

The Maldives: Three years since Rilwan's disappearance still no credible investigation

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 7 August 2017) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) expresses deep concern over the lack of a credible investigation into the disappearance of Ahmed Rilwan. The inaction of the Government of the Maldives to pursue justice and legitimately address the matter contributes to a worsening environment for human rights defenders in the country.

It has been three years since the disappearance of the Maldivian journalist and blogger, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla. He was a strong voice against Islamic extremism and critical of human rights violations in the country. He is believed to have been abducted in the early hours on 8 August 2014 outside his apartment building in Hulhumalé.

In 2014, a petition, with 5,055 signatures calling for the parliament's National Security Committee to urge the Maldivian Police to conduct a speedy and thorough investigation, fell on deaf ears. The President's refusal to comment on the case three years after Rilwan's disappearance is reflective of the Government's inability or lack of willingness to protect human rights defenders and uphold freedom of expression and freedom of the press in the country.

Local non-governmental organisation, the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), in September 2014 published a report¹ of findings by a private investigator into the disappearance of Rilwan. The report was shared with the public and specifically with the Maldives Police Service. The report revealed several possible leads, including identities of individuals allegedly involved in the surveillance of Rilwan on the night of his disappearance, information on previous death threats he received, possible motives behind the attack, and more. The police, in addition to failing to act upon these leads, threatened MDN with legal action. However, 18 months after his disappearance the Maldives Police Service publicly shared the very same information in the MDN report as 'new findings' in the case.

The police only confirmed his disappearance on 2 April 2016, almost two full years after he was last seen. Two suspects were arrested four days after the confirmation, but they were released soon after. Rilwan's family fears that the suspects might flee the country in the same way that two previous suspects did shortly after their release.

On 7 February 2017, Rilwan's family filed for legal action against the police for refusing to disclose information on Rilwan's case, also under the Right to Information Act.

Journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders have been forced to live in a constant state of fear as both police and the Government of the Maldives have shown complete inaction in these cases and failed to invest reasonable efforts to investigate and apprehend individuals involved in these crimes against dissenting voices. More than two-and-a-half years after Rilwan's disappearance, the Maldives also

¹ <http://mdn.mv/report-on-findings-of-the-report-on-the-disappearance-of-maldivian-journalist-ahmed-rilwan-abdulla/>

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witnessed the brutal murder of yet another secular blogger, Yameen Rasheed, the main person involved in the campaign to find Rilwan.

There is a clear pattern of systemic repression of free expression and dissent in the Maldives, and particularly the unsafe environment for secular bloggers, journalists and defenders is of grave concern.

FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of the Maldives to:

- 1) Ensure an independent and impartial investigation into the disappearance of Ahmed Rilwan, and to undertake all measures to prevent and protect all human rights defenders in the country.
- 2) Monitor that the police conduct the investigation in accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code of the Maldives.
- 3) Enable the National Integrity Commission to conduct an independent inquiry into allegations of police failure in their response to both the disappearance of Rilwan and threats against him prior to his disappearance.
- 4) Provide open communication channels and cooperation between the police and the Rilwan's family wherein the family is provided with regular and adequate updates about past and current developments in the case.

FORUM-ASIA emphasises that the Government of Maldives must take all necessary actions against impunity and in favour of justice in this and all cases of human rights violations in the country.

About FORUM-ASIA:

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

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