



Joint statement of the Friends of Maldives and ARTICLE 19  
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**PRESS FREEDOM IN THE MALDIVES: ON-GOING ATTACKS AMIDST PLAN FOR REFORM**

On the World Press Freedom Day, the Friends of Maldives and ARTICLE 19, Global Campaign for Free Expression, wish to highlight the restrictive conditions in which the independent media operate in the Maldives and call on the government of Maldives to prove its commitment to protect media freedom in the country.

Maldives is amongst the worst offenders in Asia in terms of press freedom. The Maldivian media is governed by a draconian set of regulations that are aimed at curtailing any criticism of the government or officials. The government applies the Criminal Law to prosecute outspoken journalists and puts barriers to entry for independent media to operate in the country. They also censor and harass critical and opposition media.

On the eve of her visit to the Maldives, Agnes Callamard, the Executive Director of ARTICLE 19 states: "The government has produced an agenda for reform, but the independent and opposition media and activists continue to be targeted. Therefore we call on the Maldivian government to show more commitment to protect press freedom and freedom of expression."

In March 2006, the government of Maldives launched a Roadmap for the Reform Agenda, which includes reform of media related legislation and several bills related to media have already been tabled. The Friends of Maldives and ARTICLE 19 acknowledge the importance of media law reform, but question the process of the tabling these bills, which have been drafted without public consultation. ARTICLE 19's legal analysis of one of these, the Bill on Media Freedom, indicates that it does not meet international standards and actually provides legal justification for more government control over the media.

Recent government's attack on the independent media, such as the raid of Minivan Radio and threat of imprisonment of journalist Nazem Sattar, raises concerns over the government's commitment to uphold freedom of the media and to seriously implement legal reform of the media.

The Friends of Maldives and ARTICLE 19 call on the Government of Maldives to:

- stop the intimidation and harassment of media and journalists who are critical to the government;
- respect the independence of all media, including independent and opposition media;
- consult and involve the public (including the opposition parties and media) in legal reform concerning the media;
- bring the proposed media laws in line with international standards on freedom of expression.

### **Background**

President Gayoom has ruled the Maldives for 28 years. Despite the economic growth with the development of tourism industry, the people of Maldives are denied most basic human rights such as freedom of expression. Since the custodial murder of a young prisoner in September 2003, there has been a growing opposition, and independent media in the form of websites and radio have exposed human rights violations in the Maldives.

The independent news group Minivan has suffered greatly in the last year. In October 2005, Jennifer Latheef, photojournalist for Minivan Daily, a newspaper registered in the Maldives in July 2005, has been sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for 'terrorism'. In December 2005, the Sri Lankan police raided the premises where Minivan Radio and Minivan News were operating following a warrant issued by the Maldivian police of false allegations that the group were gun running. No weapons were found. Minivan Radio is the only free media that reaches the outer atolls and Minivan News is the main independent source of information in English. In April 2006, Abdulla Saeed Fahala, a reporter for Minivan Daily, was sentenced to life imprisonment on drug charges. The editor of Manas Magazine, Abdul Hameed is currently under investigation for "acts against the state" after publishing an advertisement in Minivan Daily calling for people to join a peaceful demonstration to protest against high property rents in Male. Nazim Sattar, sub editor for Minivan Daily faces 6 months in prison for an article he wrote in which he quotes an opposition member. He is held responsible for reporting what someone else stated. If Mr Sattar is sentenced, the newspaper will be severely understaffed and might close down.

In addition to the above cases, there were a number of legal cases against journalists and online writers. Ahmad Didi, Mohammad Zaki, Ibrahim Lufthy and Fathimah Nisreen, who were working for an online newsletter, Sandhaanu, were charged with defamation and "attempting to overthrow the government" in July 2002. The first three were sentenced to life imprisonment and Ms Nisreen to ten years. Ibrahim Lufthy, who fled the country, is still considered a fugitive, although the other three have since been released.

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Agnes Callamard is representing ARTICLE 19 on an international monitoring mission to the Maldives with other organisations campaigning for media freedom, including International Media Services of Denmark.

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