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Slavery thrives in Mauritania

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HRWF (28.10.2013) - On 14th October 2013, the Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament heard testimony on slavery in the Sahel region of Africa, particularly in Mauritania. The panel was shared by Biram Abeid, an abolition activist of Mauritania, Sarah Mathewson of Anti-Slavery International and Jean-Marie Kagabo of the International Labour Organization.

Worldwide from 21 to 30 million people are estimated to be enslaved today. Mauritania tops the list with up to 600 000 people in some form of slavery or twenty per cent of the country's total population of three million. Slaves in Mauritania are regarded as personal property by the dominant Berber-Arab class and slave families are passed down from one generation to the next.

In May 2013, the European Parliament passed a resolution that "condemns in the strongest terms" slavery in Mauritania.

Slavery is officially illegal in the country; however, even when cases are brought to court, the perpetrators are never prosecuted. The Government routinely denies the existence of slavery within its borders. At this meeting, the Ambassador of Mauritania read a statement, which contained almost no reference to the subject at hand. The pretence of the Ambassador's remarks was not lost on any that were present.

Despite pressure from international actors, not much improvement in the situation has been achieved. French MEP Jean-Jacob Bicep charged Mauritania with the misuse of funds in the country's recent census, which was largely sponsored by the European Union. Could the link to cooperation and development aid be a possible leverage point for ending slavery in Mauritania? he posited. The representative from the External Action Service was more cautious in his assessment, saying that human rights are always on the agenda in dialogues with the Mauritanian Government. The EU is seeking to make headway in its fight against the country's historic practice of slavery, but the road is difficult indeed.
