



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

June 25, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We write to express our deep concern about ongoing human rights abuses in Mauritania. While Mauritania remains an important partner in our fight against terrorism in the Sahel, we believe that it is critical to also keep human rights at the forefront of bilateral relationship. Specifically, impunity for racial discrimination, including ethnic cleansing; the suppression of political rights; and hereditary slavery and human trafficking constitute grave violations of human rights that the United States should work to remedy through our engagement with the country.

Mauritania has not provided accountability for mass murders, repression and unwarranted deportation of Afro-Mauritanians between 1989 and 1991. Perpetrators remain shielded from prosecution under law number 93-23, which provides that “full amnesty is accorded to members of the Defense and Security Forces who committed infractions between January 1, 1989, and April 18, 1992 relative to the events that occurred within these forces and which engendered armed actions and acts of violence,” and further stipulates, “any legal case and any investigative document relative to this period and concerning a person benefitting from this amnesty will be immediately closed.” This impunity has left several Mauritanians without recourse for wrongs they and their families suffered almost three decades ago.

These abuses are not simply in the past. Mauritania has continued to strip the citizenship of tens of thousands of Black Mauritanians, despite agreeing to repatriate refugees who were forcibly displaced in 1989-1991. Since the country modernized its civil registrations system in 2011, large numbers of Afro-Mauritanians have been unable register in the national civil databases.

Additionally, Mauritania has not protected freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, including through laws criminalizing apostasy and placing onerous restrictions on public

gatherings and the formation of civil society organizations. For instance, a so-called anti-discrimination law in 2017 extends punishments for certain vaguely-defined speech. Organizations, like Human Rights Watch, have documented that these regulations have been used to silence and intimidate anti-racism and anti-slavery activists who are advocating for their most basic human rights.

Finally, Mauritania has a long history of hereditary slavery, based on ethnic and racial discrimination against Black Mauritians. Mauritania has the dubious distinction of being the last country to formally abolish slavery (in 1981), failing to criminalize it until 2007. While the Government of Mauritania has taken modest steps to improve the situation, the State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report makes clear that it is not making several needed reforms to truly address the problem. In addition to hereditary slavery, the TIP Report also documents that Mauritania remains a permissive environment for sex trafficking of women and girls.

In 2018, in response to Mauritania's record on slavery and trafficking, the Trump Administration stopped some assistance to the government of Mauritania,¹ and suspended Mauritania from receiving unilateral trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).² With these steps in mind, we would like to better understand the scope of your engagement with the Government of Mauritania regarding human rights. Specifically, what other steps is the Administration taking to pressure the Government of Mauritania on its record of impunity and abuse of political rights; how is the Administration working to support Mauritania's progress on the recommendations discussed on slavery and human trafficking detailed in the State Department's TIP Report; and what, if any, assistance is Mauritania still receiving from the United States?

Thank you for your attention to this letter. We hope that you will seek additional means to address the grave human rights abuses we discussed and make them a priority for your engagement with Mauritania.

Sincerely,



Steve Chabot
Member of Congress



Christopher H. Smith
Member of Congress

¹ "U.S. Relations With Mauritania: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," United States Department of State, August 2, 2019, accessed June 24, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-mauritania/>

² "Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate," WhiteHouse.gov, November 2, 2018, accessed June 24, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-senate-45/>



F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr.
Member of Congress



Ron Wright
Member of Congress



Tim Burchett
Member of Congress