

WFP warns that its response is “severely hampered by critical funding shortages and severe shortages of jet fuel, as well as limitations on road deliveries and airlifts imposed by the rainy season. These problems sabotaged WFP’s efforts to deliver by air and preposition food aid before rains cut road access in much of the south.” It also said that it was struggling to feed the 90,000 Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in eastern Sudan.

## Mauritania

### A coup long overdue

from Issandr El Amrani in Cairo

“Don’t worry, it will come, we will realize this dream.” With these words Saleh Ould Henna, a former army commander and the leader of the failed coup against Mauritanian President Maaouiya Ould Taya on 8 June 2003, defied judges at his trial.

A little over two years and two botched coup attempts (in August and September 2004) later, Ould Henna’s prophecy came true. On 3 August, Ould Taya was deposed by a military junta led by his director of police and security services, Colonel Ali Ould Mohammed, in a remarkably bloodless coup. Taya, who was on his way back from King Fahd’s funeral in Riyadh when the coup took place, has taken refuge in Niger and pledged to return.

Ould Taya had become increasingly despotic since taking power in his own coup in 1984 and was deeply unpopular with many Mauritians. His repressive tactics landed scores of political dissidents, particularly Islamists, behind bars. His policy of engagement with Israel, which opened an embassy in Nouakchott in 1999, incensed Arab nationalists at home and abroad, as did his close collaboration with the United States on counter-terrorism in the Sahara.

In one of the few countries of the world where slavery persists, he also led a campaign of discrimination against Mauritania’s already downtrodden non-Arab population, exacerbating tensions between

the “fair-skinned” of Arab and Berber origin and those of West African origin. Tens of thousands of Fulani, Sarakole and Wolof were driven to seek refuge in nearby Mali and Senegal in 1989 and in 1990-91, he purged the army of hundreds of officers, killing many of them, in an effort to “Arabize” it.

#### Time for reform

The new junta, composed of Ould Mohammed and 16 other security and army officers and calling itself the “Military Council for Justice and Democracy”, issued a statement promising reform:

*This council is committed before the Mauritanian people to create the appropriate circumstances for an open and transparent democracy. This will enable civil society and all political activists to participate with complete freedom. Our armed forces will not rule for longer than the necessary period required to prepare and create genuine democratic institutions. This period will not exceed two years.*

Both coup and statement were welcomed on the streets of Nouakchott, as were further declarations promising a constitutional referendum to impose a one-term limit on the presidency and restrict the ability of future presidents to modify the Constitution, as well as assurances by the junta not to back any party in future elections or present its members as candidates. The junta has also held meetings with civil society organizations, professional syndicates and opposition parties. It released 21 of the 60 political prisoners held since the last coup attempt in June, including Islamist leaders.

International condemnation of the coup was immediate, but positions altered quickly in light of the obvious enthusiasm of many Mauritians. The African Union initially froze Mauritania’s membership and called for a reversal of the coup but softened its position in light of “the feelings of Mauritians”.

The US condemned efforts “to change governments through extra-constitutional or violent means”, but after its ambassador in Nouakchott met junta leaders its position changed to merely wanting “to see a return to constitutional rule”. The Quai d’Orsay was also quick to

dilute its initial condemnation of the coup.

#### Justified optimism?

Both domestic support for the coup and tacit international acceptance indicate that the junta is now firmly entrenched. But is the optimism about its commitment to democratic reform justified?

“It’s a palace coup,” Alice Bullard, professor of history at the Georgia Institute of Technology who has researched Mauritania’s human rights abuses, told MEI. The junta “has other motivations”, she said. “Democracy is not one of its primary concerns.”

The Council’s members have a poor humanitarian track record. Ould Mohammed was one of Ould Taya’s right-hand men, commanding the army regiment which secured Nouakchott for him in 1984. He is not a very public figure, but his position as head of the security services have given him a detailed knowledge of the country’s political intricacies and a shared guilt in past atrocities. He has been accused by some opposition members as being behind the “Arabization” measures of the early ’90s.

He is known to be a Francophile, having been reared by the French army as a child and later trained in Morocco’s elite Meknes Military Academy. He seems to have the support of both France and Morocco despite the fact that these countries were previously supportive of Ould Taya.

Analysts speculate that the coup could redress France’s diminishing importance in the Sahara. With the establishment of a large base manned by 400 troops in Tamanrasset in Southern Algeria, which press reports say is being used to eavesdrop on communications in sub-Saharan Africa, the US has dramatically expanded its presence in the region. It has also conducted Special Forces operations in Mauritania as part of an ever-closer military relationship with Ould Taya’s regime.

Reaction to the coup in the Arab world was mixed. Much of the media quickly denounced it. When the Arab League sent an envoy to meet the new government, Abd al-Rahim Rashed, head of al-Arabiya TV and a columnist for *al-Sharq al-*

*Awsat* asked how the League could “bestow legitimacy on an illegal regime that seized power by force?”

Also in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Egyptian Islamist Fahmi Huwaydi wondered whether military coups might make a come-back in the region as a convenient method of regime change with the pretext of democratization — a method, he wrote, that would suit US interests. But by and large, the coup received the scant attention that Mauritania usually receives.

Once legitimized, the junta may be pressed to carry out its promise of democratic transition within two years. That pressure will be exacerbated by the country’s economic problems — more than a quarter of Mauritians live on less than \$1 a day — and international interest in its strategic position role in the Sahara. Starting next year, it will also be the producer of 75,000 barrels of oil per day.

## Afghanistan

### Light sentences

from Kate Clark in Kabul

The Afghan government has expressed its shock after a military court in the United States gave minimal sentences to four American soldiers convicted of abusing two Afghan detainees who died in custody. One soldier was sentenced to three months in prison, another to two months and the two others to fines and demotions. They were the first US soldiers serving in Afghanistan to be convicted for abuses.

The four had been found guilty of charges including assault, mistreatment and maiming in connection with two men who died in custody in late 2002 at Bagram air base north of Kabul: Dilawar, a taxi driver, and Mullah Habibullah, the brother of a Taliban commander (MEI 751).

A US army investigation into the deaths, leaked to the *New York Times* earlier this year, revealed how Dilawar died after being chained to a ceiling by his wrists for four days and repeatedly beaten on his legs and lower body. An autopsy report found that the muscles in his legs

had been torn apart by the beatings. Habibullah died of a pulmonary embolism, apparently caused by blood clots which had formed in his legs from beatings.

One of the servicemen who received a demotion was a prison guard, Private First Class Willie Brand. He repeatedly told the court that he struck the detainees on the knee to gain their compliance so he could shackle them or put hoods over their heads. His lawyer claimed Brand, who had been serving as a reservist with the 337th Military Police Company, had been poorly trained and not ready for war when he was deployed to Afghanistan. He also argued that those above Brand in the chain of command should be held liable for Brand’s abuses.

Prosecutors had asked the court for a ten-year sentence for Brand, arguing that it should ignore his defence that he had not known that what he was doing was abusive.

Afghan presidential spokesman Karim Rahimi said the government would take up the cases with the US. Afghan human rights officials were also shocked, “We want the US to justify why these people have received such leniency,” said Nader Nadery of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

In response to questions about the treatment of detainees in Afghanistan, the US military routinely points to its track record of investigation into alleged abuses as evidence that it takes the care of detainees seriously.

In response to fresh allegations made by MEI in May (MEI 751), Lt.-Col. Jim Yonts, the spokesman for US-led international forces in Afghanistan said: “All I can say is, we do not condone the mistreatment of detainees and, as you have seen, we’ve taken appropriate action when allegations have proved to be true.” But he also warned that Afghan detainees should be seen as a special case. “They’re not normal criminals,” he said, “they’re enemy combatants.”

### Surge in violence

This year has proved the deadliest for the US army since it invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Sixty seven servicemen have been killed, including 13 in August.

The latest four to die were killed when a roadside bomb hit their vehicle in the south of the country. Two US embassy employees were also wounded when their convoy was hit by what Afghan officials said was a remote-controlled explosion carried out in the area of Paghman, just west of Kabul. The area is controlled by a non-Taliban Mujahedin faction, Ittihad-i Islami, which was part of the US-supported Northern Alliance in 2001. Over 1,000 Afghan fighters and civilians have also been killed in the upsurge of violence this year.

The latest UN figures show bombings and mine explosions in May in the south and south-east (where the insurgency is strongest) up by 40% from 2004. The UN is also worried that insurgents have extended their targets from international forces to pro-government clerics and community leaders.

In recent weeks the deputy head of the religious council in Panjwey district of Qandahar, Mullah Abdullah Malang, was shot dead, along with a companion, while the head of Khost clerical provincial council, Mawlawi Rahmatullah, escaped unhurt after a bomb attack outside his house.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that a resurgent Taliban, a rampant opium trade and persistent government corruption were hampering reconstruction and threatening next month’s elections. “Afghanistan today is suffering from a level of insecurity, especially in the south and parts of the east, not seen since the departure of the Taliban,” he said. “There have been troubling indications that remnants of the Taliban and other extremist groups are reorganizing.”

Four candidates in the forthcoming parliamentary elections and four election workers have also been killed.

Both the UN and the US are expecting violence to intensify in the last few weeks before the election. Abdul Latif Hakimi, who claims to speak for the Taliban, said the movement viewed election facilities and officials as legitimate targets but would refrain from targeting voters on election day itself — 18 September — for fear of hitting innocent civilians.