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Lawyers can help fight modern-day slavery

By Don R. Sampen

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The month of February, which celebrates both Black History Month and Abraham Lincoln's birthday, frequently prompts reflections on the great civil rights struggle in the United States.

Leaders of the struggle and scholars who have studied it can debate the achievements to date and progress yet to be made. In some parts of the world, however, the movement has barely begun.

Mauritania, a sparsely populated Saharan country on the coast of West Africa, is unknown to most Americans. It is there that, according to the respected Global Slavery Index, the largest percentage of a country's own people remain enslaved.

"Slavery" in Mauritania does not refer merely to human trafficking in the form of forced labor or forced prostitution. While many Mauritians are, in fact, trafficked to other countries for these purposes, slavery occurs in Mauritania more in the traditional sense, similar to that which existed in America before the Civil War.

Some 155,000 or more darker-skinned Mauritians are trapped in this form of slavery, and treated as chattel, by lighter-skinned Mauritians known as "White Moors."

The system is based on race and descent. Children born into slavery remain the property of their masters until they die. They can be bought, sold, traded or given as wedding gifts. They do not have access to civil, political or economic rights — the White Moors dominate the government and the economy. Female slaves are routinely raped by their masters, often to produce more slave children to work on their masters' holdings.

Slavery was not criminalized in Mauritania until 2007, and since then, only one slave owner, who was subsequently released, has ever been prosecuted. With the government and power structure firmly on the side of the slave owners, fighting slavery in Mauritania presents complex legal challenges.

A group of Chicago-based lawyers and human rights advocates have nonetheless begun to try to deal with the challenges. Their efforts have been focused on working with a Chicago-based organization known as the Abolition Institute.

The institute was inspired by a 2012 CNN expose, “Slavery’s Last Stronghold.” The story begins with a former Mauritanian slave who escaped after her master killed her infant daughter because he believed she would work faster without the child on her back. The Mauritanian government never pursued prosecution.

Following the expose’s publication, Sean Tenner, a Chicago-based political consultant active in African philanthropy, and Bakary Tandia, a Mauritanian native who now lives in Brooklyn, created the Abolition Institute as an Illinois nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation.

Chicago attorneys who have lent their pro bono services to the institute include [Michael O’Malley Kurtz](#) of Kurtz, Augenlicht & Froylan LLP; [Stephan D. Blandin](#) of Romanucci & Blandin LLC; [Renato T. Mariotti](#), an assistant U.S. attorney; and myself.

The institute has worked closely with leading Muslim organizations, including the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, Inner-City Muslim Action Network, Masjid Al-Taqwa and various Muslim bar associations and attorneys. Mauritania is nearly 100 percent Muslim.

The institute’s activities have included advocating successfully for \$3 million in new funding for anti-slavery programs in Mauritania and its region. U.S. Sen. [Richard J. Durbin](#) provided strong leadership in efforts to secure the anti-slavery funding.

The institute also worked on a bipartisan basis with U.S. Sen. [Mark S. Kirk](#) (known for his anti-trafficking proposals) and U.S. Reps. Jan Schakowsky and [Peter J. Roskam](#). On Dec. 13, Congress approved the \$3 million appropriation, which may mean the difference between freedom and slavery for thousands of Mauritians.

Other activities of the institute include examining ways to improve existing anti-trafficking laws to focus on the type of chattel slavery that still exists in Mauritanian and other places around the world.

Institute members also communicate regularly with Mauritanian partner organizations such as SOS Esclaves, global philanthropies such as Anti-Slavery International in London, Open Society Foundations in New York and the Walk Free Foundation in Australia.

In September, the institute worked with 46th Ward Ald. James Cappleman and other members of the city council to pass a resolution recognizing and condemning the practice of slavery in Mauritania and supporting Durbin’s actions to fight it.

After the resolution’s passage, it was read aloud in Nouakchott, Mauritania, by Biram Dah Abeid, the son of a former slave and founder of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania). He also is the recipient of the 2013 UN Human Rights Prize, an honor previously bestowed upon Nelson Mandela, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter and Martin Luther King Jr.

Shortly after the reading in Mauritania, however, Abeid was arrested for his anti-slavery advocacy. He currently remains in prison. In the past few months, the Mauritanian government has spent more energy and resources prosecuting him and his colleagues than it has ever spent prosecuting actual slaveholders.

His arrest grabbed the attention of the world’s media and has been condemned by the State Department, the European Union, the United Nations and many of the world’s leading human rights groups. Washington, D.C.-based attorney Alice Bullard is serving as one of Abeid’s lead lawyers as he appeals his imprisonment.

Because of the legal challenges regarding slavery in Mauritania, anyone with international legal expertise is welcome to join the effort. If interested, please e-mail sean@stoppingsslavery.org.

Fighting slavery is the proudest tradition of the Land of Lincoln and honors the legacy of abolitionists who began taking up the cause in our state more than 175 years ago.

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