

PUBLIC

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Medical concern/Legal concern/Prisoner of conscience

REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

Jennifer Latheef (f), aged 32, photojournalist

Opposition political activist Jennifer Latheef was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on 18 October, convicted of "terrorism" for joining a protest in September 2003 against deaths in prison and political repression. Immediately after sentencing, she was taken away in a speedboat, and her whereabouts are now unknown. She is suffering from irregular blood pressure and influenza, and without treatment her health could deteriorate further. Amnesty International considers her imprisonment to be politically motivated, and believes Jennifer Latheef is a prisoner of conscience, jailed solely for exercising her right to peaceful protest.

Jennifer Latheef was one of thousands of people who peacefully took to the streets of the capital, Malé in September 2003 to protest after four young prisoners had been killed by prison guards. Protesters also called for an end to other human rights violations and political repression in the country.

She was repeatedly detained without charge as a prisoner of conscience, for periods of one to six weeks, during 2003 and 2004, spending several months in custody. After her detention in August 2004, she was blindfolded, subjected to verbal and physical assault, and held in prison conditions which amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. No one has been brought to justice for these abuses

President Gayoom acknowledged the protestors' legitimate demand for a thorough investigation of the deaths in custody, and the killing of prisoners when prison guards opened fire at them. He also promised to reform the political and judicial system in speeches following the protests. These included the reform of the criminal justice system and the constitution to improve the political and human rights environment in the country. The government has taken some steps towards implementing these reforms such as the formation of a human rights commission and the removal of barriers against the registration of political parties. However, it has reacted strongly against those exercising their right freely to engage in peaceful political activity, as is exemplified by the imprisonment of Jennifer Latheef. She is also the daughter of a leading Maldivian politician and government critic in exile, and her harassment is believed to be a ploy by the government to silence her father.

Jennifer Latheef's trial began in 2004 and ended in July that year but the court did not announce its verdict. She received several summonses in recent weeks to attend the court to hear her sentence, but the court sessions were repeatedly postponed. The last summons was issued several days ago but Jennifer Latheef could not attend because she had fallen ill. She informed the authorities that she could not go to court, but the police insisted on taking her. Her illness worsened, and she was admitted to hospital for treatment on 17 October. Nevertheless the police continued to demand that she should go to court with them. It was only after repeated representations by her family, and advice from doctors, that the authorities allowed her to remain in hospital. After the diagnosis and medical attention, she was advised by her doctor that she could go home to rest. However, the police insisted that she should appear before the court.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Opposition activists in the Maldives are frequently the targets of arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, and some have had apparently baseless criminal charges filed against them.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- calling on the President to release Jennifer Latheef immediately and unconditionally, as she is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for exercising her right to peaceful protest;
- calling for her to be given immediate medical treatment for her condition for as long as necessary for her to reach a complete recovery;
- calling for her to be given immediate access to her family and her lawyer.

APPEALS TO:

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom
The President's Office
Mulee-aage, Henvairu
Medhuziyaaraiy Magu
Malé 20-05
Republic of Maldives

Fax: + 960 325500

Salutation: Dear President Gayoom

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of the Republic of Maldives accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 November 2005.