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Maldives: Reforms will gain no credibility unless prisoners of conscience are released

Five prisoners of conscience continue to be held in the Maldives in gross violation of their fundamental rights to freedom of expression despite developments in recent months promising to improve the human rights situation in the country, Amnesty International said today.

The prisoners include Mohamed Zaki, Ahmed Ibrahim Didi and Fathimath Nisreen, arrested two years ago and sentenced in evidently unfair trials to long periods of imprisonment. Two other prisoners of conscience, Naushad Waheed, sentenced to 15 years, and Ibrahim Fareed, reportedly held without charge or trial, have been in detention since December 2001 and May/June 2002 respectively.

"We urge President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom to release these prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally," the organization emphasized. "No move towards reform can gain credibility while these prisoners of conscience remain in detention."

Amnesty International acknowledges the steps the government has taken since last October to address the failure of the criminal justice system to protect fundamental rights. These include the establishment of a Presidential commission of inquiry into instances of human rights violations in September 2003, as well as the establishment, in December 2003, of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives "with a mandate of protecting and promoting human rights in the country". The commission of inquiry has submitted its report and the government has promised to bring to justice those responsible for the death in custody of a prisoner as a result of beating, and the shooting resulting in deaths of several more prison inmates by the National Security Service.

The Human Rights Commission has reportedly begun investigating cases, but it is not empowered to deal with cases older than one year prior to its formation. The Government has also announced further measures to remove some of the shortcomings of the judicial system and to improve detention conditions.

"While these are positive steps in reforming the justice system, the continued detention of the five prisoners of conscience severely undermines their credibility. Promises of reform for the future can only be taken seriously if these clear cases of gross violation of fundamental rights from the past are resolved."

Background

Mohamed Zaki , Ahmed Ibrahim Didi and Fathimath Nisreen, have been detained since the end of

January 2002 on charges related to their involvement in the production of a clandestine Internet e-mail magazine, Sandhaanu, publishing articles critical of the government and circulated widely amongst Maldivians. They were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in July 2002 following grossly unfair trials. Recent reports suggest that Zaki and Didi's sentences (life imprisonment) may have been reduced 15 years'. Fathimath Nisreen's sentence (10 years') has reportedly been reduced to 5 years' and she has been banished to a remote island where she is to spend the rest of her sentence - still a form of imprisonment. Mohamed Zaki is reportedly suffering from a bladder condition which is not being treated.

Naushad Waheed, a businessman, artist and outspoken critic of the government, has been detained since December 2001. He is serving a sentence of 15 years' imprisonment following a grossly unfair trial. He is suffering from loss of weight and has reportedly become mentally unstable but the authorities have not provided him with adequate medical treatment.

Ibrahim Fareed, an Islamic scholar with moderate religious views who commands considerable respect in the Maldives, has reportedly been detained in custody or under house arrest since May/June 2002 after a speech in a mosque in which he raised the issue of corruption in the government administration. He is reportedly suffering from a severe respiratory condition with no access to adequate treatment.

Public Document

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