

Mauritania

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) presents the following backgrounder on the humanitarian crises in Mauritania as of March 10, 2021. Information and maps are from various sources and not the original work of USCRI.

Quick Overview

Mauritania was the last country in the world to abolish slavery, and only criminalized the practice in 2007. However, the practice remains prevalent today, based on a caste system of white **Beydane** masters and black **Haratin** slaves. Haratins experience discrimination and persecution in all areas of life, from political participation, to education, to citizenship. Despite the efforts of anti-slavery activists in the country, the government denies that slavery exists and fails to implement meaningful human rights reforms. Even Black Mauritians who are not enslaved are subjected to systemic discrimination and persecution in all areas of life, from citizenship, to land ownership, to access to education and healthcare.

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WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization that responds to the needs and advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants worldwide.

Basic Information¹



Demographics²

Population: 4.7 million

Beydanes (Arab-Berbers/
White Moors): 30%

Haratins (enslaved Blacks): 40%

Other Black West Africans (including
Fulani, Bambara, and Soninke): 30%

*Note: the Haratins are not an ethnic group, but a name used to identify Black West Africans who are enslaved. Beydanes differentiate “Haratins” from other Black groups to maintain power over them.

History of Mauritania

Mauritania was originally settled by the Soninke ethnic group of the Mande people.³ Starting around the third century CE, North African Berber populations, also known as Beydanes, began to settle in the region.⁴ Around the eighth century, Islam began to spread slowly through the area due to increasing Arab influence.⁵ Beydane traders set up a slave trade, taking darker-skinned West Africans north to North Africa and the Middle East to be sold into slavery.⁶ The regional slave trade continued until the 1890s, by which time a rigid caste system subjugating Haratins below the Beydane population was firmly established.⁷

Mauritania became a French colonial territory in 1904, and gained independence in 1960.⁸ President Moktar Ould Daddah became the first President of independent Mauritania, establishing authoritarian rule under the claim that Africa was not ready for democracy.⁹

Arbitrary geographic borders established by the French had caused conflict between Mauritania and Morocco over the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which Mauritania annexed in 1976.¹⁰ However, a peace deal brokered three years later led Mauritania to relinquish the territory.¹¹

In 1978, President Ould Daddah was deposed in a coup, which led to a series of leaders taking power and being ousted over the next seven years.¹² Mauritania was the last country in the world to outlaw slavery in 1981.¹³ However, slavery was not criminalized there until 2007.¹⁴

Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, a Beydane, then came to power in 1984 and ruled the country until he was ousted in another coup in 2005.¹⁵ During his rule, persecution of Black

Mauritanians began to escalate, spurring the formation of Black human rights groups such as the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (FLAM).¹⁶ In the mid-1980s, FLAM became outspoken about the oppression of Blacks in the country, and in 1986 the government responded by arresting over 20 FLAM members, and imprisoning and torturing them.¹⁷ This crackdown became an example of the government's intensifying crackdowns on Black Mauritanians.¹⁸

In 1989, rising tensions between Beydane and Black African populations, as well as escalating land and water disputes between Senegal and Mauritania, led to clashes between the two countries.¹⁹ Beydanes in Senegal were murdered and their businesses burned to the ground by Senegalese rioters. Black West Africans living in Mauritania were attacked and killed. About 70,000 Black Mauritanians were deported from Mauritania to Senegal, despite most of them not having links to Senegal and having lived in Mauritania for generations.²⁰ The government claimed it was only Senegalese who were being repatriated, but it also expelled some Black Mauritanians to Mali, suggesting that the government did not actually believe the Blacks it was expelling were Senegalese citizens.²¹ Despite being dark-skinned like other West Africans who were being expelled, Haratins were not expelled due to the government's interest in keeping its slave labor force intact.

Although the government attempted to frame the expulsions as an international dispute with Senegal, human rights organizations revealed that this was only the latest attack in the Beydane-dominated government's long pattern of repression against Black Mauritanians.²² For decades, the government had been using various methods of ethnic cleansing to reduce the Black population, maintain Beydanes' hold on power, and align the country with the Arab world.²³ Government campaigns in 1958, 1964, and 1968 attempted to repress political opposition to the Beydane-controlled government.²⁴

In 1958, Mauritania was declared "the Islamic Republic of Mauritania," aligning the country with the Arab world and alienating its Black citizens, who identified more with West African culture.²⁵ In 1964, the government declared a one-party state ruled by the Mauritanian People's Party, a Beydane-dominated political party.²⁶ In 1968, the government declared Hassaniya Arabic and French official languages of Mauritania, further alienating Black Mauritanians who predominantly spoke West African languages.²⁷ The conflict between Mauritania and Senegal in 1989, which started with a minor dispute between two people, was proliferated by the government to carry out its ethnic cleansing mission under the guise of an international dispute.²⁸

Before exiling Blacks they claimed were Senegalese, the Mauritanian government confiscated and destroyed their Mauritanian identity papers, leaving them without any possessions or identification.²⁹ Blacks were specifically targeted and rounded up by the police. The police would often then interrogate them, beat them until they lost consciousness, separate them from their families, drive them to Senegal, and dump them without any possessions or identification.³⁰

In the years that followed the expulsions, government repression against the Black population worsened. Government security forces systematically beat, raped, arbitrarily detained, and indiscriminately murdered Black Mauritanians along the Senegal River.³¹ Protestors began to speak out against the government's human rights abuses.³² In retaliation, the government arrested around 3,000 Black Mauritanians and tortured and killed about 500.³³

Since the 1990s, the government has engaged in systematic attempts at ethnic cleansing against Black Mauritanians to strip them of their rights and physically expel them from the

country. However, with increased international attention on the country due to the 1989 expulsions, the government transitioned away from overt violence and expulsions, to more indirect repression, most notably through censuses aimed at excluding Blacks from all aspects of Mauritanian society.

After the 2005 coup, the Military Council for Justice and Democracy took over and formed a transitional government with the goal of restoring democracy to the country by 2007.³⁴ In March of 2007, President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi became the first democratically elected president of Mauritania.³⁵ Facing international pressure to take action on modern-day slavery, Abdallahi's government passed a law criminalizing slavery in 2007.³⁶ Although the law provided for imprisonment of five to ten years for the crime of slavery, there was a complete failure of police, administrators, and the judicial system to enforce it.³⁷ Abdallahi was ousted in another coup and replaced by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who led the country until 2019.³⁸ In 2015, Aziz's administration passed a more comprehensive anti-slavery law in response to pressure from the human rights community.³⁹ The 2015 law replaced the 2007 law, and is more comprehensive.⁴⁰ It deems slavery to be a crime against humanity and provides for the creation of criminal tribunals specifically dedicated to prosecuting slavery.⁴¹ However, the law has again failed to create meaningful change due to lack of enforcement.⁴²

Since the 2011 census, repression of Blacks in Mauritania has escalated. Biram Dah Abeid and members of his organization, the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), became outspoken about slavery and other issues facing Black Mauritians.⁴³ Abeid has been arrested several times on bogus charges related to his protests.⁴⁴ IRA members and other anti-slavery activists are frequently arbitrarily detained in retaliation for their activism.⁴⁵ In addition, Amnesty International and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture reported during this time that police in Mauritania use beatings, threats, and torture against detainees.⁴⁶ After President Abdelaziz called a referendum in 2017 to abolish the country's senate, the government shut down private news stations and arrested journalists.⁴⁷

The current President of Mauritania, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, was elected in a fraught election in 2019.⁴⁸ Ghazouani has failed to commit to improving human rights in the country, as evidenced by his refusal to sign on to a human rights manifesto, his campaign's silence on human rights issues, and the detentions of opposition activists after his election.⁴⁹

Current Issues

Slavery

Despite outlawing slavery in 1981 and criminalizing it in 2007, it is estimated that Mauritania still has over half a million slaves.⁵⁰ Slavery is an inherited status, and enslaved children inherit their status from their mothers.⁵¹ Enslaved individuals can be difficult to identify because slavery in Mauritania looks very different from the historical enslavement of Africans in the United States. In Mauritania, slaves are not usually chained or sold publicly.⁵² They may seem to move about freely and without their masters, but they remain enslaved due to extreme psychological coercion, dire poverty, and lack of economic opportunity.⁵³ Slaves are treated as their masters' property and are forced to work long hours without any compensation.⁵⁴ They depend completely on their masters for basic needs such as shelter and food.⁵⁵ Slave masters often use extreme physical violence against their slaves, and beatings are common.⁵⁶

In addition to forced physical labor and beatings, enslaved women and girls are frequently raped.⁵⁷ If they become pregnant from the rapes, some masters will beat them until they miscarry, or kill the baby once it is born.⁵⁸ Given that slavery descends matrilineally, some masters engage in systematic rape to produce more slaves and increase their labor force.⁵⁹

Even when slaves gain freedom, they experience such complete social and economic discrimination that they are often forced back into a slavery-like relationship with their former masters who continue to exploit their dependency.⁶⁰ Many “freed”¹ slaves report going back to their masters for work due to an inability to make a living on their own. The persecution former slaves experience in Mauritania means that their forced servitude and economic dependency do not end with their “freedom.”⁶¹ Even for slaves who manage to escape completely, they live in constant fear knowing their former masters could come back for them or their family members at any time.⁶²

There have only been a small handful of criminal cases brought against slave holders in the 14 years since slavery was criminalized. The 2015 creation of special courts dedicated to prosecuting slavery-related crimes has done little to improve justice for slaves; in 2020, the courts only investigated one case and convicted five slave traffickers without sentencing them to any prison time.⁶³ In contrast, last year a Mauritanian human rights organization reported an incident in which an 8-year-old boy escaped his master’s home only to be jailed in the same cell as his master and then returned to the home by police.⁶⁴ In another incident, a 14-year-old girl who filed a complaint against her master was also returned to his home.⁶⁵ Human rights activists have expressed concern that instead of progressing, the Mauritanian government is actually regressing in its fight against slavery.⁶⁶

Human Trafficking

Aside from slavery—the most prevalent form of trafficking in the country—Mauritania also struggles with forced begging, child labor, sex trafficking, and exploitative migrant smuggling.⁶⁷ Traffickers rely on systemic discrimination against Haratins and other Black West Africans that results in extremely limited economic opportunities for these populations in formal work sectors.

Within the country, boys from poor Black families who attend Quranic schools are frequently forced by their teachers to beg for food and money.⁶⁸ Black women and girls are lured into sex and labor trafficking with the promise of food, shelter, and education.⁶⁹ Survival sex and sex trafficking are common. Refugees living in Mauritania are also vulnerable to exploitative sex due to dire financial situations.⁷⁰ Sex trafficking flourishes in the country due to laws and practices that criminalize and stigmatize sex outside of marriage.⁷¹ Women who report rape are blamed for the incident and can even be prosecuted for extramarital sex.⁷² Survivors find little to no support to escape sexual abuse.

Traffickers from the Middle East also recruit Black Mauritanian women with promises of good jobs abroad, instead trafficking them for domestic servitude and sex.⁷³ These women may be sent to Morocco or as far as Europe.⁷⁴ Sometimes, poor families enter their daughters into forced marriages with traffickers with the promise of financial compensation.⁷⁵ These girls are then trafficked abroad.⁷⁶

Black men are also trafficked abroad, most frequently as laborers recruited to work for

¹ I put the word “free” in quotes throughout the backgrounder to emphasize that most slaves who are nominally freed end up forced back into slavery-like conditions due to lack of economic opportunity and social power.

companies in Gulf countries. The Mauritanian government enters into contracts with foreign companies and promises them cheap labor.⁷⁷ The government takes advantage of the lack of economic opportunity for Blacks in Mauritania by offering them these contract jobs abroad.⁷⁸ Often, those job opportunities turn out to be trafficking situations, in which workers are overworked and underpaid, abused, and prevented from returning to Mauritania.⁷⁹ However, Blacks have little choice but to accept such opportunities, given their complete inability to obtain stable employment at home.⁸⁰

Racial/ Ethnic Discrimination

Both Haratins and all other Black Mauritanian ethnic groups experience such crippling and systemic discrimination in the justice system, the labor market, and service provision, that they are forced into slavery-like conditions to meet their most basic needs. Police frequently refuse to receive criminal complaints from Black Mauritanians, cutting off their access to justice at the beginning of the criminal process.⁸¹ Even when a complaint is received, prosecutors fail to work with victims or seek any compensation for them.⁸²

When they can find work, Black Mauritanians are relegated to dangerous and dirty professions such as working in slaughterhouses and collecting trash.⁸³ Black women are even more limited in their choices, forcing many to turn to prostitution.⁸⁴ Another hurdle to finding work is the discrimination Blacks face in education. It is estimated that at least 80% of enslaved children do not have access to education, partly due to discriminatory laws that require children to produce identification to enroll in school.⁸⁵ Lack of education drastically limits Blacks' job opportunities.

Black people also struggle to access basic services such as healthcare and sanitation.⁸⁶ According to the U.S. State Department, medical facilities in the country are extremely limited, and medications are hard to find and may be fake.⁸⁷ With Black Mauritanians often being forced to live in the most remote areas of the country, accessing a healthcare facility can be difficult or impossible.⁸⁸ Some healthcare facilities are more than a day's walk away, and they are inadequately staffed to meet the needs of the community.⁸⁹ The best healthcare facilities are reserved for Beydanes, and are too expensive for Black Mauritanians to afford.⁹⁰ Despite Beydanes' access to healthcare, they often refuse to provide any for their slaves. Some Haratins report that their masters have never taken them to receive medical care, even if they are sick or malnourished.⁹¹

Statelessness

Statelessness has been an issue for Black Mauritanians since the late 1980s, when tens of thousands of non-enslaved Blacks were forced to flee the country to escape ethnic persecution by the predominantly Beydane government.⁹² Those who fled had their national identity documents confiscated or destroyed, leaving them without proof of a nationality.⁹³ Although about one third of these Black Mauritanians returned to the country after President Taya's rule ended, and despite a UNHCR initiative to help them obtain identity documents, the government only issued proper documentation to a handful of returnees.⁹⁴

The UNHCR initiative to help repatriate Black Mauritanians lasted from 2008 until 2012. The process included UNHCR issuing paperwork to returnees that would then allow the returnees to obtain official identification documents from the Mauritanian government. However, the government largely failed to issue identification documents in the first years of the program.⁹⁵ Then in 2011, the government initiated a census, claiming that it needed to ensure identification documents were only issued to real Mauritanians.⁹⁶ The census required people

to register at physical locations that were far from where many rural Blacks lived, and therefore inaccessible to many of them.⁹⁷ Census workers would also use arbitrary knowledge tests, sometimes in Arabic which many Black Mauritians did not know, to decide whether a person was really a Mauritanian citizen.⁹⁸ Even more blatantly, Blacks were required to produce more documentation to prove their nationality than Beydanes, including birth and death records over several generations, which were often impossible to retrieve.⁹⁹ As a result, the census effectively denied many returning Blacks their Mauritanian identity, leaving them stateless.¹⁰⁰

Haratins were not expelled with other Blacks in the 1980s because Beydanes wanted to retain their slave population. However, Haratins are denied citizenship in other ways.¹⁰¹ Mauritanian citizenship law is descent-based; a child is not considered to be Mauritanian simply by virtue of being born in the country.¹⁰² To be a citizen, the child must have at least one parent who is a citizen, and the law contains restrictions on when mothers can pass down their citizenship to their children.¹⁰³ Therefore, children of slaves who are denied citizenship are rendered stateless themselves. Slaves who do happen to have documentation still live in peril, as their masters usually keep their identity documents and can withhold or destroy them at any time rendering them undocumented.¹⁰⁴

Another cause of statelessness is a law that children born out of wedlock cannot be civilly registered.¹⁰⁵ Given that many slaves' children are born of rape by their masters, and that even when slaves do marry their marriages are often not legally recognized, children of slaves encounter numerous obstacles to obtaining and proving citizenship.¹⁰⁶

The denial of citizenship prevents stateless Mauritians from accessing basic services such as secondary education.¹⁰⁷ They are also not allowed to vote, have a bank account, or own property.¹⁰⁸ Their freedom of movement within the country is limited in certain areas where the government sets up roadblocks and checks for people's documentation.¹⁰⁹ Sometimes checkpoint agents financially exploit those without documentation by detaining them until they pay a fine to be released.¹¹⁰

When Mauritians living in the United States are deported back to Mauritania, they are systematically jailed upon arrival without charge or due process.¹¹¹ They are interrogated in harsh conditions, without access to counsel, about why they applied for asylum in America.¹¹² They are released only after they pay a bribe, and those who cannot pay remain detained indefinitely.¹¹³ The government denies that their travel permits are legitimate documentation and informs them that they do not have Mauritanian citizenship or any of its accompanying rights.¹¹⁴

Land

Black Mauritians have historically been stripped of their land ownership rights, most notably in the 1980s when a new law provided a legal basis to confiscate their land and redistribute it to Beydanes.¹¹⁵ This system, which still occurs today, creates "l'esclavage foncier," or land slavery. Land slavery is the pattern of the government taking land away from Black Mauritians and giving it to Beydanes, and then the Beydanes employing or enslaving the Black Mauritians to work the land they previously owned.¹¹⁶

Despite a program to compensate those who lost their land during that time, very little land has actually been redistributed.¹¹⁷ Human rights activists report that local authorities still allow Beydanes to take over land occupied by Haratins and other Black Mauritians, and even to block their access to water sources.¹¹⁸

In addition to stealing Black-owned lands to give to individual Beydanes, the Mauritanian government contracts with large foreign companies in the Middle East and Western countries to exploit Mauritania's natural resources. The country is rich in iron, gold, copper, phosphates, zinc, gypsum, uranium, and natural gas.¹¹⁹ The government allows companies such as BP and Kosmos to set up extraction projects on lands occupied by poor Blacks, displacing entire communities while giving unconvincing promises to pay for their relocation.¹²⁰ Russian, Chinese, and Turkish fishing boats also occupy Mauritania's waters, overfishing and depleting fish populations and destroying Mauritania's local fishing industries.¹²¹ Not only are Black Mauritians displaced by these industries, but given the government's systemic discrimination against them, they receive no benefit from the profits gained through these agreements.

Government

The 2019 presidential election was fraught with irregularities, as Mohamed Ould Ghazouani declared victory before all votes had been counted.¹²² Protests broke out over the election results, and security forces arrested dozens of opposition supporters.¹²³ An internet blackout was imposed.¹²⁴ Journalists and anti-slavery activists, including members of the prominent abolitionist group the IRA, were detained.¹²⁵ Biram Dah Abeid, a former slave and founder of IRA, came in second place in the election.¹²⁶ Abeid has been detained periodically over the past several years for his activism and his criticism of the government's stance on slavery.¹²⁷ He was detained in August of 2018, just weeks before the parliamentary election, on allegations that he had threatened a journalist.¹²⁸ However, the IRA and other human rights activists stated that the allegation was baseless and that Abeid's arrest was entirely politically motivated, to silence him before the upcoming election.¹²⁹

Mauritania's government denies the continued existence of slavery as a widespread practice. In fact, government officials have been quoted as saying that "all people are free" and that slavery "no longer exists" at all.¹³⁰ To maintain this position, authorities ban peaceful protests, arrest and torture protestors, outlaw anti-slavery organizations, and issue death threats to human rights defenders.¹³¹ All Black Mauritians are also prohibited from holding high-ranking government positions, so they are effectively excluded from political processes and rendered politically invisible.¹³²

Freedom of Speech

Activists who stand up for the rights and freedom of slaves are routinely silenced through beatings, arbitrary arrests, and torture. Although Mauritanian law only requires protestors to notify authorities of upcoming protest events, authorities often prohibit human rights groups from protesting even when they have given advance notice.¹³³ For those who protest anyway, they are subjected to excessive force, as Mauritanian law does not contain any guidance on proportionality, and does not even prohibit the use of lethal force by security agents.¹³⁴ A 2018 Amnesty International study found that protestors suffered serious injuries at the hands of authorities, including fractured bones and head trauma.¹³⁵

Amnesty International documented 168 arbitrary arrests of human rights defenders between 2014 and 2018. At least 20 of the arrestees reported being tortured in detention.¹³⁶ Members of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), Mauritania's leading anti-slavery organization, have been particularly targeted for arrests and criminal prosecution.¹³⁷ Dozens of members have been arrested in recent years, and about one quarter of those arrested were convicted of crimes and sentenced to prison after unfair

trials.¹³⁸ Members report being blindfolded, beaten, chained, deprived of food and water, and threatened with death during their time in detention.¹³⁹

Journalists are also systematically targeted by the government. In the political unrest resulting from President Abdelaziz's call for a referendum to abolish the country's Senate in 2017, Mauritania's five privately owned news stations were ordered to cease operations.¹⁴⁰ Journalists covering protests over the referendum were detained in vans so they could not film the protests, and others were beaten and detained by police.¹⁴¹ In 2018, Amnesty International and over 30 other human rights and free speech organizations called for the release of journalist Mohamed Mkhaitir, who was sentenced to prison on a blasphemy conviction for writing a blog about slavery, and was supposed to be released in 2017.¹⁴² During his prison sentence, he was held in an undisclosed location without access to his lawyers.¹⁴³ Due to pressure from groups such as Amnesty International, he was finally released in 2019 after five years in detention.¹⁴⁴ Mkhaitir's imprisonment is part of a larger pattern of harassment and silencing of journalists in the country.¹⁴⁵

Children

Child labor is common in Mauritania, especially among Black children. Some of these children are born into slavery, while others are born "free" but are forced to work in exchange for basic needs such as food and shelter.¹⁴⁶ These children are often tasked with dangerous jobs such as herding large animals and crushing gravel, or forced into begging or sexual exploitation.¹⁴⁷ Mauritanian law also requires children to produce a birth certificate to register for secondary school, and since many Black children do not have birth records, they are denied educational opportunities that would reduce their vulnerabilities to child labor.¹⁴⁸ Even for children who do have access to education, the school system in Mauritania is so inadequate that several years of school do little to decrease a poor child's vulnerability to child labor. Most of Mauritania's teachers have very little education themselves, school facilities are in poor condition, and they lack proper learning materials.¹⁴⁹

An issue facing Black girls is the high rate of child marriage in the country. An estimated 37% of girls in Mauritania are married before they turn eighteen, and almost 20% marry before the age of fifteen.¹⁵⁰ This issue affects Black children almost exclusively, as Beydane families do not experience the financial struggles that lead poorer families to resort to child marriage.¹⁵¹ This custom is reinforced by the country's high rate of female genital mutilation (67% of all women and girls), a process that happens to girls as young as eight years old and is seen as a symbol of readiness for marriage.¹⁵² Black girls are especially vulnerable to child marriage due to discrimination that keeps their families in dire poverty and prevents them from going to school.¹⁵³ Slave masters also have an incentive to marry enslaved girls to get them pregnant and produce more slaves.¹⁵⁴

Food Security

Last year, over 1.4 million Mauritians faced food crisis conditions, representing 15% of the total population, the highest rate among the countries of the Sahel region.¹⁵⁵ Three years of drought, recent floods, and locust infestations, compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated the food crisis.¹⁵⁶ Blacks have been hit especially hard. With restrictions on movement due to the pandemic, Black Mauritians who sell items on street corners in the evenings are no longer able to do so, leaving them in greater poverty than before the pandemic.¹⁵⁷ Last May, one man who violated curfew while transporting goods was shot dead by security forces.¹⁵⁸ The man, Abass Diallo, had been working late to try to make enough money to feed his six children.¹⁵⁹ Although the President claimed early on that the

government would provide financial support and food to the most vulnerable families during the pandemic, the aid never materialized.¹⁶⁰

Water access in rural areas is sparse. In these areas, it is common for the government to create a well or water tap, and charge residents of the area a large fee to use the water.¹⁶¹ The wells are guarded by government personnel to ensure that no one gets the water without paying.¹⁶² A 2016 UN Report found that some people were forced to pay a subscription to access a water tap, but the cost of the subscription was higher than the average yearly salary of someone at the poverty line.¹⁶³ Some villagers, usually women and children, had to walk over two miles to a water source to get enough water to feed their families.¹⁶⁴

COVID-19

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have classified Mauritania's COVID-19 levels as Level 4, or "very high," the highest possible rating from the CDC.¹⁶⁵ Despite this rating, President Ghazouani has previously claimed that Mauritania is virus-free.¹⁶⁶ Restrictive measures in place to combat the virus, such as strict curfews and the closing of markets, have led to further social exclusion of Haratins.¹⁶⁷ Many Haratins rely on selling items in markets, often after long days of working other jobs. However, when they break curfew to go to the markets, they are targeted by security forces and brutally beaten or arrested.¹⁶⁸ In addition to the hardships brought on by the spread of disease, the pandemic has worsened Haratins' isolation and ability to support themselves financially.

Looking to the Future

The election of President Ghazouani in 2019 was hailed as a renewed opportunity for the government to seriously combat slavery.¹⁶⁹ However, just months after the election, human rights activists began to claim that Ghazouani's government was actually regressing in its efforts.¹⁷⁰ In early 2020, the IRA documented several cases of children who escaped slavery and were returned by the government to their masters.¹⁷¹ Ghazouani's political affiliations are also cause for concern; he has a close relationship with former president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who has denied that slavery still exists.¹⁷²

Anti-slavery activists in Mauritania say that the international community has done little to pressure the country to address the issue of slavery.¹⁷³ These activists believe that greater international pressure would be a vital catalyst for creating lasting change.¹⁷⁴

¹ Alphabet Inc., "Mauritania," Google Maps, accessed February 9, 2021,

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Mauritania/@20.7947743,-17.0715143,5z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0xe80b8c314b3394f:0x83220bebd6be534e!8m2!3d21.00789!4d-10.940835?hl=en>.

² World Population Review, "Mauritania Population 2021 (Live)," World Population Review, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/mauritania-population>.

³ Dokosi, Michael, "A Look at the Mande People who Founded Africa's Greatest Empires with Speakers in 9 Countries," Face 2 Face Africa, July 20, 2020, <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/a-look-at-the-mande-people-who-founded-africas-great-empires-with-speakers-in-9-countries>.

⁴ BBC, "Mauritania Profile- Timeline," BBC, February 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13882166>.

⁵ EENI Global Business School, "Mauritanian history. Doctorate in African Business," EENI Global Business School: History of Mauritania, accessed on February 9, 2021, <https://www.hauniversity.org/en/Mauritanie-History.shtml>.

⁶ The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, "Member Profile: Haratin, Initiative for the resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania)," The Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization, April 2017, <https://unpo.org/downloads/2342.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid.

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- ¹² Stewart, Elizabeth, "History of Mauritania," *The Guardian*, Guardian News & Media, August 6, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/06/mauritania.history>.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Mauritania: Events of 2018," Human Rights Watch, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/mauritania#>.
- ¹⁵ BBC, "Mauritania Profile- Timeline," *BBC*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13882166>.
- ¹⁶ Human Rights Watch/ Africa, "Mauritania's Campaign of Terror: State-Sponsored Repression of Black Africans," Human Rights Watch, April 1994, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/MAURITAN944.PDF>.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
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