

The Maldives: Ensure the security and protection of human rights defender Shahindha Ismail

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 3 January, 2018): The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) expresses serious concern over death threats and online intimidation against Shahindha Ismail, the Executive Director of the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN).

On 21 December 2017, Shahindha responded to a speech by President Abdulla Yameen, in which he declared that Islam would be the only religion allowed, stressing restriction of all other religions. In response, Shahindha tweeted "Religions other than Islam exist in this world because Allah allowed for it. No other religion would exist otherwise, is it not?"

Following her comment, on 28 December 2017, multiple news articles and a report were published on news website Vaguthu Online which deliberately and maliciously distorted the words of Shahindha. The articles accused her of blasphemy and branded her an apostate – both crimes with serious legal penalties in the Maldives, including death penalty in some cases. There were no requests for interviews made to Shahindha for clarification and no context provided about her comments. A public statement was then issued by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs on the same day condemning ‘anti-Islamic’ speech which is believed to be in reference to her.

The news articles and statement by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs propagated death threats and harassment against Shahindha on social media. Instead of providing security and protection, the Maldives Police has chosen to investigate her comments rather than the serious threats and intimidation she faced.

In response to the online death threats and harassment, Shahindha believes that her Twitter comment escalated “due to the targeted and false news article published on Vaguthu Online”. ‘I believe that it aims to encourage violence against me. There have been similar occurrences experienced by others who have criticised the regime, especially the bloggers Yameen Rasheed and Ahmed Rilwan. The harassment and death threats still continue but the police hasn’t taken any actions yet’, she added.

The severity of the online threats and intimidation may be exemplified by those Shahindha refers to in her comment that were also targeted for simply exercising their right to freedom of expression. In April 2017, online activist Yameen Rasheed was brutally murdered following online death threats and harassment and Ahmed Rilwan was subjected to enforced disappearance in August 2014.

‘The trends as observed in the Maldives are clearly the efforts to silence critics and human rights defenders’, said John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. ‘Online threats and intimidation is part of planned attacks against dissidents and indicate an effort to stifle freedom of expression and human

rights advocacy contrary to the spirit of international human rights standards and constitutional freedoms guaranteed in the Maldives', he added.

The Government of Maldives is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that guarantees freedom of expression and applies obligation to states to respect this rights at any time (Article 19 of the ICCPR). In addition, the United Nations Human Rights Council also concluded, '... unequivocally [condemning] measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law and calls on all States to refrain from and cease such measure"¹. Furthermore, states have a positive obligation to secure the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression along with the "means necessary to exercise this right, including the Internet."²

FORUM-ASIA and its members urges:

- The Maldives Police Service and the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives to take prompt action against the death threats and online harassment against human rights defender Shahindha Ismail and drop all charges against her.
- The Government of the Maldives to ensure that social media platforms are available to all its citizens for free exchange of ideas, public debate and access and dissemination of information.
- As a party to the ICCPR and a member of the international community, the Government of the Maldives must commit to its obligations and guarantee an enabling and unrestricted environment on the internet, free of censorship, intimidation and threats, in keeping with values of democracy and human rights.

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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¹ Resolution A/HRC/32/L.20 passed on 1 July, 2016

² Frank La Rue, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, A/HRC/17/27 : http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf

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