

MAURITANIA 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mauritania is a highly centralized Islamic Republic with a president as head of state and a constitution grounded in French civil law and sharia. The Senate and National Assembly exercise legislative functions but were weak relative to the executive. Voters elect municipal councilors, who in turn elect senators. Voters re-elected Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz to a second five-year term in June 2014. In 2013 Union for the Republic (UPR), the president's party, won 74 of 147 seats in the National Assembly in direct legislative elections, which some opposition parties boycotted. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The chief human rights problems were continuing slavery and slavery-related practices, trafficking in persons, and harsh, overcrowded, and dangerous prison conditions. Violations of freedom of press and association were also of concern.

Other reported human rights problems included use of torture by law enforcement officers, arbitrary arrests, and lengthy pretrial detention. Male guards sometimes patrolled women's prisons, and authorities incarcerated children with adult prisoners. Government influence over the judiciary, limits on freedom of assembly, restrictions on religious freedom, and public corruption were also problems. Only Muslims may be citizens of the country. Discrimination against women, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); early and forced marriage; political marginalization of southern-based (non-Arab) ethnic groups and of the Haratine caste of slave descendants; racial and ethnic discrimination; discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons and persons with HIV/AIDS; child labor; and inadequate enforcement of labor laws also occurred.

The government took modest steps to punish officials who committed abuses and prosecuted a number of officials, but officials frequently acted with impunity. Civil society organizations objected to the scant number of indictments.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit torture, but nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that law enforcement officials tortured their members. Methods of abuse reportedly included beatings. There were also credible reports of torture, beatings, and abuse in police detention centers, several prisons throughout the country, and gendarmerie and military facilities.

On March 3, the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), an active antislavery and “Haratine rights” NGO, reported that its vice president, Saad Ould Louleid, officially complained that the organization’s activists were not only harassed, imprisoned and sequestered, but also regularly tortured and humiliated in prisons. He and other IRA members repeatedly drew the attention of prison authorities to these alleged abuses without any positive reaction either from the prison administration or from the prosecutor.

On March 31, Saleck Ould Cheikh, a Salafi (member of strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect advocating a return to the early Islam of the Quran) prisoner sentenced to death for terrorism and killing a gendarme, accused prison authorities of beating him and denying him access to a doctor for medical treatment. In a message to the *Essirage* news website, Ould Cheikh indicated that he began a hunger strike because of mistreatment and torture and confinement to a narrow prison cell.

On July 12, Mohamed Ould Abdou, an opposition activist in the “25 February” group, claimed he was tortured and throttled by police in Tévragh Zeina II after being arrested with a colleague, during a demonstration they organized denouncing regime corruption.

On August 13, the government adopted a law against torture that requires the establishment of a mechanism for its prevention. This law considers torture, acts of torture, and inhuman or degrading punishments as crimes against humanity not

subject to a statute of limitations. The law specifically covers activities in prisons, rehabilitation centers for minors in conflict with the law, places of custody, psychiatric institutions, detention centers, areas of transit, and border-crossing points.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening. Poor security conditions and the fact that dangerous inmates shared cells with less dangerous ones obliged prisoners to live in a climate of violence, and some had to pay bribes to other prisoners to avoid brutalization and harassment. Human rights groups continued to report prisons were overcrowded and lacked adequate sanitation and medical facilities; the government's capacity, however, to administer detention facilities and house the prisoner population improved somewhat.

Physical Conditions: The Mauritanian Observatory for Human Rights, an independent human rights body, continued to denounce overcrowding and long pretrial detention. The Dar Naim Prison, the main civil prison in Nouakchott, had a capacity of 300 but held 900 inmates, of whom 497 were convicted prisoners and 403 were pretrial detainees. Authorities frequently held pretrial detainees with convicted and often with dangerous prisoners. Male guards frequently monitored female inmates in the women's prison of Nouakchott, a practice criticized by the National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH). Conditions of detention for women were generally better than those for men. According to prison officials, the women's prison in Nouakchott was less crowded.

In July 2014 corrections officials closed Salah ad Dine Prison, a "secret" maximum-security facility in Adrar that had held incommunicado a number of inmates convicted of terrorism-related offenses. The government transferred its entire prisoner population to the Central Prison of Nouakchott during the same month. In February local press reported that authorities transferred three Salafist prisoners who were considered dangerous back to the Salah ad Dine Prison located on the Salah ad Dine Military Base. The government reopened the prison after these same transferred prisoners rioted in the main prison in the capital in early 2015.

Due to deteriorating conditions at the juvenile detention facility at Beila, authorities held 68 children between the ages of 15 and 17 at Nouakchott's Central Prison. They held seven more children within the same age range at the prison in Nouadhibou. The minors had contact with adult prisoners, including those

convicted of terrorist offenses and other violent crimes. The Ministry of Justice sometimes gave temporary custody of the children of prisoners to another family member to remove them from confinement.

On April 9, a group of researchers led by a human rights activist Saleck Ould Cheikhani confirmed the persistence of tuberculosis, poor health and hygiene, lack of potable water, and inadequate ventilation and heating in prisons. Overcrowding, violence among inmates, and poor medical care remained problems. Prisons lacked products such as soap and detergent, and some had no waste disposal systems. Malnutrition, particularly among foreign inmates, prisoners without familial support, and sick inmates, was widespread.

On February 23, Biram Dah Abeid, Bilal Ramdane, and Djiby Sow (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees) began a hunger strike to protest “squalid conditions” and abuse by prison authorities.

Authorities reported six inmate deaths during the year. One prisoner died after a fight between prisoners inside Dar Naim Prison. Two died from illness in the prison in Selibaby. On April 5, the national hospital announced the death of three prisoners who succumbed to illness at Dar Naim between February and April. According to the Mauritanian Observatory for Human Rights, prison officials deliberately neglected these prisoners.

Access to food for most prisoners was generally inadequate, as were sanitary conditions in prison kitchens. Medical facilities and staff were similarly inadequate, particularly in the Dar Naim men’s prison and at the Central Prison. Government allocated a budget of approximately 600 ouguiyas (\$1.82) a day for each prisoner for food and medical supplies. Generalized corruption in the prison systems, smuggling of medicine, and lack of skilled medical staff accounted for most deficiencies.

Ventilation in many cells and holding areas ranged from inadequate to nonexistent.

Administration: Efforts to improve recordkeeping continued to progress slowly. Local NGOs reported that prison officials often misplaced prisoner files, leading in some cases to postponement of release. In January prisoners who had completed their sentences rioted at Nouakchott Central Prison after authorities failed to honor their scheduled release dates.

There was no data available on whether the courts used alternatives to sentencing nonviolent offenders. Independent ombudsmen were absent from the prison system, but prisoners were permitted to file allegations of abuse with the CNDH. Regulations also allowed inmates to choose one of their own to represent them in dealings with the administration, and prisoners occasionally made use of this opportunity.

The government responded to allegations of inhuman conditions but rarely took corrective action.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted prison and detention center visits by NGOs, diplomats, and international human rights observers. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had unlimited access to prisons and conducted multiple visits, including visits to terrorism suspects. The ICRC worked with prison authorities to improve conditions of detention and the treatment of inmates by renovating infrastructure and providing food, medical assistance, water, sanitation, prison management advice, and legal safeguards. The ICRC conducted frequent visits to the Dar Naim and Central Prison in Nouakchott. Corrections officials continued to allow access to several prisons in Nouakchott to diplomatic personnel, who had the opportunity to interview prisoners and staff members.

Previously biweekly visits by imams to prisoners increased to weekly during the year.

On July 25, a human rights association, Observatory of Human Rights, visited Dar Naim and reported the prison had become “a school for professional criminals,” due to its neglect and serious overcrowding.

Improvements: The ICRC took some steps to improve prison conditions. It provided a monthly compensation to prison health staff to encourage them to remain at the prisons to continue provision of basic medical services to the prisoners and to distribute hygienic products in selected prisons.

The Ministry of Justice undertook several measures to improve conditions and reduce overcrowding, including the deportation of foreign prisoners to their home countries, pardons, commutation of sentences, or conditional release of prisoners convicted of nonserious crimes.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, but authorities did not observe these prohibitions. In some cases authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained protesters, human rights activists, and journalists (see section 2.a.).

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

Under the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization, the National Police is responsible for enforcing the law and maintaining order in urban areas. The National Guard, also under the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization, performs limited police functions in keeping with its peacetime role as the guarantor of physical security at government facilities. For instance, regional authorities may call upon it to restore civil order during riots and other large-scale disturbances. The gendarmerie, a specialized paramilitary organization under the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for maintaining civil order around metropolitan areas and providing law enforcement services in rural areas. The Ministry of Interior and Decentralization's newest police force, the General Group for Road Safety (GSSR), maintains security on the roads and operates checkpoints throughout the country.

Police were poorly paid, trained, and equipped. Corruption and impunity were serious problems. Police regularly demanded bribes at nightly roadblocks in Nouakchott and at checkpoints between cities. There were numerous reports that police at such roadblocks arbitrarily detained individuals--often without probable cause--for several hours or overnight.

The government rarely held security officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses or crimes, unless the charges involved terrorist activities. In April police arrested an officer of the gendarmerie for attempting to smuggle an alien for financial compensation at the Nouakchott airport. In February the Zouerate police arrested a GSSR member and accused him of theft.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires duly authorized arrest warrants, although their issuance was uncommon. Authorities generally did not inform detainees of the accusations against them until the conclusion of an investigation. The law requires that in most cases courts review the legality of a person's detention within 48 hours of arrest, but police may extend the period for an additional 48 hours, and a prosecutor or court may detain persons for up to an additional 15 days in national terrorism

cases. Authorities generally respected the two-week deadline for formally arraigning or releasing terrorism suspects in national security cases. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the right to contact an attorney. By law indigent defendants are entitled to an attorney at state expense, but frequently either legal representation was unavailable or attorneys did not speak local languages. There was a bail system, but judges sometimes refused such requests arbitrarily or set inordinately high bail fees.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists (see section 2.a.). Police arrested a number of human right activists and journalists without charge or hearings.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem, although no statistics on the average length of detention were available. Security forces sometimes arrested demonstrators and held them longer than regulations allow, often due to lack of capacity to process cases in a timely manner. By law authorities may hold a minor for no more than six months while awaiting trial. Nevertheless, there were reports a large number of individuals, including minors, remained in pretrial detention for extended periods due to judicial inefficiency.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, but the judiciary was not autonomous. The executive branch continued to exercise significant influence over the judiciary through its ability to appoint and remove judges. Observers often perceived judges to be corrupt and unskilled.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for due process, and defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence. While authorities informed defendants of the charges/accusations against them and provided them with free interpretation services as required, the quality of these services was generally poor, and defendants did not learn of the charges until the investigation was complete. Defendants have the right to a public trial, although juries are not used. They also have the right to be present during trial. All defendants, including the indigent, have the right to legal counsel, but authorities rarely respected this entitlement. Likewise, defendants may confront or question witnesses and present witnesses and evidence in both civil and criminal cases. Defendants have the right to access evidence for the prosecution, although in practice it was difficult to obtain such evidence. Defendants generally had

adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense. Defendants enjoy the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt and have the right of appeal. These rights extend to minorities and men but do not extend equally to women.

Sharia is, in part, the basis for law and court procedures. Courts did not treat women equally with men in all cases.

A special court hears cases involving persons under age 18. Children who appeared before the court received more lenient sentences than adults, and extenuating circumstances received greater consideration. The minimum age for a child to stand trial is 12 years. Juvenile offenders between ages 12 and 17 generally served sentences at detention centers for minors, although several NGOs expressed concern that authorities held youthful offenders in the general population along with more dangerous inmates at Nouakchott Central Prison.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

On January 15, a court in Rosso sentenced the leader of the IRA, Biram Dah Abeid, and his deputy Brahim Ould Bilal Ramdhane to two years in prison for leading an unarmed rebellion. They were widely considered political prisoners. They boycotted their appeal trial in Aleg in August, claiming the Aleg court did not have jurisdiction over their case. The court denied their appeal in absentia. In September the two made a final appeal to the Supreme Court, which had not ruled on the case at year's end. A third activist arrested, Djiby Sow, received provisional release on medical grounds on June 22 and went to Germany for medical treatment.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Complaints of human rights violations fall within the jurisdiction of the Administrative Court. Individuals or organizations may appeal decisions to international regional courts. NGO representatives stated they collaborated with the Administrative Court, adding that it was not impartial. There are administrative remedies through the social chamber of the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court. Persons may sue at the Administrative Court and appeal to the Court of Appeals and then to the Supreme Court.

Property Restitution

Property ownership in the southern regions has been controversial since the government expelled tens of thousands of Mauritians from non-Arab sub-Saharan communities based in the Senegal River Valley (Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) from 1989 to 1991 amid tensions with Senegal. Many non-Arab Mauritians were dispossessed of their land, which regional officials subsequently sold or ceded to Beydane (“Arabo-Berbers” or “White Moors”--see section 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities). Although the government continued to make modest efforts to indemnify returning deportees, it did not restore their property rights.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. Individuals were generally free to criticize the government publicly or privately but were occasionally subject to retaliation. The constitution and law prohibit racial or ethnic propaganda.

Press and Media Freedoms: The government owned two daily newspapers and most broadcast media; five radio stations and five television stations were independent. Several independent daily publications generally expressed a wide variety of views with limited restrictions. Throughout the year incidents of government retaliation against a variety of media deemed too outspoken increased.

Independent media remained the principal source of information for most citizens, followed by government media. Government media focused primarily on official news but provided some coverage of opposition activities and views.

Violence and Harassment: There were several reported incidents of violence and harassment of journalists. On February 11, dozens of journalists organized a sit-in in front of the Criminal Court in Nouakchott, protesting the prosecutor’s arrest of *Essirage* website’s director following his publication of sensitive documents about a businessman detained for fraud concerning the bankruptcy of his bank.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Some opposition leaders asserted they had no effective access to official media. The government made payment of back taxes, at times unpaid for years with official complicity, a matter of priority, threatening the solvency of several independent stations.

On February 2, local press reported police arrested and then released Aziz Ould Souvi, a journalist investigating a medical malpractice case that resulted in a death at the national hospital. In August the Higher Authority for Broadcasting warned the local press against criticizing the president and members of his family. On September 17, authorities shut down a local radio program called *Sahara Talk* for broadcasting on a variety of controversial subjects.

Some journalists practiced self-censorship when covering topics deemed sensitive, including the military, corruption, and the application of sharia, and there were reports that police detained and questioned journalists in connection with their coverage of those topics as well as slavery.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2014 approximately 11 percent of the population used the internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events. Police occasionally took action against what it called unauthorized events, including shuttering a student production in May that touched on interracial issues at a school in Nouakchott.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly. Registered political parties are not required to seek permission to hold meetings or demonstrations. The law requires NGO organizers to apply to the local administrative chief for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies. Authorities usually granted permission but

on some occasions denied it in circumstances that suggested the application of political criteria.

On several occasions officials with the IRA reported security forces arrested their activists for failing to petition the local prefect for permission to hold a rally.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right.

All local NGOs must register with the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization. Generally, if the ministry fails to respond within 45 days to a request to establish an NGO, the NGO may proceed with its work, even though it is not considered officially registered. In July, however, authorities prevented a Salafist organization from launching its political activities.

On August 2, the Progressive Forces for Change (FPC), previously the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania, petitioned the government for a meeting to launch its activities officially but was turned down. Authorities subsequently denied the FPC's application for recognition.

The government encouraged local NGOs to join the government-sponsored Civil Society Platform. Approximately 7,000 local NGOs accepted the invitation, with the notable exceptions of the IRA, whose president challenged President Aziz in the 2014 presidential election.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights, but there were exceptions.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, vulnerable migrants, or other persons of concern. Resources provided by the government were inadequate to meet the assistance needs of these populations.

In-country Movement: Persons lacking identity cards could not travel freely in some regions. As in previous years, the government set up mobile roadblocks where gendarmes, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers.

Exile: The law does not provide for forced exile. Nevertheless, several prominent opponents of the president, including his cousin and businessman, Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, have remained in self-imposed exile for years for fear of persecution or retaliation.

Emigration and Repatriation: Launched in 2013, the National Agency for the Fight against the Vestiges of Slavery, Reintegration, and the Fight against Poverty (Tadamoun) is responsible for overseeing the reintegration of repatriated refugees and providing administration and identification support, as well as for contributing to the social and economic development of resettlement areas. Despite challenges--including food insecurity, land disputes, and inadequate sanitation, health, education, and infrastructure--the government made modest progress in reintegrating repatriated refugees. According to a local NGO, formal sector workers who lost their jobs as a result of being deported to Senegal between 1989 and 1991 totaled 1,159 workers. Of these, 602 employees were reintegrated and 417 benefited from their right of retirement. The remaining 140 were negotiating for reintegration as their former organizations had changed status. For example, the Mauritanian company of postal and telecommunication (MAURIPOST) became MAURITEL, with many of the new partners unwilling to reintegrate former employees of MAURIPOST.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. UNHCR carries out refugee status determinations under its mandate and then presents cases to the National Consultative Commission for Refugees for recognition. According to UNHCR, as of September 1, the government hosted

50,649 Malian refugees at the Mberra camp, located in the southeastern region of Hodh El-Chargui, and an estimated 1,000 other persons.

In accordance with agreements with the Economic Community of West African States on freedom of movement, the government allows West Africans to remain in the country for up to three months, after which they must apply for residency or work permits. Migrants determined to be illegally seeking to reach Spain's nearby Canary Islands were deported. According to the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization, immigration officials returned 4,600 migrants to their countries of origin between January 1 and September 4.

Stateless Persons

The law allows children born outside the country to Mauritanian mothers and foreign men to obtain Mauritanian nationality at age 17. Children born to Mauritanian fathers and foreign mothers are Mauritanian. If the father is stateless, children born outside the country are subject to statelessness until age 17, at which point the child is eligible for nationality. The unwillingness of local authorities to process thousands of sub-Saharan returned from Senegal, following their mass expulsion between 1989 and 1991, rendered the returnees stateless.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage, and citizens exercised that ability.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In June 2014 President Aziz won re-election to a second and final five-year term with approximately 82 percent of the vote. Although some opposition groups alleged procedural irregularities and inconsistent application of vote-counting policies, the Constitutional Council and international observers endorsed the results of the election.

In 2013 the president's party, the UPR, won 74 of 147 seats in the National Assembly in direct legislative elections, which some opposition parties boycotted.

The Senate was elected in 2006. New elections to choose two thirds of its members were to have occurred in 2011 but were indefinitely postponed.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The government often favored individuals based on political ties.

The Beydane account for 27 percent of the population but occupied 80 percent of top leadership positions. Haratines (Black Moors) constitute 44 percent of the population and held 10 percent of the positions. The sub-Saharan ethnic groups, Halpulaar (18 percent of the population, 8 percent of the positions), Soninke (9 percent and 1.5 percent), and Wolof (2 percent and 0.75 percent), remained greatly underrepresented in leadership positions in the government.

Participation of Women and Minorities: The law reserves 20 seats in the National Assembly for women. Following the 2013 legislative elections, 31 women held seats in the 147-member National Assembly. Of the country's 30 ministers, eight were women, four were Haratines, and six were from non-Arab, sub-Saharan ethnic groups.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, but authorities did not enforce the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Corrupt practices were widely believed to exist at all levels of government. According to the World Bank's most recent Worldwide Governance Indicators, corruption was rampant.

Corruption: There were reports government officials frequently used their power to obtain favors such as unauthorized exemption from taxes, special grants of land, and preferential treatment during bidding on government projects. Corruption was most pervasive in government procurement but also common in the distribution of official documents, fishing licenses, land, bank loans; and tax payments. Although there was a slight increase in prosecutions for corruption during the year, authorities rarely jailed those found guilty. Instead, they were required only to return the funds in question.

In May the Criminal Division for Economic and Financial Crimes accused an accountant of the National Guard of embezzling public funds from the salaries of soldiers and officers and arrested him.

The arrests of several treasury managers in the rural, interior regions of the country occupied public attention. Audits and investigations revealed fraud in several

government sectors and private sector companies and resulted in the ousting of senior officials, including ambassadors, accountants, and managers, while others managed to escape to neighboring countries to evade prosecution. Authorities arrested 30 employees of the state treasury for fraud and the embezzlement of more than one billion ouguiyas (\$3.03 million) and dismissed many financial auditors who overlooked the embezzlement in regional treasury services. The embezzlement network extended to the fishing, foreign customs, and health sectors, and led the minister of finance to resign.

Corruption and impunity were serious problems in the police force, and the government rarely held security officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses.

On August 20, parliament adopted an anticorruption law, but its enforcement was used as a weapon against opponents of the regime. The law defines corruption as “all exploitation by a public agent of his position for personal purposes, whether this agent is elected, or in an administrative or judicial position.”

Financial Disclosure: The government enforced the requirement that senior officials, including the president, file a declaration of their personal assets at the beginning and end of their service. The information is not available to the public. The last public accounting of President Aziz’s personal assets took place in 2010; the president of the Supreme Court declared Aziz did not have to renew the public declaration when he was re-elected in 2014. Members of his first administration who resigned in the wake of his re-election had not declared their assets.

Public Access to Information: The law provides for public access to government information, and the government generally granted some access to citizens and noncitizens, including foreign media. The government did not fully implement the law, since the law still requires adoption of implementing legislation before it can take effect.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Several domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Commissariat for Human Rights and Humanitarian Action designs, promotes, and implements national human rights policies. During the year its budget increased to 575 million ouguiyas (\$1.7 million), a one million ouguiyas (\$3,000) increase compared with 2014. The commissariat managed government and internationally funded human rights and humanitarian assistance programs.

The CNDH, an independent ombudsman organization, includes government and civil society representatives. It actively monitored human rights conditions and advocated for government action to correct violations. Its annual budget was 105 million ouguiyas (\$318,180). The CNDH produced an annual report on thematic topics, conducted regular investigations, and made recommendations to the government.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution and law provide for equality for all citizens regardless of race, national origin, sex, or social status, but the government often favored individuals based on racial and tribal affiliation and social status.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal. Rapists who are single men face penalties of forced labor and whipping, and married rapists are subject to the death penalty. The government regularly enforced the law, convicting 22 and sentencing two perpetrators to death. Nevertheless, as in years past, wealthy rape suspects reportedly avoided prosecution or, if prosecuted, avoided prison. Families of the victim commonly reached an agreement with the perpetrator for monetary compensation.

Local NGOs noted the incidence of both reported and unreported rape continued to be high. National statistics on arrests and prosecutions for rape were unavailable, but the Association of Female Heads of Families (AFCF) reported 1,273 rapes between January and September, a marked increase compared with the 412 cases reported for all of 2014.

Human rights activists and lawyers reported that rape victims were stigmatized, persecuted, and even imprisoned. Since rape is often associated with the concept of adultery, judges could, in theory, accuse the victim of fornication under sharia,

hold the victim responsible for the rape, and imprison her. There were no reports that this provision or interpretation of the law was enforced.

Domestic violence was also a serious problem. Spousal abuse and domestic violence are illegal, but there are no specific penalties for domestic violence. The government did not enforce the law effectively, and convictions were rare. Most cases went unreported. No reliable government statistics on prosecutions, convictions, and sentences for domestic violence were available. In the course of the year, the AFCF identified 2,375 (a 10 percent increase compared with 2014) minor victims of domestic violence and provided legal assistance to 1,775 of them.

Police and the judiciary occasionally intervened in domestic abuse cases, but women rarely sought legal redress, relying instead on family, NGOs, and community leaders to resolve domestic disputes. Traditional sharia judges handled many domestic violence cases. NGOs reported that, in certain cases, they asked police for help to protect victims of domestic violence, but police declined to investigate. The AFCF and other women's NGOs provided psychologists and shelter to some victims.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: The law states that any act or attempt to damage a girl's sexual organs is punishable by imprisonment and a fine of 120,000 to 300,000 ouguiyas (\$363 to \$910). Nevertheless, authorities seldom applied the law, since the accompanying implementing law remained provisional.

FGM/C was practiced by all ethnic groups to varying degrees and performed on young girls, often on the seventh day after birth and almost always before the age of six months. Excision was the most severe form of FGM/C practiced. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF's) 2013 report estimated the prevalence among women at 69.4 percent, its prevalence among girls ages five to 18 at 54.8 percent, and its prevalence among girls under five at 46.6 percent.

During the year the government entered the third phase of a five-year FGM/C action plan, which aims to reinforce FGM/C policy and law, offer education and community support, encourage public declarations of FGM/C abandonment, and establish partnerships and public outreach campaigns. The government's program, which extends to 2017, focused on communities in the regions of Gorgol, Guidimaka, Hodh El Gharbi, Hodh El Chargui, Assaba, and Tagant. The program worked through five local NGOs to create association networks to conduct awareness campaigns against FGM/C.

The government, international organizations, and NGOs continued to coordinate their anti-FGM/C efforts, which focused on eradicating the practice in hospitals, discouraging midwives from performing FGM/C, and educating the population on its dangers. The government, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF, the national Imams' Association, and other members of civil society emphasized the serious health risks of FGM/C and sought to correct the widespread belief the practice was a religious requirement. The law prohibits government hospitals and licensed medical practitioners from performing FGM/C, and several government agencies worked to prevent others from perpetrating it. UNFPA had an agreement with the National School of Health to integrate FGM/C awareness into training curricula for midwives and nurses. According to several women's rights experts, these efforts appeared to be changing popular attitudes.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Traditional forms of mistreatment of women continued to decline. One of these is the forced feeding of adolescent girls prior to marriage, practiced by some Beydane families. Increased government, media, and civil society attention to the problem, including the health risks associated with excessive body weight, continued to lessen traditional encouragement of female obesity.

Sexual Harassment: There are no laws against sexual harassment. Women's NGOs reported that it was a common problem in the workplace.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children; manage their reproductive health; and have access to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence. Contraception was available at private health centers for those who could afford it. According to UNICEF, 11.4 percent of girls and women between the ages of 15 and 49 used a modern method of contraception.

The World Health Organization estimated the maternal mortality rate to be 602 per 100,000 live births. This high rate was due to lack of medical equipment, low participation by mothers in programs promoting prenatal care, births without the assistance of health professionals, poor sanitary conditions during birth, and maternal malnutrition. According to UNICEF, skilled health personnel attended approximately 64.5 percent of births.

The AFCF stressed that these deficiencies applied in particular to poor women or to those from traditionally lower castes, such as slaves and former slaves, who often lacked access to contraception, obstetric and postpartum care, and treatment

for sexually transmitted infections. The Mauritanian Association for the Health of Mothers and Children, which operated a center in Nouakchott for rape victims, provided emergency contraception to victims.

Discrimination: Women have legal rights to property and child custody, and the more educated and urbanized members of the population recognized these rights. Nevertheless, women had fewer legal rights than men. Divorced women, for example, could lose child custody if they remarried. According to common tradition, a woman's first marriage requires parental consent. The personal status code permits men to have up to four wives at the same time, but they are required to treat them equally. Government awareness programs encouraged women to obtain a contractual agreement at the time of marriage stipulating the marriage will end if the husband marries a second wife. This practice was common in Moor (Arab) society. Women who did not establish a solid contract remained unprotected. Moreover, government authorities did not always respect either the validity of such prenuptial agreements or the right to establish them. Polygyny continued to be relatively unusual among Moors, although its popularity has grown. The practice was more common among sub-Saharan ethnic groups. Arranged marriages were increasingly rare, particularly among the Moor population. Cultural resistance to intercaste marriage persisted. NGOs continued to report that powerful individuals used the judicial system to intimidate and persecute members of their families who married below their social rank.

The law considers women to be minors, and women faced other legal discrimination. According to sharia as applied in the country, the testimony of two women was necessary to equal that of one man. The courts granted only half as large an indemnity to the family of a female victim as that accorded to the family of a male victim. The personal status code provides a framework for the consistent application of secular law and sharia-based family law, but judicial officials did not always respect it. Formulas for property distribution therefore varied widely from case to case. Human rights lawyers also reported that judges treated differently cases concerning Beydane women, female slaves or other lower-caste women, non-Arab citizen women, and foreign women.

Women did not face legal discrimination in areas not addressed specifically by sharia (see section 7.d.).

Children

Birth Registration: By law a person generally derives citizenship from one's father. One can derive citizenship from one's mother under either of the following two conditions: if the mother is a citizen and the father's nationality is unknown or he is stateless, or if the child was born in the country to a citizen mother and the child repudiates the father's nationality a year before reaching majority. Children born abroad to citizens can acquire citizenship one year before reaching the majority age of 18. Minor children of parents who have become naturalized citizens are also eligible for citizenship.

The process of registering a child and subsequently receiving a birth certificate is reportedly difficult. A lack of documentation, a situation common among the country's sub-Saharan ethnic minorities and the Haratines, may block a child's ability to enroll in school, to travel, and to have access to health care and other benefits of citizenship.

Education: The law mandates six years of school attendance for all children, but the law was not effectively enforced. Many children, particularly girls, did not attend school for six years. Children of slave-caste Haratine families often did not receive any education.

Child Abuse: Child abuse occurred, but no data was available on its prevalence. During the year the AFCF identified 2,375 minor victims of domestic violence (a 10 percent increase compared with 2014) and provided legal assistance to 1,775 of them.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal marriage age is 18, but authorities rarely enforced the law, and child marriage was widespread. Since consensual sex outside of marriage is illegal, a legal guardian can ask local authorities to permit a girl younger than 18 to marry. Local authorities frequently granted permission. Nevertheless, the government continued to work with UNICEF to implement a program to combat child marriage through judicial and political reforms. It also cooperated with civil society to disseminate the personal status code, which sets the minimum age for marrying at 18 and requires a woman's consent to seal a union. These efforts appeared to show encouraging results. According to UNICEF in 2011 (the most recent data available), the percentage of children who were married before age 15 dropped from 19 to 15 percent, while the percentage of those married before age 18 fell from 43 to 35 percent.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: See information for girls under 18 in Women's section above.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits sexual relations with a child under 18 years of age, with penalties of six months to two years in prison and a 120,000 to 180,000 ouguiyas (\$363 to \$545) fine. The possession of child pornography is illegal, with penalties of two months to one year in prison and a 160,000 to 300,000 ouguiyas (\$485 to \$910) fine. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is illegal, and conviction carries penalties of two to five years in prison and a fine of 200,000 to two million ouguiyas (\$606 to \$6,060). NGOs asserted the laws were not properly enforced.

Displaced Children: The Ministry of Social Affairs, Children, and Family monitored approximately 17,000 street children in nine of the country's 15 regions through youth integration centers and local NGOs. The centers focus on four major themes for the integration and promotion of children: enrollment in the civil register, social reintegration, fighting against child labor, and countering violence against children via psychosocial support. Despite this program, government assistance to these children was limited. A local NGO, Infancy and Development in Mauritania, monitored 500 children in Nouadhibou who lived on the streets largely as the result of poverty and the urbanization of formerly nomadic families.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information see the Department of State's country-specific information at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/country/Mauritania.html.

Anti-Semitism

A very small number of foreigners practiced Judaism. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, or the provision of other state services, and

there were no reports of governmental discrimination against persons with disabilities. The law provides for access to information and communication, and to existing public buildings through retrofitting and future buildings through amendments to the building code. Authorities did not enforce the law, and persons with disabilities generally did not have access to buildings, information, and communications. The law provides for access to air transport and other transportation at reduced rates for persons with disabilities, although such access was often not available.

During the year the government decreased its annual disability assistance outlay by 9 percent, allocating 85 million ouguiyas (\$258,000), compared with 94 million ouguiyas (\$285,000) allocated in 2014, to 60 national associations and NGOs working on disabilities issues. As in the past, it also contributed 30 million ouguiyas (\$91,000) in technical assistance. The government did not mandate preference in employment, education, or public accessibility for persons with disabilities, although it provided some rehabilitation and other assistance through small income-generating projects for such persons. One inspector from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Children, and Family was responsible for monitoring the projects implementation and oversaw social reintegration programs for persons with disabilities. It developed training programs and validated the certificates issued by the institutions created by professional associations of persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities may file complaints with the ministry and seek additional recourse through the Court of Justice. During the year the ministry received only one complaint, compared with two complaints the previous year.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Some ethnic groups faced governmental discrimination. Issuance of national identification cards, which are required for voting, to Western Saharans of Beydane ethnicity protected the interests of the dominant Beydane minority group at the expense of the Haratine and non-Arab sub-Saharan ethnic groups.

Racial and cultural tension and discrimination also arose from the geographic, linguistic, and cultural divides between Moors who, while historically representing a mix of Berber, Arab and sub-Saharan Africans, today largely identify culturally and linguistically as Arab, and sub-Saharan (Afro-Mauritanian) ethnic groups. The Moors encompass numerous tribal and clan groups and are further distinguished as either Beydane (White Moors) or Haratines (Black Moors, former slave caste). Beydane tribes and clans dominated positions in government and business far beyond their proportion of the population. The Haratines remained, as a group,

politically and economically weaker than the Beydane, although they are the largest ethnocultural group in the country. The sub-Saharan ethnic groups, which included the Halpulaar (the largest non-Moor group), Soninke, and Wolof, were concentrated in the Senegal River Valley and urban areas. They, along with the Haratines, remained grossly underrepresented in leadership positions in government, industry, and the military (see section 3).

The constitution designates Arabic the official language and Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof as the country's national languages. The government continued to encourage French and Arabic bilingualism within the school system. Arabic is the armed forces' language of internal communication. Neither the sub-Saharan national languages nor the local Hassaniya Arabic dialect was used as a language of instruction.

Ethnic friction frequently underlay protests and incidents of labor unrest. On occasion Haratine laborers invoked the legacy of slavery to explain their conflict with Beydane freight executives, port officials, retail storeowners, and public safety officers.

Ethnic rivalry also contributed to political divisions and tensions. Some political parties tended to have readily identifiable ethnic bases, although political coalitions among parties were increasingly important. Haratines and Mauriticians of sub-Saharan origin remained underrepresented in mid- to high-level public and private sector jobs.

Reports of land disputes among Haratines, sub-Saharans, and Beydane were common. According to human rights activists and press reports, local authorities continued to allow Beydane to appropriate land occupied by Haratines and sub-Saharans, to occupy property unlawfully taken from sub-Saharans by former governments, and to obstruct access to water and pasturage. For example, in May national political figures joined local human rights NGOs in accusing security forces of arresting and mistreating 14 sub-Saharan women and three men in the village of Thiambene near Rosso following a land dispute related to a mango plantation.

As in years past, human rights NGOs reported numerous cases of inheritance disputes between slaves or former slaves and their masters. Traditionally slave masters inherited their slaves' possessions.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

No laws protect LGBTI persons from discrimination. Under sharia as applied in the country, consensual same-sex sexual activity between men is punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals, and such activity between women is punishable by three months to two years in prison and a fine of 5,000 to 60,000 ouguiyas (\$15 to \$182). The LGBTI community was rarely identified or discussed, which observers attributed to the severity of the stigma and legal penalties attached to such labels.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Persons infected with HIV/AIDS were often isolated due to societal taboos and prejudice associated with the disease.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law allows all workers, except members of police, armed forces, and foreign and migrant workers, to form and join independent unions of their choice at the local and national levels and provides for the right to conduct legal strikes and to bargain collectively.

Prior authorization or approval by authorities is required before a union may be recognized. The public prosecutor must authorize all trade unions before they enjoy legal status. The public prosecutor may provisionally suspend a trade union at the request of the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization if ministry officials believe the union has not complied with the law. The law also provides that authorities may initiate legal proceedings against union leaders who undermine public order or make false statements. This law, in effect, authorizes administrative authorities to dissolve, suspend, or deregister trade union organizations by unilateral decision. Noncitizens do not have the right to become trade union officials unless they have worked in the country and in the profession represented by the trade union for at least five years.

Bargaining collectively at the national level requires previous authorization or approval by the president, who decides how collective bargaining is organized. No such authorization is required for collective bargaining at the company level. The

minister of labor, public service, and modernization of the administration may call for bargaining among employers, employees, labor unions, and the government. In addition the ministry is entitled to take part in the preparation of collective agreements. The law provides that the meeting must occur 15 days following a statement of nonagreement between parties.

The law provides for the right to strike, but aggrieved parties must follow long and complex procedures before taking such action. The government may also dissolve a union for what it considers an illegal or politically motivated strike. The law prohibits workers from holding sit-ins or blocking nonstriking workers from entering work premises. Workers must provide advance notice of at least 10 working days to the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration for any strike.

The government did not enforce the law effectively, and resources and inspections were often inadequate. While violators were seldom punished, on several occasions the government ordered the reinstatement of workers who had been wrongfully terminated and/or directed companies to improve employee benefits and services. In November 2014 the president announced a salary increase of 50 percent for salaries of under 100,000 ouguiyas (\$303) and a salary increase of 30 percent for salaries of more than 100,000 ouguiyas (\$303) a year. This decision was implemented in January.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were not fully respected, although unions exercised their right to organize workers during the year. There were reports of government interference with union activities. According to the reports from the General Confederation of Mauritanian Workers, for instance, the Ministry of Fisheries and the Maritime Economy deducted overtime pay from workers who had engaged in trade union activities as a means of pressuring them to withdraw their union membership.

Registration and strike procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Labor ministry officials routinely issued notices calling on all parties to negotiate. Such notices legally restrict workers from striking for a period of four months. If negotiations fail to produce an agreement, the case is referred to the Court of Arbitration. If the court fails to broker a mutually satisfactory agreement, employees may have to wait up to four additional months from the time of the decision before they can legally strike.

Workers and unions organized several strikes during the year, but in contrast with years past, authorities only occasionally employed force to disperse them.

While antiunion discrimination is illegal, national human rights groups and unions reported authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, including by children. It also criminalizes the practice of slavery and imposes penalties both on government officials who do not take action on reported cases and on those who benefit from contracting forced labor. Although the government made advances toward ending slavery, such as the adoption of the Roadmap for the Eradication of the Vestiges of Slavery, its efforts to enforce the 2007 antislavery law were widely seen as inadequate, given the severity of the problem. Tadamoun, the government agency charged with combating the “vestiges” of slavery, received 7.4 billion ouguiyas (\$24.6 million) of public funding. Nevertheless, its progress continued to be slow. Throughout the year Tadamoun’s director general underscored his intention to address slavery through indirect means, such as awareness campaigns and local agriculture projects, rather than through referrals to criminal prosecutors.

There was one conviction for slavery during the year, and the government initiated judicial proceedings against other alleged slave masters. In May the antislavery organization S.O.S. Esclaves filed a complaint on behalf of a 60-year-old woman, Salma Mint Vreikine, who accused the family of Hamoudi Ould Saleck of enslaving her, her husband, and their two children. After a preliminary court hearing, authorities arrested the alleged slave owner. The Supreme Court accepted Salek’s request for provisional release, which was granted after three months in prison.

Data on the number of victims removed from forced labor was not available. The International Labor Organization (ILO) continued to encourage the government to strengthen its prosecution efforts by ensuring that victims are able to turn to police and judicial authorities to assert their rights and that law enforcement officials conduct investigations promptly, effectively, and impartially throughout the country, as required by law. The ILO also urged the government to improve its victim protection efforts by adopting and implementing a comprehensive strategy to combat slavery. The government responded by adopting the new antislavery law.

Slavery-like practices, which typically flowed from ancestral master-slave relationships and involved both adults and children, continued throughout the year. Former slaves and their descendants remained in a dependent status in part due to a lack of marketable skills, poverty, and persistent drought. Such practices occurred primarily in areas where educational levels were generally low or a barter economy still prevailed, and in urban centers, including Nouakchott, where domestic servitude was relatively common. The practices commonly occurred where there was a need for workers to herd livestock, tend fields, and do other manual or household labor. Some former slaves and descendants of slaves were forced or had no other viable option than to work for their old masters in exchange for some combination of lodging, food, and medical care. Individuals in subservient circumstances were also vulnerable to mistreatment. Women with children faced particular difficulties; they could be compelled to remain in a condition of servitude, performing domestic duties, tending fields, or herding animals without remuneration.

Some former slaves reportedly continued to work for their former masters or others under exploitative conditions to retain access to land that they traditionally farmed. Although the law provides for distribution of land to the landless, including to former slaves, authorities rarely enforced it. Both NGO observers and government officials suggested that deeply embedded psychological and tribal bonds made it difficult for many individuals whose ancestors had been slaves for generations to break their bonds with former masters or their tribes. Some persons continued to link themselves to former masters because they believed their slave status had been divinely ordained or feared religious punishment if that bond was broken. Former slaves were often subjected to social discrimination and limited to performing manual labor in markets, ports, and airports.

Forced labor also occurred in urban centers where young children--often girls--were retained as unpaid household servants. Human rights groups reported that masters persuaded persons in slave-like relationships to deny such exploitative relationships to human rights activists.

NGOs continued to report cases of trafficking in persons for domestic service, street begging for unscrupulous religious teachers, and slave-like relationships as domestic servants or herders. Victims were men, women, and children.

In May the AFCF and El Hor (a leading antislavery NGO) denounced what they asserted was trafficking of young women from the Haratine community. The

AFCF president claimed 300 young women, who initially went to Saudi Arabia to perform white-collar employment, were instead used for menial labor and denied the right to terminate their employment. Local and international organizations helped repatriate 21 girls; others who wished to return home were in the process of repatriation. In its response to the complaints, the Mauritanian government characterized the situation as allowable under a labor agreement between Mauritania and Saudi Arabia and stated the victims should file a legal complaint with the Mauritanian Ministry of Justice, which had an office for that purpose.

In August 2014 activists from the IRA and El Hor staged a sit-in at a police station in Nouadhibou to protest the government's "indifference" to a slavery complaint. The Nouadhibou case involved two women: Vatma Mint Mohamed, a 22-year-old slave, and her alleged mistress, Zeina Mint Babe, who, according to the IRA, had planned to abduct Mint Mohamed and take her to Dakar. Although police questioned Mint Babe in the wake of the complaint, they declined to recommend criminal charges.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The labor code sets the minimum age for employment at 14. Nevertheless, children as young as 12 may be employed in most forms of family enterprise with authorization from the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration, as long as the work does not affect the child's health, exceed two hours per day, or occurs during school hours or holidays. The law states that employed children between ages 14 and 16 should receive 70 percent of the minimum wage and those who are 17 and 18 should receive 90 percent of the minimum wage. Children should not work more than eight hours a day and given one or several one-hour breaks, and they are prohibited from engaging in night work. In May the government began a participatory process that resulted in the development of a National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labor. This plan was an integral part of the government antislavery "Roadmap" adopted in March 2014. The law prohibits employing or inciting a child to beg and provides penalties for violations ranging from one to eight months' imprisonment and a fine of 180,000 to 300,000 ouguiyas (\$545 to \$910). The penalties were generally insufficient to deter violations. The law does not prohibit hazardous occupations and activities in all relevant child labor sectors, including agriculture. Moreover, no law prohibits the use of children for illicit activities, such as selling drugs.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. According to a 2014 UNICEF report, 21.5 percent of children ages five to 14 were engaged in labor. No mechanisms existed for exchanging information among agencies or assessing effectiveness. There was no specific mechanism for submitting complaints, other than labor inspectors or the Special Police Brigade for Minors. NGOs were the only organizations that handled cases of child victims, referred them to the Special Brigade for Minors, and pressured the government to adjudicate the cases or integrate the victims in social centers or schools.

An unknown number of “talibes” (young students), nearly all from the Halpulaar community, begged in the streets and gave the proceeds to their religious teachers as payment for religious instruction. There were reliable reports that some “marabouts” (religious teachers) forced their talibes to beg for more than 12 hours a day and provided them with insufficient food and shelter. The government continued a program to reduce the number of talibes and cooperated with NGOs to provide talibes with basic medical and nutritional care.

Child labor in the informal sector was common and a significant problem, particularly within poorer urban areas. Several reports suggested girls as young as seven--mainly from remote regions--were forced to work as unpaid domestic servants in wealthy urban homes.

Young children in the countryside were commonly engaged in herding, cultivation of subsistence crops, fishing, and other significant labor in support of their families. Young children in urban areas often drove donkey carts and delivered water and building materials. Street-gang leaders forced children to steal, beg, and sell drugs in the streets of the capital. In keeping with longstanding tradition, many children also served apprenticeships in small industries, such as metalworking, carpentry, vehicle repair, masonry, and the informal sector. The government continued to operate six Centers for Protection and Social Integration of Children in Difficult Situations: one each in Kiffa, Nouadhibou, and Rosso, and three in Nouakchott. During the year these centers hosted 325 children.

Also see the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/findings.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Women faced legal discrimination in other areas (see section 6). The law prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, disability, religion, political opinion, national origin, citizenship, social origin, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, age, or language, but the government often did not enforce the law. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to race and language. For example, in conformity with long-standing practice, the advancement of black Mauritians--both Haratines and sub-Saharan--in the armed services remained limited.

The law provides that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. The two largest employers, the civil service and the state mining company, observed this law, although most employers in the private sector did not. In the modern wage sector, women also received family benefits, including three months of paid maternity leave.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The nationally mandated minimum monthly wage for adults was 30,000 ouguiyas (\$91). The most recent poverty level estimate by the government, from 2008, the latest year for which figures are available, was an annual income of 129,600 ouguiyas (\$393), and the extreme poverty level for 2008 was an annual income of 96,400 ouguiyas (\$292).

The law provides that the standard legal nonagricultural workweek must not exceed either 40 hours or six days, unless there is overtime compensation, which is to be paid at rates graduated according to the number of supplemental hours worked. Domestic workers and certain other categories could work 56 hours per week. The law provides that all employees must be given at least one 24-hour period of rest per week. There are no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime.

The Labor Office of the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration is responsible for enforcing labor laws but did not do so effectively. The country had 42 labor inspectors and 19 inspectors in training at the National School of Administration, and they were expected to take up their positions in two years.

The government sets health and safety standards and in principle workers have the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of

employment. The law applies to all workers in the formal economy. The labor code applies to all workers regardless of nationality.

The majority of the working population labored in the informal sector, primarily in subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. According to the General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania, only 25 percent of workers filled positions with regular pay.

Despite the law, labor unions pointed to conditions approaching modern slavery in several sectors, including the food-processing industry. In these sectors workers did not have contracts or receive pay stubs. Their salaries were below the official minimum wage, and they worked in unfavorable conditions. Sometimes they did not receive pay for several months.

Working conditions in the fishing industry were similarly difficult. Commercial fishermen reportedly often exceeded 40 hours of work per week without receiving overtime pay. Additionally, some factory workers employed by fish processing plants and boat manufacturers did not receive contracts guaranteeing the terms of their employment. Government inspections of fishing vessels, processing plants, and boat factories remained rare.

Violations of minimum wage or overtime laws were frequent in many sectors but more common in the informal economy, which includes domestic service, street vending, artisanal fishing, garbage collection, bus fare collection, donkey cart driving, apprenticeship, auto repair, and other employment.

According to the General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania, the National Agency of Social Security registered 417 workplace fatalities or injuries through December, 243 of which occurred at SNIM, the national mining company.