

APACHE: Amnesty denounces secret Belgian return agreement with Mauritania

By Stef Arends

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A secret return agreement between Belgium and Mauritania does not guarantee human rights sufficiently, according to Amnesty International. State Secretary Francken recently presented the collaboration with the West African police state on social media. Exactly what has been agreed, however, remains a secret.

Amnesty International denounces the return agreement that State Secretary Theo Francken (N-VA) concluded earlier this month with Mauritania. A return agreement with the United States led in August this year to several Mauritanian refugees being expelled and imprisoned on arrival.

Francken announced his agreement with social media [with a Facebook live video](#) from the capital Nouakchott.

Nothing was said about the content of the agreement in the announcement. "One of the big promises of the elections was to conclude agreements with Maghreb countries for a smoother return and better cooperation", as later [on the website of the N-VA](#).

Spokesperson for Theo Francken Katrien Jansseune told Apache that it can not be released 'for diplomatic reasons'. Problematic, according to François Patuel, researcher West Africa at Amnesty International.

Slavery

"Certainly in a country like Mauritania it is very important that clear guarantees are given for the maintenance of human rights. Mauritania is a society where discrimination is omnipresent, and slavery is still a common practice," says Patuel.

According to the Slavery Index of Walk Free Foundation, Mauritania is one of the countries where slavery is most common. Only six countries in the world score worse. Perhaps more worrying is that it is also in the top ten countries that take the fewest steps to prevent slavery.

François Patuel, Amnesty International: "Mauritania is a society where discrimination is omnipresent, and slavery is still a common practice."

The slavery problem is closely linked to the oppression of the 'dark-Moorish' population. The ruling Arab minority group considers them second-class citizens. The Mauritanian government started an operation in 2011 to deprive dark-colored residents of their nationality.

"At that time everyone had to prove once again that he or she was actually a Mauritanian," this is how Lynn Tramonte from the American NGO Ohio Immigrant Alliance (OIA) knows. OIA is committed to the rights of Mauritanian refugees in the US.

Laissez passer

The organization reported in September this year about four Mauritians who were sent back to their country of origin. Upon arrival at the airport they were immediately imprisoned. They had no Mauritanian identity papers and were therefore not recognized as a citizen.

"The return agreement made it possible for Mauritians without papers to be deported from the US", explains Tramonte. "Mauritania issued a laissez-passer for this [a temporary travel document, ed.]. However, that document is useless once it reaches the country."

"Once arrived, the refugees were not recognized as citizens, and moreover accused of besetting the reputation of Mauritania. Flights from your country because it would not be safe there is seen as bad talking about your country. And that is punishable in Mauritania. "

The returned Mauritians were only released two weeks later after family members had bribed the prison guards, the NGO reports.

For Amnesty International, it is therefore problematic that the content of the return agreement that Francken has signed is not public. "Secret co-operation with a country ravaged by discrimination and slavery offers insufficient guarantees that human rights will be respected", says François Patuel.

Four Mauritians

Are the illegal Mauritanian immigrants then such a big problem in Belgium? The figures indicate that this is not the case. Federal migration center Myria reported in its annual evaluation report of 2018 that in the years 2016 and 2017 a total of 4 Mauritanian transmigrants were arrested in our country.

The number of Mauritanian refugees following the official asylum procedure is slightly higher. According to Eurostat, there were 20 asylum applications from Mauritania in 2016 and 15 in 2017.

The return of Mauritians who stay in Belgium illegally is not the only reason for the agreement. The Francken spokesperson told Apache that it was also agreed that Mauritania would prevent refugees from other African countries from reaching Europe.

"Given Mauritania's role in combating crime, radicalization, illegal immigration and its geographical proximity to Europe, Mauritania is a strategically important country in West Africa," said Franckens spokesman Jansseune.

The agreement includes agreements with Mauritania to "improve border controls" and to "raise awareness of the consequences of illegal residence and smuggling of human beings".

The masonry of Africa

François Patuel of Amnesty is aware of several other similar agreements between Mauritania and other EU countries. "The bottom line is that the European Union wants to prevent migrants from reaching Europe," he explains. "The result is that it is made impossible for legitimate refugees to flee".

"That creates a great risk of human rights violations. Mauritania has already been criticized by the international community for the arbitrary detention of people and its dealings with people trying to flee. In the city of Nouadhibou there is a prison that has been specially built for migrants. In people who have been stuck there is known as 'Guantanamo', small Guantanamo."

Francken and human rights

According to Katrien Jansseune, this return agreement allows Francken to make the Belgian return procedure more human. Among other things, because the agreement would make it easier to identify Mauritians who reside without papers in Belgium.

"This agreement allows Belgium to considerably shorten the deadline for identifying illegal aliens and their effective expulsion through well-defined procedures. As a result, the stay in the closed center will be much shorter than before, which can guarantee a humane return policy ", the spokesman states.

An earlier agreement with the Sudanese government aimed at the same goal. Cooperation with the dictatorial regime of Omar Al Bashir ensured that Sudanese people in Belgium could be identified more easily, and then sent back to Sudan.

It is not clear how the agreement with Mauritania should ensure easier identification of Mauritanian migrants.

Before that, we worked together with a delegation from the Sudanese secret service NISS, an organization known to not shrink from torture and arbitrary detention. Several Sudanese people ran a real risk of being tortured by this cooperation.

It is not clear how the agreement with Mauritania should ensure easier identification of Mauritanian migrants. Only transparency about the content of the agreement can offer certainty.



Theo Francken signs the return agreement in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. (Photo: N-VA)

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