



For immediate release  
9 May 2006

### **Maldives Freedom of Press Bill must be amended to live up to its name**

**Today, ARTICLE 19 releases an analysis of the Maldives Freedom of Press Bill against international standards on freedom of expression. The analysis concludes that while the Bill contains some positive safeguards for freedom of expression, these are outweighed by numerous broad and vaguely worded restrictions that may be abused to control the media. The Bill needs to be amended to offer real protection for press freedom.**

The Freedom of Press Bill is part of a package of measures introduced by the Maldives Government as part of its “Roadmap for Reform”, and it is intended to improve media freedom in the Maldives. While the Bill introduces some positive measures – for example, prohibiting censorship – it also imposes a number of unacceptably broad and vague restrictions on what the media may publish. For example, the Bill introduces various “media crimes”, including the publication of anything that can be interpreted as an “act against the State”, anything “deemed to be a State secret” or anything that would “serve to detract from ... social standards”. The Bill also places various matters outside the scope of “freedom of the press” altogether, prohibiting the publication of anything that is inconsistent with “basic tenets of Islam”; anything that would threaten the sovereignty of the nation; and anything that would impinge on the maintenance of “public peace”.

Restrictions such as these are incompatible with international law because they are vaguely worded and open to wide interpretation. This means that they are easily abused for political purposes. For example, a publication that is harshly critical of government policies or that exposes a government minister as corrupt can easily be deemed to have committed a criminal “act against the State” and have all its copies confiscated; and the ban on the publication of matters “deemed to be a State secret” can be interpreted to extend to any government document, including those that are of significant public interest.

ARTICLE 19 recommends that the Bill should be amended to offer strong and real protection for media freedom on the basis of internationally accepted standards. We have offered our support to all parties concerned to review and help redraft future versions of the Bill, as well as of other legislation that impinges on human rights and freedom of expression.

Notes to editors:

1. ARTICLE 19’s full analysis of the Maldives Bill on Press Freedom can be found at <http://www.article19.org/publications/law/legal-analyses.html>.
2. For more information, contact Peter Noorlander, ARTICLE 19 Legal Officer, at 020 7278 9292, or via email [peter@article19.org](mailto:peter@article19.org).