

Sergey Lavrov in Nouakchott



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Mauritania on February 8 and held talks with Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Cheikh Al-Ghazwani, in which they discussed a number of issues concerning the interests of the two countries. No sooner had Lavrov left Nouakchott than the Western ambassadors in Mauritania took the initiative to meet Mauritanian Foreign Minister Mohamed Salem Marzouk for the third time in two weeks. **Read P3**

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interview with Ibrahim Bilal Ramadan, President of the Sahel Foundation for Human Rights, Educational Support, and Social Peace

“We have good cooperative relationships with the US Embassy”



Ramadan holds a master's degree in sociology and is a researcher interested in social mobility and development issues. He is the founder and president of the Sahel Foundation for Human Rights and Educational Support, and Social peace. He is a recipient of the US Department of State's Award for Combating Human Trafficking and currently serves as the head of the Guidance and Monitoring Council of the National Agency to Combat Trafficking in Persons. **Read P4-5**

Together for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation

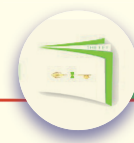
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NOUAKCHOTT HOSTS INTERNATIONAL SOONINKE FESTIVAL:



FISO 2023

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Nouakchott: 2023 Cultural Capital of the Islamic World

The foundation of the city of Nouakchott dates to the late 1950s, when a modest rural village with a population of barely 300 people was chosen as the nascent Mauritanian state's capital. In July 1957, under French occupation, the first Mauritanian government held its first meeting in a modest tent in Lksar, now located at the heart of Nouakchott. On July 4, a French decree transferred the capital of Mauritania from the city of Saint Louis, in Senegal, to Nouakchott, the new capital. In March 1958, the cornerstone was laid for the capital, Nouakchott, in a ceremony attended by both Moktar Ould Dadah, who would become the country's first president, and Charles de Gaulle.

The declaration of Nouakchott as the Cultural Capital of the Islamic World came from a program launched by the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO). In 2004, ALECSO adopted the program of the Cultural Capital of the Islamic World, which is assigned annually to three Islamic cities, one for each of the three Islamic areas, the Arab World, Africa, and Asia.

Mauritania cancelled its participation in 2011 due to a lack of preparation. Ten years later, however, ALECSO chose the capital of Mauritania, Nouakchott, as the Cultural Capital of the Islamic World for 2023. The Ministry of Culture in Mauritania considered this decision "a recognition and testimony of the major cultural role that Mauritania plays to spread Islamic culture globally." Mauritania has always been a diverse cultural bridge and an incubator for multiple civilizations. Islam came to Mauritania in the eighth century with Muslim merchants who traveled throughout the land spreading the religion of peace and to trade. Yahya



Ibn Ibrahim of Godala, who was one of the leaders of the Berber tribes of Sanhaja, contributed immensely to the spread of Islam along with Abdellah ben Yassin. In 1035, after his return from a pilgrimage, he established a village near the present capital, Nouakchott, to teach religious sciences. When the Almoravids

assumed power in the eleventh century, the people converted to Islam. In 1076, after a four-year war during the reign of Abu Bakr ibn Umar al-Lamtuni, the Ghana Empire was expelled from Mauritania. Throughout this period, the religion of peace was spread, tribes were unified, and cities such as Chinguitti and Tichit pro-

duced religious and intellectual texts.

Historians have disagreed on the meaning of the name Nouakchott; some say it is coined from a Berber word meaning place of the winds, while others say it is distorted from a word meaning camels beach. Though the establishment of the city of Nouakchott

goes back to shortly after independence, it is considered a cultural centerpiece that reflects the originality of the historical cities of Mauritania, notably Chinguitti, Wadane, Walata, and Tichit, which reflect culture, science, and knowledge. Scholars agree that the place of culture in Mauritania is deeply rooted in history through more than eight centuries of scholarship. Pilgrimages and trade caravans carried the word of God and spread sciences.

The mahdara is a traditional Mauritanian school from which dozens of notable Islamic scholars have graduated. These scholars have represented Chinguitti throughout both the Islamic and Arab worlds; they have made an icon out of the name of Chinguitti, which became a metaphor for exploring sharia and languages. The diversity of the Mauritanian culture can be perceived through its various cultural aspects such as rich music, creative traditional crafts, decorations, and fashions. The Supreme Committee of "Nouakchott, The Cultural Capital of the Islamic World 2023" asserted that Nouakchott is truly one of the significant capitals of the Islamic World and it stores important cultural treasures through the antiquities in its museums, precious manuscripts, libraries, and lectures, in addition to the cultural movement in its universities, and exhibitions. The committee added that Nouakchott represents a country whose culture is deeply rooted in its extraordinary traditional schools (mahdara) which link nomadism and science. The scholars who graduated from these schools are famous for their incredible memories and as ambassadors in all the countries through which they have passed.

**By: Brahim Said
MA in Translation and
Cross-Cultural Communication**



New York: Because of Hope

New York has a long history of receiving displaced refugees from all over the world. This amazing state welcomed refugees from all continents and continues to do so. It was not only the state of money and business but also a gate to freedom that millions of victims dream to reach every single day. It was the right place to set the Statue of Liberty, standing tall in the state to remind all people, domestic and foreign, that human beings were born free and should live free (though there are still some forces of darkness that deny this basic human right).

Those who still deprive human beings of their own rights failed to read and understand human history. Today's world is increasingly globalized; however, nations are divided by visible and invisible barriers that are creating major differences. These differences show in the quality of education, security, health, infrastructure, and more importantly, differences in terms of the culture of human rights and the rights of minorities.

Extracted from Dr. Mohamed Yahya Abdel Wedoud's book (From Mauritanian Sahara to the Streets of NEW YORK)



Murder of Activist Souvi Ould Cheine: Public Anger and International Sympathy

According to police, on February 8, security forces summoned human rights activist Souvi Ould Cheine to a police station in the Dar Naim neighborhood of Nouakchott in regard to a complaint about the payment of a delayed loan. Just hours later, Nouakchott's police commissioner announced that Cheine had died in police custody. Questions about his death began even before he was brought to a nearby hospital, and the police quickly released a statement saying his death was due to a heart attack. The family of the deceased rejected that conclusion and demanded an autopsy, which was supervised by a group of doctors, lawyers, and representatives from international organizations. It revealed that Cheine had a neck fracture on two vertebrae, indicating death by torture. An investigative committee, headed by the public prosecutor at the Court of Appeals, has been formed to follow up on the initial investigation. After four days of protests, the pre-



sident ordered the arrest of a number of security personnel accused of killing Cheine and offered condolences to the family of the deceased. International and local organizations condemned the killing, describing it as a dangerous development and a return to political assassinations. Twenty-eight local lawyers pledged to reveal the "truth and bring the accused to justice."

Cheine's funeral was the largest in the country's history and was attended by a diverse set of mourners, spanning socioeconomic class and ethnicity. The crowd that came to pray over the body highlighted the widespread support for police accountability and rule-of-law enforcement in Mauritania. Attendees pointed to three main issues that drew them to the event. First, that Cheine's death serves evidence for the need to overcome tribal and ethnic barriers in the country. Second, that the respect for human rights should be a key part of Mauritania's political and social landscape. And third, that the officials responsible for Cheine's death should be brought to justice in a court of law. The extent to which his death will impact Mauritania's political landscape in these regards remains to be seen. The government's investigation continues and key officials in Nouakchott may soon be brought into court to answer for Cheine's killing.



Addis Ababa: President Holds Talks with African Leaders

President of the Republic, Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, held separate talks with a number of high-ranking personalities and African leaders on the sidelines of the 36th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa on Saturday. El Ghazouani met with the President of Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso, and the President of Madagascar, Andry Rajoelina. The President of the Republic also attended a luncheon hosted by the President of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, in honor of a number of high-ranking personalities and leaders, in the Ethiopian capital on Saturday afternoon. El Ghazouani also met with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, the President of the African Development



Bank, Akinwumi Adesina, and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel. During these various meetings,

the bilateral relations and means of enhancing them were reviewed, as confirmed by the Mauritanian News Agency.

Western Ambassadors Meet with Marzouk Following Russian FM's Visit



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In Mauritania: Mariem Dadah



«Mariem Dadah», the wife of the first Mauritanian President «Mokhtar Dadah», passed away recently at the Military Hospital in the capital city Nouakchott. She had suffered from a health crisis and was taken to the hospital. Mrs. Dadah converted to Islam in the mid-70s without any pressure, and made the decision based on her personal belief that Islam had become her choice after studying its teachings. Mariem Dadah witnessed the birth of the Mauritanian state and was present in various stages of its establishment.

Awareness Campaign

The Sahel foundation for the Defence of Human Rights and Support for Education and Social Peace recently launched a traveling awareness-raising program from the city of Rosso, south of Nouakchott, on the importance of voter registration in preparation for the upcoming disbursement of state entitlements. This program is the result of cooperation between the Sahel Authority and the American Embassy in Nouakchott. The awareness-raising program will take place in Trarza, Braknah, and Gorgol states, as well in some states in the north of the country. Under the chairmanship of Pro-



fessor Ibrahim Bilal Ramadan, the Sahel Authority met with administrative, educational, and local authorities in Trarza. The delegation also visited modern private schools named «Daldek» and «Al-Manhal» in Rosso, the capital of Trarza State, where it heard about teaching conditions and problems in the educational process from the directors of public and private institutions.



The Key interviewed. Ibrahim Bilal Ramadan, President of the Sahel Foundation for Human Rights, Educational Support, and Social Peace

We have good cooperation with the US

Ramadan holds a master's degree in sociology and is a researcher interested in social mobility and development issues. He is the founder and president of the Sahel Foundation for Human Rights and Educational Support, and Social peace. He is a recipient of the US Department of State's Award for Combating Human Trafficking and currently serves as the head of the Guidance and Monitoring Council of the National Agency to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

The Key : When was the Sahel Foundation established, what are its objectives, and how many members does it have to date?

Ibrahim Bilal : The Sahel Foundation was established in March 2017 with the objectives of defending human rights – especially the right to education –, good governance, and election transparency and fairness. The founders of the Sahel Foundation were mostly leaders in the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist (IRA) Movement who chose a more realistic approach that yields tangible results in the field, away from politics and rhetoric. The Foundation's membership now exceeds one hundred.

The Key : How do you assess the human rights situation in Mauritania and the current government's handling of the issue of the legacy of slavery? Do you think the country is moving in the right direction?

Ibrahim Bilal : My assessment of the human rights situation in Mauritania aligns with the US ambassador to Nouakchott's, such as when she said: «Mauritania has made a lot of progress on the legislative and institutional levels, but this has not yet been reflected on the ground.» This means that Mauritania has ratified all necessary international agreements to protect human rights and has a good legal framework for combatting slavery, discrimination, and human trafficking. It has also established important institutions for the same purpose, but the results of these efforts have yet to be seen.

Personally, I believe that the weak point in this regard is primarily due to the selection of individuals who lead these institutions, who are more concerned with improving the government's image and concealing the reality than with the interests of citizens. The best evidence of this is the recent trip of Mr. Ahmed Salem Ould Bouhoubini to the city of F'derick



to meet the man who filed a complaint against a family who were enslaving his daughters in the area. As soon as the head of the National Human Rights Commission arrived there, the victim withdrew

his complaint. Instead of investigating the complaint, the commission resorted to bribing the complainant to withdraw the complaint.

Similarly, the National Mechanism for



the Prevention of Torture did not take any action despite the late Soufi Ould Sheyn suffering from torture, and eventually death, at the hands of the police.

The Key : What has the Sahel Foundation achieved at the national level so far?

Ibrahim Bilal : The Sahel Foundation is five years old today and during this time it has been able to integrate nearly 1,000 students from underprivileged backgrounds into private schools, as well as organize dozens of training sessions, seminars, and caravans aimed at raising awareness among citizens about their basic rights and accompanying them when needed to file a complaint or claim their rights. We collaborate in this area with the United States Embassy in the field of serving the rule of law. We also participate in an international alliance against employment and ethnic discrimination. In this area, we have a project called VOICE supported by the Netherlands.

The Key : What is the rationale for the Sahel Foundation's focus on education?

Ibrahim Bilal : We have noticed that, in combating slavery and other societal ills, it is no longer enough to rely on shouting or fiery speeches; there must be field work to develop generational and community engagement. We believe that education is the solution, even if it is in the long term. There is no way to overcome the past and reorganize the house on objective foundations except through education.

The Key : Do you have any direct or indirect connections with other national human rights organizations, such as the IRA movement, for example?

Ibrahim Bilal : We have good relationships and joint projects with all local human rights organizations that are far from politics, such as Najadat Al-Abid (SOS-Slaves), Meshael al-Hurriya (Flame of Liberty), the League of Women Heads of Families, and the Mauritanian League for Human Rights.

The Key : Do you have a presence outside Nouakchott? If so, what is the nature of that presence and what are the challenges that stand in your way there?

Cooperative relationships US Embassy



terested partner in human rights and the most knowledgeable about serious human rights organizations in Mauritania.

The Key : Is the feminist element represented and present in the Sahel Foundation , and what support do you provide for women and youths at the institution level?

Ibrahim Bilal : The feminists are strongly present in the executive body of the Sahel Foundation , and most of our programs and training are aimed at women and youth. Our work in education prioritizes women because we consider them the source of all social advancement.

The Key : A recent Sahel Foundation tour of Mauritania, aimed at raising awareness about the importance of voter registration, was strongly supported by the US Embassy in Nouakchott. How was the tour, and was there support from other parties during the activities of the Sahel Foundation ?

Ibrahim Bilal : Indeed, the purpose of the caravan we are running now is to raise awareness about voter registration and to help people obtain identity documents. We will participate with the independent election committee in achieving fair and transparent elections, all within the framework of the «good governance» project supported by the US Embassy, in cooperation with the Sahel Foundation.

Ibrahim Bilal : We have a nascent presence in the Mauritanian interior. We have started an awareness caravan that will reach all the states of the country, and it has so far reached the states of Brakna, Tagant, Tiris Zemmour, Adrar, Dakhlet Nouadhibou, and Inchiri. In these states, we have coordinators and representatives in most of the districts we have visited so far. The biggest challenge we face is the lack of financial and human resources and the absence of cooperation with state institutions such as Taazour in these fields, despite our repeated attempts to convince its top official that our role is complementary to its main mission (eradicating the effects of slavery).

The Key : Tell us about your relationship with the US Embassy.

Ibrahim Bilal : We have good cooperative relationships with the US Embassy in Nouakchott as part of its mission. The embassy is interested in human rights issues, especially combating human trafficking and slavery, and we have gained credibility in this field. As a result, we enjoy the trust of state partners in the field of human rights, and the US Embassy is considered the best and most in-



The Key : Finally, you were appointed as the head of the Guidance and Monitoring Council at the National Institution for Combating Trafficking in Persons and Migrants. Tell us about this organization and its strategy.

Ibrahim Bilal : This is a very important institution that was recently established by the state to combat trafficking in persons. The role of this council is limited to guidance and monitoring. It is an important and necessary body, and if the strategy for which it was created is applied, it will be a qualitative addition to the field of human rights. Otherwise, it will be just one of many paper tigers in this field, like the National Committee for Human Rights, the mechanism against torture, human rights forums, the women's observatory, and others. The problem is that the state continues to select politicians more concerned with pleasing the rulers than serving human rights, and therefore the results are still below expectations.

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In his Speech of the Opening Ceremony, President Ghazwani stated solemnly that: “Soninke culture is a source of pride for Mauritians and a fundamental component of the country’s rich cultural diversity; it’s a pillar of the national cultural identity and a unifying force in the social fabric of the country”, he even added: “The Soninke culture here in Mauritania, on its own land and in its own home, has shown and spread its radiance from the cities of the historic Ghana Empire”, President Ghazwani continues with: «We in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania are very proud of this culture, which is a major component of our rich cultural diversity and a pillar of our national identity and the fabric of our social cohesion.» He ended his engaging declaration by: “this festival provides an opportunity to enhance the radiance of Soninke culture and highlight its significant role in enriching our collective and rich culture at both the national and African levels”.

Conferences at Nouakchott Convention Center

This Festival has gathered all of the human resources of Soninke people across the globe: Philanthropists, UN Ambassadors, Businessmen, AU officials, Writers, Islamic spiritual leaders, poets, artists, comedians, reporters, painters...etc. were discussing over

topics, not limited to (1) Soninke Women’s Entrepreneurship, (2) Place of Soninke religious leaders in peace keeping in the world, (3) Negative impacts of social networks on Youth, (4) Importance of training Journalists in National languages, (5) Conflict resolution in Soninke Community group, (6) Mechanisms to stop the illegal migration...etc.

Exhibitions at the Olympic Stadium of Nouakchott

There were about 200 stands inside of the stadium. Men, women and youth or curious visitors were bargaining, selling, exhibiting, purchasing during the whole duration of the event. In the Exhibition Zone, we can read: “Sissoko Habbatu Saouda” Malian producer of medical products and aphrodisiacs 100 % bio with outlets in 10 countries including, USA, France and UK.

The Stand of “Yonki Saha” (Health care) is owned by Rakayatou Diabira (Mauritanian) who invents cosmetic and beauty products 100 % bio with Mauritanian plants. Another stand reads “Microassurance” that procures medical assistance to the families of the diaspora in home countries. Besides, there were countless quantity and quality of merchandise related to hygienic food, men and women clothing, traditional jewelries, handmade shoes, handmade home household utensils, junk jewelry of all kinds...etc.

Cultural and artistic shows

Dance and chant performers, poets, come-

dians, lyricists, drummers, acrobats, painters...etc succeed one another on the podium every day from 5 pm to Midnight. During the shows, money is distributed excessively. Many legendary musicians and griots came from abroad such as : Mamadou Diabaté (Lyricist, France), Demba Tandia (Singer, Mauritania), Djiby Dramé (Singer, Gambia), Samba Parisien (comedian, Senegal), Goudia Mandjou Kouyate (France), Salou Samassa (Poet, Mauritania), Diango Soumare (Calligraph, Mauritania), Mona Pendo Diara (actor, Senegal), Abbass Tambadou (Dancer, Mali)...etc. For more out breathtaking pictures and videos, feel free to visit FISO 2023 facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/FISO23/>

The Participation & Contribution of Abdou Ndiaye, the Billionaire

Mr. Abdou Ndiaye is a philanthropist (Mauritanian & Senegalese) on the top of the most economic influencers in West Africa ranking in the second place after Aliko Dangote (Nigerian). He is employing over 6,000 people in Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania and elsewhere. As contribution, he has granted 2,000 000 MRU to this Festival Edition. As a reminder, when Selibaby (Guidimakha, Mauritania) was flooded in 2018, he cashed out One hundred million Ouguiyas to assist the disaster victims. Not only that, Mr. Abdou Ndiaye initiated “Abdou Ndiaye Award”

since the last edition of the International Soninke festival held in Gambia (2018) to compensate efforts of men and women in the field of search, entrepreneurship, sports, arts and culture. In this Edition, Abdou Ndiaye Award granted 3 nominees:

- 1st Prize to The School of Deaf & Dumb (in Goinitt, Mauritania) in the direction of Mr. Bakary Tandia (Mauritanian) with 300,000 MRU in the category of Search.
- 2nd Prize to Mrs. Rokhayatou Diabira (Diaguily, Mauritania), owner of “Yonki Saha” (Health care) with 300, 000 MRU in the category of Entrepreneurship.
- 3rd Prize to Mohamed Cissé (webmaster of Soninkara.com, Senegalese) with 300,000 MRU in the category of Arts and Culture.

FISO 2023: Effective Resolutions

- Creation of the Soninke Islamic International Bank in Banjul
- Launching a Soninke Satellite Station in Dakar
- Opening of the HQ to the CIAS (Confederation of International Soninke Associations) in Dakar
- Project Center of promoting Soninke language and Culture
- Project Center of teaching Soninke Journalists and reporters in their Mother Tongue
- Translation of The Holy Koran in Soninke by Ustaz Mohamed Mandjakho Tandjigora (Senegal)
- Edition of the first Soninke Dictionary (Soninke-French/French-Soninke)
- Renewal of the Mandate of Mr. Ousmane Diagana (Mauritanian) as the President of CIAS for 4 years.

As a conclusion, in the evening of Feb.26, 2023, Mrs. Savia Mint N’Tahah as Ministry of Social Action, Children and the Family has lowered the curtains of this Festival Edition by praising Soninke Women seen as “role models in the home schooling, household management, entrepreneurship, society capacity building, peace keeping and hardworking supportive of men in the family management”.

I myself am Proud of the Soninke blood running in my veins. In this regard, I am much thrilled to announce that the International Soninke Festival is bi-yearly and it will be hosted by Ivory Coast in 2025.

By Makha Korera





Together for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation



The phenomenon of female genital mutilation in Mauritania is considered a normal practice, where girls are subjected to a procedure known as «beautification» or «purification» after the third week of birth and until the age of marriage, carried out by women who practice the despicable profession with primitive means.

Lawyer Aisha Ahmed Mawloud, a member of the Association of Women's Rights and Civil Society, launched awareness campaigns to eradicate the phenomenon of female circumcision, i.e. the mutilation of the genitalia of girls, in cooperation with the Ministry of Women in Mauritania. The phenomenon was considered normal in Mauritanian society and seasonal in some parts of the country, where circumcisers gather and make a lot of money. In the past, practitioners of this profession announced the end of their work finally and turned to some foreign organizations for some freelance work to earn their daily bread. The civil society has made the utmost effort to raise awareness and

education in this field, but the disappearance of this phenomenon requires many years.

Thirty-four scholars in Nouakchott issued a fatwa 12 years ago that prohibited female circumcision. The text of the fatwa stated that if female circumcision caused harm directly or indirectly to the girl, it was prohibited. This fatwa (a religious ruling) received a great welcome, especially in the women's circles in the country. Female circumcision is globally considered a violation of human rights and is recognized by the World Health Organization as part of «all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons».

Amina Isghir, head of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department at the Ministry of Health in Mauritania, has announced a new strategy: the Modern Mother and Adolescent Obstetrics and Gynecology Program. The program focuses on harmful practices against girls, including female genital

mutilation. This can cause psychological, social, and physical problems. Female genital mutilation often occurs at a young age, such as in the first or second year of a girl's life, and can result in bleeding or death. The practice has severe consequences and can affect a woman's health long term. Statistics from 2019 show that 70% of female genital mutilation cases occurred in southern Mauritania. The highest rates were recorded in the regions of Guidimagha (98%) and Gorgol (97%). Because of the strong taboo surrounding female genital mutilation in our country, there has been a recent decrease in the rates of female genital mutilation, a drop to 66% with a decrease of 8 percent. There are two centers in the capital, Nouakchott, that support victims of female genital mutilation at the Friendship Hospital, Motherhood and Childhood Hospital. The supervisors there stated that they have not had any cases of female genital mutilation yet.

■ By Sidi Ely

Mauritanian Soccer In 2022:

Accomplishments and Setbacks



The First Team:

The national team was top of its group in the African Nations Championship's qualifiers, ahead of the Gabonese, Sudanese, and Angolan teams (which outranks it). Despite moving up on the FIFA rankings list, the first team failed to qualify for the World Cup. This failure resulted in the replacement of its former French manager, Corentin Martins, with the Comorian coach Amir Abdu.

Local League Teams and CHAN:

Al-Murabitun has qualified for the African Nations Championship (CHAN). The championship began on January 13, in Algeria. The team defeated Guinea-Bissau in the last qualifying round after they skipped playing the first qualifying round, as a result of their FIFA ranking.

Nouakchott Hosts Championships, Fails to Qualify

Nouakchott successfully hosted two championships in 2022, the 2023 Africa U-20 Cup of Nations qualifier and the 2023 Africa U-17 Cup of Nations qualifier. The Mauritanian teams were disqualified in both tournaments,

Mauritanian Soccer Shines Internationally

Mauritanian soccer ambassadors, administrators, referees, and professional players are well-known internationally for their dedication to the sport. Ahmed Ould Yahya, the president of the Mauritanian Football Federation, is also the vice president of the Confederation of African Football (CAF). He was also a member of the organizing committee of the 2022 World Cup.

Mauritanian referees were also present in a number of tournaments last year and the women's team is becoming stronger despite being created only two years ago.

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