

URGENT ACTION

ACTIVIST JAILED FOR CRITICISM OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Maldivian social media activist Thayyib Shaheem was arrested on 16 March, and has since been detained in Dhoonidhoo island prison. He is accused of “spreading panic” on social media after he criticised a development project in Maldives. He faces up to a year and three months in jail if convicted. He is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally.

Thayyib Shaheem is a prominent social media activist in Maldives and supporter of the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP). He was arrested on 16 March. The police claim the basis of his arrest is his spreading panic and disinformation on social media through his tweets about the recent swine flu (H1N1) outbreak in Maldives. Amnesty International, however, believes that he was detained for his public criticism of a proposed large-scale development project currently in the country, which involves Saudi Arabia.

Over the past few weeks activists and opposition parties have protested against the development project, which is due to take place on Faafu atoll, a group of islands southwest of the capital Malé. Among other things, they have raised concerns about the project’s potentially harmful environmental impact. The government has yet to disclose the full details of the project; it continues to reject rumours that the whole atoll will be sold to Saudi Arabia for around USD\$10 billion. Since early March, authorities have launched a disturbing crackdown against media, opposition parties and activists who oppose the project. The Criminal Court in Malé has threatened “legal action” against journalists who “disrupt the peace and stability of Maldives”, while police have raided the MDP headquarters to seize banners and other material.

On 16 March, just hours after tweeting criticism against the Faafu deal, Thayyib Shaheem was arrested. He was remanded into custody by a Malé court a day later, and moved to a prison on Dhoonidhoo island. According to his lawyer, conditions in the prison are extremely poor, with a lack of clean water and protection against mosquitoes, which are incessant. On 23 March, a court in Malé extended his custody by 15 days, describing his tweets as not “religiously acceptable”, despite not being able to specify which tweets it was referring to. Thayyib Shaheem has yet to be charged, but is suspected of violating sections 122 and 610 of the penal code, which relate to spreading false information and disorderly conduct. He could face up to one year and three months in prison if convicted.

Please write immediately in English, Dhivehi or your own language calling on the Maldivian authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Thayyib Shaheem, and drop any criminal proceedings against him as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- Respect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, in line with their international law obligations, and not penalise those who engage in public debate on the Faafu atoll development project;
- Immediately end all efforts to harass or arbitrarily restrict the work of media workers and outlets.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 10 MAY 2017 TO:

Minister of Home Affairs

Azleen Ahmed
Ministry of Home Affairs
10th Floor, Velaanaage, Male'
Republic of Maldives
Twitter: @homeministrymv
Email: info@homeaffairs.gov.mv
Salutation: Honourable Minister

President

Abdulla Yameen Gayoom
The President's Office
Boduthakurufaanu Magu
Male' 20113
Republic of Maldives
Fax: (960) 332 5500
Twitter: @presidencymv
Salutation: Honourable President

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. High Commission of the Republic of Maldives, 22 Nottingham Place W1U 5NJ, 020 7224 2135, Fax 020 7224 2157, www.maldiveshighcommission.org
Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

There have been persistent rumours in Maldives that the government is planning to sell the whole of Faafu atoll - a group of some 23 islands southwest of the capital Malé – to Saudi Arabia for around USD\$10 billion, and that this deal would be announced during the King's visit. On 17 March, the government announced that a planned visit of the Saudi Arabian King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud had been postponed indefinitely, citing an outbreak of swine flu in Maldives.

Activists and opposition parties have raised concerns over the possible environmental impact of such a deal, the lack of transparency about the terms and conditions, and what would happen to the estimated 4,000 inhabitants in Faafu. While the government has confirmed that there is a large-scale development project planned in Faafu with Saudi involvement, they have denied that the entire atoll will be sold. The government, however, has also said that the specific details of this project will only be made public once the deal has been finalised.

The Maldivian authorities have sought to suppress critical reporting around the Faafu deal and have harassed media workers and activists. On 2 March, a relative of a ruling party Member of Parliament allegedly threatened to assault and destroy the equipment of two journalists- Hassan Mohamed and Hassan Moosa, from the *Maldives Independent*, when they were visiting Faafu. After the incident, police took the journalists into "protective custody" for nine hours, during which they confiscated their phones and refused to let them contact their editors or families. A day before, on 1 March, the opposition-linked privately owned TV station, Raajje TV stated that it had received repeated death threats over the phone against a team of its reporters visiting Faafu. More recently, on 19 March, the Criminal Court issued a statement threatening "legal action" against journalists whose writings "disrupt the stability and peace in the Maldives" or "incite sedition and strife". Although the statement made no mention of specific media outlets or the Faafu project, a number of sources in Maldives told Amnesty International that they believe it was a direct threat against journalists who cover this issue.

Over the past year, there has been a wider crackdown on freedom of expression in Maldives. In August 2016, parliament passed a law criminalising defamation, which was widely criticised by human rights groups and media outlets as contributing to self-censorship. Privately owned media outlets faced harassment in the form of lawsuits and bans in 2016. The news outlets Haveeru, DhiTV, AdduLIVE and Channel News Maldives were on occasion blocked or forced to shut down.

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