

# UN urges release of Mauritanian blogger

UN experts have urged the immediate release of detained Mauritanian blogger Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'kheitir, who is eligible for release on time-served.



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A group of UN human rights experts have expressed grave concerns about the continued detention of M'kheitir on charges which violated his human rights. M'kheitir remains in detention at an unofficial location, reportedly due to concerns for his safety. There are concerns that his conditions of detention have seriously affected his health.

“We have been repeatedly in contact with the Government of Mauritania and are calling on them to release him from arbitrary detention and ensure his safety,” the experts said, in a release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“It is a matter of grave concern that this young man has now been in detention for four years. The charges against him and the previous death sentence for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of conscience and expression, clearly contravene international human rights law and the international conventions ratified by Mauritania.”

M'kheitir was arrested on 2 January 2014 and sentenced to death for apostasy in December 2014, after publishing an article online questioning the use of religious justification to legitimise caste discrimination.

On 9 November 2017, the Court of Appeals in Nouadhibou quashed his death sentence and commuted it to two years in prison and a fine for blasphemy, rendering him eligible for immediate release on time served. The following day the Prosecutor General appealed the ruling.

“Following the Prosecutor’s appeal against the Appeal Court’s decision, it is not clear whether or when the case will be considered by the Supreme Court. In any case, we urge that the Mauritanian government comply without delay with the finding of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention,” the experts added.

It is incompatible with international human rights law to criminalise apostasy. The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention adopted an Opinion in April in 2017 calling for M’kheir’s immediate release and stating his right to seek compensation.

The experts concerns are heightened by the recent amendment of article 306 of the Penal code that reportedly mandates the death penalty for Muslims considered guilty of apostasy.

The experts have written to the Mauritanian Government about the case, received responses to their letters and are waiting for the government to take further action.

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