

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 1, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Kamala Harris  
Vice President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas  
Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security  
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20016

The Honorable Ur Jaddou  
Director of Citizenship and Immigration Services  
20 Massachusetts Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20001

RE: Temporary Protected Status for Mauritania

Dear President Biden, Vice President Harris, Secretary Mayorkas, and Director Jaddou:

We write to you with a request for an immediate 18-month designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for Mauritania and a halt to ongoing deportations due to extraordinary conditions including slavery, forced statelessness, land grabbing, ongoing racial and ethnic discrimination, and other human rights abuses.<sup>1</sup> Human rights experts have described Mauritania as an apartheid-like state where Black individuals suffer from systemic oppression and marginalization at every level of society.<sup>2</sup> If deported back to these conditions, Black Mauritians would likely face violence and potentially death.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, despite fleeing enslavement, ethnic cleansing, and forced statelessness, more than 100 Mauritanian asylum seekers were detained by ICE solely on their inability to pay a \$5,000 bond while being denied access to language interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Some of these Mauritanian asylum seekers

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Bernal, *Advocates cite Mauritania's ongoing slavery in pushing for end to deportations*, THE HILL (Aug. 17, 2023), <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/4157839-mauritania-slavery-advocates-push-end-deportations/>; *Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Mauritania*, FWD.US, <https://www.fwd.us/news/tps-for-mauritania/> (last visited Oct. 2, 2023); “Land Slavery” and Stolen Land: Another Tool for Oppression of Black Mauritians, OHIO IMMIGRANT (Mar. 2021), [https://ohioimmigrant.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Slavery-and-Land-Grabbing-in-Mauritania\\_March-2021-1-1.pdf](https://ohioimmigrant.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Slavery-and-Land-Grabbing-in-Mauritania_March-2021-1-1.pdf); Danae King, ‘Guilty until proven innocent’? Advocates say Black immigrants face racial bias in court, USA TODAY (July 14, 2023), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/07/14/advocates-say-black-clients-face-racial-bias-ohio-immigration-court/70412069007/?gnt-cfr=1>.

<sup>2</sup> Garba Diallo, *Mauritania—The Other Apartheid?*, NORDISKA AFRIKAINSTITUTET (1993), [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/104909/16\\_Mauritannia.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/104909/16_Mauritannia.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Black Mauritians’ Ongoing Search For Safety*, OHIO IMMIGRANT ALLIANCE (Mar. 22, 2022), <https://ohioimmigrant.org/2022/03/22/mauritania-today-deportations-arrest-torture-expulsion-oppression-and-black-mauritians-ongoing-search-for-safety/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Immigrants’ Rights Organizations Urge Release of Mauritanian Asylum Seekers Detained by ICE*, ACLU (July 20, 2023), <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/immigrants-rights-organizations-urge-release-of-mauritanian-asylum-seekers-detained-by-ice>.

have reportedly already been deported to the country where they fled enslavement and other forms of race and ethnicity based human rights violations. In response, more than 100 advocate organizations wrote to your Administration asking that you immediately halt deportation flights to the country, secure the return of Mauritians who were “wrongly deported,” and designate Mauritania for TPS.<sup>5</sup>

We join their calls for your Administration to provide TPS for Mauritania. By designating Mauritania for TPS, the U.S. would not only be halting the deportation of Black Mauritians to a country where their lives and freedom are under constant threat, but also demonstrating our dedication to upholding human rights.

We would like to emphasize the urgency of this request by highlighting the devastating consequences that slavery and statelessness have in the daily lives of Black Mauritians. Beginning with ethnic cleansing and mass deportations in the late 1980’s, the Mauritanian government effectively stripped the nationality of hundreds of thousands of Black Mauritians, rendering them and their children stateless.<sup>6</sup> Many Black Mauritians who were made stateless now face racial profiling at the hands of security forces, arbitrary detention, extortion, torture, and are even trafficked into slavery.

Chattel slavery and a racist caste system continue to operate in Mauritania, which only abolished slavery in 1981 and criminalized it in 2007.<sup>7</sup> Poor enforcement of anti-slavery laws have allowed slavery to continue and today the Mauritania government has one of the worst governmental responses to slavery in the world.<sup>8</sup> According to the Global Slavery Index (GSI), 62 percent of the entire population is vulnerable to enslavement-like conditions.<sup>9</sup> Black Mauritians who are enslaved experience sexual assault, family separation, and even murder.<sup>10</sup> In its latest iteration of

---

<sup>5</sup> Rafael Bernal, *supra* note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Rone Tempest, *In Senegal and Mauritania, Ethnic Conflict Rages Amid Talk of War*, LA TIMES (June 3, 1989), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-06-03-mn-831-story.html>; Sebastian Kohn, *Fear and Statelessness in Mauritania*, OPEN SOCIETY JUSTICE INITIATIVE (Oct. 2, 2011), <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/voices/fear-and-statelessness-mauritania>; *An ambitious plan to end statelessness*, THE NEW HUMANITARIAN (Nov. 7, 2014), <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2014/11/07/ambitious-plan-end-statelessness>; Joint Submission to the Human Rights Council, *Universal Periodic Review: Mauritania*, INST. ON STATELESSNESS AND INCLUSION (July 9, 2020), [https://files.institutesi.org/UPR37\\_Mauritania.pdf](https://files.institutesi.org/UPR37_Mauritania.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> John Campbell, *The State of Slavery in Mauritania*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (Oct. 14, 2016), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/state-slavery-mauritania>; Mauritanian MPs pass slavery law, BBC NEWS (Aug. 9, 2007), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6938032.stm>.

<sup>8</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mauritania*, U.S. DEPT. OF STATE (2022), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mauritania/>.

<sup>9</sup> *World Report 2021: Mauritania Events of 2020*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/mauritania> (last visited Oct. 3, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Johanna Higgs, *Surviving Violence in the Sahara: The Women of Mauritania*, HUFFINGTON POST (Feb. 17, 2018), [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/johanna-higgs/surviving-violence-in-the\\_b\\_14807932.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/johanna-higgs/surviving-violence-in-the_b_14807932.html); *Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania’s Haratine Women*, MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP INT. (Apr. 2015), [https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MRG\\_Rep\\_Maur\\_ENG.pdf](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MRG_Rep_Maur_ENG.pdf); John D. Sutter, *Slavery’s last*

ethnic cleansing, the Mauritanian government adopted Arabic as the only official language, eliminating the use of French in official business. Now, applications for jobs, civil service exams, hospital records, court records, and applications for government-issued documents are offered in Arabic alone, locking many Black Mauritians out of basic functions and services.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. State Department's 2022 Country Report on the Human Rights Practices in Mauritania acknowledged the continued and widespread violence, repression, and abuses in the country.<sup>12</sup> Human rights experts have documented similar conditions, confirming the prevalence of slavery and a lack of progress in reforming repressive laws.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, land-grabbing has resurged and families who relied on farming or fishing for generations are left with nothing, while the Mauritanian government and international corporations grow richer.<sup>14</sup> The policy is widely understood as yet another way for the government to render Black Mauritians extinct, in this case through starvation.

Finally, we would like to remind you of the decades of bipartisan consensus in the U.S. government to protect Black Mauritians from deportation including under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.<sup>15</sup> Human rights advocates, Members of Congress, and even Vice President Kamala Harris during her tenure as a U.S. Senator have all urged the U.S. government to provide lifesaving protection for Black Mauritians in the United States.<sup>16</sup> There are approximately 8,000 foreign-born Mauritians residing in the United States, with an estimated 3,000 eligible for TPS upon designation (many of whom have U.S. citizen children), making this an issue of paramount importance. Many Mauritians arrived in the U.S. in the 1990s, but yet were denied asylum due to a lack of access to legal services and interpreters, and due to discrimination within the asylum system.<sup>17</sup>

The U.S. must be a country that stands against racial discrimination and enslavement. We respectfully request that you designate Mauritania for TPS, in order to save lives, keep families

---

*stronghold*, CNN (Mar. 18, 2012),

<https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> *Black Mauritians' Ongoing Search For Safety*, *supra* note 3.

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *supra* note 10.

<sup>13</sup> *World Report 2021: Mauritania Events of 2020*, *supra* note 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Black Mauritians' Ongoing Search For Safety*, *supra* note 3.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin Foer, *How Trump Radicalized ICE*, *THE ATLANTIC* (Sept. 2018),

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/trump-ice/565772/>.

<sup>16</sup> Senator Sherrod Brown, *Brown, Carey Urge Biden Administration to Put in Place Protections for Mauritians Living in The United States*, U.S. SENATE (Jan. 18, 2023),

<https://www.brown.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/sherrod-brown-carey-urge-biden-administration-put-place-protections-mauritians-living-the-united-states>; Congressman Jerry Nadler, *Nadler, Harris, Thompson, Lofgren, Beatty Lead Lawmakers in Letter to Urge Administration to Halt Deportation of Black Mauritians*, U.S. HOUSE OF REPS. (Oct. 12, 2018), <https://nadler.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=391397>.

<sup>17</sup> *Temporary Protected Status protects families while also boosting the U.S. economy*, FWD.US (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://www.fwd.us/news/temporary-protected-status-report/>; *Black Mauritians' Ongoing Search For Safety*, *supra* note 3.

together, and promote a humane and effective immigration system. Thank you in advance for your attention to this critical matter. We appreciate your efforts and are willing and able to provide any support or assistance you may need.

Sincerely,



---

Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick  
Member of Congress



---

Joyce Beatty  
Member of Congress



---

Mike Carey  
Member of Congress



---

Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress



---

Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.  
Member of Congress



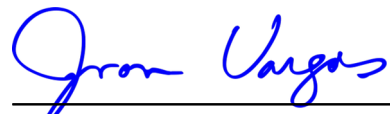
---

Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress



---

André Carson  
Member of Congress



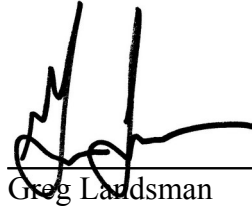
---

Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress



---

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress



---

Greg Landsman  
Member of Congress



---

Dwight Evans  
Member of Congress



---

Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress



---

Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress



---

Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress



---

Gwen S. Moore  
Member of Congress



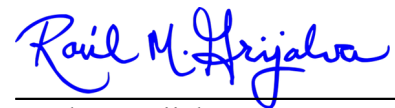
---

Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.  
Member of Congress



---

Adriano Espaillat  
Member of Congress



---

Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress



---

Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress



---

Sylvia R. Garcia  
Member of Congress



---

Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress



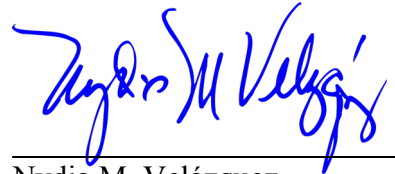
---

Joaquin Castro  
Member of Congress



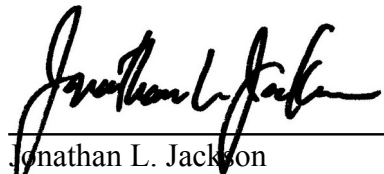
---

Judy Chu  
Member of Congress



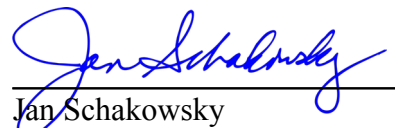
---

Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



---

Jonathan L. Jackson  
Member of Congress



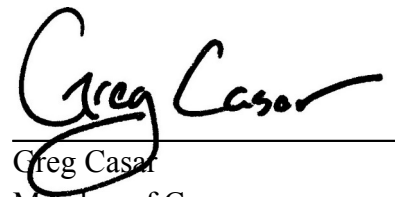
---

Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress



---

Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress



---

Greg Casar  
Member of Congress

*Tony Cárdenas*

---

Tony Cárdenas  
Member of Congress

*Maxwell Frost*

---

Maxwell Alejandro Frost  
Member of Congress