

# *Mauritania* | *A Time to Prosper*

Special report prepared by Strategic Media

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# Mauritania

## A Time to Prosper

Introduction by **President Abdallahi:**

## Hailing in a New Era for Democracy and Growth

**A**fter the democratic, transparent, and pluralist elections of March 2007, Mauritania has inaugurated a new period for its international relationships. This new stage is based on the principles of neighborliness, mutual respect, and cooperation with nations that share a respect for human rights, justice, tolerance, and democracy. Mauritania adopted politics of openness and moderation, and strives for the establishment of a world of peace, security, and stability.

As a Member of the Union of the Arab Maghreb (Arab States of North Africa), Mauritania participates in the development of this sub-regional group. Mauritania's uniquely strategic position on the northwest African coast and blend of Arab and African culture sets the stage for mutually beneficial relationships with surrounding nations and particularly European, American, and Asian partners.

Economically, Mauritania is establishing policies that will accelerate development and control inflation. Mauritania wants to ameliorate the efficiency of public investment through structural reforms that allow for competition, a productive economy, to stimulate private investment. The choice of a liberal economy, in which the private sector has a leading role for the economic development, is a government-wide commitment. Mauritania is prepared to do what is necessary to overcome any obstacles to the promotion of private investments.

In order to secure consistent development, highly qualified human resources must be available. Therefore, national education reform is essential and would address our needs of development while supporting future generations. Reforms

will emphasize the needs of the labor market. Additionally, we are building a healthcare system based on preventive and curative strategies and durable financing.



**Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi**  
*President of the Islamic Republic  
of Mauritania*

The citizens of Mauritania are the focus of all action. We consider access to basic services a right for everyone. We plan to meet all the necessary conditions for a global approach that guarantees equal access to services, and that considerably improves their quality of life.

All these factors are being incorporated in the plans for Mauritania's development. Our main goal is to fix, in a long term, the people's major orientations. That involves the organization and structure of the national space, in order to create proper conditions for a stable development, based on the appraisal of the comparative advantages of our different regions.

In a world of globalization that faces multiple socioeconomic challenges, Mauritania is bound to the founding values of the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, the resolution of conflicts with peaceful means and the pursuit of dialogue between nations. Mauritania wants to establish national unity, re-establish the State, lead an economic expansion and a fair division of its gains, increase the productive base and generalize the infrastructures and basic services.

In the same frame of mind, Mauritania condemns all forms of violence and terrorism, no matter of what origin. It strongly fights against all forms of corruption. In cooperation with its partners Mauritania attempts to eradicate poverty, ignorance, and inequality, which are a source of conflicts, opting for transparency and moralization of the management of finances and public markets. ■

# New Government, Democracy, and Monetary Policy

The election of Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi last March in Mauritania's first democratic presidential elections since the country's independence 47 years ago marked a turning point for this north-west African Islamic state. Not only did it turn its back to a history of coups d'état, but the newly elected government also signifies a great change benefiting from a real and legitimate democracy

Traditionally insular, Mauritania was unknown in the international arena. Investors feared involvement with a country whose political, social, and economic indicators were uncertain.

The first step towards improving Mauritania's image abroad was a peaceful take-over in 2005 by a military junta. The junta initiated awareness of the importance of a more transparent Mauritanian government. In a referendum on June 26, 2006, Mauritians overwhelmingly (97%) approved a new constitution that limits the duration of a president's term in office. The military leader, Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, promised to abide by the referendum and relinquished power peacefully. Parliamentary and municipal elections followed later that year, and the historical 2007 presidential elections marked the final transfer from military to civilian rule, and a testament to the nation's aspirations for growth.

President Abdallahi is no stranger to the country's political scene having served as a minister of several departments in former governments. He was also involved in the nationalization of the country's Iron mines and the introduction of the national currency, the ouguiya. After working for the Kuwait Fund in Niger from 1998-2003, Mr Abdallahi planned to retire in Mauritania, but was convinced by fellow citizens to run for president. Through creating "an atmosphere of democracy in which citizens must have full freedom to live," President Abdallahi's main objectives are the reinforcement of national unity, the eradication of poverty, and restructuring the national economy.

"We need to make certain that this democratic experience takes root," says Mr Abdallahi, "that it develops and that it leads us to an irreversible situation where in the coming years we substantially improve the living conditions of our population." He has urged the government to redefine its role and prerogatives in order to fortify its commitment to complete the country's democratic transition. According to Presi-

dent Abdallahi, building confidence and democratic integrity includes fostering a sound financial environment, embodied in a new financial law, a major aspect of the long awaited government program announced by Prime Minister Zeine Ould Zeidane in June this year.

The financial law goes a long way in explaining how Mauritania's socio-economic landscape has changed in the past 30 years, and what steps the government needs to take realize the country's full capability. "It started with the largest government reformulation in the country's history, with the objective of developing greater synergy and more effective performance," says Prime Minister Zeidane. A former World Bank economic specialist and Central Bank governor, he succeeded in maintaining a strict monetary policy, reducing inflation to six percent and raising the GDP five percent. "Mauritania is a country with a lot of potential. Last year we had an economic growth of approximately 12 percent. But the majority of the population live in a very difficult situation, therefore the question is how to better use this potential."

The Central Bank of Mauritania (BCM) has also been given the autonomy to implement the economic policy framework and strengthen the financial sector. Both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have recognized its endeavors. "The readjustment of the economy was not only an economic change but cultural as well," says BCM Governor Kane Ousmane, adding that a new banking law seeks more alignment with Islamic values. "International banks offering original financial products which are adapted to our local situation will find an interesting margin of growth here," observes Economy and Finance Minister Abderrahmane Ould Hama Vezaz. He predicts a significant increase in monetary reserves from signals being emitted by promising sectors. "Our economic forecast up to 2010 considers an annual growth close to 6 percent and reduction of inflation no greater than four percent."

Even though oil production in Mauritania remains below predicted levels, the government went in search of a solution to increase its revenues and bolster the specially created National Hydrocarbon Revenue Fund, under supervision of the BCM. "Because the Mauritanian budget depends in large part on petroleum products, the fund plays the role of fiscal stabilization," says Governor Ousmane. "We need a barrier to decrease exogenous shocks, and this fund also serves that purpose." ►►

Private sector:

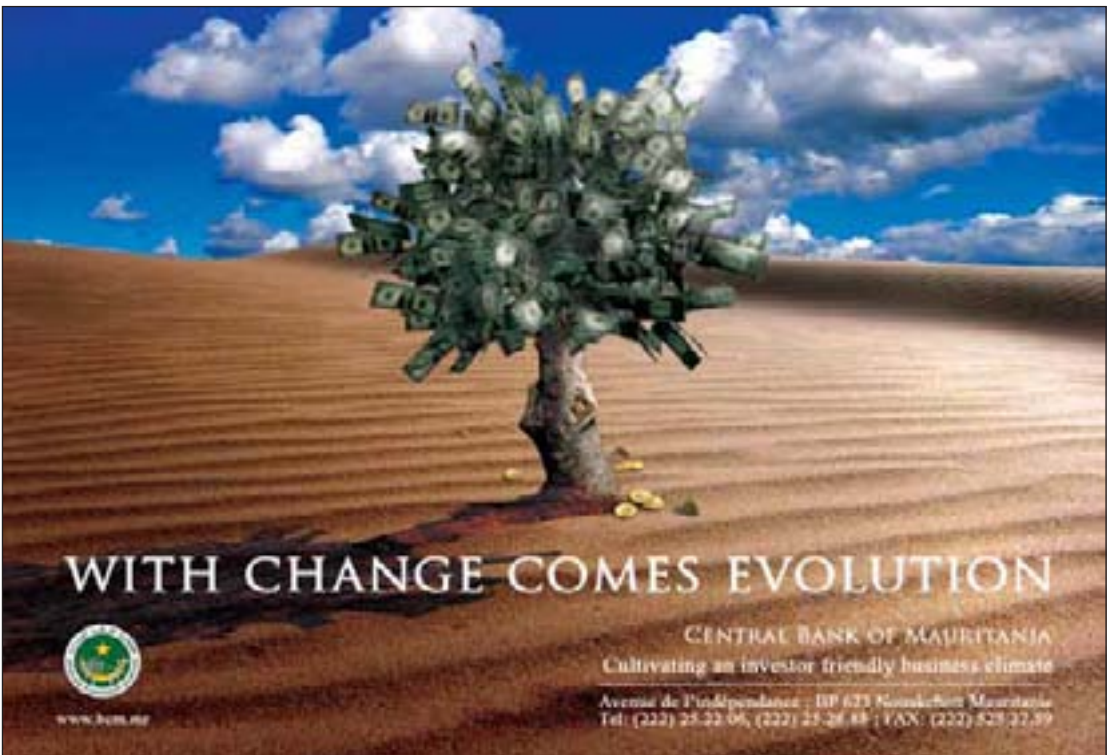
## Building up economic character

The key to boosting Mauritania's private sector is foreign investment. The government created the Delegation for the Promotion of Private Investment whose task is the creation of an attractive business environment for national and international investors and the private sector. President Abdallahi appointed a successful and insightful entrepreneur, Mr Mohamed Ould Yaha, to head the delegation. "It is a delegation, [that is] to suggest that we are a mission and not a political position," clarifies Mr Yaha. "Our mission evolves around letting the world know that our country is interested in investments and comprises an institution exclusively dedicated to investors. We need to put forward our geographical position which is an extraordinary asset."

Mauritania's location on the western tip of North Africa, accessible to both Europe and the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean, is a great boon to its possibilities. François Rantrua, Resident representative of the World Bank, an institution that has supported both of the country's Poverty Reduction Strat-

egy Papers (PRSP) through its Country Assistance Strategy (CAS), says that rapid transformations in recent years show that "Mauritanians have a big capacity for adaptation." As of March 2007, the World Bank had approved 86 credits and grants for Mauritania for a total of around \$1.14 billion. The next CAS (FY 2008-2011) is closely aligned with the PRSP-2, one of the central themes of which being the transparent and prudent management of the new oil revenues. "With this strategy we want to help the key elements which will trigger growth," Mr Rantrua points out. "If we work on the investment environment, especially in fishing and mining, there would be competitive advantages."

Several companies already investing in the country have contributed to the development of infrastructure and the population's basic needs, such as water and electricity. Stimulated by a shift in public spending, significant improvements have also been registered in social sectors, such as an increase in primary school enrollment rates from 46 percent in 1990 to 95 percent in 2004. Access to maternal health care has registered similar results. But there is still plenty that needs to be achieved, and it is here that Mauritania has chosen to stabilize and advance itself in order to tap into the world market's assets. As Prime Minister Zeidane puts it: "we will be part of this globalization process in order to reach economic growth and become an example for Africa." ■



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# Raising Mauritania's Oil and Mining Code

When an African country strikes oil, how does it most efficiently turn its newfound resource into a significant contributor to GDP, industry, and social development? This is the question Mauritania faced upon the discovery of the offshore Chinguetti oil field in 2001. In many ways Mauritania was at an advantage in being a latecomer. It was able to learn from the experiences of other members of the oil club, assessing which decisions to take and which mistakes to avoid. All too often the power that comes with a significant oil find is misused, so in conjunction with Mauritania's first production in February 2006, the main focus was on transparency and sustainability.

The government's expectations were high when Woodside, the Australian-traded subsidiary of Shell, began operating the Chinguetti platform. The onset looked promising and Mauritania anticipated the oil industry would represent 22 percent of the national budget. But by the first quarter of 2007, due to geological complexity, production had dropped from an original output of 40,000-60,000 barrels per day to 20,000, dimming the government's ability for further investment in the industry's infrastructure. "We have some technical difficulties in meeting expected levels," explains Minister El Hacén. "There are still some important activities that must be carried out, while a development program on the Tevet and Walata fields is also up and running. We hope to achieve additional production by 2010."

For the moment these steps suit the country's objective of diversifying the economy, avoiding its complete domination by oil. "If we keep increasing the production at a steady rate, we will be able to manage it properly," says Minister El Hacén. "Mauritania is a new oil country worth discovering. Compared to our neighboring countries, the conditions are encouraging," assures Aboubakr Ould Maroini, Director of the 2005-initiated company SMH. Even in its early stages, the company set up to manage the government's portfolio in the oil industry raised confidence by publishing daily and monthly production, sales, and revenue reports. Attributing the decrease in production to pockets of oil rather than a convenient stream, Mr Maroini regards Chinguetti's geological data as a lesson that will be heeded in other sites. "We will be more vigilant on the accuracy of a field's development plan and provide critical analysis to operators. We are changing our methods and improving the technical performance of fields." SMH has developed partnerships with international companies such as Petronas to boost technical development and in return offering detailed geological surveys.

In addition to treating oil revenues transparently in the 2006 and 2007 budgets, Mauritania wants to capitalize on the lessons learned from the experience of other oil producing nations. "With our national oil company, the Société

Mauritanienne des Hydrocarbures (SMH), we need to make sure that there is no conflict of interest and that the rules of the game are set for all to follow," explains the country's Minister of Oil and Mining, Mr Mohamed Elmoktar Ould Mohamed El Hacén. To this end the government has set up the National Hydrocarbon Revenue Fund and adheres to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). President Abdallahi aims to channel funds to non-oil sectors that have the greatest impact on social and employment programs. "What we want to accomplish is to make certain this oil production really serves the interest of the people."

## Mining potential

Compared with oil, the Mauritanian mining regulatory code has had time to mature, making the sector much more developed. Iron ore has been exploited efficiently since the 1960s by state-owned company SNIM (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière), whose revenue reach the \$135-million mark and exports 93 percent of its production to Europe. SNIM's average production is 12 million tons per year, a figure set to jump to 25 million tons by 2011. The driving forces behind this increase are several expansion projects, the most current of which is a plant that will introduce the pelletization process to Mauritania, a joint venture between SNIM and a consortium of Qasco of Qatar, Hadid — a subsidiary of Saudi giant Sabic — and Australia's Sphere Investments Co. "SNIM's biggest achievement is that we managed to show that developing countries can overcome difficulties," says the company's Director Mohamed Aly Ould Sidi Mohamed. "Now we are looking to create local added value through tighter international collaborations."

Mauritania's mining sector is attractive due its vast opportunities for investors in unexploited resources. The country's golden grounds contain a wealth of additional minerals; including bauxite, cobalt, copper, diamonds, phosphate, and uranium. Recent developments show the vivacity of Mauritania's mining sector, such as a \$100 million investment in the Akjoujt copper mine and this year's inauguration of the Tasiast gold mine, operated by Canada's Rio Narcea through its subsidiary Mauritania Tasiast Ltd. Tasiast is expected to produce 120,000 ounces of gold per year with a revenue of \$310 million over eight years. Even within this mature sector there is room for improvement. Investments in energy provision will greatly enhance the mining sector's output, as will infrastructure projects such as SNIM's new mining port at Nouadhibou. Director Mohamed sums it up with a simple truth: "Investments of today are the benefits of tomorrow." ■

# Energy, The Source of Development

Energy is at the root of all development, and providing a vast country like Mauritania with electricity is at the root of enhancing economic expansion and the quality of life. But for Mauritania the energy sector poses a great challenge. From the basic needs of households to those of heavy mining industries, many parts of the country still have restricted access. Currently Mauritania's main source of energy comes from thermal plants, but the government has already started to implement renewable energy projects and is keen to attract support and investment to solar panel systems at rural villages and aeolian farms along one of the most windswept coastlines in the world. In addition there are ongoing studies into transforming natural gas from the Chinguetti oil fields into electricity.

"The government set up a department gathering the sectors directed towards the supply of basic services to the population," says Minister Oumar Ould Yali of his Ministry of Energy, Water, and ICT (information and communication technologies). According to Yali they are strategic elements in the fight against poverty because improved infrastructure will "result in the provision of employment and diversify sources of income. Electricity arriving in the most remote regions gives access to information facilities and allows an

opening to the external world." The ministry has proposed an ambitious investment plan aiming at the electrification of 30 rural areas and 13 urban centers. It is also in charge of the sector's two most important companies: energy production and distribution company SOMELEC and the butane gas producer and distributor SOMAGAZ.

Since Mauritania's largely arid landscape is devoid of large woodlands, Butane is a principal alternative source of energy for rural communities used mainly for cooking. According to SOMAGAZ that production increased from 6,000 tons in 1987 to 30,000 tons in 2006, but due to rising demand it seeks to invest in new filling stations and storage equipment. Currently it covers less than 50 percent of the demand, creating space for other operators to enter the market.

SOMELEC presents another highly attractive opportunity in that it is open for privatization. According to the company, Mauritania is ready to connect its resources, not only through public-private partnerships, but also as a power grid with neighbors Senegal and Mali. "The improved distribution of energy will help to maintain people in the country's interior, avoiding an exodus to the urban centers. We have to develop at the same speed as our country, with reliable energy resources capable of meeting demanding needs". ■

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# Transforming Fisheries

The fishing industry would be well served by an enhanced energy infrastructure. Blessed with rich seas along its 430-mile coast, Mauritania's fisheries constitute 25-30 percent of the country's budget. It could be looking at an even larger catch with the installation of large freezing and packaging units. Processing fish for export in Mauritania would boost the industry and add value to a significant fishing agreement already signed with the European Union. Covering the 2006-2010 period, the deal is expected to reach \$118 million in revenue and is the largest agreement between the EU and any other country. According to the EU, it is not only a commercial breakthrough, but it is also a partnership that will contribute to the sustainable management of fishing resources.


Currently only one company exports frozen fishing products, the Société Mauritanienne de Commercialisation des Produits de Peche (SMCP). It was created in 1984 and became an important catalyst in the industry's development. Its main export markets are Japan, Europe, and Africa. It contributes 4-5 percent of Mauritania's GDP. The company owns and operates 10 establishments along the coast that are EU accredited for adhering to international standards of hygiene and safety. SMCP's director Mohamed Ould Rzezim notes that although it has served the national economy for 30 years, new products would give the country an even greater competitive advantage over its neighbors. "We have great potential in frozen and dried fish," says Mohamed Ould Rzezim "But we need to further exploit products to ensure optimum conditions. With investments, we can liberalize and optimize this sector. We have a plan to increase commercialization and repatriate the transformation of fishing products here in Nouadhibou."

The port of Nouadhibou serves as the gateway to Mauritania and is the first port of call for investors looking to export goods. It also needs to be expanded and transformed to be competitive. Fisheries Minister Assane Soumaré says that part of the funds received from the EU contract will be used to develop the port's infrastructure. "It is certain that in the future everything must be done to assure this treasure chest is used to create more opportunities in this country, both for factories and traditional fishing." A comparison of Mauritania and neighboring Senegal indicates how a restructuring could complement the sector's potential. Senegal has revenues reaching \$400 million per year employing 600,000 people, while Mauritania employs 36,000 people with an annual revenue of \$350 million. ■



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# Mauritania Connected

## The making of an inter-modal transport hub

**M**auritania's transition from a land of nomadic caravans trailing across the desert to a nation joining the motorized mass transportation age is marked by an interesting phenomenon. For great parts of the country's interior, the most important connection with the outside world was air transportation.

Today camels have by and large been substituted by four-wheel drives, with a road network spanning nearly 3,000 miles, and acute urbanization has amassed the importance of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou as central hubs. Their ports have become Mauritania's main gateways to and from the world making port expansions necessary. Air transport still remains essential, with 10 airports functioning across the territory, but regional competition is proving to be a challenge for Air Mauritanie. "The means for being a successful airline are well known: capital, equipment, human resources and a potential number of passengers," sums up Mohamed el Moctar Aoufa, Director of national carrier Air Mauritanie. "Our main competitors are the flight companies of North Africa. Countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco have developed tourism industries so their market is quite big. But even with the competition we have now there is space for everybody. This company has public obligations that include the transport of troops, politicians, or any national purpose. In a free market we need an arbitrary authority to remain competitive." Future plans see Air Mauritanie flying to the Middle East, mainly Dubai and Saudi Arabia, serving the large Mauritanian communities there. With a new airport scheduled for Nouakchott the country could also become an African transfer hub for European flights. This is a developing sector that newcomer Mauritania Airways, a joint venture between Tunisair and Mauritanian investors, is also keen to capture.

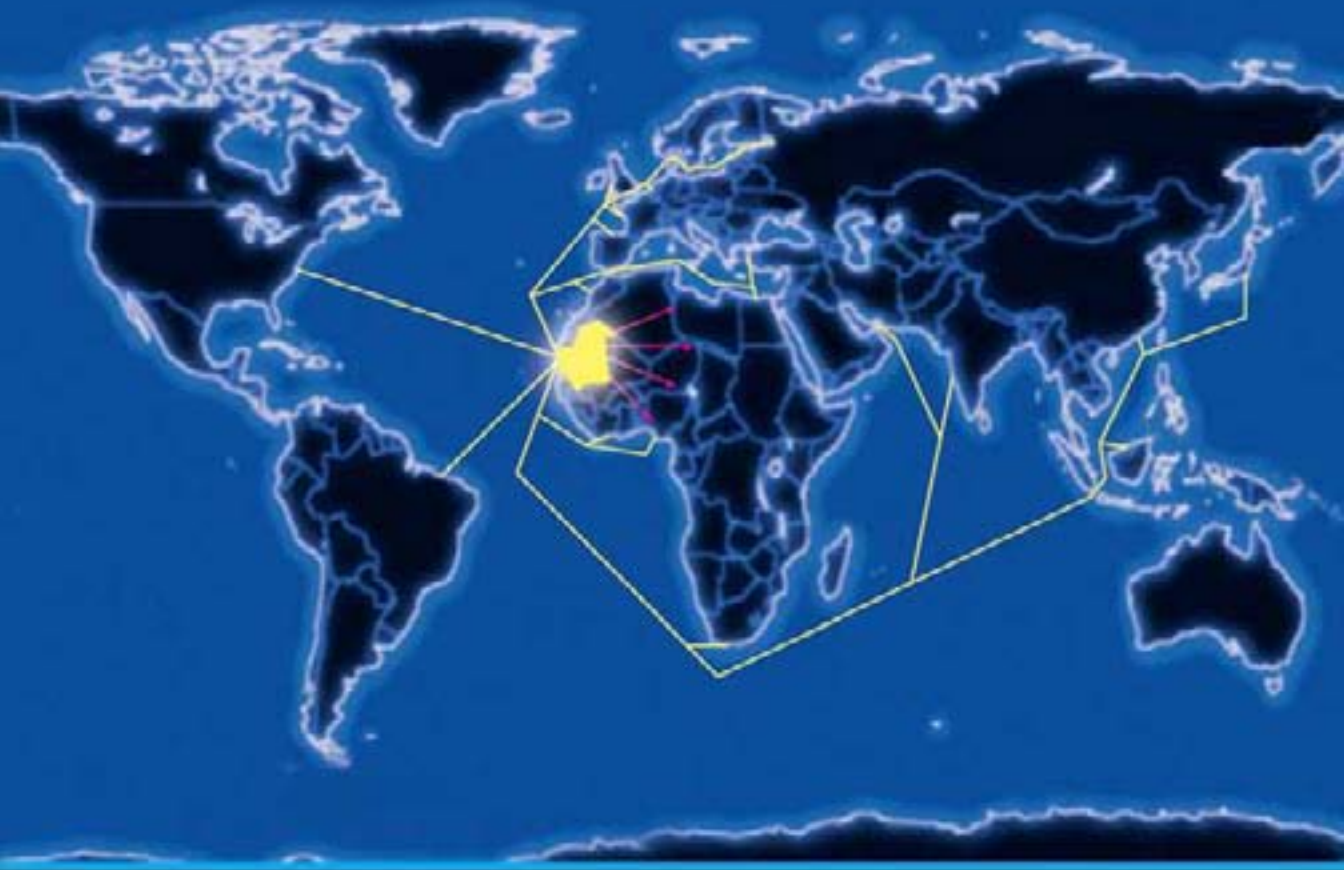
With political turmoil now a thing of the past, the government has focused on building infrastructure, devoting 20 percent of its public investment program to transportation, half of which is allocated to roads. It has created a ministry solely dedicated to transport, headed by former Nouakchott Port director and road maintenance functionary Ahmed Ould Mohameden. Its immediate activities are to ensure Mauritania's infrastructure supports economic development that links to the global market, especially through the ports.

"They have a very important role regionally as well as internationally, connecting Mauritania with Europe, Morocco and other places," says Minister Mohameden. "Another project is to build a bridge over the Senegal River at the city of Rosso. In the north we have already connected our roads with Mali and shortly also with Algeria." Mauritania has engaged in a strong financial partnership with the EU to expand its networks and foreign investments already contribute to the development of ports and the new airport.

The Chinese-built deep-sea harbor at Nouakchott became the nation's second port in 1987 and now handles 90 percent of Mauritania's imports. Describing its competitive advantages, Autonomous Port of Nouakchott (PANPA) Director Ahmed Ould Guenaya says, "It is at the intersection of key shipping routes between Europe, America, and South Africa. The port's location has become strategically important in terms of serving the sub-Saharan region, specially with the Aioun-Nioro road that links Mauritania to Mali." However, Nouakchott is currently running at near its maximum of 1.5 million tons annually, raising the need for increased storage space and new docks. "The Port extension project will double the traffic and improve the quality of service dramatically towards our clients, which include Maersk, Delmas, and MSC."

With the boost of attention in Mauritania the northern port of Nouadhibou is also aiming to widen its horizons. "We need a global strategy for Nouadhibou to provide the necessary infrastructure and services to the rest of the country," says its director Bebaha Ould Ahmed Youra, "we are really in a prime position to become a key development destination." Catering to the security needs of visiting shipping companies and established industries, the port installed an American surveillance system. The system lays the foundations for a Dubai-style free zone at Nouadhibou. "It is a plausible reality," Youra claims. "Mauritania offers the security, justice, and environment necessary to create a city like Dubai. We have a long way to go, but the willpower and the potential are there." Add to that the booming ICT sector, with Mauritania listed third among African countries with the strongest mobile telephony penetration, after South Africa and Gabon, and you have a country ready to take off. ■

# Anchoring Mauritania's Development



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# Giving a Global Approach to Industrialization

Apart from oil and mining, the industrial sector has found it difficult to take root on Mauritanian soil. With 80 percent of the country covered by desert, and the after effects of drought in the 60s and 70s, previous governments have struggled to set employment dynamics in motion or to create value for Mauritanian products. The government is engaged in realizing a rapid success in the agriculture sector, with 350,000 acres of land suitable for cultivation, and outstanding opportunities in cattle farming most notably in beef meat and camel meat processing. Agriculture Minister Correra Issaga's main challenge is to reduce the country's need to import basic food products, fight poverty, and avoid a rural exodus. "We need to find an alternative to traditional agriculture. A solution is to move into agricultural industry. I want local and international experts to combine their efforts and work together at this."

The need for essential food products following the drought led to the creation of import-export company Sonimex. It is connected with world markets to bring products such as rice, wheat, flour, sugar, and milk into the country and regulating distribution prices and stocks of mass consumption foods. Since liberalization of the import sector in 1989, Sonimex has also supported the country's agricultural base, as General Director Moulaye El Arbi Ould Mohamed details. "Due to its strong presence in the interior

of the country, Sonimex can help farmers commercialize their products. We have also fortified their capabilities by importing fertilizers for the past 6 years."

The country's Minister of Industry and Trade Sid Ahmed Ould Raiss says consolidation, a stronger investment strategy, and several new projects have already put Mauritania on the right path. "We will focus on growing sectors, specially the private industries, and try to access international markets within the World Trade Organization framework." Through its membership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) known in French as CEDEAO, Mauritania is currently discussing an economic partnership with the EU. It will ultimately allow the country to export "made in Mauritania" branded products that adhere to international standards, such as its excellent camel cheese.

"The objective is precisely to link our national economy to Europe through bilateral partnerships," says Minister Raiss. As far as trade with the United States is concerned he concludes that "there is an effort to be made for mutual discovery. American enterprises not only have access to the Mauritanian market with its inexpensive labor, but also the sub-Saharan structure, the Maghreb market next door, and over 200 million consumers in ECOWAS." ■



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# Oasis of Opportunities

## Discovering Mauritania's tourism hotspots

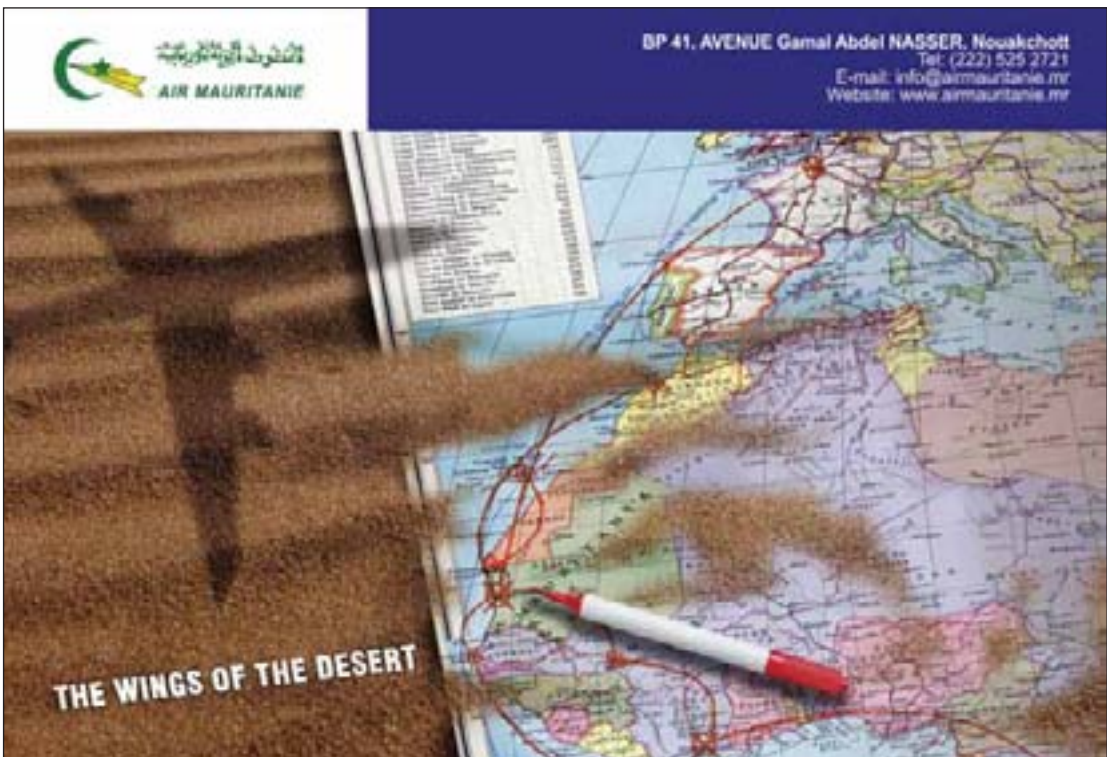
Even within our globalized world, there are always new corners to explore and cultures to encounter. Mauritania's climate may be hot on average, but its largely undiscovered treasures, natural and historical, make it a potential travel hotspot. After decades of neglect as a source of income, Mauritania's new administration is serious about tourism and established the Ministry of Tourism and Crafts. In a way the country is rediscovering its own assets, seeing them through a visitor's eyes. The ancient "ksour" towns of Oudane and Chinguetti, more than 400 miles of pristine coastline, nature parks, and a fascinating desert are just few of Mauritania's diverse attractions.

"People have a great need to move and to discover other places as there are now many facilities and means of transportation," says Ba Madine, Minister of Tourism and Crafts. "Thus Mauritania should offer facilities to attract tourists and investors." The ministry is working with the Delegation of Private Investment Promotion to identify and create the best opportunities in tourism as a tool for economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction. "My objective," says Minister Madine, "is that in five years we will have 40,000

to 50,000 tourists per year." By 2010, 2,500 rooms are expected to complement to the country's accommodation profile.

Currently French tour operators are selling Mauritania as a desert destination, a package which attracted 12,000 tourists in 2005. "People can experience adventure, camels, and dunes," Khadijetou Mint Boubou of the National Tourism Organization (ONT) points out. The organization was set up in 2002 to promote and diversify the nation's tourism offerings. "The region of Atlas attracts the most visitors, specially from October to April when people come to hunt wild boars. We need to explore possibilities along the Senegal river, and we are creating combined packages with Senegal and Mali."

Undoubtedly one of the most unique experiences in Mauritania is a visit to the Banc d'Arguin National Park, a protected area of land and sea covering one third of the country's coastal region. It is an eco-haven for hundreds of migratory bird species and fish that can reproduce in peace, maintaining sustainable development of the fishing industry. "If we associate the desert with the sea we find an original product which one can only find in Mauritania," says Dr. Sidi Mohamed Ould Moine, the park's director. "Tourism in Mauritania should be turned towards the valorization of large eco areas and selling them together. That is where we find the true potential." With the support of the World Wildlife Fund, the Swiss Hoffman group and other international funds, the Banc d'Arguin is a tourism gem within a country where many more are waiting to be found. ■



# Culture from Coast to Ksour

Understanding Mauritania means understanding its unique cultural structure. Granted, it has rapidly evolved in the past 30 years with nomadic people settling in urban areas and democratic values becoming embedded in the social fabric. Great strides have also been made to rid the country of some stubborn negative customs. Even though it was banned officially in 1981, Mauritania's parliament unanimously passed legislation this August making the practice of slavery punishable by up to 10 years in prison, a move warmly welcomed by human rights groups.

First and foremost Mauritania has a large multicultural heritage. Four ethnic groups; Poulars, Soninke, Wolof, and Meures (Arabs) maintain their own languages, clothing, food, and traditions. So rich are the historic and anthropological structures that UNESCO has designated four old towns (ksour), Chinguetti, Tichitt, Oudane, and Oulata as World Heritage Sites. The preservation of the traditional universities and libraries, containing paper and parchment manuscripts from the 11th and 12th centuries, falls under the Ministry of Culture and Communication, headed by Mohamed Vall Ould Cheikh. For this purpose, the government has created the "preservation and development of Mauritanian cultural heritage project" ("Sauvegarde et valorisation du patrimoine culturel Mauritanien"). The project's innovative mission is to re-establish the cultural heritage and integrate it in the dynamic development of the country.

"There are two institutions that work in this area," explains Culture Minister Cheikh, a doctor in language didactics and former UNESCO consultant in Chad and Niger. "There is the Mauritanian Institute of Scientific Research (IMRS) and the Foundation for Ancient Cities (FAC). IMRS's role is to undertake archaeological excavations at the historical sites of Koumbi Saleh and Aoudaghost. A representative of IMRS accompanies oil companies during exploration campaigns in order to protect a historical site. It is also entitled to preserve and appraise the manuscripts."

FAC's role is as custodian of the four cities. It also oversees small projects implemented by local populations. These projects employ residents who might otherwise leave for opportunities in bigger cities, and help to keep traditions alive. "We are a multicultural country," says Culture Minister Cheikh, "composed of Arab Berbers and Africans, living harmoniously as Sunnite Muslims, and I think this best characterizes the unique Mauritanian identity." ■

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