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Mali: Slavery by descent must be criminalised, UN experts say

08 May 2023



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GENEVA (8 May 2023) – Slavery by descent and the resulting violence perpetrated by so-called ‘nobles’ or ‘masters’ against people born into slavery persisted in Mali, UN experts said today, urging authorities to adopt legislation to criminalise slavery in the country without delay.

“Nothing can justify slavery, whether it be culture, tradition, or religion,” Tomoya Obokata, **Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences** and **Alioune Tine, Independent Expert on the situation of human right in Mali**”, said. “Continuing to support slavery in the 21st century contradicts the repeated commitments made by Malian authorities to respect, protect and fulfil human rights for all.”

Slavery by descent was forcing the displacement of hundreds of people and entire communities, who have no hope of returning to their home communities for fear of attack, the experts said. They highlighted the example of the Kayes region of Mali, where violent clashes have resulted in injuries and forced people to flee their homes. The experts said descent-based slavery was also widespread in the central and northern regions of the country, including Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. According to Mali’s National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH), there is no data on the number of victims of slavery by descent in the country. However, some organisations estimate that at least 800,000 people are considered to be born into slavery, of whom around 200,000 live under the direct control of their “masters.”

The experts acknowledged important efforts made by the Malian authorities, in particular the Ministry of Justice and judicial authorities, to end impunity for cases of slavery by descent. They welcomed the

conviction of several individuals for such crimes at a special session of the Kayes Assize Court from 27 February to 17 March 2023.

“The Government as a whole must act, and the criminalisation of slavery must be a priority,” the experts said.

“Some human rights violations and abuses committed in the context of descent-based slavery could constitute offences under the Malian Penal Code, but not all,” the experts said. “A specific law criminalising slavery by descent would facilitate the prosecution of perpetrators and increase the protection of victims,” they said.

In [a recent study](#), Mali's National Human Rights Commission detailed human rights violations and abuses related to slavery by descent, including acts of violence, assault, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, public humiliation, insults, intimidation, kidnapping and rape committed daily by “masters” against “slaves”, denial of access to basic social services (including water facilities such as pumps or wells, schools, sports and health facilities); and denial of access to businesses or farmland. Individuals or communities who resist slavery are often subjected to physical or social isolation and restrictions on movement by their “masters.”

“Slave ‘masters’ must be held accountable for their actions, compensate victims and restore their rights and dignity,” the experts said. Traditional and religious leaders must play in eradicating slavery by descent in the country, given their influence, they said.

The implementation of the recommendations made during the Interactive Dialogue on Mali in March 2023, and Mali's Universal Periodic Review in May, provide an opportunity for the country to immediately adopt specific legislation criminalising slavery. “Mali is the only country in the Sahel region that does not have such legislation,” they said.

The experts have previously called on Mali to criminalise and eliminate slavery by descent and raised the issue on [8 September 2020](#), [19 July 2021](#), and [29 October 2021](#).ENDS

** The experts: Mr. Tomoya Obokata, [Special Rapporteur on contemporary](#)*

forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences ; *Mr. Alioune Tine, Independent Expert on the situation of human right in Mali.*

UN human rights country page - Mali

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