

## **MAURITANIA**

Mauritania is a highly centralized Islamic Republic dominated by a strong presidency. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania's human rights record remained poor in 2003. Although there were improvements in some areas, several problems remained. Democratic institutions remained rudimentary and the Government circumscribed citizens' ability to change their government. Some members of the security forces reportedly used excessive force, beat or otherwise abused detainees and used arbitrary arrest and detention and illegal searches. The Government continued to refuse to officially recognize some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights organizations. Discrimination against women continued. Female genital mutilation remained a serious problem, despite some government efforts to halt the practice. Despite government efforts to eradicate the practice, local and international reports continued that slavery in the form of involuntary servitude persisted in some areas, and that former slaves continued to work for former masters. Child labor in the informal sector was common. The Government passed a law during the year that imposed substantial criminal penalties for trafficking in persons.

The U.S. human rights and democracy strategy in Mauritania is to promote democratization and respect for fundamental human rights, develop civil society and responsible media, promote religious freedom and tolerance and combat forced labor, child labor and trafficking in persons. The United States throughout 2003 and early 2004 raised human rights and democracy on a high level with the Government. When the Mauritanian Foreign Minister visited the United States in 2003, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman highlighted U.S. concerns regarding democracy and human rights in Mauritania. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Lorne Craner also raised those concerns with the Ambassador of Mauritania to the United States. In addition, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs visited Mauritania in January 2004, and raised human rights issues with Mauritanian officials, in particular trafficking in persons and how to promote democratic development.

The United States provided computer equipment to financially strapped, independent newspapers. This equipment, which will be accessible to several independent newspapers, should increase the newspapers' efficiency and save them money.

The United States sponsored a seven-person delegation from the Washington-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in the run-up to the November 7, 2003 Presidential elections. Although concerns about security prevented the NDI team from observing the election first-hand, NDI representatives, assisted by the Embassy, were able to participate in a useful series of meetings with government officials and members of civil society, including pro-government and opposition human rights groups. The NDI team is drafting a report with recommendations on how to promote democratic development in Mauritania that should be ready in early 2004.

A Democracy and Human Rights Fund grant allowed the United States to work closely with the free press association to sponsor a series of seminars on the role of the press in a developing democracy, election coverage and ethics in journalism. The United States sponsored the participation of the editors of two independent Mauritanian newspapers in a June 2003 International Visitor (IV) program on "Investigative Journalism" conducted by the State Department's Education and Cultural Affairs bureau. The United States will send two more journalists on democracy-related IV programs in March and April 2004.

In January 2004 the United States sponsored a weeklong seminar on civil-military relations. Seminar moderators challenged participants, including senior military leaders and the Secretary-General of the Defense Ministry, to understand each other's perspectives and roles in a developing democracy. The program was well received and publicized, including at least two news stories on national television and radio. The United States reviewed human rights records of members of military and security forces who participated in training conducted by U.S. civilian or military personnel. U.S. embassy personnel based in Nouakchott used the opportunity of these Leahy Amendment reviews to discuss with senior security and military officials the importance of protecting human rights in the conduct of law enforcement or military activities, and of requiring human rights training for security and military personnel.

Embassy officials and various U.S. visitors discussed religious freedom and tolerance with senior government officials and religious leaders. The United States also engaged religious leaders in

the fight against HIV/AIDS, developing a close working relationship that also provided opportunities to discuss and promote religious tolerance. The United States built on this close working relationship by conducting three seminars with local Imams on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

Throughout the year, U.S. officials encouraged the Government to adopt and implement key international agreements on trafficking of persons. Embassy officials also emphasized the need for the Government to make statistical evidence of its anti-trafficking activities publicly available. In July 2003, Mauritania ratified and publicly promulgated a national law against trafficking in persons. This law included, for the first time, substantial criminal penalties for those found trafficking in persons.