

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 8
Mauritania

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Two newsletters ago I wrote about the Senegalese aspect of a plot that purportedly involved Mali, Morocco and Mauritania as well as Senegal. The Senegalese part of the story ended in March with the trial of the six accused plotters. Two men got ten years, two got five years, and two, including the lawyer accused of "failure to denounce the plot", were acquitted. After that the focus of the plot story shifted to Mauritania. On March 29 three Frenchmen were killed by an exploding grenade in an officers' club in Nema in Eastern Mauritania (see map on page 2). On April 24 twenty-four men, eighteen of them soldiers, were put on trial for the grenade attack and for plotting to overthrow the Mauritanian government; the plot was said to have been mounted by Morocco from the same base in Mali that, according to the Senegalese government, was used in the plot against Senegal. I journeyed up to Mauritania to attend the trial. This newsletter will be an account of that journey - but first some background:

Mauritania covers 418,810 square miles, most of it desert, and has a population estimated at from 750,000 to one million. This works out to about two people per square mile. Three-quarters of the population are "Moors" who speak a dialect of Arabic. Most of them are nomads who live on the milk of their camels, sheep and goats. Most of the Moors are light-skinned people of Berber and Arab origin, but there is a minority of black Africans who have been culturally absorbed by the Moors. As a rule the black Moors are ex-slaves ("ex" in law, but often still slaves in practice) of the white Moors, but one finds white slaves and black slave-owners. One quarter of the population are black Africans, sedentary farmers along the Senegal River, who are closely related to the Senegalese; they do not speak Arabic and are little influenced by Moorish culture. (To make things simple, if not semantically accurate, I will refer to these three peoples as "white Moors" or "Moors", "black Moors" and "black Africans".) The nation has about 100 graduates of French lycees, and many of the key jobs in the govern-



MOORISH NOMADS

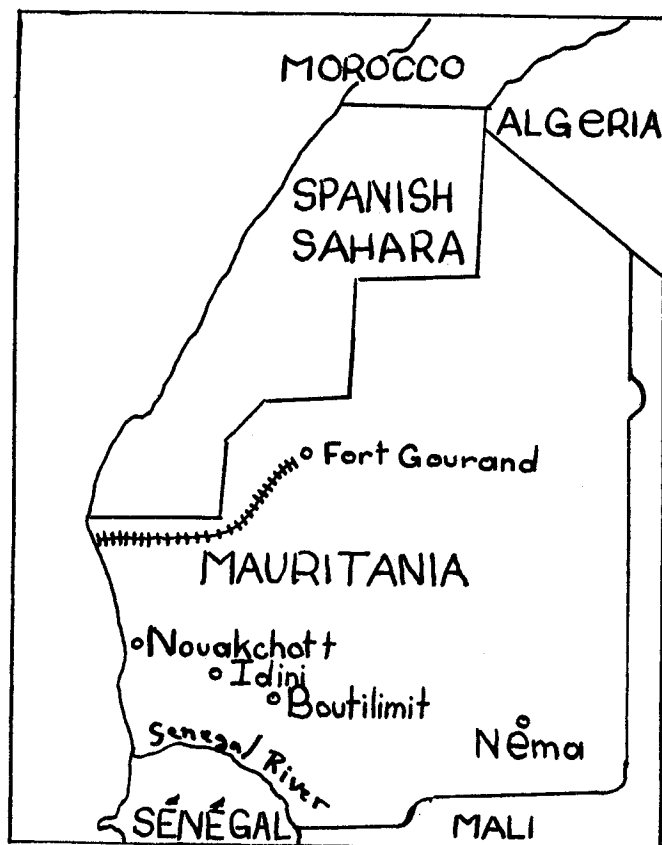
ment are held by Frenchmen and Senegalese. The Moors talk about the Senegalese the way the Senegalese talk about the French in Senegal: "We'd like to throw them all out, but we still need them." The President, Moktar Ould (son of) Daddah, is a white Moor, and the only political party at present is Moktar's Parti du Peuple. Nardah, the opposition party which backs Morocco's claim to Mauritania, has been banned. Long-standing tribal quarrels motivate much of Mauritanian politics. The country's main known mineral resource is iron ore at Fort Gouraud in the north. The French-operated international combine MIFERMA is building a railroad to Fort Gouraud and expects to start shipping ore within a year. The government hopes that royalties from MIFERMA will balance the budget by 1967; France now subsidizes about half the budget.

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Nouakchott, the capital, must be one of the most improbable cities on earth, just as Mauritania is a rather improbable nation. Nouakchott is entirely artificial: nothing was there except a tiny village when it was chosen as capital in 1960. Nor was there any great reason for its existence: it was chosen simply because it is on Mauritania's one "highway" and is about halfway between the northern and southern borders. Buildings that pleasantly blend Moorish and European themes are rising out of the sand among the nomads' tents. The city was designed by French architects and is being built with French money and Senegalese labor; the Moors look on from their tents

and have little to do with it all. Around Nouakchott's impressive buildings there is nothing - just sand.

One of these impressive buildings is the Palais de Justice. The courtroom had not been finished yet, so the trial was held in a vast hall, with the judges on a platform at one end, and two hundred spectators squatting on the floor. Outside about a thousand people listened to the proceedings over a loudspeaker. The defendants were brought in handcuffed two by two: twenty-four white Moors, most of them very young. The courtroom was guarded by about thirty black African soldiers and two French officers. The guards pinned green number tags on the defendants.

The trial began, and it was soon evident that this was to be frontier justice. No pleas, no defense lawyers, no witnesses other than the defendants. The presiding judge, who is the Minister of Defense, did almost all the questioning. He got right to the point in the first question:



"How were you recruited into this plot against the state?"

Answer: "In December, 1961, I met a man who told me this organization (Nardah, the banned pro-Moroccan party) wanted to drive the Europeans and the infidels out of Mauritania. He told me all the young people and soldiers belong, and even some men in the government, but they can't say anything because of the French."

"Did you know the organization was controlled from outside the nation?"

"No."

"Why didn't you shoot Europeans in colonial times, instead of now when they are under our protection?"

"I wasn't in the organization then."

"Why did you throw the grenade?"

"I had sworn on the Koran to obey orders."

"How did you get the grenade?"

"We went to a mountain outside Nema and a man coming from Mali gave it to us."

"Who told you to throw the grenade?"

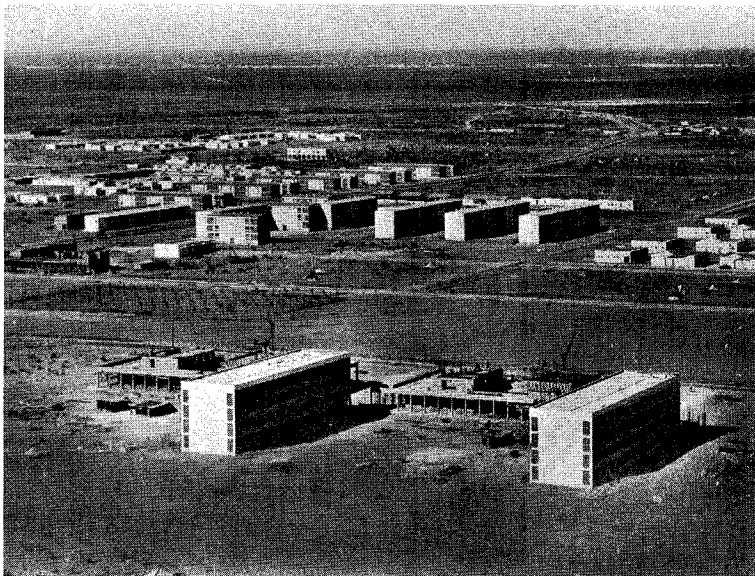
"An emissary from Mali."

"Didn't you know by then that the organization was controlled from outside the country?"

"I had sworn on the Koran."

The other defendants told much the same story. None of them seemed to be a leader. None professed to know who ran the organization, though it was impossible to tell whether this was due to ignorance or to loyalty to their comrades. Outside the courtroom, the city was in a jumpy mood. A 9 P.M. curfew had been imposed four days earlier after a Frenchman was assassinated at night in a cafe. Guards were posted outside Gomez' Hotel, and foreigners were repeatedly warned to be "prudent". Government officials were predicting that six to ten of the defendants would have to be executed, and its opponents were rumored to have promised one-for-one assassinations in retaliation.

The trial went into its third day, and I set out to see the interior. The route from Nouakchott to Boutilimit is simply the tire tracks of vehicles that passed before you, tracks that criss-cross and wander around as each traveler chooses his own path over or around the sand dunes. Other than trucks only jeeps and Land Rovers travel the desert, and even a Land Rover in four-wheel drive must tack up the dunes like a sailboat going upwind.



Idini, 64 kilometers from Nouakchott, is an encampment of 300 people, ex-nomads who have settled there since the government built a pumping station for the capital that provides them enough water for their herds. There is a one-room school with fifty pupils who are taught in both French and Arabic. The teacher, Mohammed Lydiaould Zein, one of two men in Idini who speak French, invited us to break our journey with him. During the day, the men of Idini lie around under the tent endlessly drinking strong Moorish tea in tiny glasses. The men do virtually no work, but there is little to do beyond caring for the animals on which they live, and that little is done by the supposedly freed slaves. The visitor easily succumbs to unfounded impressions, for the scene is wildly romantic. The younger men look like the Sheikh of Araby, and the older men - flowing blue-white beards and noble heads - are from the Old Testament. In their graceful robes, they move with slow dignity; there is, after all, nothing to do and a lifetime to do it. The spell was broken, absurdly, when my wife inflated a rubber balloon that was intended for the children watching us from the next tent. The balloon never got to the children. In a moment everyone was whooping with laughter as the men batted the balloon back and forth under the tent.

In most ways the lives of the people of Idini remain as they were many centuries ago, insulated from outside influence by the desert. (The Mauritanian scholar Issa Sarr argues that the Arabic culture of Mauritanian is far purer and less "contaminated" by Europe than that of Morocco.) But there is one all-important innovation. The teacher owns a transistor radio, and at 12:30 conversation stops for a broadcast in Arabic. It was Radio Mauritania; they also listen to the whole gamut of Arab-language broadcasts. Radio Mauritania was talking about the trial, and after the broadcast I tried to raise the subject. The only reaction came, indirectly, from Mohammed Lydia, who asked me if I could explain why the Algerian F.L.N. had "signed away its birthright" by coming to terms with the French at Evian.

Though Nouakchott's water supply comes from Idini, there is no semblance of civil or military administration. Mohammed Lydia, the school teacher, calls himself "the organizer", and everyone, young or old, jumped to his orders. But his power derives from his standing in the group; he owes nothing to Nouakchott. The only military presence is the rifles of the men of Idini; most Mauritanian nomads are armed. This is the situation through-



MAIN TENT AT IDINI

out Mauritania outside the few towns and border posts. Only in an official sense can it be said that the government "governs" the greater part of the country. All this makes a peculiar background for Mauritanian politics: armed nomads under no authority but their own, profoundly ignorant of the world outside, but - now that they have radios - buffeted by winds of propaganda from every ideological point of the compass.

Boutilimit, 140 kilometers beyond Idini in the interior, is a Beau Geste fort on a huge red sand dune overlooking a town of 1,000 and miles of empty desert. It is the political and religious heart of Mauritania. Most of the members of the government, including President Moktar, come from Boutilimit; so does the Emir of Trarza, an opposition leader now in exile in Morocco. Boutilimit is the site of an Islamic institute of higher learning and of the country's first French lycee. Most Mauritanian political leaders are tribal aristocrats who have received a French education. "Everyone here is for the government," said the commandant in Boutilimit, but when we tried to venture out at night we were turned back by a Moorish soldier. We chatted, and the conversation turned to relations between the Moors and the black Africans. The Moorish soldier said: "I know many blacks, I've even worked with them. But I don't know how their minds work. You can't tell what they are. With us, if a man is born a smith, he's a smith whatever he happens to be doing. With them, he's whatever his job is, no matter what caste he belongs to. If he's a mechanic, they call him a mechanic, even if he was born a smith." (In fact, the Africans he was talking about do have a relatively tight caste system.) The next morning a man with a Moorish mother and black African father asked me to take his picture in Moorish dress between the crescent-topped gates of Boutilimit. "I'll put the picture up in my room and people will know I'm a real Mauritanian," he said.

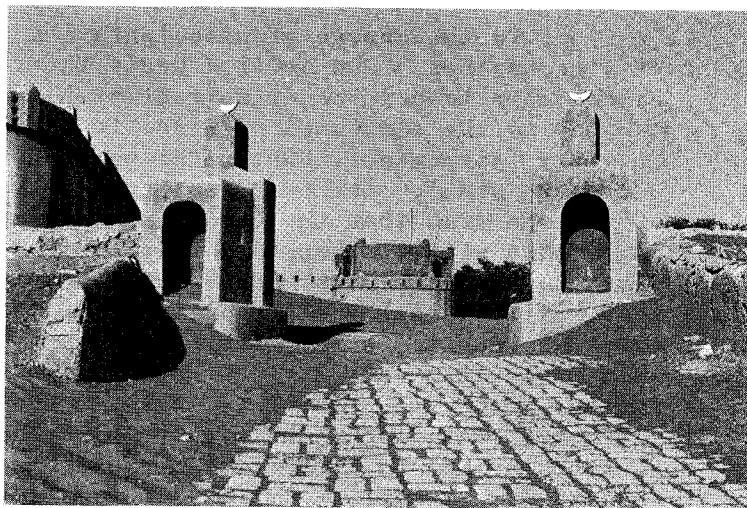
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Five days after the trial had started, the judges gave their verdict. Three men were sentenced to death, ten got life imprisonment, and the rest got terms ranging up from six months. The question was whether the death sentences would really be carried out. No one had yet been executed in independent Mauritania. President Moktar, anxious not to rock his fragile ship of state, had freed a number of his opponents who were under sentence of death.

Moktar was under con-



BOUTILIMIT

flicting pressures. His all-out supporters (including, for highly personal reasons, the French residents) wanted the men executed in order to impose discipline on the Moors, particularly the Moors in the army. But Moktar also wanted to conciliate his old opponents in the Nardah, some of whom are highly placed in the government. One of these, Bouyaguiould Abidine, the Minister of Transport, was openly described as having been in on the plot; incriminating documents were said to have been found when his house was searched while he was in Dakar swearing fealty to Moktar. But at the time of the trial Bouyagui was calling for execution of all the defendants.

On April 30, two days after the convictions, Allal el Fassi, Moroccan Minister of State for Islamic Affairs, cabled Moktar: "We warn you that the day of Mauritania's liberation is approaching... You will be responsible for the blood of patriots shed under your authority." Two days later the three convicted men were shot at dawn in the desert outside Nouakchott. Since then, there have been reports of scattered shooting along the Mali border, but no major incidents have taken place.

Morocco's desire to absorb Mauritania is no secret, for the government has devoted much of its lung power to the issue. At times this has an obsessive tone reminiscent of "Cartago delenda est": at the recent youth conference in Conakry, the Moroccan delegate devoted his entire speech to the need for liberating "the Mauritanian province of Morocco". Morocco's case is that Mauritania historically was part of Morocco and was simply detached by the colonial power. If the Moroccans should succeed in taking over Mauritania, they would probably find it as hard to govern as Moktar does; but the Moroccans may well prefer the issue to the reality. Moroccan propaganda uses the themes of neocolonialism and pan-Islam against Moktar; not only do the French still run the country, Morocco says, but Moktar is not a good Moslem (it is noted that he has a French wife).

To the charge of neocolonialism, the Mauriticians reply: "You're another." On April 7 Radio Mauritania gleefully noted a Moroccan move toward "conciliation" with the European Common Market and pointed to the continued presence in Morocco of U.S. bases and French military instructors. "But we do not say the Americans or the French govern in Rabat," the broadcast added. Mauritania also tries to show it is more Arab than the Moroccans, and on this theme Israel provides Mauritania with its happiest flights of fancy. When Morocco gave exit visas to Moroccan Jews, Radio Mauritania rattled the airwaves in protest. With Israel a safe continent away, Mauritania can boast - in the words of Mauritanie Nouvelle, the government weekly, for April 21 - that it is "the only African country and the only Arab country that is intransigent with Israel... It is we who are doing the real work against Israel, for we have no relations with her." This "real work" consists primarily of Moktar's refusal to shake hands with Golda Meir when their paths cross (this is not my interpretation; it is evidence

cited by the Mauritanian Embassy in Dakar). Even Mauritanie Nouvelle has contributed to the holy war. On March 21 the paper reported this "modest" but "proud" blow against Zionism: "The management of Mauritanie Nouvelle refused last year to let Israel subscribe to Mauritanian newspapers."

In his efforts to stay on his feet despite the pressure from Morocco, President Moktar is being forced into continued dependence on the two non-Moorish minorities, the French and the black Africans. The racial divisions at the trial were stark evidence that Moktar cannot count on his Moorish troops; his basic military force is French equipment and French and black African troops. He appeals to the black Africans by saying that Mauritania will be a "hyphen" between white and black Africa; but this will have little meaning as long as the black Moors are as badly off in Mauritania as Negroes in Mississippi.

Despite its recent troubles, Moktar's government claims that it is making progress in bringing the country under control. The ruling party is busily organizing local "comites de vigilance", which are just what they sound like. Some of their membership is secret and their job is to spy on potential opposition. The government says the nomads who drift back and forth across the borders keep it well informed on what is being prepared in Morocco and Mali, and it claims its mobile military units, some motorized and some on camelback, can reach any invading band before it gets very far. And, of course, the same geography that makes the county hard to govern makes it hard to conquer, from outside or from within, as long as the government holds the main towns.

Can this unlikely state survive? It would take a braver observer than I to hazard a guess.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Hapgood". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

David Hapgood

Received New York June 18, 1962