

OHIO IMMIGRANT  
ALLIANCE

September 7, 2023

The Honorable Jim Jordan, Chairman, Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement, House Judiciary Committee

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement, House Judiciary Committee

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Dear Chairman Jordan, Ranking Member Nadler, and Members of the Subcommittee,

I am writing to submit testimony to the Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement, House Judiciary Committee for the September 14, 2023 hearing, "Terrorist Entry Through the Southwest Border."

**First, I want to state that this testimony has nothing to do with terrorists entering the United States through the southern border.**

I submit this statement anticipating that some subcommittee members may confuse the issues of humanitarian protection and terrorism, as has happened in other hearings. **As you know, people who are forced to seek asylum are not terrorists. Terror is what they are fleeing.**

Senator Lankford made this very mistake in a hearing before the Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, on September 6, 2023. He talked about the increase in people from Mauritania who are seeking asylum in the U.S. as a cause for concern.

Senator Lankford does not seem to know about the Mauritanian genocide, or the fact that 90,000 or more Black people are held in slavery there, while others are subjected to apartheid measures.<sup>1</sup> The reasons Black people are not safe in Mauritania are detailed in the attached report, "Black Mauritians' Ongoing Search for Safety."

**Instead of being forced into dangerous journeys to escape this abuse, Black Mauritians should have safe migration paths. Also, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security should designate the country for Temporary Protected Status, and allow people deported to slavery, statelessness, and apartheid to return to the U.S. No one should be deported to these dangers.**

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<sup>1</sup>Peyton, Nellie. "Unshackled yet Far from Free, Ex-slaves Struggle Anew in Mauritania." *Thomson Reuters* (Dakar, Senegal), February 26, 2019.  
<https://jp.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-slavery-survivor-feature-idUSKCN1QG04C>.

Ohio is home to the largest population of Black Mauritians in the United States. The resident Mauritanian community, many of whom have become U.S. citizens and married and raised children here, has opened its arms and homes to the recently-arrived Mauritians because they have been in their shoes. And this is how people care for each other.

Abdoul Mbow is one of the leaders who have been helping people find housing, food, and lawyers, as well as driving them to English classes. Because the U.S. has not established safe ways for Black Mauritanian refugees to migrate, several men have died on the journey. Others have told him why they risk their lives to come here. "We are dead already."

Respectfully,



Lynn Tramonte

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## **ENCLOSURES**

"Black Mauritians' Ongoing Search for Safety," Ohio Immigrant Alliance, September 2023

Columbus Dispatch, "'We are people. We are not ghosts.' Migrants 'dying to live,'" Abdoul Mbow, November 2022

MEDIUM: "In Ohio, Black Mauritians Rev Up the Cycle of Mutual Aid and Community Support"

MEDIUM: "Mauritanian 'ghost boats,' economic violence, and dying to live"



## **Black Mauritians’ Ongoing Search For Safety**

***Deportation, Arrest, Torture, Expulsion, Oppression***

***Solutions and the Sacredness of “Home”***

The Mauritanian government is engaged in a slow-motion ethnic cleansing against its Black population. Black Mauritians from Fulani, Soninke, Wolof, and other ethnic groups have rich histories and cultures that the Moorish government has been [trying to extinguish](#) for decades.

In most cases the world has failed to act, or even notice. That must change. This backgrounder discusses the real state violence that Mauritania carries out on its Black residents, the United States’ role in repressing Black Mauritians, and steps the U.S. must take to allow Black Mauritians to recover from, and move past, these harms.

### [The Mauritanian Government Is Still The Oppressor](#)

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# The Mauritanian Government Is Still The Oppressor

## Contradictions and Murder in 2023

In the summer of 2023, the Mauritanian government ordered the death of a Black female high school student [charged with blasphemy](#), because of a paper she wrote that allegedly maligned the Prophet. The decision came from the highest levels, [President Ghazouani](#) and the Mauritanian Council of Islamic Scholars. Now, they are [demanding](#) that her murder be carried out.

This latest horror came after a [difficult spring and summer](#) of crackdowns on human rights and anti-slavery activists; police beatings, kidnappings, and murders of Black people; and another round of corrupt elections so that the government's preferred candidates could maintain power.

These incidents have gotten very little international attention, despite the disturbing video and photographic evidence circulating through WhatsApp. The Mauritanian government has a good public relations game, and when all else fails, they [turn off the Internet](#).

The United States sees Mauritania's cooperation against terrorism as crucial. But even the State Department's own trafficking report [shows](#) that Mauritania is dangerous, despite any conclusions they may highlight in a press release. Despite what [some Immigration Judges](#) have told Black Mauritians when denying their asylum cases, Mauritania is still not a safe place to be Black.

Ahead of the 2023 elections, the voter list used in the 2019 elections was [discarded](#), and a new one created to “increase public confidence in its accuracy, comprehensiveness, and inclusiveness,” in the words of USAID and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Instead, however, the effect was to further disenfranchise Black voters. Official “results” [held](#) that the EI Insaf party officially won a majority in the National Assembly. General Mohamed Ould Meguett was deemed president of the legislative body, despite [his well-known role in the 1989 genocide](#), documented in “[L’Enfer D’Inal](#)” by torture camp survivor Mahamadou Sy.

Speaking out about the corrupt electoral process, internationally [acclaimed](#) human rights defender Biram Dah Abeid was [arrested](#) and held for several days. New instances of police brutality and government repression have spawned a wave of protests in cities across Mauritania. The government responded with escalating violence and another Internet blackout. One of the first police killings that led to mass protests was the torture of Oumar Diop, who had been planning to seek asylum in the United States.

**The repression Black Mauritians experience at the hands of their own government rationalizes the asylum claims made by those risking their lives to go to the US and Europe; the need for safe migration pathways; and the urgency of designating Temporary Protected Status for Mauritania.**

Recently, a ninth man from Mauritania died on his journey to the United States, suffering cardiac arrest on an airplane. Diaspora leader Abdoul Mbow [wrote](#) about the decisions Mauritians are forced to make in the *Columbus Dispatch*:

Today, the Mauritanian government has [new ways to erase Black people](#).

They refuse to issue identity documents, [so that we don't exist in official records](#). Without IDs, we also can't travel or get jobs. They [cancel](#) our ways of communicating so that we have no mobility in an all-Arabic society. They still [take our land, put us in jail, and beat us](#).

This is why some people take this risk. What future is there, when you have no present?

Many other Black Mauritians have [died trying to reach safety in Europe](#). These deaths could be prevented if the International Community acknowledged the real situation, developed safe migration options, and forced the Mauritanian government to end apartheid. Read on to learn about the latest incidents experienced by Black people in Mauritania.

## A Brief History

The Mauritanian government and civil society is controlled by “White Moors” who have systematically tried to repress, enslave, and extinguish the country’s Black citizens. It is an absolute apartheid regime. Their goal is to make Mauritania into an “Arab state” by reducing the number of Black people in the country—despite the fact that their families have lived on the land for centuries—and controlling the rest.

Through a combination of gaslighting, denial, and brute force—and a lack of international media scrutiny—the government has been able to hide its violence in plain sight.

The success of the Mauritanian government’s disinformation campaign is undeniable. The U.S. State Department praised Mauritania’s 2019 presidential election, [calling](#) it “the first democratic transition of power between two elected presidents since the country’s independence in 1960.” The reality was quite different, the outcome pre-ordained.

Before votes could be counted, the “victory” party for Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ghazouani was underway and military tanks roamed the streets of Nouakchott to intimidate potential protesters. The government shut off the Internet nationwide and arrested opposition leaders. Ghazouani was the hand-picked successor of former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who is now facing criminal [corruption charges](#) for his actions while president.

Most White Moors in Mauritania continue to deny, minimize, or recast blame for the genocide carried out against Black Mauritians in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In a seminal 1994 [report](#), “Mauritania’s Campaign of Terror,” Human Rights Watch (HRW) wrote: “long before ‘ethnic cleansing’ entered popular parlance, its effects were painfully apparent in Mauritania. Since 1989, tens of thousands of black Mauritians have been forcibly expelled, and hundreds more have been tortured or killed; an undeclared military occupation of the Senegal River Valley, where many of the blacks live, subjects those who remained to harsh repression. The campaign to eliminate black culture in Mauritania, orchestrated by the white Moor rulers, reached its height in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and continues today.”

Although written in 1994, many of this report's painful findings remain relevant in 2022. HRW writes: "a chronic and insidious pattern of violations against black Mauritians, including indiscriminate killing, detention, torture, rape, and beating by the military and militia forces stationed in the valley has been the result. The abuses have been associated with attempts to seize land owned by blacks, expel them from the country, deny their civil rights, and institutionalize control over them."

Unlike thirty years ago, the Mauritanian government is not carrying out mass murder on a daily basis—although police violence against Black people is common and unchecked. And while slavery remains an egregious problem, it would be wrong to think that the repression of Black Mauritians begins and ends there. Today's Mauritanian government is using tools like land-grabbing and denaturalization to disappear and destroy Mauritania's Black ethnic groups. Simply put: Mauritania is still not a safe place to be Black today.

There is a huge gap between perception and reality when it comes to Mauritania's human rights record, fueled by the government's successful clampdown on accurate information and the lack of international observers and media in this country. While Mauritania's ongoing problem with slavery is well-known, if not well-understood, other tactics used to repress Black people mostly fly under the radar screen.

For example, on November 28, 2021, while Assistant Secretary of State Catherine Phee [congratulated](#) the Mauritanian government for making "progress" on human rights, Mauritanian police beat peaceful protestors nearly to death. It seems the only progress the Mauritanian government has made was to get better at hiding its actions.

The Mauritanian government's goal is still to reduce the Black population in the country, which actually forms the majority despite declarations from "official" sources. Rather than genocide, however, the government is using tools to limit Black Mauritians' mobility, rights, and access to a means to survive. These tools include: police violence, land-grabbing, and statelessness.

## Language Erasure

French and Arabic have co-existed as the two languages of government in Mauritania for decades. Black Mauritians mostly speak French, plus one or more native languages, such as Fulani, Soninke, or Wolof. Most do not know and have not received instruction in Arabic. For years, the Mauritanian government has been slowly eliminating the use of French in public life. Now, there is near-total Arabization of government services. For example, the following services are conducted only in Arabic:

- Exams required for certain jobs, such as police and medical positions
- Hospital records
- Birth certificates and other governmental records
- Police and court records

Highly trained neurosurgeon, Dr. Aminata Boubacar Diop, was [denied employment](#) in the civil service because she does not know Arabic. She points out that the patients she would see in this position do not speak Arabic either, but do share common languages with her. Another

man interviewed by the Ohio Immigrant Alliance failed the police exam because he did not know Arabic.

Black schoolchildren are beginning to get instruction in Arabic, while their families prefer they learn to read and write French. That choice is being taken from them in order to “Arabize” the culture. And it leaves generations of older children and adults of all ages locked out of official life because they do not read or understand Arabic.

The erasure of languages spoken by Black Mauritians is not incidental. It’s part of the multi-layered apartheid regime the Mauritanian government has put in place to keep Black Mauritians from achieving agency and power.

## **Police Violence**

(Content Warning – graphic images and violence)

In 2018, a peaceful protest calling for the release of abolitionist (and intended presidential candidate) Biram Dah Abeid from prison was met with violence by the Mauritanian government. Front Line Defenders, the global human rights organization, reported that twelve human rights activists were attacked by Mauritanian police. Disturbing photos of the victims of police brutality, which included the wife of Biram Dah Abeid, were published on the blog CRIDEM. View photos of this police violence against human rights activists in Mauritania [strict content warning].

In 2019, Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ghazouani declared himself the winner of the country’s presidential elections, sending military tanks into the streets and closing off Internet access nationwide. He arrested opposition leaders like Samba Thiam in a strong show of force against Black Mauritians advocating for civil and human rights. Ghazouani is the hand-picked successor of former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who is now facing criminal corruption charges for his actions while president.

In 2020 Abbas Diallo, a Black Mauritanian, was gunned down by security forces in the south of Mauritania as he was returning from work in Senegal. The reason this father of six was killed by the police? Violation of the COVID curfew. Diallo was Black. No one has ever been held accountable for his murder by police. Also in 2020, observers witnessed Mauritanian police using a “Derek Chauvin” type hold on a Black man. These two incidents became public, but the vast majority of these situations are never reported in the media.

In 2021 and 2022, Ghazouani’s security forces beat peaceful demonstrators, including a pregnant woman protesting the seizure of her family’s land, and others commemorating the lives of 28 Black soldiers who were murdered by the Mauritanian government in 1990. Their injuries resulted in lost teeth and broken bones. Photo documentation has circulated in the diaspora, but there has been no media coverage of these incidents.

In fact, the beatings of protestors by Mauritanian police occurred the very same day that Assistant Secretary of State Catherine Phee hailed “Mauritania’s efforts to address long standing human rights issues, combat corruption, and defeat Covid-19,” calling them “profound and progressive.”

The fact that the U.S. State Department does not have an accurate picture of what is happening to Black people in Mauritania today is of deep concern. State Department reports are relied upon in U.S. immigration court, where judges consider asylum claims and decide whether or not it is safe to deport someone. State Department assessments may inform actions in other areas, such as U.S. trade policies and the Department of Homeland Security's deliberations over the potential issuance of Temporary Protected Status.

## **Land-Grabbing and Extinction of Families – Then and Today**

Land-grabbing was one of the tactics the government used to drive Black Mauritians out of the country in the 1990s, and it remains so today.

In a 2021 report, the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in US described how the current Mauritanian government takes land and water access that has been in Black Mauritians' bloodlines for centuries and uses it for profit, with no consideration for how the people who relied on these resources will survive. The current exodus of Black Mauritians to the United States and Europe is related to both state violence and co-option of these long-held resources needed to survive.

Iba Sarr, president of the southern branch of the Free Federation of Artisanal Fishing (*la Federation Libre de la Peche Artisanal*), laments the impact on N'Diago residents:

*The state is creating a town [by the newly-constructed port], and it's going to change the area, bring in others, and limit our access to resources—and we have no information about it. We have been here a long time, but we will get nothing. They will take our land and our resources, and we should have been told that they are doing this. They are not protecting us....*

*We used to have an abundance of fish, and today we have fewer fish—the conditions have become so much scarcer. Russian fishing boats and Chinese and Turkish ships have also been pillaging the seas. Every day we try to defend our community. The problem is that we have powerful businessmen who are looking to exploit us and they tell the world that Mauritania does not have a fishing tradition, but we do. . . . We want to practice responsible fishing; our life depends on it. Our life is the sea—we have nothing else.*

Similar to the rarely-enforced anti-slavery laws in Mauritania, a policy to compensate the victims of land-grabbing exists—on paper. But, like the anti-slavery laws, this policy is almost never enforced. Villages are becoming extinct. The Mauritanian government does not include Black Mauritians in decisions about development and or access to mineral rights on land they and their ancestors have relied on for generations.

## **Statelessness: Another Form of Repression And Extinction**

In 2011, Mauritania instituted a national Census which resulted in the de-naturalization of Black Mauritians who were not living in the country at the time, as well other Black Mauritians subjected to heightened tests by government officials. For example, in order to “prove” their citizenship, Black Mauritians are required to produce death certificates for multiple generations of their family members, an impossible feat in a country where 41% of children do



not even have birth certificates. Mauritians of Arab origin were not subjected to the same impossible tests. Protests about the de-naturalization of Black Mauritians were met with arrests and the death of at least one activist.

To this day, the Mauritanian government refuses to recognize the citizenship of many Black Mauritians who fled the genocide in the 1990s and early 2000s, or were forcibly deported by Mauritania. Without proof of citizenship, people cannot work, travel, or leave their homes without risk of harm.

The police often stop Black people walking down the street and demand to see their identity documents. If none are produced, individuals are extorted, beaten, and sometimes jailed.

## **The U.S. Became Complicit In Harming Black Mauritians**

Until the Trump administration took office, deportations from the U.S. to Mauritania were deliberately rare. Some Black Mauritians who fled the country in the late 1990s and 2000s won asylum in the U.S., but others were denied for technical or unfair reasons. They didn't have a lawyer, or were represented by unscrupulous "legal" advisors, and couldn't navigate U.S. immigration law alone. Some didn't know about the one-year filing deadline, or didn't receive notice about an upcoming hearing. Court-appointed interpreters spoke the wrong dialect.

Others lost their cases because the immigration judge decided they were "not credible." In this scenario, White, Christian judges—with no cultural background or trauma training—were empowered to assess the "credibility" of conservative Muslim men. The people seeking asylum had witnessed family members killed, and may have been tortured themselves. If they didn't break down sobbing in the courtroom, did that mean they were lying? Many of these judges thought so. What a dangerous, false assumption.

Despite losing their cases, previous presidential administrations exercised prosecutorial discretion to forego these deportations, understanding the dangers Black Mauritians would face if returned. In the eight years President Obama was in office, only 67 people were deported to Mauritania. Instead, many who had lost their asylum cases were put on Orders of Supervision with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They were allowed to work legally. They paid taxes, bought homes, started businesses, and raised families—living peaceful lives for decades.

Everything changed in 2017, when President Trump began to prioritize the deportation of long-settled immigrants who had Orders of Supervision with ICE. From a moral perspective, the deportations of long-term U.S. residents who regularly attended "check in" meetings with the U.S. government does not make sense. But the Trump administration approached it from a logistical perspective, with the goal of deporting as many people as possible—regardless of the consequences. And that is what they did.

In just one year, the Trump administration deported more people to Mauritania than the Obama administration did in eight years. Only 67 people were deported to Mauritania by the Obama administration, while the Trump administration deported 98 in FY 2018 alone. The FY 2021

number is not available, but using the low number of 15 as an educated guess, we can see that the average annual deportations of Mauritians rose 462% when Trump took office.

This change in policy was first documented by *The Atlantic* in the [article](#), “How Trump Radicalized ICE.” A [video](#) that accompanied the article followed Columbus, Ohio residents who had been living the “American Dream,” until it became an American nightmare. A series of respected members of the Ohio Mauritanian community—including a Quran teacher, Seydou Sarr—were arrested at ICE check-ins and deported to a country they all feared. Word spread and frightened Mauritians began to sell their homes, cash out their retirement accounts, and [prepare their families for a life apart](#), unraveling all of the safety they had found.

## Deported To Danger

At the same time ICE ratcheted up deportations to Mauritania, the U.S. Trade Representative [terminated](#) Mauritania’s trade preferences under the African Growth and Opportunity Act, over its poor efforts to end slavery. Said Deputy U.S. Trade Representative C.J. Mahoney: “Forced or compulsory labor practices like hereditary slavery have no place in the 21st century. This action underscores this Administration’s commitment to ending modern slavery and enforcing labor provisions in our trade laws and trade agreements.”

Despite this acknowledgement, deportations continued.

The Ohio Immigrant Alliance interviewed 117 Black Mauritians who were deported from the United States—or left the country out of fear of deportation—during the Trump administration. Many were [arrested and held in horrific jails](#) in Mauritania after their deportation, until their families paid a bribe. Others paid bribes at the airport and were able to avoid immediate arrest or a lengthy detention, but could not remain in Mauritania safely.

Many of the Black Mauritians who were deported now live in Senegal. An additional cohort, fearful of the change in U.S. policy, fled before being deported, and now live in Canada or other African countries. Only fourteen of the 117 people interviewed by the Ohio Immigrant Alliance currently live in Mauritania, and most of them are in hiding. They don’t have identity documents and are at risk of detention and torture at any time. Read more [here](#) and [listen to their experiences](#).

The arrests and abuse of people deported from the U.S. to Mauritania have been documented by [Reveal](#), [Reuters](#), and [Truthout](#), which published pictures from inside one Mauritanian jail, as well as [Biram Dah Abeid](#), the internationally-renowned human rights defender.

Deporting stateless people to a country that persecuted them, and dehumanized them by stripping them of their citizenship, is clearly wrong. Yet, as with other Trump administration immigration policies, the human cruelty was deliberate.

The Mauritanian government will not recognize the citizenship of people it had rendered stateless, or issue them passports. Passports are typically required in order to deport someone. So the Trump administration found a workaround, facilitating the deportation of Black Mauritians with *laissez-passers*. Issued by the Mauritanian embassy, these are temporary travel documents that are immediately invalid once the person touches down on

Mauritanian soil. They are not considered evidence of Mauritanian citizenship and cannot be used to obtain identity or travel documents in Mauritania.

People deported to Mauritania without identity documents are frequently exploited by the Mauritanian police, including at the airport upon arrival. If the police stop someone walking down the street, ask him for his identity document, and he cannot produce one, the person is often beaten, extorted, and/or taken to jail until he can pay a bribe. People interviewed by the Ohio Immigrant Alliance and the media report that they are consistently denied identity documents by Mauritanian officials upon deportation.

After nearly two decades in the United States, Seyni Diagne was deported to Mauritania and immediately arrested in the airport. He had originally sought asylum in the United States after Mauritania deported him to Senegal during the Mauritanian genocide. While Mr. Diagne lost his asylum case, he was allowed to remain in the U.S. under an Order of Supervision, until the Trump administration started revoking these permissions in 2017.

When Mr. Diagne arrived in Mauritania in 2018, ICE lied and told a Mauritanian police officer that he was a criminal in the U.S. and had been in prison. The police asked Mr. Diagne for his Mauritanian papers, which he did not have because the Mauritanian government no longer considered him a citizen.

He was imprisoned in a Mauritanian jail and held without trial for almost twenty days, in conditions so unbearable that he still feels the effects to this day. While Mauritania no longer considers Mr. Diagne to be a citizen, they do consider him a traitor for having sought asylum in the United States and speaking “blasphemy” against the Mauritanian government.

In the Mauritanian jail, Mr. Diagne reported that people were not allowed to use the bathroom for days or leave the cell, so they were forced to urinate where they slept. The jail was filthy, with mosquitoes and cockroaches everywhere. Every time a detainee screamed, the guards would beat and torture him. The conditions were so horrible, Mr. Diagne even lost consciousness. Eventually, he asked to be deported (again) to Senegal, and was allowed to leave after his family paid a bribe.

Mr. Diagne has kidney cancer and Hepatitis-C, for which he received no treatment while in U.S. immigration jail or the Mauritanian prison. To this day, he deals with the effects of a skin infection he received in that jail. His hands, feet, and skin are permanently damaged, and doctors have not yet found a cure.

“AB” and four other men were deported to Mauritania in January 2021. All five men were immediately arrested in Mauritania and held in jails there, into which AB was able to smuggle a phone. The conditions were disgusting. He was able to take a few photos. AB was released after his family paid a bribe, but he is on “probation” and has to check in with the Mauritanian government every two weeks, at which time he is detained the entire day.

The other men were detained even longer in the Mauritanian jails because their families had a harder time raising the money to buy their freedom. When telling his story, AB noted that his experience was not unique. “We are suffering as Black people here in Mauritania,” he said.



## The Brutal Detention And Deportation Machine

When immigration policy affecting Black Mauritians changed in 2017, deportation was not the only harm. They were also spending months or even years in U.S. immigration jails, further destroying their mental health and their families' finances, and then deported in shackles or worse—the WRAP torture device—on on shadowy charter planes.

The federal government uses incarceration to coerce people into accepting deportation, rather than continuing to fight their cases from jail. Being detained makes it infinitely harder to find and pay a competent lawyer, and gather documents and evidence needed to succeed in immigration cases. Incarceration is extremely expensive and emotionally taxing for families. It takes breadwinners out of homes and adds new costs, like price-gouging phone and video calls and commissaries. Lawyers' fees also increase when a person is detained and harder to access. Incarceration compounds the stress on spouses, children, and detained people, such that they may never fully recover from these experiences.

On top of the procedural and financial hurdles created by incarceration, the government has used physical and psychological abuse, including the denial of medical care, against individuals to try to get them to accept deportation. Like Seyni Diagne before him, ICE denied medical treatment to Goura Ndiaye for months and then deported him in shackles, his hip bone necrotic and detached from his body.

In mass deportation charter flights like the one Mr. Ndiaye endured, people are shackled at their wrists, waists, and feet for hours, even when trying to eat or use the restroom. Some are tied up in “The WRAP” restraints and forced to endure hour after hour in stress positions, barely able to breathe. These flights are deliberately hard to track, and detained people are not given advance notice of their deportation date so that they can try to prepare. The whole process is deliberately disorienting and gratuitously dehumanizing.

Said Breanne Palmer, Interim Policy & Advocacy Director at the UndocuBlack Network, “Black people in America, including Black immigrants, are familiar with the U.S. government’s unrepentant misuse of medical devices and experimentation on Black bodies. DHS and its component agencies must be held accountable for coercing Black immigrants onto deportation

flights with what amounts to a torture device. It is time for all people to be outraged by the myriad ways Black immigrants are targeted by DHS for egregious harm.”

## **Beyond Responses, Solutions**

### **Support from Congress and the Community**

In January 2023, Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown (D) and Representative Mike Carey (R-OH/15) sent a [letter](#) to President Joe Biden and Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, requesting the designation of Temporary Protected Status or Deferred Enforced Departure for Mauritians in the United States. They write:

*Beyond enslavement... Black Mauritians forcibly returned to their country face the threat of suffering human rights abuses including arrest, torture, and detention without due process. This is especially true for Mauritanian activists and journalists who speak out against slavery and human rights issues.... Some of those who have been imprisoned after being forcibly returned to Mauritania have reportedly been subjected to inhumane conditions including unsanitary cells, lack of water, and torture.*

Pressure for protection of human rights in Mauritania has long been a bipartisan issue. President Trump [cut off trade benefits](#) to Mauritania because of its record, and the Biden administration [renewed these restrictions](#) after receiving [input](#) from the Mauritanian diaspora. Republican and Democratic members of Congress have issued various reprimands, including this [letter](#) to the International Monetary Fund from Reps. Meadows, Garrett, Duncan, Bilirakis, Zeldin, and Perry; this [letter](#) to Secretary of State Pompeo from Reps. Chabot, Smith, Wright, Sensenbrenner, and Burchett; and this [letter](#) from then-Senator Harris and Reps. Nadler, Thompson, Lofgren, and Beatty.

Scores of humanitarian organizations have also called for the [immediate designation of TPS or DED for Mauritania](#).

### **Necessary U.S. Policy Changes**

The U.S. government must take immediate steps to reverse its role in the abuse of Black Mauritians, prevent further harms, and pressure Mauritania to truly recognize its Black residents' civil and human rights. The Biden administration must:

1. Issue accurate reports on country conditions that reflect the lived experiences of Black Mauritians, and are not influenced by Mauritanian government propaganda.
2. Designate Temporary Protected Status or Deferred Enforced Departure for Mauritania.
3. Grant U.S. government-issued identity, travel, and work permission documents to stateless people, and stop their deportations.
4. Support Black Mauritians' meritorious asylum claims.
5. Allow deported Black Mauritians, and others, to come home to the United States.
6. Use every tool available, including but not limited to trade sanctions, to pressure the Mauritanian government to guarantee full civil and human rights to Black Mauritians.

The number of Black Mauritians who need Temporary Protected Status or Deferred Enforced Departure, or return after deportation, is not large. But for those who need it, the stakes are high. Black Mauritians in the United States consistently express the same fear of arrest, torture, and death if deported. During Trump's deportation wave, many were forced to become refugees once again.

With a few actions, the Biden administration could bring much-needed security and relief to people in the U.S. who have Mauritanian roots, and allow families to reunite and start to heal.

## **The Sacredness of “Home”**

Safety for Black Mauritians will only exist in Mauritania when the government enforces anti-slavery laws; ends police brutality, extortion, and discriminatory arrests and detentions; permits the exercise of free and open speech without repression; guarantees equal access to education and opportunities for all people; restores the citizenship of stateless people in Mauritania; stops taking land, water access, and other property and resources from residents; and holds itself accountable for abuses past, present, and future.

Houleye Thiam, President of the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in US, said: “Dictators are weapons of mass destruction. Black Mauritians aren't leaving their homes, families, and lives to go on an adventure. They are fleeing to survive, running from a country where Black people are oppressed, enslaved, denied citizenship, attacked, and killed simply for being Black.”

Like all people, Black Mauritians deserve the right to not have to leave their country in order to survive. For those who do have to migrate, the U.S. can guarantee their safety and rights, and allow them to live peaceful lives in their adopted home.

**This is why it is imperative for the Biden administration to designate Mauritania for TPS or DED, stop challenging meritorious asylum cases, and allow deported Mauritians to return.**

Families in the United States are struggling, financially and emotionally, because of these cruel and unnecessary deportations. Savings were depleted while attempting to contest the deportation in court and “live” in the expensive immigration detention system. A deported father or mother has little ability to work or earn a living, much less support their loved ones back home. Some families are even facing homelessness.

Volumes of studies and analysis by physicians, psychologists, and other experts in healthy child development show that family separation has serious and long-term, negative impacts on children. Financial insecurity is one factor but, according to Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff, Director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: “the most important protection a child can possibly have to prevent long-term damage [is] a loving adult who's totally devoted to his or her well-being.”

Testifying before Congress, Dr. Shonkoff explained: “Stable and responsive relationships promote healthy brain architecture, establish well-functioning immune, cardiovascular, and metabolic systems, and strengthen the building blocks of resilience. If these relationships are

disrupted, young children are hit by the 'double whammy' of a brain that is deprived of the positive stimulation it needs and assaulted by a stress response that disrupts its developing circuitry."

Children around the country are dealing with the consequences of a parent's deportation, on top of other challenges. Fatima Sow of Ohio wrote to the Biden administration's Family Reunification Task Force: "My kids always ask about their father. It's hard and painful to witness.... My six-year-old son always asks me why he isn't with his dad, why all his friends are with their dads but not him." This father's absence is something the government has the power to reverse, during his son's childhood.

Awa Harouna, whose father was nearly deported, knows the hopelessness, anxiety, and fear of deportation. In episode six of the Netflix documentary, "Living Undocumented," she explained: "You can watch a documentary (and) you can say, 'Well, this is too bad.' But at the end of the day, it's just something that you're watching on TV. And you can turn that off and go about your life."

While some Americans can turn off the TV, others in Ohio and across the country are dealing with the impact of deportation every day. They often feel like their stories are not part of the national conversation about immigration, and that their pain is invisible to everyone but them. They still have hopes and dreams. Their lives and families matter.

Deportation is a human-made consequence wholly in humans' power to change. The Biden administration has solutions at hand. It needs the will to act.

*Contact Itramonte AT [ohioimmigrant.org](http://ohioimmigrant.org).*

# The Columbus Dispatch

**GUEST | Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

## 'We are people. We are not ghosts.' Migrants 'dying to live'| activist

**Abdoul Mbow** Guest columnist

Published 5:47 a.m. ET Nov. 14, 2022

*Twenty-four years ago this month, Abdoul Mbow landed at JFK airport from Mauritania and started his new life. He resides in Fairfield and works as a companion for people with mental and physical disabilities. He remains an activist for Black Mauritanians' civil rights, working to improve understanding between Black and Arab Mauritanians and end slavery.*

A. Faye died in Guatemala, after a journey that started in Senegal. He was 29 years old. Another young man, from Mauritania, died in Colombia. Solo Ndiaye died in Mexico just this month.

He was 36.

So many others, whose names are never reported, are literally dying to live.

To many people, it doesn't make sense. Why would a young person leave Africa for Brazil, then travel through South and Central America for a slim chance at freedom in the United States?

There is rough terrain, animals.

People who prey upon migrants, and no one to help. If the elements and the predators don't kill you, having no food and water could.

If you make it to the U.S. border and request asylum, which is your legal right, you will most likely be turned away, or jailed before being flown back to everything you fled.

**More:** City should rally around Mauritanians living here

Not obtaining safety.

Even I have said this to people leaving Mauritania, my home country, and I know the apartheid that suffocates Black people there. "Please don't go," I beg. "Don't make this dangerous journey." And what do they say to me?



*“We are dead already.”*

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Mauritania was never the capital of the free world, but it wasn't always the way it is now. The Fulani people and other Black groups were there before the French colonizers and Arab elites. For centuries, we cared for the land and ocean, farmed and fished, played music and told stories, and sustained our families.

I've been an activist since 1966, after Mauritania's independence from France, when the new government started excluding Black Mauritians.

In the '80s and '90s, the government carried out a genocide. They killed Black Mauritians and took our land. They put us in jail and tortured us. They deported us to Senegal, even though we weren't born there.

**More:** Deported asylum seekers ask President Joe Biden for a chance to return to families in U.S.

I was a manager with a European airline. I had an education and money in the bank. But the murders continued, and the government did unspeakable things to people who spoke up. They showed us our own graves.

One day, I went on a business trip and when I came back, they had arrested 11 of my fellow organizers. My friends said “Abdoul, you have to leave.” I boarded a plane.

In the U.S., a former Peace Corps volunteer helped me apply for asylum. I didn't have to fight my deportation in court, and I wasn't put in immigration jail — adding to my trauma — like people are today. I made my case with the U.S. government and a few weeks later, was granted asylum.

Now, you could be in direct danger and no country will help you. It makes you feel less than human. Like a ghost, with nothing to lose.

Today, the Mauritanian government has new ways to erase Black people.

They refuse to issue identity documents, so that we don't exist in official records. Without IDs, we also can't travel or get jobs. They cancel our ways of communicating so that we have no mobility in an all-Arabic society. They still take our land, put us in jail, and beat us.

This is why some people take this risk. What future is there, when you have no present?

**More:** Immigrants, refugees in central Ohio urged to participate in census

Mauritanian leaders in Ohio met with Rep. Steve Chabot multiple times and asked him to help. He hasn't done much.

As a senator, Kamala Harris supported us. But the Biden administration has turned its back on people seeking asylum. Instead of providing a way for people to get safe, they treat migration as a security problem, like Donald Trump did.

We are people, not threats to security. Security is what we are seeking. If U.S. Rep. Steve Chabot, President Joe Biden, and other leaders would walk a mile in Mr. Faye's shoes, they would see.

We are not ghosts. We want to live.

*Twenty-four years ago this month, Abdoul Mbow landed at JFK airport from Mauritania and started his new life. He resides in Fairfield and works as a companion for people with mental and physical disabilities. He remains an activist for Black Mauritanians' civil rights, working to improve understanding between Black and Arab Mauritanians and end slavery.*

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# In Ohio, Black Mauritians Rev Up the Cycle of Mutual Aid and Community Support



Lynn Tramonte

4 min read · Jun 12



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**It's time for the rest of us to help.**



*A man stands outside a home in Hamilton, Ohio, wearing a shirt he got from ICE as he was released from custody. He and hundreds like him are preparing to file for asylum in the US due to apartheid and slavery in Mauritania. (Photo credit: Ohio Immigrant Alliance © 2023)*

On June 10, the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights called a meeting and more than 500 Black Mauritians—newcomers to Ohio and Kentucky— showed up. The topic? How to apply for asylum in the US.

Apartheid in Mauritania has grown worse in recent months, with police murdering, attacking, and disappearing people. The ruling institutions, led by White Moors, want the world to view Mauritania as an “Arab state.” But there are millions of Black people living on this land, as their families have done for centuries. They demand rights, recognition, and dignity.

The group of Mauritanian refugees who came to the US after the late 80s/early 90s genocide are older now, but they still have that activist energy. They will never give up on the demand to be treated as humans in their own country. The new group of refugees are mainly young people—mostly men but some women—because the government sees young Black people as a threat.

After police murdered Oumar Diop and Mohamed Lemine, you would think the world would understand that the true threats are the people doing the killing. But the Mauritanian government’s PR machine is masterful at driving a narrative. Mauritania may be rich in natural gas, but gaslighting is even more prevalent. And when all else fails, they’ll just shut off the Internet to keep the world from learning what is really going on.

The vibrant community of Black Mauritians in greater Cincinnati has been making heroic sacrifices to house, clothe, and feed the newcomers; get them to their ICE check-in appointments; and try to find them legal representation. This has been going on for a while now, but the rest of us did not know until recently. It seems that every Mauritanian has at least one newly arrived asylum seeker living with them — and usually many more than that.



*Young people attend an asylum clinic in Cincinnati on June 10. (Photo credit: Ohio Immigrant Alliance © 2023)*

The Mauritanian Network for Human Rights' legal briefing featured lawyers from the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati and private attorneys. Amadou Dia and the Mauritanian Network pulled off an amazing feat. The spirit in the room was of mutual understanding and community support. People leading the discussion had been in these young people's shoes twenty to thirty years ago. They have always advocated for human rights and an end to slavery and apartheid in Mauritania. Now they are leading the assistance effort and their children are helping with interpretation, fundraising, and even giving up their bedrooms so others can use them.

I've been struck by how much the Mauritanian community has been carrying on its shoulders, alone. The videos of police violence in Mauritania, circulating on social media, and the frantic messages from loved ones, have to be retraumatizing. And then,

to house one or more new people and try to help them apply for asylum, knowing the stakes are so high if they are denied — it's a lot to bear.

So this is a call to all Ohioans who have not already mobilized to welcome Black Mauritians. Everyone can do something to help. What will you do today? You can:

- **Help pay for basic needs (rents, bills, groceries).** The people who apply for asylum will be allowed to apply for work permits, but that will take several months. Until then, they will need financial support. Please donate to this community fundraiser.
- **Create housing solutions around Ohio.** There are many abandoned homes that need rehabbing. Some large churches are no longer being used. We can repurpose empty spaces to become safe and comfortable homes, a long-term community benefit.
- **Call on President Biden and the Department of Homeland Security to designate Temporary Protected Status for Mauritania.** Temporary Protected Status is a provision in US law that the federal government can invoke when a country is in crisis, as Mauritania is today. It would provide people with immediate access to work permits and remove the fear of deportation, at least for the time period it remains in place. TPS is a much-needed bridge for people seeking asylum, as that process will likely take years.

I do not consider this “help for the needy.” The people who need assistance today are strong, brave, intelligent, and resilient. Many told us that the journey here was the hardest thing they have ever done. With the arms of the established Black Mauritanian community around them, they already feel less scared. They are eager to get settled in the US and feel useful. They will be wonderful neighbors, friends, and coworkers when they find their footing. And, they will be helping others in no time, too.

There is bipartisan support for designating TPS for Mauritania in Congress. Senator Sherrod Brown and Rep. Mike Carey are leading the way. We can help by calling on the rest of the Ohio congressional delegation to join them, and contacting the White House and DHS today.

For more, read “Black Mauritians Ongoing Search for Safety” and “Mauritanian ‘ghost boats,’ economic violence, and dying to live.”

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# Mauritanian “ghost boats,” economic violence, and dying to live



Lynn Tramonte

4 min read · Jul 3



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**The Atlantic Ocean is a graveyard for “ghost boats” — people dying in search of freedom , including Black people from Mauritania.**





AP reporters Felip Dana and Renata Brito spent two years trying to identify more than a dozen people whose bodies surfaced thousands of miles from home (northwest Africa) and their intended destination (Spain). They write:

*“The reasons pushing these men, women and children to go — a lack of jobs, poverty, violence, climate change — have only gotten worse.”*

You can draw a straight line between the government repression of Black Mauritians and their economic poverty. **This is just one reason why the U.S. government must**

## **designate Temporary Protected Status for Mauritania today.**

It's common knowledge that slavery is rampant in the country. The very set-up of slavery — forced work with no pay — is an obvious example of economic violence as a tool of social repression.

**Land-grabbing is another socio-economic problem.** Black families whose descendants farmed the land for centuries are seeing their ability to survive suddenly taken away.

**The Mauritanian government often denies Black people citizenship and identity documents, so they can't get good-paying jobs.** The lack of documents also gives police an “excuse” to beat or extort Black people, and take them to jail.

**The government eliminated the use of French in public business, so that people who don't speak Arabic are locked out of government jobs and educational opportunities.** Most Black Mauritanian adults were never taught Arabic. This is a Black ban on government jobs and access, without saying it explicitly.

Add police violence to the economic violence directed at Black people and it's little wonder why many are leaving Mauritania. But instead of offering safe migration pathways, they are forced to “try their luck” on the open sea (to reach Europe) or over land and jungle (to reach the U.S.)

Abdoul Mbow wrote about conversations he had with young people taking the southern land route and hoping for safety in the United States. Several young men have died along the way.

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*“Please don't go, I beg. ‘Don't make this dangerous journey.’ And what do they say to me? ‘We are dead already.’”*

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In eerie affirmation of Mbow's point, the AP reported that at least twenty migrant boats vanished after departing from Mauritania.

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*“These migrants are as invisible in death as they were in life. But even ghosts have families,” write Dana and Brito.*

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The body of one young man was found wearing a t-shirt with a line from Lionel Richie: “Hello, is it me you’re looking for?” Terrified relatives gave the AP photographs of loved ones who left Mauritania by boat and disappeared, in hopes they could identify bodies by their clothing.

The man’s name was Abdoulaye Tall and he was from the Mauritanian village of Bourdouji. Tall’s father was “grateful for the information, even though it shattered his hopes,” according to the AP.

There were no survivors on Tall’s boat. But an account from Moussa Sako, who survived another journey where 60 people perished, narrates what it’s like to watch life become death aboard a vessel in the middle of the sea.

From the very beginning, Sako’s journey seemed doomed. The boat was overcrowded; gas and salt water leached into the bottom, burning their skin. Within a couple of days, they ran out of food and water; soon afterwards they ran out of fuel.

The first person to die was twenty years old. Soon, three to four people were dying every day. We’ll let the AP and Sako tell the rest of this story:

*Some had hallucinations. One man jumped to his death thinking they had arrived. Others jumped to end their suffering. Sako, the healthiest, tried to help the others.*

*“I had four full (layers of clothes) on me,” he recalled. “I would take one off and put it on them ... until I had only one.”*

*On day 18, he tried to get away from the rotting bodies. But they were everywhere. Only a handful of people were still alive. They hardly spoke.*

*Sako no longer feared death. He did worry about what would happen afterward.*

*“I wanted that even if I died, for people to recover (my body) and bury me,” Sako said. “If you disappear in the water, they can look for you for a hundred years.”*

*Finally, on day 22, a grey plane appeared in the sky above. Then came a helicopter. A rescuer dropped down and pulled Sako and the other two survivors from the corpse-ridden pirogue.*

*The bodies of 24 people were recovered and buried in the Canaries with case numbers instead of names. The remains of the other 36 were swallowed by the Atlantic.*

Only three of the 63 passengers survived.

When the AP and police in Trinidad and Tobago contacted the Mauritanian government to request assistance identifying the bodies, their calls were not returned.

Perhaps that’s because this is the government’s plan. And it’s working.

