

30 September 2016

## Mauritania – 13 members of IRA-Mauritania transferred to Zouérat detention center

On 28 September 2016, thirteen human rights defenders from the organisation ***Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste Mauritanie – IRA (Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement)*** were transferred from Dar-Naim prison in Nouakchott to a detention center in Zouérat, over 700 kilometres away from their families and lawyers. As the appeal against their conviction remains pending, there are concerns that this transfer may affect their access to legal representation and therefore their right to a defence.

IRA-Mauritanie works to eradicate slavery in Mauritania, as many descendants of former slaves are still deprived of their basic human rights, even though slavery was officially abolished in 1981. IRA-Mauritanie was the recent recipient of two international awards for their work, the 2015 Human Rights Tulip Award and the 2016 James Lawson Award from the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict. The president of IRA-Mauritanie, Mr [Biram Dah Abeid](#), received the 2013 Front Line Defenders Award, the 2013 United Nations Prize for Human Rights, and he is a 2016 U.S. Department of State Trafficking In Persons Report Hero.

Between 29 June to 4 July 2016, thirteen members of IRA-Mauritanie, including Mr [Abdellahi Matalla Saleck](#), Mr [Amadou Tidjane Diop](#), and Mr [Hamady Lehbouss](#) were arrested in Nouakchott, and taken to different detention centers without being informed of the reasons for their arrests. The arrests followed in the wake of riots which took place near Nouakchott on 29 June 2016, organised by the Hratine people, whose slum the authorities planned to destroy for an alternative development project. Despite the fact that no members of IRA-Mauritanie participated in these riots, the authorities arrested them and sentenced them on 18 August 2016 on diverse counts related to the protests with penalties ranging from 3 to 15 years' imprisonment.

On 22 August 2016, the legal team for the thirteen defenders filed an appeal of their conviction, which remains pending. While no date has yet be set for the appeal, court proceedings will take place in Nouakchott, while the thirteen defenders have been transferred to Zouarét, over 700 km away from the appellate court. It is reported that the thirteen defenders will soon be transferred to a detention center in Bir Moghreïn, approximately 1200 kilometers from Nouakchott. The distance between their new detention center and Nouakchott will affect their access to legal representation and therefore their right to defense.

This judicial harassment of members of IRA-Mauritanie is part of a pattern of judicial harassment against human rights defenders in Mauritania. The President of IRA-Mauritanie, Mr Biram Dah Abeid and the Vice President, Mr [Brahim Bilal Ramdhane](#), were arrested on charges of “*illegal assembly and revolt, incitement to revolt, and refusal to respect administrative authorities' orders*”. After 18 months imprisonment, they were released on 17 May 2016 following a decision by the Supreme Court. Front Line Defenders is concerned about the transfer of the thirteen defenders to Zouarét as it distances them from their families, legal representation, and doctors. In light of the repeated harassment of members of IRA Mauritania, Front Line Defenders believe that this decision may be motivated by their legitimate activities in the defence of human rights.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Mauritania to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release the 13 defenders and quash the sentences against them, as Front Line Defenders believes that this judicial harassment comes as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the thirteen defenders;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Mauritania are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.