

Open letter from Biram Dah Abeid
Aleg Prison, 20 August 2015

My name is Biram Dah Abeid. I have devoted my life to the struggle against slavery, impunity and injustice. It's a promise I made to my father, who married a slave and whose family was ripped apart because of slavery. Today, I am writing to you from the prison cell I am kept in for speaking out to end this cruel trade.

My country, Mauritania, has the worst slavery problem on earth -- the Haratin, (a reference to slaves and former slaves), represent 50% of the Mauritanian population. Babies are born to masters and forced to serve them their whole lives.

In October 2008, I took the decision to create IRA-Mauritania (Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement Initiative), an independent, peaceful and non-violent organisation whose primary goal is to deliver our country from the scourge of slavery.

Despite support from the international community, and many sit-ins and protests on behalf of slaves and former slaves, our organization IRA-Mauritania is not recognized by the Government of Mauritania. Instead, our members have been harassed, tortured, tried, convicted and imprisoned, accused of belonging to an illegal organization. I have been behind bars since November, with my assistant Brahim Bilal. This is my third spell in jail for speaking out against slavery.

The government has passed laws that speak of punishing those involved in slavery, but in practice it has focused on stamping out our fight to end exploitation of slaves. My government wants to silence me, by demonizing me, harassing me, and imprisoning me, and hopes I will abandon this cause by being silent or leaving the country.

Yet I refuse to give in to their blackmail.

To end this suffering, we need more than words from the international community, we urgently need strong action. The leaders of the European Union, and the United States have strong ties with the Mauritanian government. From the darkness of my prison cell, I appeal to them to use all legal and diplomatic channels, including the suspension of financial aid, to push the government to stop the repression and take serious steps to eradicate slavery, and the racism and exclusion that underpins it.

I refuse to give up. I will not be silenced. I will not stop challenging the dogma which is used to legitimise slavery here. I refuse to give up on my country, and those whose lives are blighted by slavery. Today, I call on the world to support our struggle for freedom.