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Maldives: Renewed repressive measures against the opposition

Mass arrest and detentions

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at reports that repressive measures are again being adopted by the Government of Maldives to suppress freedom of expression and assembly in the country.

These measures include the reported mass arrest of some 110 opposition activists in the past few weeks, beatings and other ill-treatment of the detainees at the time of arrest, and severe restrictions on detainees' access to lawyers, medical treatment and to their families. Scores of detainees have remained held without charge, while at least 22 have been released after being charged with apparently unsubstantiated, politically motivated criminal offences. Others have been released reportedly with a warning that they could be arrested again.

Although the government denies being responsible for such human rights violations, testimonies and reports of arbitrary arrests and torture or other ill-treatment of the detainees abound.

The recent mass arrests were made following government allegations that the opposition had planned to overthrow the government by force. The opposition has denied the allegations, which have not as yet been corroborated by independent sources.

Amnesty International remains concerned that the government's allegations against the opposition may have been made simply as a means to suppress the opposition's right to freedom of assembly and expression. This is not the first time the Government of Maldives has resorted to such allegations prior to a widespread crackdown on peaceful opposition activity.

The government has so far failed to provide substantive evidence to support its allegations that the detainees had used, planned or advocated violence. A number of detainees have been charged either with criminal offences which they are supposed to have committed in the past, including participation in earlier rallies which the government had declared unlawful, or with the vague offence of "disobeying orders" following a ban imposed on a public rally planned by the opposition for 10 November 2006.

Amnesty International is concerned, based on its research into similar cases in the past, that those charged are not likely to receive a fair trial in accordance with international standards. Leading legal commentators on the Maldives have stated that the judicial system there is fundamentally flawed and incapable of providing fair trial.

Prisoners of conscience

These concerns are heightened by the manner in which some outspoken critics of the government have been convicted and sentenced to terms of imprisonment in recent years. Ahmed Abbas, a political

cartoonist and designer of Maldivian banknotes, was sentenced in November 2006 to six months' imprisonment, reportedly in his absence and without him knowing that he was being tried. His conviction related to his remarks in a newspaper in August 2005, which the government claimed were incitement to attacking the police. The true reason is believed to be his role as a prominent critic of the government. Ahmed Abbas reported he only found out about his conviction accidentally after checking the government's website. Fearing ill-treatment, he sought sanctuary in the UN building in the capital Malé but had to leave the building under government pressure. He was then detained by the police and transferred to the prison island of Maafushi.

Amnesty International believes that Ahmed Abbas and other such detainees are likely to be prisoners of conscience, deprived of their liberty solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs.

Failures to respect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly

In a country slowly emerging from years of repression, people have frequently sought to peacefully express their views through public rallies and demonstration. However the government has often taken punitive measures against the demonstrators and those criticizing the government.

Mass arbitrary arrests and continued detention of people without charge or trial took place in August 2004, several times in 2005 and currently in November this year. Following the recent wave of arrests, the opposition called off their planned 10 November demonstration, but the government continues to keep in detention scores of their supporters.

Over a dozen of the November 2006 detainees have reportedly been beaten or otherwise ill-treated at the time of arrest. One detainee was reportedly forced to run after police placed handcuffs on him. He lost his balance and fell over. He sustained severe injuries including a broken arm. Despite his injuries, he was not reportedly allowed to see a doctor for a least two weeks.

In another incident, all 45 passengers of a boat travelling from outer islands were reportedly warned that they would be arrested if they continued with their journey. Most of them were coming to take part in the planned 10 November demonstrations in Malé. A gunship reportedly came within several metres of the passenger boat causing big waves, which rocked the boat violently. The gunship followed the boat and reportedly forced it to anchor near an uninhabited island. According to reports, for a period of about eight hours the gunboat deliberately prevented the boat from reaching habitable islands to replenish its food supplies, which had run out. The passengers were then taken into custody. Even though they offered no resistance, they were reportedly pushed around and thrown on the floor, and then transferred to the Dhoonidhoo detention centre reportedly while handcuffed and without life jackets.

Amnesty International is concerned that the detainees are held in Dhoonidhoo detention centre under conditions that may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Prisoners are held in solitary confinement and access to fresh air is severely limited. The sewerage system is reportedly damaged following heavy rain and emanates a foul smell, which penetrates the cells. Some detainees are reportedly held in the so-called "Alcatraz" cells which have no windows for the detainees to tell day from night.

The government has continued to deny reports of human rights violations in the context of the planned 10 November opposition rallies, but has as yet failed to launch independent and impartial inquiries that would refute or substantiate these reports.

Respect human rights: urgent need for remedial measures

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Maldives to release anyone detained solely on the grounds that they were going to take part in the planned 10 November demonstrations, or were otherwise engaged in peaceful exercise of their human rights, and to ensure that security forces do not arrest or detain persons arbitrarily and do not torture or otherwise ill-treat detainees.

Amnesty International is further urging the government of Maldives to institute an independent, impartial and transparent inquiry into the reports of arbitrary arrests, torture or other ill-treatment of detainees, restrictions on access to lawyers, medical attention and families and the allegations that charges brought against the detainees are politically motivated.