

Press Freedom Mission to the Maldives

Malé 6th May 2006

Statement

After four days of fact finding in the Maldives, members of the International Press Freedom Mission – an independent group of international organizations working to promote international standards on freedom of expression - deplore frequent attacks against media professionals and dissenting voices. We have observed the opening up of the freedom of expression space and growth in independent media during the past 18 months. Despite pressure and restrictions, journalists have exercised their rights to inform the Maldivians. We fully support such efforts of the media community in creating this space.

The Mission recognizes the steps taken by the government to relax restrictions, such as procedures for licensing and registration of private publications. But more needs to be done in this regard.

After meetings with high officials of the Government, including the Attorney General and the Information Minister, media community (including opposition, pro-government and government journalists), civil society members, detained journalists, the Human Rights Commission and diplomats, the Mission is committed to remain engaged in monitoring the press freedom situation and to support the independent media.

The Mission is concerned that the proposed draft Bill on freedom of the press fails to meet international standards on freedom of expression.

We acknowledge the steps already taken by the Government to improve the press freedom environment in the country through the “road map” for the reform agenda.

However, the Mission’s analysis of the draft Bill shows that the restrictions on freedom of expression are too broadly and vaguely worded and therefore can be easily abused for political purposes. The draft Bill proposes a number of media crimes and fails to provide sufficient protective measures for freedom of the media.

We welcome the statement by the Minister of Information that the Government will transform Television Maldives and the Voice of Maldives into a public service broadcaster and offer our expertise on how to ensure that this is a truly independent entity. The current control of the state-owned media by the authorities does not ensure adequate editorial independence and balanced reporting.

The Mission strongly condemns arbitrary arrests, detention, harassment and intimidation of journalists.

The Mission has been collecting information about recent cases of arrests and arbitrary detention of journalists by the security forces, such as Manas editor Abdul Hameed and Minivan sub-editor Nazim Satar. Journalists covering political and social events and

demonstrations and the participants to those demonstrations have been the victims of excessive use of force by the police. In all such cases, the security forces have acted in total impunity for their actions. The Mission has also recorded cases of death threats and verbal intimidation against journalists, both within independent and state-media, and the resulting chilling effect on the media community and on freedom of expression.

We express serious concern about the charges brought against 5 journalists and editors working for Minivan, which would appear to constitute a concerted effort by the authorities to target this publication.

The mission also deplores abuses of Interpol procedure against exiled journalists and overseas Maldivian media, blocking of Divehioobserver and Maldivesculture web sites, and the jamming of the short wave frequency of Minivan Radio.

Calls for action

- The Mission calls for a review of the cases against the following journalists detained or under house arrest: Jennifer Latheef, Abdullah Saeed, and Mohamed Yushau. In particular, principles of fair trial must be followed to the letter.
- The Mission calls upon the Government and security forces to respect the right of journalists to cover and report on all demonstrations without obstruction or intimidation.
- The Mission calls upon the government to bring to trial all those among the security forces involved in excessive use of force, torture and ill-treatment, to end the climate of impunity for such crimes, and to award compensations to the victims of police brutality.
- The Mission asks the Parliament to adopt without delay the draft Bill for the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and calls for the expeditious appointment of independent members, including a specific member focusing on freedom of expression.
- The Mission recommends that civil society organisations such as the Detainees Network and independent radios including Minivan Radio be allowed to register and operate independently.
- The Mission has made available its comments and recommendations relating to the draft Bill on freedom of the Press and calls upon the government and the Parliament to amend the Bill on the basis of international standards.
- The Mission calls upon the government to pursue the transformation of state-controlled broadcasting into Public Service Broadcasting, as well as the development of access to information and defamation laws in accordance with international standards and best practices.

- The Mission calls upon the media community to explore options for creating a journalists union and the development of professional standards. The role of the government on these matters should be restricted to creating an enabling environment.

In conclusion, the Mission announces its intention to continue making its expertise available in the drafting and implementation of freedom of expression legislations in accordance with international standards; as well as to closely monitor and internationally highlight the situation of press freedom, including the harassment, intimidation and security of journalists in the Maldives.

The Press Freedom Mission to the Maldives comprises 5 international press freedom and freedom of expression organisations.

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