

**ORAL STATEMENT**

International Humanist and Ethical Union

**UN Human Rights Council, 31<sup>st</sup> Session (29<sup>th</sup> February – 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016)**

**UPR: Mauritania**

**Elizabeth O'Casey**

Whilst we welcome Mauritania's actions to help combat slavery [in the country] and to designate slavery and torture as crimes against humanity, we remain deeply concerned about the "long-standing and embedded nature of it in Mauritian society"<sup>1</sup> and the great deal of work that still needs to be done.

In this intervention however, we would like to concentrate particularly on the grave situation for those seeking to highlight and criticise the ongoing practices of slavery; those who have suffered a history of harassment, intimidation and repression by the Mauritanian authorities.<sup>2</sup>

An estimated 21 anti-slavery campaigners were arrested following the protests and solidarity rallies held in Mauritania at the end of 2014, and their headquarters closed down. The activists were held in different detention centres, without access to phones or visits from their families, and in many places, their conditions of detention did not comply with the minimum international standards.<sup>3</sup>

A particularly urgent case is that of writer **Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'Kheitir**, who in December 2014, was sentenced to death for "apostasy." He had been arrested for publishing an article in which he highlighted the indentured servitude in Mauritanian society, often socially justified with reference to national cultural identity and in particular to Islamic tradition.<sup>4</sup> M'Kheitir remains on death row and has been kept in solitary confinement since being charged.

What is particularly disturbing in relation to these cases, is not only the complete lack of regard for the basic rights to expression, assembly and association, but these individuals are *seeking to exercise such rights in order to highlight and improve the rights-situation for enslaved people in Mauritania*. The work of anti-slavery activists and the crucial role they play in holding the government to account in terms of its human rights obligations and commitments must be respected fully by the Mauritanian government<sup>5</sup>.

We call on it to cease its harassment, intimidation and ill-treatment of anti-slavery campaigners; and, crucially, to remove the crime of apostasy from national legislation and drop the wholly unjust charges against M'Kheitir and release him immediately.

<sup>1</sup> <http://unpo.org/downloads/1208.pdf>, p.vi

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/mauritania-must-end-clamp-down-anti-slavery-activists-2014-11-12>

<sup>3</sup> <http://unpo.org/downloads/1156.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://iheu.org/iheu-condemns-death-sentence-for-apostasy-handed-to-writer-in-mauritania/>,

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/mauritania-must-end-clamp-down-anti-slavery-activists-2014-11-12>