

Alert: Land Confiscation in Mauritania

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The local authorities in Mauritania are pursuing their dangerous project to take southerners' agricultural land. Fuuta, name of the region of southern Mauritania, covers a large portion of the band that mark the transition from the Sahara desert to what is commonly called Sub-Saharan Africa. Fuuta was once part of the Ghana Empire (8th Century) with its own kingdoms before falling in Mauritania, Senegal and Mali after French subdivided what they called French Soudan into the referenced three countries around 1900. In that country (region) land is life and is a representation of one's family wealth and ownership. The livelihood consists of farming and livestock, growing cows, sheep and goats. Geographically speaking, it consists of the Senegal River valley.

The region has always been the target of the nomad Moors (Arabs), resulting in numerous deadly conflicts throughout the region's history. The attachment to the land of the Fuuta population can be described as religious. The land is what they swear with. The land determines power and family membership. For example, a young man at the age of marrying is offered a piece of land by his father to cultivate in order to attend to the needs of his future family.

The nomad Moors, with their herds of camels travel from place to place in search of water and grass for their livestock during dry seasons. Other caravans come for trans-Saharan trade needs.

They travel from the desert north to the relatively wet south where the Blacks halpular, Wolof, Soninke and other African ethnic groups live. They setup camps in the outskirts of the villages.

For reasons of history, although it is out of the scope of this article, it is during these trips that they kidnap black children playing around the villages or sent to get wood, or also, working as herd keepers. Those kidnapped children are used as a labour-force.

There is no need to say that, in the era of globalization and the race of the fast growing economies and over populated countries for land grabbing, the traditional way of hand farming must leave the place to a modern more productive way. We are seeing countries like China, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait among others go in search for agricultural land in Africa. This phenomenon known as Land Grab is more and more in the news. The prospect of a global food crisis in the coming decades justifies that race. Back in Mauritania, the interest of the north nomadic population on the south land is for a survival purpose. The drastic change in the climate seen in the image of a fast desertification in the north is constraining the nomadic Moors to move south to gain access to water. The Mauritanian government in 2010 recently completed the construction of a 200km pipe system that will supply the capital city Nouakchott with water from the Senegal River.

It is also the case that the people from Fuuta have no means to exploit their land on a large scale. They are impoverished by decades of discrimination and brutal dictatorship with many dramatic results on their lives. Since the country's Independence in 1960, Arab presidents have succeeded each other. They come and go, but, all have one thing in common: they all believe in making Mauritania an exclusively Arab country; denying in the process the existence of the Black African portion of the population; which is, we all know, the majority in the country. The attacks on the Blacks civil rights are made on several fronts. The educational system is the first and main battle field. The first trouble started in 1966 when learning Arabic was made mandatory in all schools. That decision faced a harsh resistance that sparked the first ethnic riots in the country. One protester died and several young Blacks were incarcerated. The other contested domain is the economic monopoly of the Arabs in all economic sectors.

With no opportunity to succeed in business, many blacks resorted to immigration. Last but not least, they installed a military and political domination with a ratio of less than 8% in all office tenures for Blacks at all times.

Misinformation campaigns, relayed by the Arab media, took place to depict Mauritania as an Arab majority country. All these attempts have failed to bring about the wanted results. The Government of the dictator Maaouya Ould Taya (1984-2005) blew out of proportion an incident between a Senegalese farmer and a Mauritanian nomad shepherd in April 1989 (both Black) into an international conflict. Scores of black people were massacred in the streets, in their homes, and at their work places by hordes of angry Moors. They claimed they were targeting Senegalese residents

who they accused of having killed their fellow Mauritians in Senegal. It was the perfect opportunity to actually eliminate the maximum possible of Blacks from Mauritania. Looting and burning of Black owned businesses took place simultaneously. After the cry out of the international community, the killings stopped and the decision was taken to return citizens to their respective countries. With the help of the UN, the French government and some other friendly countries, constructed an aerial bridge between Dakar and Nouakchott. This was another golden opportunity for the racists to rid the country of the "stain" as they used to call blacks.

They went on a hunt for black people from homes, workplaces, villages and streets and boarded whoever they met in trucks and sent them to Senegal and Mali. This is when more than 120,000 Blacks were stripped of their citizenship, of their belongings and deported to Senegal and Mali. Currently 20,000 are still waiting for an organized return after the authorities recognized their citizenship again few years back. In this same year, all officers and NCO's from the Army and all other corps were arrested, accused of trying to overthrow the power. More than 500 more will die under torture or due to summary executions. Worst, on November 28th 1990, in order to celebrate Independence Day, soldiers hung 28 blacks soldiers. Families are still waiting for justice, even though the perpetrators are known and living free in Mauritania.

Let's not forget that previously in the summer of 1986 after a group of Black intellectuals published a document named "The memorandum of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian", in which the document demanded increased justice and equality in favor of the Black, non Arab Mauritians in the country, this was met with a savage repression. Multiple arrests were made, not only of the signing members of the declaration but of every intellectual. Sent in the four corners of the vast desert country very few of them came out alive after five years of torture and mistreatment.

This period (1986 -2001) marked the bloodiest years of Mauritania's history. The rule of the ruthless dictator Ould Taya ended when he was taken down by his own cousin in 2005. He is today in asylum in Qatar. His reign gave the biggest break to the land grabbers in Fuuta. While whole families are sent to Senegal and Mali fighting to gain the right to come back, Moor businessmen with the help of the Government rushed to setup agricultural perimeters that today are still in place.

With this move today the government is just trying to implement and complete the job of stripping poor farmers of the land they inherited from their ancestors.

There is, without doubt, a real need for modernization of the agriculture in Fuuta, but it must consider the interests of the real owners of the land. Any project of exploitation; be it by nationals or foreigners must start first with discussions with the local populations who have owned the land for centuries. No mandate from any authority should override the traditional ownership of the land. Instead of giving the

land to foreign investors, the government should create an environment of trust and work with the farmers to meet the millennium goal of food self-sufficiency. The irony is, back in September 2010, the government pushed out an envelope of mr62 million (US\$230,000) to support moor farmers develop their land. Those farmers are located just 75km off the site they are targeting today around the city of Aleg. The locals say literally and figuratively that "Land and blood are closely linked in the Fuuta." Consequently a responsible approach is necessary to avoid risk of serious trouble. French colonialists did try during a long time to take over the same fertile zones. Faced with a tough resistance they resorted to imposing a tax for land use and recognizing the ownership of the land to the peoples of the region. Later some Arab emirs tried to extend to their own benefit that tax. Local chiefs like Thierno Souleymane Ball, a historic figure in the region, refused to pay and fought to break that domination.

Today, local authorities representing the central Arab government believe that after decades of suffering and poverty the land grab will be easy and there is no need to convene with anyone but the money holders (Saudi investors). They are using legislation they made several years back in the 1980s in the intent to legalize that expropriation. In that piece of legislation they place the arable land belonging to families for two thousand years in the public domain; as such, it belongs to anyone who has the means to develop it. The Article 3 of this law #83-127 Order of June 5, 1983 on Reorganization of Land and Property ownership stipulates "the system of traditional land tenure is abolished". With the blessing of the central government the last decades have seen a flow of Arab (Moor) businessman taking advantage of the deportations of 1989 to occupy land.

Many NGO's have been denouncing the practice but all complaints are falling on deaf ears.