

International Affairs Forum Interview: Mr. Abda Wone, FLAM North America



International Affairs Forum speaks with the Director of Communications for FLAM North America, Mr. Abdurahmane Wone. In July, Condolezza Rice visited the Muslim country of Sudan, in hopes of rebuilding US-Sudan relations. Meanwhile in West Africa, the country of Mauritania is silently becoming the “Other Sudan. One major Mauritanian organization, FLAM, has been promoting the awareness of slavery and racial discrimination in Mauritania. By Hussainatu Blake. (IA-Forum, 7/30/2005)

BACKGROUND

Overview of the Mauritanian conflict

For 800 years, internal conflict has existed between Arabs and Blacks in Mauritania resulting from the issue of Black slavery, an integral part of Mauritanian society. Since Mauritania’s independence from France in 1960, Black groups have repeatedly charged the government with discrimination and enslavement. Black slaves, estimated to be between 100,000 to a million, serve their Arab masters and most remain in bondage their entire lives. Ethnic violence in 1989 sparked the Mauritanian government to exile thousands of blacks. Roughly 20,000 Mauritanian refugees are still living in neighboring Senegal. Mauritania theoretically outlawed slavery in 1981 and the government continues to deny any practice of racial discrimination. The U.S. State Department has routinely cited Mauritania for slavery in its human rights reports. However since Mauritania’s cooperative participation in the Middle East peace process, the U.S. government has not cited Mauritania’s human rights violations regularly.

FLAM

In 1983, the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (FLAM) was established. FLAM was created by a group of black Mauritanian leaders looking for a unified body of various black organizations “engaged in fighting the continuous racial oppression against the black community.”

INTERVIEW

IA-Forum: Your family was exiled from Mauritania. Why?

Mr.Wone: The philosophy behind the deportations of Black Mauritians is to have fewer Blacks in Mauritania and to keep the fertile land of the Southern part of the country. In order to achieve their plan, Black intellectuals and rich land and cattle owners were the target of Nouakcote's regime.

IA-Forum: When and how did you get involved with FLAM?

Mr.Wone: Before the deportation of 1989, I was talking to my older brother Ibrahima who lives in Cincinatti about the plot against Black Mauritians. At that time I was a junior high school student and he was already a university student. We used to have long discussions about the politics. So I knew about some FLAM leaders from him. In 1989, when we were deported, I had two options: forget everything and try to start over a new life in Senegal or face the reality and know that it is going to be difficult. I chose option b. So since 1989, I have been active member of FLAM. I believe the struggle to free my people from racism, slavery and dictatorship must be my priority.

IA-Forum: What is the current slavery situation in Mauritania and how FLAM is helping to combat it?

Mr.Wone: Some people think that slavery is a thing of the past. They should truly think again. In my country, there are people who own other people. In 2005, there are men, women, and children who belonged to other people. As you know, FLAM is fighting for a new democratic country. Since the Nouakcote regime is not returning our calls, we believe this issue must come to the international level. That is why we believe the struggle against racism and slavery in my country should not be left to Mauritians alone. One of our organization's goals is to promote global awareness of the problem.

IA-Forum: How effective has FLAM been in getting the current Mauritanian Human Rights violations on the US radar?

Mr.Wone: Truly it still is timid; but I am still optimistic. I know what brought Americans to help to free South Africa will bring them to help us.

IA-Forum: There are many similarities between the Sudan crisis and the Mauritanian crisis when it comes to racial discrimination and slavery of Black Africans by Arab Africans. Many reporters and international organizations refer to it as the "Other Sudan." However, what makes the situation in Mauritania different from the Sudan crisis?

Mr.Wone: In both Mauritania and Sudan, Blacks are enslaved and treated as second class citizens. The difference is Sudan has received more attention than Mauritania. The second difference is that religion should not be used as an excuse for slavery in Mauritania, since we are a 100% Muslims.

We had our Darfur in Mauritania in 1989. Actually, the capture and enslavement of Blacks in Sudan by Arabs first happened more than seven centuries ago. The consequences are the existence of a group called Haratins (descendents of slaves) in Mauritania.

IA-Forum: How has the Mauritania government responded to the FLAM branches in Senegal and Mali, where many Mauritanian refugees reside?

Mr.Wone: Nouakcote's regime has never wanted to resolve the issue peacefully. They have continuously refused to recognize FLAM and its leader. In Senegal, Mali, France, as well as in the USA, Taya's policy remains the same; ignore those who are fighting for equality and justice.

IA-Forum: What are your expectations/ hopes for the future of Black Mauritanians?

Mr.Wone: I have faith in the future. I believe that one day my people will be free from racism, slavery, and dictatorship. What Martin Luther King said about his people can be said about my people: "We, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

IA-Forum: What do you think needs to be done for the US to start to pay more attention to the Mauritanian crisis?

Mr.Wone: I think what needs to be done first is to educate people about this issue. One cannot do something that he or she does not know about. It is our duty to inform people about this issue. It might take time but we should not give up.

IA-Forum: How do you think the US and FLAM can best work to free Black Mauritanian slaves and to end racial discrimination?

Mr.Wone: FLAM has a plan to free Blacks in Mauritania. Of course we need support from the United States in our struggle to free our people.

IA-Forum: What is the US-Mauritanian relationship? Does it truly exist?

Mr.Wone: Yes, there are some relations between the two countries. Nouakcote's dictator goal is to have good relations with the USA, so they can continue to treat Blacks as slaves and second class citizens.

IA-Forum: Thank you.

Hussainatu Blake is an International Policy Studies Master's Degree candidate at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, CA. She specializes in Conflict Resolution and Negotiation, particularly in African countries.

RELATED LINKS

FLAM: <http://www.flamus.net>

The Library of Congress: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>

iAbolish.com <http://www.iabolish.com>

AllAfrica <http://allafrica.com>

afrol News <http://www.afrol.com>

