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Men load a camel with large bags of salt, mined from a salt field on the outskirts of the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.



A petrol station is seen in the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.

As well as the unique architecture from its heyday, carefully maintained by UNESCO and the Mauritanian government which stipulate that new buildings retain the style, reams of yellowing historic manuscripts have survived. The documents are stored haphazardly in people's homes. High school headmaster Mouhamedou Ahmadou set up a group to preserve them about 20 years ago and was allotted a house for the purpose.

the heart of the desert and it's hot," Ahmadou exclaims. As he pulls out works from the shelves written mostly during the 7th and 8th century Arab conquests, the dust clouds make everyone in the room cough.

#### 'Forgotten'

"Tichitt is forgotten," its mayor Hamadou Lah Medou, 38, says. Even within an already sparsely populated country of some four million, its isolation makes life difficult and expensive. There's a small clinic offering first aid—and an ambulance, one of the six cars in the town, jokes local official Mohamed Teya. For more serious treatment, people must go to the hospital in Tidjikja, the regional capital about 230 kilometres (143 miles) away. "We need a road," the mayor bemoans. Yet, the petrol station—two pumps and a sign in the sand—is often empty.

Many try to make a living elsewhere. "There's nothing to do here, no work, no opportunities," says Gildou Muhamedou Babui, 34, dressed in a sky-blue boubou. Some find jobs at the palm grove, he says. Others work at the salt field, paid a few ouguiyas for their heavy manual labour, cutting the salt and loading up the camels of passing traders impatient to be on their way.

Babui himself tried to find work in the capital Nouakchott and in the northwestern town of Atar but to no avail. He now keeps the accounts at the town hall. "At least it's stable," he says, of the work that earns him about 3,900 ouguiyas (\$103, 95 euros) a month. "What can we do?"—AFP

But he has few resources for the job and their future looks bleak. "These manuscripts are like old people and children: they are fragile," Ahmadou says. Towns like Timbuktu in Mali—renowned worldwide for historically important manuscripts—benefit from foreign funding, or even temperature-controlled rooms, he points out. "Look here! We're in



A person is seen inside the ancient rock formation of Makhrouga between Tichitt and Aratane in Mauritania.



Men are seen praying at the historic Chinguetti Mosque in the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.



Two young men are seen resting at a camp along the road from Tidjikja to Tichitt in Mauritania.



People are seen in the market centre of the town of Tidjikja.—AFP photos



Ancient transcripts are seen stored in a library in the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.



Mouhamedou Ahmadou, the Director of the library and transcript writer, brushes the dust off an ancient transcript in a library in the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.



A general view of the outskirts of the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt is seen.