

July 7, 2023

TO: Office of the United States Trade Representative

RE: FRN 88 FR 31579 - Regarding eligibility of countries to be designated as beneficiary sub-Saharan African countries under African Growth and Opportunity Act

We the undersigned civil and human rights defenders urge the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) to maintain Mauritania's ineligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

Mauritania is not qualified to receive AGOA trade benefits due to the government's failure to make progress toward ending forced labor, as well as its continued propagation of apartheid measures against Black citizens. In 2020, the UN reported that "680,000 out of a total [Mauritanian] population of 3.4 million" are enslaved (*Appendix F*). This practice persists into 2023, as the Mauritanian government and legal system fail to take concrete action against this crime.

As noted in a January 2023 letter from Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Mike Carey, even when they are not enslaved, Black Mauritians "face significant discrimination, forced displacement, and exclusion from full citizenship rights" because of racial bias exhibited by the Berber power structure in Mauritania (*Appendix B*). Land-grabbing, language erasure, and denial of identity documents are intentional measures to limit Black Mauritians' economic mobility and prosperity. This system of repression leads many Black Mauritians to flee the nation, often along deadly migration routes, as well as retaliation if forced to return (*Appendices G, H, I*).

The recent escalation of political repression and police violence against Black Mauritians only adds to the country's clear ineligibility for the AGOA (*Appendix D - content warning, graphic images and video*). After local and regional elections were held in May 2023, those who protested corruption in the voting process, including anti-slavery leader Biram Dah Abeid, were arrested. Mauritanian police beat protestors, including Abeid's wife in the ensuing outrage.

Also in May 2023, Mauritanian police attempted to rob Oumar Diop, a man saving money to seek asylum in the United States; took him to a police station; and electrocuted him to death. As protests in the wake of this atrocious act spread, more police and government repression followed—including tear gas, beatings, torture, internet shutdowns, border closures, and the fatal shooting of a young protestor named Mohamed Lamine (*Appendix D - content warning, graphic images and video*).

Violations of the rule of law, the right to due process, political pluralism, and freedom of speech and assembly cannot be tolerated (*Appendices J and D - content warning, graphic images and video*). Nor can police murders of activists like Mohamed Lamine and Souvi Ould Jibril Ould Cheine earlier this year, arrests of other dissenters like Mamadou “Mickey” Aly Diallo, and the atrocious extortion and electrocution of Oumar Diop. The internet blackout that occurred upon Mr. Diop’s police murder, subsequent protests, and government violence against Black people is further proof that democracy is dead in Mauritania.

For these and other reasons, Mauritania should not be rewarded with the reinstatement of AGOA trade benefits in 2024.

Respectfully,
Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in US
Undocublack Network
Cleveland Jobs with Justice
Global Cleveland
MountainGem Advocacy & Communications
Ohio Immigrant Alliance
The Willows Project (Cincinnati)

APPENDIX

A - Letter from 87 non-governmental organizations to Biden administration, urging designation of Temporary Protected Status for Mauritania due to civil/human rights abuses

B - Letter from Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Mike Carey urging designation of TPS for Mauritania due to civil/human rights abuses

C - Letter from other Members of Congress urging designation of TPS for Mauritania and other countries due to civil/human rights abuses

D - Timeline: Anti-Black Violence In Mauritania, May-June 2023 [content warning - graphic images and video of police violence and dead bodies]

E - Article showing indifference of Mauritanian government to nationals who left to seek asylum

F - CNN expose on slavery in Mauritania

G - Backgrounder on land-grabbing in Mauritania from the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in US

H - Black Mauritians’ Ongoing Search for Safety

I - Abdoul Mbow: “We are people, we are not ghosts - Migrants Dying to Live” (Columbus Dispatch)

J - Death of Souvi Ould Jibril Ould Cheine