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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, welcome to the 67th meeting of the subcommittee on international human rights.

Today we have the privilege and opportunity to engage with Biram Dah Abeid, a leader in the anti-slavery movement. He was listed as one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in 2017, and received the UN human rights prize in 2013. He has appeared before the EU Parliament, and has been honoured by then secretary of state John Kerry.

As foreign and abhorrent as this concept seems to us in Canada, his grandparents and many of his siblings and family were enslaved. Mr. Abeid belongs to the Haratin ethnic group, half of whom are in de facto slavery in Mauritania. In 2008 Mr. Abeid founded the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement to raise awareness about modern slavery, particularly among existing slaves, who are often unaware of their rights. Today's meeting is to take advantage of the opportunity to hear from Mr. Abeid while he is in Canada, along with Madam Ba, of course.

Mr. Abeid, I invite you to make your opening remarks. Please take as long as you need. Then we will proceed with questions from the members of this subcommittee on international human rights. Thank you very much.

Please proceed, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid (President, Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA Mauritania)): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all members of the committee.

I am a descendent of slaves. All around me since I was a child, people have been born as the property of other people. Those persons are not entitled to papers establishing their civil status or to an education. They perform forced labour without rest, pay, or care. They are liable to be pledged, sold, or transferred to others, and they are subjected to corporal punishment.

Women and girl slaves are the property of their masters, who have the right to assault them sexually, regardless of their age, number, or consent. That is why girl slaves, from the ages of 8, 9, or 10, have already been raped several times by their masters and by their masters' sons, male relatives, employees, strangers, and even their masters' friends. Some of the girls whom we have freed from slavery, with considerable difficulty, and who still live in my home at the age of 17 or 18, have already had three or four children and cannot identify the fathers of those children because they have been assaulted by many different men. They cannot refuse because they are brought up to submit.

In Mauritania, there is a black code, a code of slavery, that is still in force. That code is viewed as the sole official interpretation of Islamic sharia, and thus of the Quran and the deeds of the prophet, and it is considered valid. In Mauritania, this black code is called the Malikite rite and Islamic sharia, and it is entrenched in the Mauritanian constitution as the main source of law. This black code, this slave code, is extremely harsh, violent, and atrocious. For example, it permits the castration of slaves. The code provides that, when beautiful boy slaves grow up, they must be castrated to prevent sexual relations between them and the master's wives or daughters, so that the master's pure blood does not mix with the impure blood of slaves.

In Mauritania, 20% of the population is still subject to hereditary slavery. These people have no rights and suffer every type of violence. The Mauritanian state established by colonial France inherited the dominant slave-owning groups and the Arab-Berber minority. As a result, by the time France colonized Mauritania, the Arab-Berbers had already colonized and enslaved the native Africans.

The Haratin community, to which I belong and which currently represents 50% of the population of Mauritania, includes slaves and descendants of slaves. In Mauritania, 20% of the population, and these include some of the Haratin who represent 50% of the population, are still slaves subject to the system of forced labour, sale, secession, rape, mutilation, and castration.

The Arab-Berber community is a minority in Mauritania. It has established a form of apartheid in West Africa, specifically in Mauritania. This minority, which does not even represent 20% of the population, nevertheless controls all the levers of power in the country: the economy, wealth, the banks, the judicial system, the security apparatus, and the government.

•(1310)

This is why our organization, which we established in 2008, is banned in Mauritania. Our organization is a civil rights movement involving hundreds of thousands of Mauritians who support the cause every day through demonstrations. The organization is banned and violently repressed. As its president, I have been imprisoned three times. I was last released from prison on May 17, 2016 after being incarcerated for a year and a half.

In 2012, I was imprisoned for publicly and wilfully burning the black code, which reduces us to slavery. I was also convicted of apostasy. The justice system and the government found that I had stopped adhering to the Islamic religion. A person who does so in Mauritania is liable to the death penalty. Consequently, I spent four months on death row awaiting my execution, but the international community, through the countries of the European Union, the United Nations, and major international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, in particular, brought pressure to bear on Mauritania to release me.

However, two of my friends are still in prison, serving five-year sentences. Many of us, including my wife and children, were injured because the police attacked my house several times. The police use tear gas grenades, sound bombs, and incendiary bombs. My wife was hit in the face by a tear gas bomb during one of the attacks. She was hospitalized and lost the use of her left eye.

We are not allowed to meet in Mauritania. When I go there, I am escorted by the Mauritanian police, under heavy surveillance, from the airport or the border with Senegal, where I enter from time to time. All population groups are prohibited from visiting me at home. The government does not want those populations to listen to me. The police sometimes intervene when they enter my house and resort to violence by throwing tear gas bombs and sound bombs against the building. They attack and hit people in and around the house.

When I entered Mauritania on January 15 last, my house was violently attacked and several persons were injured. Some of the sympathizers and supporters who had come to my house had to be hospitalized.

This security system has been reinforced in Mauritania to prevent the country's native inhabitants—that is to say, those who are not Arab but rather black, the Fulani, Wolof, Bambara and Haratin—from speaking.

An act was passed two days ago providing for five-year prison sentences for any person who criticizes the slavery code, which these people call Islamic sharia.

This is what is happening in Mauritania. Native inhabitants do not have documents proving their civil status. They are stateless in their own country. The results of elections are falsified because the members of a single community hold documents attesting to their civil status and are able to vote. A single community controls the judicial system and has judges, security forces, and senior armed forces officers at its disposal.

For our part, we are forced to remain silent and follow orders. All our lands have been expropriated. We no longer own land. These people own it now.

In spite of everything, the Mauritanian government has economic, security, and military relations with the European Union and economic relations with the United States of America and certain corporations, including Canadian corporations, which exploit oil deposits and operate gold and iron mines in Mauritania.

•(1315)

In this iron mining system, another form of slavery, a modern slavery, has also struck our community. Workers are not treated well and are underpaid. They have no right to strike and are punished if they attempt to strike in the mines or ports. They are the only community that performs manual labour. The people in the dominant Arab community, who consider themselves white, do not do manual labour. They consider it demeaning and degrading. According to their code of honour, they must not perform household work such as cooking or washing dishes or clothing. That is why they are compelled to keep many people from our population, women and children in particular, in their homes as slaves.

I prefer to stop here so you can ask questions.

Thank you, honourable members.

•(1320)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Abeid, for your testimony here today.

I'm going to open the session to the floor.

We're going to begin with MP Sweet, please.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your courage and your long-standing commitment to free your people, Mr. Abeid.

Last year, just after you were released from prison, there was a large arrest of about 20 people, who were sentenced to 15 years. Are they still in jail? Do you anticipate that they'll have to spend the entire 15-year term there?

Second, from your testimony, it sounds like the Mauritanian authorities in the government there are trying to double down and in fact get worse, in spite of the fact that there's now international pressure and your organization is putting pressure on them.

Could you respond to those two questions for me, please?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: Yes.

Of the 21 persons who were sentenced to prison terms of up to 15 years, five are still in prison serving five-year sentences. The others have been released in response to international pressure.

Since then, the Mauritanian government has reinforced this system of repression. I was previously able to hold meetings at my home and in other private homes, but the repression has been stepped up to such a degree that I have been unable to travel since I was released from prison in 2016. When I enter Mauritania, I am required to stay at my home under house arrest. I cannot go elsewhere and am unable to leave my home. Police surround my house. When I go out, police officers tell me I cannot do so. If I leave the country, they accompany me to the airport or to the Senegal border. I am prohibited from entering the towns, villages, and neighbourhoods or from meeting people. All of my friends who are the leaders of the organization are still subject to the same ban.

In addition, the international community has denounced Mauritania but has not cut off economic and military aid to the country. The Mauritanian regime receives a great deal of money from the European Union for fishing and mining co-operation purposes. It also receives a lot of money for co-operation with U.S., Canadian, and French corporations operating gold mines and iron mines and developing oil deposits. It also receives significant military aid from the United States and the European Union for anti-terrorism co-operation under which training is provided to Mauritanian military personnel and police officers. However, that training is used against us. Officers who receive training in the United States, France, and Germany punish and torture anti-slavery and human rights activists and members of the civil rights movement who want to bring democracy to Mauritania.

We hope economic sanctions will be introduced in addition to diplomatic pressure.

[English]

Mr. David Sweet: Have any countries to date done anything as far as sanctioning the authorities goes? Have there been any kind of targeted sanctions? Are there any countries or are all the western countries in normal relations with Mauritania?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: All western countries maintain good relations with Mauritania. The only sanctions against the Mauritanian government are denunciations by UN special rapporteurs respecting extreme poverty, human rights, racism, xenophobia, slavery, and torture. The rapporteurs prepare strongly worded statements and documents that annoy the Mauritanian government, but other countries unfortunately have not yet gone beyond statements of principle to impose sanctions.

•(1325)

[English]

Mr. David Sweet: According to your testimony here, Mr. Dah, it's closer to 20% of the population that is actually enslaved today in Mauritania. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: Yes, that is the case. We at IRA Mauritania have used our resources to establish our own statistics, and we have come up with the figure of 20%. The Walk Free Foundation, an Australian NGO, has prepared statistics and found that the figure was 4%.

We have asked the United Nations to persuade the Mauritanian government to allow an independent survey to be conducted to establish statistics on slavery, to which it initially agreed.

The United Nations Development Programme, or UNDP, and the European Union provided funding for the survey to ascertain the number of slaves and their circumstances in Mauritania. Unfortunately, the Mauritanian government backpedalled and refused to allow the survey to proceed, even though the UNDP had recruited an international expert.

We therefore concluded that the government was afraid the entire world would discover the extent of slavery in Mauritania. Denial of slavery is the Mauritanian government's diplomatic and official line. If it allows a survey to be conducted, it will show that the government is wrong to say there is no slavery, whereas it is widespread. That is why the government has refused to permit the survey that the UN and the European Union have already funded.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Abeid, for your very empowering testimony.

Slavery is very much alive today. Today our subcommittee has undertaken a study on human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking, within Southeast Asia. The more we study this, the more we understand that trafficking in persons is very much alive across the world. When we talk about slavery, especially here in North America, we take examples from the slavery in the United States and in Canada of Africans, and now Canadians or Americans.

Personally, one thing for me that was a lesson was the level of education and also the grassroots participation with respect to denouncing slavery as an accepted norm within a society.

Can you speak a little bit about the grassroots everyday Mauritanian who takes part in slavery within the country? What steps can we take to further educate not only those who are enslaved but also those who are enslaving at the grassroots level, who are taking part in this process?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: In our country, human trafficking, which is a modern form of slavery, is still rampant. This modern slavery co-exists with traditional slavery, that is to say slavery in which people are born as the property of other persons. The status and condition of slave are transmitted from generation to generation. In Mauritania's slavery code, all female slaves automatically transmit slave status to their children.

For example, my father's mother is a slave, but my father was emancipated while in her womb and is therefore free. Why was he emancipated? My mother's master became ill and consulted a scholar or imam to ask him what he could do to get better. The imam told him that, in order to heal, he had to perform a charitable act toward god. He told him to release a slave since that is the best charitable act there is. Rather than release my grandmother, the master released the child in her womb, the fetus. Under Mauritania's black code, fetuses are objects to be bartered, since private ownership is exercised over slaves, just as one may sell, transfer, or give away one's glasses or tables. Slaves are human goods. After he was born, my father grew up free, whereas his brothers remained slaves because their mother was a slave. They were thus the property of the same man.

My father married a slave girl with whom he had two children. One day, the girl's master sold my father's wife and both children. They in fact belonged not to my father, but to their master.

This is why, when my father sent me to school, he told me he wanted me to study so I could fight slavery intellectually.

The slavery that afflicts us is somewhat particular because it is a continuous chain. There will be new generations of slaves as long as there are female slaves. The challenge facing IRA is to find ways to put a stop to the reproduction of slavery.

In the field, we tried to fight to have Mauritania adopt anti-slavery laws, and the government enacted anti-slavery legislation as a result of our struggle, but now our challenge is to determine how to ensure those laws are enforced.

We worked on the ground, mobilizing hundreds and thousands of people to go to a police station or appear before a court to attract the national and international press and observers. We wanted to show that thousands of Mauritians were joining forces to demand that the anti-slavery law be enforced on criminal slavers.

The authorities began to enforce the law somewhat, and that broke the chains and helped release thousands of slaves. Thanks to the pressure we exercised, the government sent criminals to prison, but there was a subsequent reversal. The dominant groups protested to the government, which then decided to go after our leadership and eradicate our organization.

Here are the best ways to help us. We need to train IRA members and fund education projects without them receiving media coverage and without confronting the authorities. We also need to fund re-employment projects for people released from slavery. We have many examples of projects to which we can refer you and that you can study. We will discuss the matter with you to assist you in this matter.

• (1330)

[English]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Looking at the example of North America, African Canadians and African Americans still deal with the impact of their past generations having been enslaved. That impact is with respect to access to education and access to opportunity. It really comes with that social stigma, that social norm that encompasses the idea of slavery, where one person is not equal to another.

I take your point with respect to providing further education to not only those who are enslaved but also those who are enslaving, and providing further supports to governments so that they can better enforce these laws that they have now put in place. When we talk about providing those education opportunities to both groups, which international organizations are on the ground assisting right now, and which can be of better help in providing those resources and those opportunities?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: There is the Freedom House organization, which is based in the United States and is working with us. The Front Line Defenders organization, which is based in Dublin, Ireland, is also making efforts. There is Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture, ACAT, as well as Anti-Slavery International, which is based in London, and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, UNPO, based in Brussels. All these organizations are working with us in the field.

• (1335)

[English]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

What do you think the Government of Canada can do to further assist in this dilemma?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: The Canadian government can help us by using its diplomacy to convince its western partners, whether they be European or American, to harden their position toward Mauritania by stating that the military and economic assistance and co-operation they provide to Mauritania are conditional on its efforts to respect human rights, end slavery, stop its persecution of, lift restrictions on, and put an end to the harassment and imprisonment of human rights advocates and anti-slavery activists.

The Canadian government itself can also help us exfiltrate activists and individuals who are very much in danger in Mauritania and provide them with compassionate asylum here. Here these people would be safe and would be able to study and make their contribution to the struggle through international forums and organizations. Many officials in Mauritania experience nothing but prison and repression. They can be of great use to us by leaving Mauritania and coming here and taking training in a climate of peace.

Families, and thus children and women as well, are very much in danger and suffer under police actions. The families of activists are targeted. Members of certain families have been attacked, tortured, and seriously injured by police on numerous occasions. It is the families that suffer the consequences. Every time the government has a problem with our organization, it starts by punishing our families.

Canada is a big country, a land of welcome for endangered populations around the world. It is extremely important that those persons in danger, particularly women, children, and certain activists, be able to come here with your assistance. It is especially important that active members of our organization be able to take university training here, human rights training of all kinds, and to enhance their ability to act. This is important in developing our movement and expanding its scope and activity in Mauritania.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to MP Laverdière.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dieureudieuf trop. Thank you very much for what you are doing. Thank you for your courage above all.

I would like to go back to a question that one of my colleagues asked. You estimate that approximately 20% of people are enslaved in one way or another, whereas other organizations say 4% or even slightly more than 1%.

How do you explain the difference between those figures?

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: I explain the difference between those figures as being the result of the fact that foreign organizations do not have the capacity, human resources, expertise, or knowledge of the country and society necessary to achieve an appropriate overview of the situation.

We maintain that figure because we are members of the society and live in that society. People can conceal from foreigners things that cannot be concealed from us. We use the same intellectual tools as Mauritians, unlike the Australians, who do not have the same cultural systems as Mauritians. That is what explains the difference.

The percentage we cite is accurate. I have proof that it is accurate: the government refuses to allow the survey to be conducted. If the government knew there was no slavery, it would conduct the survey because it would know that no one would discover all these cases of slavery. It refuses to allow the survey to be conducted because it is afraid of the figure that will be revealed to the world.

• (1340)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Not to mention that it can be difficult to travel in certain regions of the country, particularly in Chinguetti.

Is slavery more concentrated in the regions, in Nouakchott, or is it spread roughly evenly across the country?

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: There is a lot more slavery in Nouakchott because that is where the Arab-Berber ruling class, which needs slaves, lives. There are no regions in particular, but there is slavery where the Arab-Berber populations live. In fact, their way of life and culture are based on slavery. In their communities, they cannot live day to day without slaves. Slavery is part of their code of honour and way of life.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: That leads me to another question.

Elections were held in Mauritania three years ago. Unless I am mistaken, the opposition has boycotted those elections. One way to solve this basic problem might perhaps be to have a government that represents the population as a whole.

Do you have any comments to make about the last elections that were held and the way in which the democratic system could be strengthened in Mauritania?

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: I can comment on this subject because I was a candidate in the last presidential election, in 2014, and, to date, I am the only declared candidate for the next election, in 2019.

There are two opposition groups in Mauritania. There is the Arab-Berber opposition, which has emerged from the system and is the opposition of the privileged class. It opposes the group in power, but the two come from the same ethnic group. They are what we call the opposition in Mauritania. There is also the popular social opposition, the opposition of the disenfranchised and society's rejects. This is the opposition that is representative of the populations that are the victims of slavery and its aftereffects, who constitute roughly 50% of the population. There is also the opposition that represents the black populations, that is to say, the Fulani, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara, who constitute about 30% of the population. These populations are the victims of government racism and domestic racism. They even suffered a genocide attempt that resulted in the massive deportation of 200,000 black Mauritians. Those native inhabitants were deported, rejected, and driven away to Senegal or Mali by the racist Mauritanian authorities. My two countrywomen Kadiata Ba and Djeneba Diallo were among the people deported. The husband of one of them was killed along with relatives as part of the ethnic cleansing the Arab-Berber minority conducted against the blacks of Mauritania.

So 200,000 persons were deported to Senegal and Mali. Thousands of people were killed in pogroms in the streets of Nouakchott and other towns of Mauritania, and land and property were expropriated. Black officials were removed from the Mauritanian government and private sector. Massive numbers of blacks were eliminated during those years. Extrajudicial executions are still being carried out. Hundreds of black civilian and military officials, especially from the Fulani community, were arrested because they were Fulani and black. The authorities killed 616 officials during the ethnic cleansing. Others were released, but most were removed from their jobs and driven from the country.

This Mauritanian opposition does not represent the populations that are the victims of slavery or the black victims of racism and ethnic cleansing. We are the social and popular opposition. We, IRA Mauritania, the banned organization, and the entire IRA civil movement, represent those populations and their concerns.

The opposition that boycotted the elections is the opposition of the privileged. It has issues with the government, but their disputes do not concern racism and slavery. That opposition, when it denounces the government, does not talk about racism or slavery because that opposition is pro-slavery. Some of its members also took part in the ethnic cleansing conducted against the blacks. Those people are involved in slavery. They have slaves in their homes. That opposition denounces us and attacks us, as does the government.

We decided to run for election out of the blue. I was not sure my candidacy would be accepted because the organization I lead is banned, as is the political party that has emerged from our organization, a very strong and popular party that aims to establish and demand the principle of "one man, one vote" in Mauritania. However, I decided to run as an independent and my candidacy was accepted. That enabled us to speak out in the media, from which we are banned by the authorities. For the 15 days of the presidential elections, I was able to speak freely in the Mauritanian media as a candidate accepted by the constitutional council.

However, restrictions were imposed and there was massive fraud. There is a biometric census in Mauritania that eliminates blacks from the outset. All black Mauritians are required to prove they are Mauritians, whereas the Arab-Berbers are registered. The purpose of that arrangement is to reproduce an artificial minority to retain power in a democracy that is in fact an ethnic democracy consisting of a single ethnic group. We are excluded from that democracy on several levels because we are prevented from holding the necessary documents.

• (1345)

I would like to travel with my wife and children, but, for a year now, authorities have refused to provide me with passports for my children. They refuse to do so. I wanted to get my children out of the country because they are traumatized, but, to date, authorities have refused to issue them passports.

I am not the only person in this situation. Most of the black populations in Mauritania do not have civil documents. Authorities refuse to provide them because they still want the Arab-Berber minority to win a majority in the election. To do that, they eliminate documents for blacks and provide them to Arabs. In that way, they will always win majorities in elections.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now move to MP Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much.

Thank you for being here today.

An article put forward by the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States says that the discrepancy in terms of numbers when it comes to estimates of those enslaved in Mauritania could be due to how these figures are tracked.

I'll read the whole quote, which says that now the estimate is 43,000 or just over 1% of the population, and although it's an impressive drop from a 2014 estimate of 140,000, "the change may be due in large part to more robust statistical techniques and improvements in survey methodology" put forward by those who compile the global slavery index. I just mention that so it's on the record. Perhaps we can explore that more.

My question relates to the caste system. Can you speak about the caste system in Mauritania and how that impacts upon the experience of slavery in the country?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: The caste system is not far from being a slave system. Slavery is a compartment, a stairway in the caste system, except that slaves are at the bottom of the ladder and castes slightly above.

I have descended from slaves. I am emancipated, but I belong to a caste: the caste of emancipated slaves. There is a basic difference between a man who has always been free and a former slave who has been emancipated. These are two different castes.

Back home in Mauritania, one remains emancipated even after several generations. For example, regardless of whether someone was emancipated in 1800, 1900, or 1950, all his or her children will always be emancipated. They will not be free men. Emancipation is a stigma.

Thus, an emancipated individual may not marry an Arab-Berber. That is always a result of the sociological relationship that provides that those who take women are always superior to those who give them. Arab-Berbers may take our women and marry them, but we may not marry their women. That is prohibited by the religious code. We have to stay within the caste.

• (1350)

[English]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Is the caste system structured along ethnic lines, then, with the Arab-Berber minority at the top and the Haratin ethnic group below? In general terms, is that the hierarchy?

[Translation]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: Yes, the Arab-Berber community is at the top and all the others are below.

There is also a caste system within the black Fulani community. For example, when we talk about the Fulani and Soninke, there are Soninke nobles, Soninke slaves, Soninke blacksmiths, and Soninke griots; there are many categories.

The problem is that, among the Moors, the Arab-Berbers, that is accompanied by actual oppression. For example, an Arab-Berber may take a black, reduce him to slavery, deprive him of freedom, and condemn him to forced labour. However, a Fulani or Soninke noble, for example, cannot do that. He can only exercise matrimonial discrimination against the slave, but he may not deprive him of freedom or exploit him physically or economically.

[English]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Whatever remaining time there is I'll pass along to Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you all for sharing your testimony with us.

My colleague Ms. Khalid mentioned education and opportunity. I just want you to elaborate on that. Anyone on the panel who wants to can answer.

That's something we see a lot in this committee. If there is a lack of education in certain communities and certain countries, and if the opportunity is not there, we tend to see a lot of instability and a lot of human rights abuses, so are there some individuals or some community members—I shouldn't say "community members"—or some ethnic groups within Mauritania who do not have that education and the opportunity? What's hindering their advancement? Obviously there are certain regulations. What can we do to overcome that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Biram Dah Abeid: The slave and former slave populations are deprived of education because slave children may only work. They are thus condemned to forced labour from childhood and required to work. They may not go to school. They do not even have civil documentation so that they can register for school.

Furthermore, there are slave villages where slaves no longer live with their masters but are placed in landed slavery, agricultural slavery, which is different from domestic slavery. They do not work directly with their masters, but their Arab-Berber masters have placed them on arable land. They therefore cultivate the land and their masters come and take the harvest. This is what is called agricultural slavery or landed slavery. These villages generally do not have schools, and, if they do, they are abandoned schools where a school teacher comes once or twice a week. This is a facade. The Mauritanian government totally neglects public schools. There are no longer any schools where slaves and blacks live.

Mauritanian Arab-Berber groups have established schools: a large French school, a Lebanese school, a Turkish school, and an American school, all of which have several branch schools, but only the Arab-Berber elite may send their children to those schools. They are very expensive and inaccessible.

The Mauritanian government has also established schools of excellence where children's studies are funded by the government, high-level studies, but only Arab-Berbers have access to those schools, not us.

• (1355)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dah Abeid.

I thank all members today for approving and supporting the addition of this extra session.

Our committee does not normally meet on a Monday, but we felt it was absolutely important, Mr. Dah Abeid, to hear from you on this issue, and we greatly appreciate all of the testimony you have provided us here today. I want to thank you sincerely for coming with your group to provide us with that information.

Thank you very much to all members.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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