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(Elizabeth  
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Photo)

## Evidence shows plague of slavery persists in northwest Africa

**By Elizabeth Bryant**

*Religion News Service*

NOUAKCHOTT, Mauritania (RNS)—In the rigid caste system of her Kunta tribe, Ghoive Mint Sabahr knew her place.

From dawn to dusk, she tended cattle and goats on the sandy plains of central Mauritania. School was a luxury for privileged children. Once a year, her owners—nomadic Moors belonging to the upper echelons of the tribe—gave Sabahr a new veil or dress. Just about every-other day, she says, she was beaten.

“I thought being a slave was completely normal, that this was a rational situation,” recalled the 26-year-old woman, now free and living in Nouakchott.

Technically, slavery has been outlawed three times in this northwest African country, most recently in 1981. Mauritania's Islamic government denies it exists beyond rare exceptions. But reports by human rights groups and former slaves like Sabahr suggest otherwise.

“There's a tacit acceptance of slavery here, out of shame or out of convenience, which must be denounced,” said Boubacar Messaoud, head of SOS Slaves, a Nouakchott-based advocacy group dedicated to eliminating chattel slavery in Mauritania. “A society that cannot look itself in the face cannot advance.”

From her new home in the capital, Sabahr described a lonely, arduous childhood. Her mother ran away when she was an infant. Her sisters were sent to serve other families. So unquestioned was her bondage, Sabahr said, that her master once identified her as a slave to a government census taker.

Stories like Sabahr's are difficult to verify independently. But reports of bondage continue to haunt a number of Saharan nations straddling the Arab and African worlds, where slavery flourished long before the transatlantic trade in humans.

Sudan, where the government also has denied slavery allegations, offers the most extreme example of long-standing injustices that have exploded into violence—first, in a years-long civil war pitting an Arab north against a black-African south, and more recently in Darfur.

But African analysts and human rights advocates point to examples like Niger and Chad, where rigid caste systems based on color, religion or ethnicity quietly persist. Mauritania, a desert nation of 2.7 million people, invariably is cited as a top offender.

“Mauritania and Sudan are probably the worst cases of slavery,” said Tommy Calvert, chief of external operations for the Boston-based American Anti-Slavery Group. “You're talking about chattel slavery, handed down from generation to generation.”

Arabs and Berbers who invaded this land centuries ago forced many indigenous Africans into bondage.

Intermixing has since blurred skin colors, but ethnic Arabs still are known as White Moors, and they dominate the government, army and private sector. Haratines, or black Africans, remain at the bottom of the social and economic heap.

Still, defining slavery, much less its prevalence here, is a matter of dispute. Mauritania's government claims reports of involuntary servitude are exaggerated, and describes a raft of educational and poverty-alleviation programs targeting its Haratine population.

“There are many opportunities for rapid, government-assisted advancement of the descendants of former slaves,” said Kemal Mohamedou, a diplomat at the Mauritanian Embassy in Washington.

In e-mailed remarks, he noted a number of governmental officials, including the country's prime minister, are descendants of slaves.

Washington—which has forged close ties with Mauritania's authoritarian president, Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, in the fight against terrorism—also cites only “vestiges” and “consequences” of slavery in a human rights report.

But a number of critics assert that while examples of classic slavery have dwindled, new forms of bondage remain as deeply destructive and entrenched in Mauritanian society.

“We haven't noticed any change,” said Adotei Akwei, African advocacy director for the U.S. chapter of human rights advocate Amnesty International, which wrote a scorching report on slavery in Mauritania two years ago.

In some cases, ex-slaves pay former owners with crops and other forms of remittances, activists say. Others continue to live with their former masters long after they are technically freed.

“Slaves cry when their masters die,” Messaoud of SOS Slaves said. “That's all they have—their masters and God.”

Sghaira Mint Tesh only has bitter memories. Like Sabahr, Tesh describes days of drudgery and beatings, working for a family of light-skinned Moors in southern Mauritania. When her master's daughter married, she was sent to live in the new household. But her old owner continued to stalk her, she said.

“He would follow me when I left the village to care for the animals,” said Tesh, an ethnic African in her 20s. “He asked for sex. When I refused, he would hit me. Then he would rape me.”

She pointed to her infant and to two small children, standing shyly by the door of her tiny Nouakchott home. “Those are his,” she said.

In 2002, Tesh ran away from her owners. Clutching her two children and pregnant with a third, she walked and walked. Eventually she came into contact with anti-slavery activists, who helped her start a new life in Nouakchott.

While the government toughened anti-slavery laws last year, critics say it rarely enforces them. Few cases ever wind up in Mauritanian courts, said lawyer Mohamed Ahmed El Hadj Sidi. Sidi comes from a family of slave owners. Today, he represents ex-slaves, pro bono.

“The government tries to settle the problem quietly because they don't want a judicial decision recognizing there is slavery,” Sidi said. “And the victims rarely file charges because they don't know their rights.”

Sabahr also fled in early 2003, ultimately finding refuge with an uncle in Nouakchott. Now she is married to another ex-slave.

From their one-room, cement-block home in the city's ramshackle outskirts, the couple is slowly piecing together a new life. But they do not consider themselves entirely free.

“Even my current work is a form of slavery,” said Sabahr's husband, Bilal Ould Samba, a mason.

“We're badly paid. We're exploited.”

As Sabahr nursed her infant son, her husband smiled bitterly.

“For me,” he said, “freedom doesn't exist.”