

March 23, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Vice President Kamala Harris  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Secretary Antony J. Blinken  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
301 7th Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear President Biden, Vice President Harris, Secretary Blinken and Secretary Mayorkas,

We write to you with an urgent request to designate TPS for Mauritania - a country where Black individuals face<sup>1</sup> widespread race- and ethnicity-based human rights violations,<sup>2</sup> including slavery, forced statelessness, state-sponsored violence, land grabbing and repression of free speech, making deporting Black people to Mauritania dangerous and deadly.

This letter is a follow up to a recent listening session with your colleagues from the agencies you lead as well as the National Security Council and the Office of Legislative Affairs within the White House. A coalition of immigrant rights, human rights, and policy organizations including the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in the U.S., UndocuBlack Network, Ohio Immigrant Alliance, Haitian Bridge Alliance, Masa Group, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and FWD.us., as well as Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Mike Carey (R-OH), are calling for a TPS designation for Mauritania.

In the recent listening session, our organizations and members of Senator Brown's team poured over the evidence of temporary, but horrific conditions in the country.

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<sup>1</sup> "Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Mauritania," *FWD.us*, Accessed March 14, 2023, <https://www.fwd.us/news/tps-for-mauritania/>.

<sup>2</sup> "ICE is sending Mauritians back to modern-day slavery," *Washington Post*, August 27th, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ice-is-sending-mauritians-back-to-modern-day-slavery/2018/08/27/1b411afe-a712-11e8-97ce-cc9042272f07\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ice-is-sending-mauritians-back-to-modern-day-slavery/2018/08/27/1b411afe-a712-11e8-97ce-cc9042272f07_story.html).

We ask that you consider these conditions, and act without delay so that the people we work with and the communities we serve no longer have to live in fear of being deported to enslavement and other human rights violations. We believe that standing against slavery and committing to protect Black Mauritians from being deported to a place where their lives and freedom would be at risk, would be in line with the Administration's stated goal<sup>3</sup> of racial equity within the U.S. immigration system for Black immigrants.

Many of the Mauritians our organizations work with have been in the U.S. since the 1990s, have built their lives here and have U.S. citizen children. Unfortunately, due to lack of access to legal services and interpreters in their correct languages, as well as discrimination within the U.S. immigration system, many of these individuals were denied asylum<sup>4</sup>, and have spent years living in fear that they might be ripped from their families and their communities. Indeed, when deportations to Mauritania started up in earnest during the previous administration, people who were deported reported<sup>5</sup> arrests, detention, extortion, and statelessness at the hands of the current Mauritanian Government. Most were once again forced to flee to another country for safety. Our Mauritanian neighbors, friends, and family members deserve protection from deportation and work authorization so they can remain with their families in their communities and live and work with dignity.

You may have seen a recent bipartisan letter<sup>6</sup> from Senator Brown and Representative Carey which called<sup>7</sup> on the Biden Administration to protect the lives of Mauritians living in the U.S., through a TPS designation “given extraordinary conditions including systemic and ongoing slavery and entrenched ethnic and racial exclusion in the country.” The lawmakers wrote, “The United States must send a clear message that our nation condemns slavery and will not return people to conditions where they may be enslaved or denied citizenship rights...”

Mauritania is ranked among the top 10 countries in the world as it relates to the prevalence of slavery, and has one of the worst governmental responses.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Biden-Harris Administration Advances Equity and Opportunity for Black Americans and Communities Across the Country,” *White House*, November 6, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/06/the-biden-harris-administration-advance-s-equity-and-opportunity-for-black-americans-and-communities-across-the-country/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Black Mauritians’ Ongoing Search For Safety,” *Ohio Immigrant Alliance*, January, 2023, <https://ohioimmigrant.org/2022/03/22/mauritania-today-deportations-arrest-torture-expulsion-oppression-and-black-mauritians-ongoing-search-for-safety/>.

<sup>5</sup> Nellie Peyton, “Mauritians who sought refuge in U.S. face deportation, then jail,” *Reuters*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-immigration-usa/mauritians-who-sought-refuge-in-u-s-face-deportation-then-jail-idUSKBN1OG1DA>.

<sup>6</sup> Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Mike Carey, “Temporary Protected Status (TPS) For Mauritania,” *Senator Sherrod Brown*, January 18th, 2023, [https://www.brown.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/11123\\_temporary\\_protected\\_status\\_tps\\_for\\_mauritania\\_sen\\_brown\\_and\\_repcarey.pdf](https://www.brown.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/11123_temporary_protected_status_tps_for_mauritania_sen_brown_and_repcarey.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Rafael Bernal, “Ohio lawmakers ask for immigration relief for Mauritians at risk of slavery,” *The Hill*, January, 18, 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3818349-ohio-lawmakers-ask-for-immigration-relief-for-mauritians-at-risk-of-slavery/>.

According to the Global Survey Index<sup>8</sup> (GSI), 62% of the entire population is vulnerable to enslavement-like conditions. Slavery was not abolished under the law in Mauritania until 1981,<sup>9</sup> and the practice was not criminalized until 2007.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately the Mauritanian Government's failure to enforce these laws means that slavery continues to be widespread.<sup>11</sup> Black Mauritians who are enslaved face sexual assault,<sup>12</sup> family separation<sup>13</sup> and even murder.<sup>14</sup> But enslavement is not the only horrific human rights violation faced by Black Mauritians in the country, who are systematically oppressed and discriminated against because of their race and ethnicity at every level of society.<sup>15</sup> The racial discrimination in the country and subsequent human rights abuses can only be described<sup>16</sup> as an apartheid state.<sup>17</sup> The Mauritanian Government has engaged in state-sanctioned ethnic cleansing en masse, subjecting Black Mauritians to violence<sup>18</sup> and land grabbing,<sup>19</sup> stripping<sup>20</sup> them of their identity documents, deporting them from their homes, and leaving them and their children stateless. Black Mauritians in the country are vulnerable to arrest, torture and their freedom of movement is restricted.

Prior to the Trump administration, deportations to Mauritania were largely paused, including under both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, due to the prevalence of enslavement and the inability for Black Mauritians to obtain identity documents as they were not considered citizens of Mauritania. President Trump restarted<sup>21</sup> these deportations.

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<sup>8</sup> "Country Data: Mauritania," *Global Slavery Index*, 2018, <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/data/country-data/mauritania/>.

<sup>9</sup> John Campbell, "The State of Slavery in Mauritania," *Council of Foreign Relations*, October 16th, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/state-slavery-mauritania>.

<sup>10</sup> "Mauritanian MPs pass slavery law," *BBC News*, August 9th, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6938032.stm>.

<sup>11</sup> Ephrem Rugiriza, "Justice Still in Chains for Mauritania's Slaves," *Justice Info*, August 23rd, 2021, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/81062-justice-still-in-chains-mauritania-slaves.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Johanna Higgs, "Surviving Violence in the Sahara: The Women of Mauritania," *Huffington Post*, February 17th, 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).

<sup>13</sup> "Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women," *Minority Rights*, April 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).

<sup>14</sup> John D. Sutter, "Slavery's last stronghold," *CNN*, March 18th, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Black Mauritians' Ongoing Search For Safety," *Ohio Immigrant*, March 22nd, 2022, <https://ohioimmigrant.org/2022/03/22/mauritania-today-deportations-arrest-torture-expulsion-oppression-and-black-mauritians-ongoing-search-for-safety/>.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Allard, "ICE is Shipping Ohio's Mauritians Back to Slavery's Last Stronghold in Northwest Africa," *CleveScene*, June 5th, 2019, <https://www.clevescene.com/news/ice-is-shipping-ohios-mauritians-back-to-slaverys-last-stronghold-in-northwest-africa-30632228>.

<sup>17</sup> Garba Diallo, "Mauritania - The Other Apartheid?" *Nordiska Afrikaninstitute and Garba Diallo*, Date Accessed: March 14th, 2023, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/104909/16\\_Mauritania.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/104909/16_Mauritania.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> "Mauritania's Campaign of Terror: State-Sponsored Repression of Black Africans," *Human Rights Watch*, April 1994, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/MAURITAN944.PDF>.

<sup>19</sup> "Land Slavery' and Stolen Land: Another Tool for Oppression of Black Mauritians," *Ohio Immigrant*, March 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).

<sup>20</sup> "An ambitious plan to end statelessness," *The New Humanitarian*, November 7th, 2014, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2014/11/07/ambitious-plan-end-statelessness>.

<sup>21</sup> Franklin Foer, "How Trump Radicalized ICE," *The Atlantic*, September 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/trump-ice/565772/>.

We are asking your administration to instead protect Mauritians in the U.S. through a designation of TPS for the country. Failing to do so would needlessly subject<sup>22</sup> more Black Mauritanians to state-sanctioned violence and potentially slavery.

The United States has documented the extraordinary conditions in Mauritania including slavery. In addition to a 2021 State Department country report<sup>23</sup> for Mauritania which noted the the country's failure to end slavery, the State Department advises U.S. citizens against<sup>24</sup> travel to Mauritania, and recently awarded<sup>25</sup> a human rights defender award to a Mauritanian man for his work in assisting survivors of slavery in the country. Further, in 2018, the Trump Administration terminated special trade<sup>26</sup> benefits for the country due to its lack of progress in ending slavery, and the current Administration has continued to keep Mauritania off of this AGOA eligibility list for this same reason.<sup>27</sup> The U.S. simply cannot deport people to these conditions. Instead we should protect Mauritanians living in the U.S. with a designation of TPS.

Human rights advocates and members of Congress have repeatedly asked for protections for Black Mauritanians living in the U.S. such as TPS, and during Vice President Kamala Harris' time in the U.S. Senate, then Senator Harris led a bicameral letter<sup>28</sup> urging the Trump Administration to protect Mauritanian nationals.

Of the approximately 8,000 foreign born<sup>29</sup> Mauritanians living in the U.S., at least 3,000 live in Ohio, and it has been estimated that as many as 2,000 to 3,000 people<sup>30</sup> would be eligible for TPS with a designation for Mauritania. These are our neighbors, our friends and our family members and they need your help to safely remain in the U.S.

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<sup>22</sup> Frances Madson, "US Officials Outrageously Claim Black Men Fleeing Slavery Lack "Credible Fear," *Truthout*, November 17th, 2021,

<https://truthout.org/articles/us-officials-outrageously-claim-black-men-fleeing-slavery-lack-credible-fear/>.

<sup>23</sup> "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mauritania," *U.S. Department of State*, Accessed on March 14, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mauritania/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Mauritania Travel Advisory," *US Department of State*, October 5th, 2022,

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mauritania-travel-advisory.html#:~:text=Mauritania%20%2D%20Level%20%3A%20Reconsider%20Travel&text=Reconsider%20travel%20to%20Mauritania%20due,Some%20areas%20have%20increased%20risk>.

<sup>25</sup> "Annual Human Rights Defender Award Recipients Announced," *US Department of State*, February 1st, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/annual-global-human-rights-defender-award-recipients-announced/>.

<sup>26</sup> "President Trump Terminates Trade Preference Program Eligibility for Mauritania," *United States Trade Representative*, November 2nd, 2018,

<https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2018/november/president-trump-terminates-trade>.

<sup>27</sup> "AGOA Country Eligibility," *African Growth and Opportunity Act*, Date Accessed: March 14th, 2023, <https://agoa.info/about-agoa/country-eligibility.html>.

<sup>28</sup> "Nadler, Harris, Thompson, Lofgren, Beatty Lead Lawmakers in Letter to Urge Administration to Halt Deportation of Black Mauritanians," October 12th, 2018,

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3A%3AUS%3A27e27390-099d-4bd4-866f-544888cffe%3Acf&viewer%21megaVerb=group-discover>.

<sup>29</sup> Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Mike Carey, "Temporary Protected Status (TPS) For Mauritania," *Senator Sherrod Brown*, January 18th, 2023,

[https://www.brown.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/11123\\_temporary\\_protected\\_status\\_tps\\_for\\_mauritania\\_sen\\_brown\\_and\\_repcarey.pdf](https://www.brown.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/11123_temporary_protected_status_tps_for_mauritania_sen_brown_and_repcarey.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> "Temporary Protected Status protects families while also boosting the U.S. economy," *FWD.us*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.fwd.us/news/temporary-protected-status-report/>.

We were encouraged by remarks the Secretary made in April 2021 at a UCLA conference on immigration where Sec. Mayorkas stated<sup>31</sup> that conditions in countries such as Mauritania deserve close review and that “review is well underway.” We are writing to request that this Administration immediately designate Mauritania for TPS. Doing so would not only save lives and keep families and individuals safe and together in their communities, but it would also be in line with the Administration's stated goal of realizing a humane, orderly and effective immigration system in the U.S. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Houleye Thiam, President, Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in the U.S.

Zeinabou Sall, Director of Immigration and Social Services, Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in the U.S.

Haddy Gassama, Policy and Advocacy Director, UndocuBlack Network

Guerline Jozef, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Haitian Bridge Alliance (HBA)

Lynn Tramonte, Director, Ohio Immigrant Alliance

Todd Schulte, President, FWD.us

Seydi Sarr, Founder, African Bureau of Immigration and Social Affairs (ABISA)

Ramya Reddy, Managing Policy Counsel, Masa Group

Eskinder Negash, President & CEO, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)

Carolyn Tran, Co-Director, Communities United for Status and Protection (CUSP)

Diana Konaté, Policy Director, African Communities Together (ACT)

Anthony Enriquez, Vice President of U.S. Advocacy & Litigation, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

cc: Director Susan Rice, Jake Sullivan

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<sup>31</sup> “Sec. Mayorkas TPS UCLA Law Event – 4 30 21,” *YouTube*, November 18th, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUgn92\\_C6J8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUgn92_C6J8).



U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
Services

April 3, 2023

Houleye Thiam  
President  
Mauritanian Network for Human Rights  
PO Box 18033  
Cincinnati, OH 45218  
[hrightsus@gmail.com](mailto:hrightsus@gmail.com)

Dear Ms. Thiam:

Thank you for your March 23, 2023 letter to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) requesting designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Mauritania. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is principally responsible for advising the Secretary on TPS and implementing the programs. Secretary Mayorkas asked that I respond on his behalf.

I appreciate the time you and your cosigners took to meet with my colleagues at DHS and USCIS on February 23, 2023. The information you provided about the conditions in Mauritania is helpful to us as we continue to monitor conditions there.

As you are aware, the Secretary may designate a country for TPS and extend or terminate a country's existing TPS designation based upon specific statutory criteria. To designate a country for TPS or extend a country's TPS designation, the Secretary must find one or more of the following: (1) there is an ongoing armed conflict within the country that would pose a serious threat to the personal safety of the country's nationals if they were returned; (2) there has been an environmental disaster resulting in a substantial, but temporary, disruption of the living conditions in the area affected, the country is temporarily unable to handle adequately the return of its nationals, and the country has officially requested TPS designation; or (3) there exist extraordinary and temporary conditions in the country that prevent nationals from returning in safety and permitting the country's nationals to remain temporarily would not be contrary to the national interest of the United States. *See* Immigration and Nationality Act § 244(b)(1).

Please also note that DHS offers support that may be available upon request to assist eligible nationals of Mauritania residing in the United States affected by special situations, such as those outlined in the conditions you presented. Such support may include:

- Change or extension of nonimmigrant status if eligible nationals are currently in the United States, even if the request is filed after the authorized period of admission has expired;
- Expedited processing of requests for advance parole documents;

- Expedited adjudication of requests for off-campus employment authorization for F-1 students experiencing severe economic hardship;
- Expedited adjudication of employment authorization applications, where appropriate;
- Assistance if applicants received a Request for Evidence or a Notice of Intent to Deny and were unable to appear for an interview, submit evidence, or respond in a timely manner because of the special situation; and
- Replacement of lost or damaged immigration or travel documents issued by USCIS, such as a Permanent Resident Card (Green Card).

More information is available under “Immigration Relief in Emergencies or Unforeseen Circumstances” on the USCIS website at <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/immigration-relief-in-emergencies-or-unforeseen-circumstances>.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. Please share this response with the other organizations that cosigned your letter. Should you require any additional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ur M. Jaddou", followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Ur M. Jaddou  
Director