



**Maldives – Authorities must take swift action following recent findings related to the disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan**

(Bangkok/Kathmandu/Malé, 12 September 2019) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and its member from the Maldives, the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) welcome the recently released report by the government appointed Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances in the Maldives that reveals vital information on the disappearance of human rights defender, journalist and blogger, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla in 2014. The report reveals disturbing details of involvement of the government machinery and extremist armed groups in suppressing justice, and subsequently creating obstacles for the investigation of the case. We urge all relevant institutions under the Government of the Maldives to take adequate measures of action against those alleged of criminal activities.

The interim findings shared from the investigation into the enforced disappearance of Rilwan, which happened on 8 August 2014 and shocked the Maldives, reveal that a violent extremist organisation in the country may have been behind his abduction. We note that a reference to the possible murder of Rilwan was also made by the Commission. However, as this information has not been confirmed, we urge the Commission to refrain from publicising inconclusive information and instead consider the wellbeing of the family of the victim.

The summary report published on the website of the Maldivian Parliament refers to several individuals conspiring to abduct Rilwan, as well as the subsequent destruction of evidence. The Commission also found that high-level officers of the Government, including the former Vice President and intelligence officers of the Maldives Police Service, collaborated to obstruct and actively derail the police investigation that commenced in August 2014. Further, the Commission addresses the involvement of a judge who assisted the violent extremists to evade justice. The findings of the Commission contradict the previous Government's denial of violent extremist organisations operating in the country, instead highlighting a strong network of active terrorist cells with transnational links that have existed in the Maldives for several years.

We welcome the initiatives of the Maldives Police Service and the Prosecutor General's Office, who assured that they have undertaken necessary steps following the Commission's investigation. We call on the authorities to: take all required measures to apprehend the perpetrators; protect witnesses in connection to what was disclosed in the report; and take swift action in the interest of the protection of the society from further violence. We also call on the authorities to regularly inform the family of Rilwan, and provide them with protection and care. Further, we urge all relevant institutions to take measures to ensure the protection of the identities of the witnesses and other innocent parties that may face further risks, when disclosing sensitive information.

We believe that the presence of criminal and violent elements within law enforcement and the judiciary is an alarming and intolerable threat to the protection of rights and the delivery of justice. The Parliament, as the State oversight, must: take immediate action to address this presence; hold

institutions to account; and bring legislative and judicial reforms that will prevent further corruption and miscarriages of justice.

Civil society has raised concerns about the rapidly increasing religious radicalism and violent extremism, which have posed a great threat to the freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms of the people in the Maldives. We call on the National Counter Terrorism Center to have stronger engagement with civil society and other relevant interlocutors to address the issue and collaborate for more preventive efforts.

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