



Senegal: Human Rights Priorities ^[1]

President Sall Should Move Quickly to Address Neglected Issues

April 3, 2012



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(Nairobi) – The new government in Senegal of President Macky Sall should promptly address longstanding human rights concerns, Human Rights Watch said today in a [letter](#) ^[4] to the new president. Sall was inaugurated on April 2, 2012, after defeating the incumbent president, Abdoulaye Wade, in the March 25 presidential runoff vote.

While Senegal has avoided the coups and large-scale human rights abuses experienced by many of its neighbors, the country still faces challenges in promoting justice and accountability and in protecting vulnerable or persecuted populations. Human Rights Watch's letter focuses on three issues: the need for Senegal to stop delaying or obstructing efforts to bring Hissène Habré to trial for atrocities committed under his rule in Chad, the widespread exploitation of at least 50,000 young boys through forced begging, and the protection of the rights of people who identify as gay or lesbian.

"President Sall has promised a new era after winning a presidential run-off in which the strength of Senegal's democracy was again made evident," said [Daniel Bekele](#) ^[5], Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "This new era should include quick progress on human rights issues ignored by the previous government."

The Hissène Habré Case

Human Rights Watch urged Sall to extradite Habré, the former dictator of Chad, from his home in Senegal to Belgium to face trial for atrocities committed during his rule, from 1982 to 1990.

Habré's victims have been fighting to bring him to justice for 21 years in what Archbishop Desmond Tutu and 117 groups from 25 African countries have [denounced](#) ^[6] as an "interminable political and legal soap opera." They had long hoped to see Habré tried in Senegal, but both [the victims](#) ^[7] and the [Chadian government](#) ^[8] now believe that extraditing Habré to Belgium is the most suitable option since a trial there can be organized quickly before all the survivors pass away.

Belgium has filed [four extradition requests](#) ^[9], the last of which is still pending before Senegalese courts. Belgium also filed [suit](#) ^[10] against Senegal at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in February 2009, alleging that Senegal has violated the [UN Torture Convention](#) ^[11] by failing to prosecute or extradite Habré. The ICJ heard arguments from March 12 to 21, 2012, and [will issue](#) ^[12] its ruling later this year. The UN Committee against Torture already [condemned](#) ^[13] Senegal in 2006 for violating the Convention.

“President Sall should not wait for the ICJ to find that Senegal has violated its international obligations,” said Bekele. “He should ensure that the most recent Belgian extradition request has been properly transmitted to the courts so that they may swiftly authorize Habré’s extradition.”

Widespread Exploitation of Talibés

Human Rights Watch also called on the new Sall government to take concerted action to end the exploitation and abuse of young boys forced to beg on Senegal’s streets.

In an April 2010 [report](#) [14], Human Rights Watch documented how at least 50,000 *talibés*, or Quranic students – the vast majority under age 12 and many as young as 4 – are forced to beg on Senegal’s streets for long hours, seven days a week, by a *marabout*, or teacher, who often serves as a de facto guardian. The report documented widespread physical abuse, including severe beatings and several cases in which children were chained, bound, and forced into stress positions for failing to hand over a required daily amount from their begging or for trying to run away. In many of the exploitative *daaras*, or Quranic schools, Human Rights Watch found that the *marabout* used little of the money for the boys’ basic needs. They often were forced to beg for their own food and medical care as well, or, all too often, go without.

Islamic scholars in Senegal say that this practice of forced begging overseen by a minority of marabouts today is far removed from the country’s traditional practice of Quranic education.

Senegal has the laws necessary to protect the talibés from exploitation, but the previous government lacked the will to enforce them, Human Rights Watch said. In September 2010, nine *marabouts* were [convicted](#) [15] for forcing children in their care to beg, under a 2005 law that specifically forbids the practice. However, one month later, President Wade [expressed dissatisfaction](#) [16] with the application of the law, [effectively ending](#) [17] arrests and prosecutions. In all but a few cases, severe physical abuse of the talibés has gone similarly unpunished.

“President Sall should call for the enforcement of Senegal’s laws against forced child begging and child abuse,” Bekele said. “The government should ensure minimum standards that guarantee children’s rights to education, health, and physical and mental development.”

Violence and Discrimination against LGBT populations

President Sall’s government should also work to protect the rights of vulnerable populations, Human Rights Watch said, including sexual minorities in Senegal.

Human Rights Watch’s 2010 report, [“Fear for Life: Violence against Gay Men and Men Perceived as Gay in Senegal](#) [18],” found systematic human rights abuses against gay men, including torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the Senegalese police, arbitrary arrest, and discrimination in access to justice. Abuses against lesbians and other sexual minorities have been less thoroughly documented, but all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people suffer discrimination in Senegal.

Senegalese authorities have also failed to discourage or punish incitement to violence against gays and lesbians, including

public remarks made by religious leaders and politicians who have called for the killing of homosexuals.

The Senegalese government, Human Rights Watch said, has an obligation to protect the basic rights of all citizens, including LGBT people. The new government should immediately put a halt to police violence against and arbitrary arrests of LGBT people. It should ensure that those who incite or participate in violence against gays, or any other community, are held accountable.

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