

**STANDING  
COMMITTEE**

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**NATO Parliamentary Assembly**

**MAURITANIA**

1. Following a military coup in Mauritania on 3 August 2005 and the dissolution of the Mauritanian parliament, the Standing Committee should decide how to proceed with contacts with Mauritania.

2. This document provides the background to the Assembly's relationship with the parliament of Mauritania, and on contacts with Mauritania since the August coup. Appendix 3 provides a short summary of the situation in Mauritania and international reactions to events there.

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3. Mauritania's National Assembly has participated in the activities of the Mediterranean Special Group of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly since December 2001, when Mr. Cherif Ahmed Ould Mohamed Moussa, attended the 7<sup>th</sup> Mediterranean Dialogue Seminar in Malta. Following that meeting, Mr. Moussa participated and actively contributed to all the Assembly's Mediterranean seminars. In October 2004, the National Assembly of Mauritania successfully hosted the 10<sup>th</sup> Mediterranean Dialogue Seminar in Nouakchott.

4. In November 2004, during the Annual Session in Venice, the NATO PA created the new status of Mediterranean Associate Member in order to deepen relations with partners around the Mediterranean and increase the opportunities for dialogue with parliamentarians from this strategically important region. Mauritania applied for the new status, which was granted by the Assembly during its plenary meeting in Ljubljana in May 2005.

5. Following a military coup in Mauritania on 3 August 2005, the former head of the Mauritanian delegation to the NATO PA, Mr. Moussa, accompanied by three of its former colleague parliamentarians, met with Assembly President Pierre Lellouche in Paris - subsequent to a meeting with the Secretary General at the International Secretariat in Brussels. These meetings took place in late September 2005.

6. The delegates stressed that many Mauritians had supported the coup, which had been bloodless and involved no infringements of human rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press. One of the former legislators said that the coup had been a "necessary evil" (*malheur nécessaire*) to rid the country of an increasingly authoritarian leader. The former parliamentarians confirmed reports that the population had generally welcomed all the decisions of the Military Council, which was composed of relatively young military officers, all "honourable and reasonable men". They declared themselves absolutely convinced that the Military Council was serious in its determination to bring democracy to Mauritania and that the pledge of organising elections within a maximum of two years was a reasonable one, because "there was much to do in terms of constitutional reforms". In this sense, they stressed the importance of the work of the three interdepartmental committees created by the new government.

7. With regard to the parliament, the group declared in the meeting with the Secretary General in Brussels that it "had not been dissolved but was now deprived of all its powers". Subsequently, during the meeting in Paris with President Lellouche, they admitted that the parliament was indeed dissolved, a situation which seems to be confirmed by the text of the ruling (or "constitutional charter") of 6 August.

8. Mr. Moussa and his former colleagues requested that their friends in the NATO PA "accompany and help them in this transitional period" by maintaining some form of co-operation. In particular, they asked whether a delegation of former members of parliament could still be invited to participate in Assembly sessions and in Mediterranean seminars. Furthermore, they proposed to President Lellouche that the Assembly send a parliamentary delegation to visit Mauritania in the following months.

9. President Lellouche pointed out the difficulty of maintaining a relationship with Mauritania without the existence of a functioning parliament. He also indicated that his colleagues in the NATO PA would probably be reluctant to maintain a proper delegation from Mauritania given the situation. For the same reasons, he deemed it very difficult for him to agree to send a NATO PA delegation to Mauritania any time soon. President Lellouche said, however, that with the Bureau's agreement and provided that he received a clear letter from the Mauritanian government clearly specifying a commitment to and timetable for restoring democratic elections, he would consider inviting Mauritanian representatives to the Copenhagen session as individual, non-parliamentary observers.

10. On 10 October, Mr Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation of Mauritania, wrote to President Lellouche to thank him for his approach towards the recent "changes" occurred on 3 August. He also indicated that at the end of the work of the three interdepartmental committees on constitutional reform, "large consultations, foreseen in October, with political parties and civil society will allow to establish the practical modalities as well as the timetable of the electoral processes (referendum, municipal, parliamentary and presidential [elections])". The letter also stated that the "transition period" leading to the re-establishment of democratic institutions would not exceed two years. In conclusion, Mr. Sid'Ahmed asked President Lellouche to allow the participation of Mauritania to the activities of the Assembly. (The text of the letter from Mr. Sid'Ahmed appears in Appendix 1 of this document)

11. On 11 October, President Lellouche, having consulted the Bureau on the question of inviting Mauritanian non-parliamentary observers to the Copenhagen Session, replied to Mr. Sid'Ahmed. His reply stated that the dissolution of the parliament of Mauritania, established by article 3 of the ruling of 6 August 2005 issued by the Chairman of the Military Council, had resulted in the suspension of the parliamentary representation of your country in our Assembly. However, in consideration of the importance that our Assembly attached to the dialogue with Mediterranean countries - and following consultations with members of the Assembly Bureau - President Lellouche invited two Mauritanian delegates to attend the Annual Session in Copenhagen as individual, non-parliamentary observers. He also indicated that the status of Mauritania in the Assembly would be on the agenda of the Standing Committee in Copenhagen. (The text of the letter from President Lellouche to Mr. Sid'Ahmed appears in Appendix 2 of this document)

12. The Standing Committee therefore should consider the following options:

- Invite former members of the dissolved National Assembly of Mauritania as individual, non-parliamentary observers to Sessions and Mediterranean Seminars until a new parliament is elected.
- Suspend all relations with Mauritania until there is a specific date for the restoration of electoral processes and then invite representatives from Mauritania as individual, non-parliamentary observers to Sessions and/or Mediterranean Seminars until a new parliament is elected.
- Suspend all relations with Mauritania until a new parliament is elected.
- A decision should also be taken on whether a delegation should plan to visit Mauritania, and if so, how should the group be composed, and when should a visit take place.

**Appendix 1: Letter of 10 October from Mr Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation of Mauritania, to President Pierre Lellouche**

**Islamic Republic of Mauritania**  
***Honour – Fraternity – Justice***

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation**

No. 114/M.A.E. C/M

Nouakchott, 10 October 2005

From: The Minister

To: Mr Pierre LELLOUCHE, President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

Mr President,

Strong indications of your feelings of friendship for and solidarity with our country have come back to us, following the changes here on 3 August last. We thank you most sincerely for these.

These changes have been favourably received by the people and by the political class as a whole, evidence of a general consensus based on an awareness of the gravity of the situation.

The new authorities in the country have entered into an undertaking to restore the operation of democratic institutions on a sound basis and the fundamental balances in the economy, at the end of the transition period, which is not to exceed 2 years in duration.

In this context, three (3) committees have been set up to sketch out future work in the following areas:

- a) the transitional democratic process (electoral timetable, method of election, etc.);
- b) good governance;
- c) justice.

Following the committees' reports, a wide-ranging process of consultation, scheduled for October, involving the political parties and civil society will make it possible to arrange the practical details and the timetable for a referendum and for municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections.

Mr President, Mauritania would be greatly honoured to receive a delegation from your distinguished institution to seek information on the progress of the transition process.

We therefore seize this opportunity to ask you to continue to accept participation by our country in the various activities of your distinguished Assembly.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed

**Appendix 2: Letter of 11 October from President Pierre Lellouche to  
Mr Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation of Mauritania**

**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY  
FRENCH DELEGATION  
TO THE NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY  
*The President***

**NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY  
*The President***

Paris, 11 October 2005

My Dear Minister,

By your letter of 10 October last you were so kind as to inform me of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania's commitment to restore the operation of democratic institutions, and you expressed the wish that your country might continue its participation in the activities of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

As I pointed out to Mr Cherif Moussa on his recent visit to Paris, the dissolution of the Parliament of Mauritania as prescribed by Article 3 of the Order of 6 August 2005 promulgated by the Chairman of the Military Council has resulted in the termination of your country's parliamentary representation in our Assembly. However, I have the right to invite individuals as non-parliamentary observers, pursuant to Article 17, paragraph 2 of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Rules of Procedure.

Having regard to the importance that our Assembly attaches to dialogue with the Mediterranean countries, I wanted to consult the members of the Bureau beforehand. Most of them have agreed to my exercising the power conferred upon me by the abovementioned Article 17. I therefore have pleasure in inviting two delegates from Mauritania to attend the Copenhagen annual session from November 11 to November 15 as non-parliamentary observers.

I wish to make it clear that the status of Mauritania in our Assembly will be put on the agenda of the Standing Committee meeting at the Copenhagen session. It is for this Committee to consider the provisions relating to associate delegations. During our discussion I will pass on to its members your proposal for a visit to Mauritania by a delegation from our Assembly, but without prejudging its decision.

With kindest regards,

(Signed) Pierre LELLOUCHE

Mr Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed  
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation of Mauritania

### Appendix 3: The Military Coup in Mauritania

13. On 3 August 2005, a bloodless coup staged by military officers deposed Mauritanian President Maaouiya Ould Taya while he was out of the country attending the funeral of Saudi King Fahd in Riyadh. The event was generally condemned by NATO nations, the European Union, the African Union and most of the Arab world. The group of officers released a statement indicating that "the national armed forces and security forces have unanimously decided to put a definitive end to the oppressive activities of the defunct authority, which our people have suffered from during the past years".

14. The new ruling junta, calling itself the "Military Council for Justice and Democracy", rapidly consolidated its hold on the country and named as Mauritania's temporary leader Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall, former head of police and intelligence services under President Taya. Most of the other 16 members of the Military Council occupied senior positions in the deposed government. The junta hurriedly held meetings with all political party leaders, professional syndicates and civil society representatives.

15. As early as 6 August, while news agencies were reporting signs of national approval of the ousting of President Taya, the Military Council promulgated a ruling (*ordonnance*) under the form of a "constitutional charter" that would "define the organisation and functioning of constitutional government during the transitional period". The text promised to "put in place truly democratic institutions at the end of a transitional two-year period". According to the document, the fundamental dispositions of the Mauritanian constitution of 20 July 1991 with regard to Islam; individual and collective liberties; rights and prerogatives of the state, were maintained. The charter granted the Military Council both the executive and legislative power. In addition, article 3 stated that "the powers of the parliament elected in October 2001 are ended".

16. Further declarations of the military leaders promised a constitutional referendum, which would impose a one-term limit on the presidential mandate and restrict the ability of future presidents to amend the constitution. Members of the Military Council also stated that they would not be candidates nor back any party in any future elections. Many Mauritians welcomed these statements by taking the streets in Nouakchott and other towns.

17. During the month of August, a new civilian government was put in place, led by prime minister Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, who had held this office from 1992 to 1996 and was more recently Mauritania's ambassador to France. The new government established three interdepartmental committees for constitutional reform, dealing respectively with (a) democratic transition (electoral system, dates of the elections, etc.); (b) good governance; and (c) judiciary reform. The Military Council also received visits of representatives of the Arab Union and the African Union, and officially requested United Nations' help in organising elections within the two-year transitional period. The African Union delegation, which had the freedom to go anywhere and interview anyone in private, reached the conclusion that the coup was immensely popular, as many Mauritians were happy to see Taya depart. In early September, the junta announced an amnesty for political prisoners benefiting 115 people, including some Islamist leaders.

18. While still condemning the use of force by the military, Western capitals softened their tones towards Mauritania considering the overwhelming popular support of the coup, but also because it appeared unlikely that the new leaders would change the country's pro-Western foreign policy (including maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel). The US Ambassador in Mauritania met members of the Military Council and stressed that the administration in Washington wanted "to see a return to constitutional rule". However, the US government did not implement section 508 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which requires the suspension of all US foreign aid to a country that has had a military coup against a democratic government. According to media sources, State Department legal advisors ruled that section 508 did not apply to the Mauritanian case because the ousted president had been elected in 2003 in a poll deemed undemocratic by all international observers. This ruling also allowed for the continuation of US-Mauritanian military co-operation.

19. On 27-29 September, Mauritania received a delegation from the European Commission, which held meetings with members of the Military Council, the government, the chairmen of the three committees for constitutional reform, representatives of political parties and civil society. At the end of the visit, a statement signed by the German, Spanish and French ambassadors as well as the EU representative in Nouakchott indicated that the Union was ready "to work in a constructive way" with all parties involved in the transition period in Mauritania and "supports the African Union's efforts". The EU said that it will "continue to closely follow up the development of the situation in Mauritania pending the establishment of a democratic system through the organisation of free and transparent elections".

20. NATO officials declared in early September that activities with Mauritania in the context of the Mediterranean Dialogue continued and that military authorities had signalled their willingness to maintain all commitments with the Alliance.

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