

The Maldives: Arrest of Journalists Condemned; Protect Freedom of Press

(Bangkok, 4 April 2016) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the arbitrary arrest of 16 journalists in the Maldives on 3 April 2016. The arrests followed a violent crackdown on a peaceful demonstration against increasing restrictions on freedom of the press and of expression in the country. FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of the Maldives to immediately stop the harassment of journalists and ensure the freedom of the press.

The Maldivian Police Services resorted to unprovoked violence, using pepper spray, to disperse a peaceful sit-in by journalists and media workers outside the President's Office in Malé, and arrested 16 journalists. They were later released on the condition that they appear before the police on 4 April 2016.

"Peaceful assembly is a legitimate means for journalists to demand the protection of their rights. Using unnecessary and excessive force against a peaceful protest, and arresting so many, exposes the Government's contempt for free expression and free press," says Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. *"We remind the Maldivian Government of its obligations under its own Constitution, as well as the international human rights treaties that it has ratified, to protect and promote the freedom of the press, of expression, and of peaceful assembly of everyone."*

The environment for the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press in the Maldives has become increasingly restrictive and dangerous over the past few years with new repressive legislations being introduced by the Government. In March 2016, the Maldivian Government proposed the Defamation and Freedom of Expression Bill to the Parliament prescribing exorbitant fines and imprisonment for 'defamation'. Newspapers and websites that publish 'defamatory' content could have their licenses revoked. The media community has warned that the bill will ["prevent journalists and citizens from speaking out on serious accusations of corruption and integrity of state officials."](#)

"The recently enacted anti-terrorism law already poses significant threats to freedom of expression in the country. This new defamation bill will further lead to self-censorship and will silence dissent", says Anjuman Ara Begum, South Asia Programme Officer of FORUM-ASIA, "This bill is a significant reversal of the positive example set by the Maldivian Government in 2009 when de-criminalising defamation. This raises serious questions about the current Government's commitment to uphold its human rights obligations."

The media in the Maldives have come under intense pressure with increasing attacks, intimidation, and harassment against them. Last week, the Maldivian Civil Court ordered the closure of one of the largest local dailies, *Haveeru* newspaper, over an ownership dispute. FORUM-ASIA believes this measure was unnecessary and disproportionate. The closure of *Haveeru* added to a string of judicial measures by a pliant and substandard judiciary to thwart basic rights of citizens. Previously, the Maldivian Criminal Court banned reporters of four news outlets from covering court hearings due to their critical coverage of trials.

The Maldivian authorities also failed to conduct a transparent and adequate investigation into the disappearance of *The Maldives Independent* journalist [Ahmed Rilwan](#). He has been missing since August 2014. No one has been held responsible for his disappearance, further perpetuating the culture of impunity for violent attacks against journalists and media in the Maldives.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of the Maldives to withdraw the proposed Defamation and Freedom of Expression Bill. FORUM-ASIA also [reiterates its calls](#) to the Government to repeal all regressive legislation including the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act 2013 and the Anti-Terrorism Act 2015 to align with international standards that the Maldives has accepted. Further, it urges the authorities to stop the harassment and intimidation of journalists, uphold the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, and refrain from pressing charges against the journalists that were arrested on Sunday.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including: freedoms of expression, assembly and association; human rights defenders; and democratisation. FORUM-ASIA operates through its offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva, and Kathmandu.

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