

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 4, 2018

H.E. Mr. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz
President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Dear President Aziz:

We have written to you on a number of occasions concerning Mohammed Shaikh Ould Mohammed Ould Mkhaitir, a Mauritanian citizen convicted and sentenced to death on charges of blasphemy in 2014. Such a charge and sentence for peaceful expression of speech were obviously of deep concern and in contradiction with established international judicial norms. As such, we were hopeful that the Mauritanian Supreme Court's January 2017 decision that a lower court had "misapplied the law" and the subsequent November 2017 Court of Appeals commutation of the death penalty to a two-year prison term and a fine would offer a way to finally resolve Mr. Mkhaitir's case.

Unfortunately, it is our understanding that he remains detained under a type of house arrest, and his final release has not progressed since the November court ruling. And most recently, your government adopted a law on apostasy-related crimes that made the death penalty mandatory for "blasphemous speech" and "sacrilegious acts" – a move widely criticized by respected human rights organizations. The new law also eliminated the possibility of substituting prison terms for the death penalty for certain apostasy-related crimes if the offender promptly repents. We are deeply troubled by both developments and urge that Mr. Mkhaitir be freed or allowed to leave Mauritania without further delay and that this new law not be used in any way to retroactively ensnare Mr. Mkhaitir into further legal jeopardy.

As noted before, the United States values its partnership with Mauritania, including on regional and security challenges, economic development, and food security. Accordingly, we hope that a fair and impartial resolution to the deeply troubling charges against Mr. Mkhaitir's can occur without delay.

Thank you for your consideration.

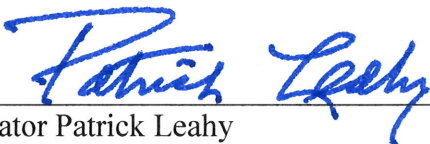
Sincerely,



Senator Richard J. Durbin



Senator Sherrod Brown



Senator Patrick Leahy



Senator Susan M. Collins