



**Mr. President,
Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Commission.
Honorable guests.**

I am honored to have been invited by your prestigious commission to speak on the theme of "Modern Day Slavery and What We Buy," a subject which is particularly dear to me.

It is thus with great pleasure that I address the Commission, comprised of notable personalities and ardent defenders of equality and human dignity.

This session coincides with a crucial moment in the future of my country, in a context of economic crisis and active denial of the practice of slavery and discrimination.

Please thus allow me to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for this wonderful opportunity which you have offered me in order to inform you of the daily suffering of slaves and marginalized peoples in Mauritania.

Mr. President, honorable members.

The Mauritanian population, composed of Bambaras, Wolofs, Pulars, Soninkes, Arabo-Berbers and Haratines, currently live in a society characterized by profound disparity and ancient practices, sustained by a system of discriminatory governance and exclusion.

The Haratines, the main victims of slavery constitute nearly 50% of the Mauritanian population. Broadly this population is poor, uneducated and lives in peripheral communities of Mauritania's main cities and in rural zones. Both the descendants of slaves and slaves are abused without mercy and are excluded from the institutionalized economic system.

According to the the Report of the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Mutuma Ruteree, Mutuma Ruteree: "The Haratines [...] constitute the most important ethnic group in Mauritania, and are also the most politically and economically marginalized group, in a society which remains profoundly stratified along ethnicity, ancestry, caste and class. The word *Haratine* is derived from an Arabic word which indicates freedom, which points to the fact that the rest of society considers them as freed slaves."

The same report indicates that "...approximately 50% of the Haratines live in conditions of slavery, submitted to domestic servitude, forced labor or bonded labor. They remain marginalized and underrepresented in political posts and in public service. In 2013, only 5 of 95 seats at the National Assembly were occupied by Haratines and only 1 senator out of 56 belonged to this group. On top of this, only 2 of 13 regional governors and 4 of 53 regional state representatives were Haratine."

"The Haratine make up 80% of the illiterate population with 80% of Haratine not having completed elementary school, and representing only 5% of students at institutions of higher education. More than 90% of the dock workers, domestic workers and workers of low-skilled and low paying jobs are Haratine, whereas only 2% of high-level officials and senior public and private sector leaders derive from this group."

Full power, as well as the economic benefits are controlled by the Arabo-Berber community.

Mr. President, honorable members.

Foremost, I would like to point out the duplicity which the Mauritanian State and the dominant groups use to scoff at international opinion and make light of the country's partners. Indeed, modern anti-slavery and anti-discrimination laws are decreed, a road map deliberately omitting the existence of the scourge has been compiled, the country adheres to the principal international instruments for defending human dignity, but, at the same time, the State continues to protect and extend all the privileges solely to the Arabo-Berber community. The State promotes the models of old, drawn from manuals of pro-slavery exegesis; those writings are explicit generators of race-based inequality. They divide Muslims into masters and slaves and stipulate that the slave is his master's property and that his master can sell him, give him away, use him as security, give him as a gift, etc. The master thus enjoys the labor of his slave without paying him wages and he has access to the bodies of female slaves against their will, no matter how old they are or how many they are. A master can thus use and abuse his female slaves, as he pleases.

This description —not complete — of the Black Code, still in effect and taught in numerous law schools and divinity schools, finds itself codified in the books which we have symbolically burned on April 27, 2012 in Nouakchott.

In Mauritania, in the area of Lebyar (zone of the wells), located in the region of the Hodh El Chargui, not far from the border with Mali, un pro-slavery master today can still castrate his slave if the slave's handsomeness is likely to elicit the desire of noble women.

IRA-Mauritania and SOS-Slaves, one of the principal and officially recognized anti-slavery organizations in Mauritania, continually draws the attention of the authorities, both at the central and local levels, on the gross abuses endured by the slaves, but the elicited responses are still far from what we expect.

Mr. President, honorable members.

As a reminder, in 2013 the country put in place a governmental solidarity agency called TADAMOUN. This agency, meant to support victims of slavery, was voided of all substance. Today this agency is a political propaganda tool, completely guided and controlled by those close to masters and stakeholders in the system of slavery. The actions undertaken by this agency are not for the benefit of the real victims. In reality, all the victims of slavery identified in the regions of Hodhs, Trarza, Assaba, Brakna, Adrar and Nouakchott have never benefited from any assistance from this agency. In these regions, women who have escaped slavery and moved to large urban areas do not receive any governmental assistance. These women are very poor, uneducated, often divorced or never married but have children borne from repeated rape by their former masters. They have to provide for the many needs of their families. This exposes them to a debauched lifestyle where morality is in grave jeopardy.

The programs initiated by this agency are very often put in the hands of Arabo-Berber businessmen who are close to power and who continue to enrich themselves much to the discontentment of the Haratine masses, poor and bound in servitude, who are the very people these programs are supposed to help. The true defenders of the rights of slaves are not asked to be part of the conception or the management, let alone the inaction, of the policies of this anti-slavery commission.

In addition, the State has given this agency the right to bring civil suits in cases of slavery. This is in direct contradiction with principles of victim protection and is devoid of all credibility. Indeed, the State as represented by the prosecutor remains in control by virtue of this government agency and is a party in these slavery-related court cases. The opportunity to be a civil party is a right that civil society has often demanded in vain when pursuing matters of slavery.

Mr. President, honorable members

In December 2013, my country announced the creation of a special court to deal exclusively with slavery and slavery-related crimes, but up until today not one measure has been taken to clarify its composition, its place within the legal framework, its prerogatives and guarantees of its independence.

Mr. President, honorable members

Since the enactment of the law criminalizing slavery in 2007, none of the cases brought before the judiciary have been dealt with appropriately. Take the case of the two brothers Said and Yargue in 2011, for which one sentence was handed down. Today the case is with the criminal division of the Nouakchott court of appeals, due to the liberation of the one convicted person, after only 3 months of detention and the annulment of the sentence.

In Mauritania, household servants constitute an extremely exploited, marginal population that enjoys no legal protections. In 2011, the country enacted a decree regulating domestic labor, but it was not applied and went unheeded.

Cases of human trafficking toward the Gulf countries have been pointed out several times without the State ever taking appropriate protective measures. The victims of this trafficking are generally exploited as household servants or as sex workers.

In 2013, a Mauritanian academic, as a guest on the Saudi Arabian television show *Rissala*, tried to deny the existence of slavery in the country. The show's host informed the academic that he himself was acquainted with people who had received a gift of slaves from Mauritania who were working as household servants.

Our organization is also very concerned with the fate of Zahra, a young girl who has been held for over 17 years in the United Arab Emirates by a family of Mauritanian origin. Despite her mother and sister's pleas, Zahra remains impossible to contact and it appears her employers are using her for household labor and for sex. This case has been extensively documented by our organization.

Mr. President, honorable members

The Mauritanian state has established a patronage system skewed in favor of Arab-Berbers in all sectors of the national economy: mining, fishing, manufacturing, services, etc. This system allocates exclusively to Arab-Berbers the benefits required for activity in these sectors. They thus are able to amass heaping profits, which allows the domination and exploitation of slaves to continue. Descendants of slaves and Afro-Mauritanians are exploited in these economic sectors and paid meager salaries.

Mr. President, honorable members

Our organization's anti-slavery activists are regularly arrested, tortured and imprisoned. Today, Hanana Ould MBoirick and Boubacar Ould Yatma are serving a year in prison without parole, and Cheikh Ould Vall has been handed a six-month prison sentence. These activists were jailed for organizing to defend women who were being dispossessed of their land in the Dar Naim neighborhood of Nouakchott.

I formally demand their unconditional release without delay. I also demand that an investigation be launched into the expropriation of Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian lands. The justice system must identify those responsible and condemn them appropriately.

In addition to the practice of hereditary slavery, the Mauritanian state fosters a system that excludes and discriminates against the Afro-Mauritanian community.

Despite many complaints and denunciations of abuse against blacks between 1989 and 1991, no legal action has been taken against those who were allegedly responsible. Law 92 (1993) granted amnesty to military and security forces personnel who had committed violations during this period. The families of the victims of these abuses are today living with disastrous socioeconomic conditions.

Given the enthusiasm of young people for our cause, and in the face of numerous attempts to slander us, we created a committee for peace in 2011. The jailed militants are all members of this committee.

Our commitment to the peaceful exchange of power and to the acknowledgement of the legitimate aspirations of the Haratines and other marginalized communities led us to campaign in the June 2014 presidential election. This experience was a valuable opportunity to raise national and international awareness about the disparities and the suffering of disadvantaged classes in my country.

The economic and media resources mobilized by those in power and the countless privations and threats we were subjected to did not prevent us from taking our message to people all over the country.

The opacity of the electoral system and the many irregularities observed drove us to contest the result and appeal to the constitutional council. Unfortunately, this appeal did not make it to court.

Mr. President, honorable members

People responsible for the crime of slavery are protected by the Mauritanian state and enjoy total immunity. More than 30 cases of slavery, mostly affecting women and children, are pending before national courts, without any convictions handed down. Taking advantage of the fear and ignorance of the slaves, Mauritanian courts of law always use the ruse of paying very small sums of money to victims, disguised as reparations.

Mr. President, honorable members

Victims of slavery and injustice in my country need you to convince Mauritania's government to end the political, economic and diplomatic policies of impoverishing and denying justice to vulnerable populations, by recognizing the existence of the massive-scale slavery to which the Haratines are subjected.

They need you to convince Mauritania to cease its hypocrisy and apply its national laws as well as the international laws that Mauritania has officially adopted.

They need you so that funding from solidarity organization TADAMOUM may end up in the hands of the real victims of slavery and exclusion, not enrich groups corrupt Arabo-Berber businessmen who steal these resources.

We need you to help us abolish the teaching a valorization of slavery and other forms of inequality that are part of our books and age-old codes and that only our country still grants immunity and inviolability today.

To conclude, I would like to pay tribute to all militants, women and men, of IRA and SOS-Eslaves, and to all my friends, and my family, for their sacrifices and loyalty for the cause we defend.

Long live a reconciled Mauritania.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Washington DC, 07/24/2014