted effort to crush the resurgent anti-slavery movement and ensure that nothing changes for the hundreds of thousands of Haratine still trapped in generational bondage.

“Since slavery was outlawed there has been one single conviction under anti-slavery laws despite dozens of cases being brought to the courts,” he said. “Instead, Biram and Brahim are still in jail and we are being beaten on the streets.”

Life for Mauritania’s slave caste is “sub-human”, says Merzough, who said children born into the caste are condemned to a life of domestic servitude, violence and poverty.

“They are [treated as] property – they are never paid for the work that they do, they are excluded from society or education and are not allowed to own any property,” he said.

“Men are forced to live like the animals they must take care of and women are routinely raped and sexually abused. Even when they are freed they are still considered slaves and excluded from society. The treatment of anti-slavery activists is all part of the discrimination and desire to keep the power in the hands of those who profit from slave labour.”

The Mauritanian government refuses to recognise anti-slavery groups including the IRA, which it claims [spreads racist propaganda](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/mauritania-upholds-conviction-anti-slave-activists-150821044245025.html) and incites civil unrest. Last year President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz declared that no slavery existed in Mauritania.

“The government’s refusal to acknowledge that Mauritania is still a slavery economy is ensuring that the judiciary is not enforcing its own laws and that people kept as slaves are not allowed to claim their rights to freedom,” said Sarah Mathewson, [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa) programme coordinator at Anti-Slavery International.

“Mauritania is a slavery economy and relies on a whole sector of society working for free or being financially exploited, and the hereditary privileges that the ruling classes still enjoy relies on the population accepting this as the natural and divinely ordained order of things. This is what the anti-slavery movement is threatening to dismantle and this is what the government are seeking to repress through violence and intimidation.”