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MALDIVES: HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEMS MAR INDEPENDENCE DAY

Next week's celebration of the anniversary of the Republic of Maldives' independence should not obscure the plight of more than a dozen political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, who continue to languish in detention centres," Amnesty International said today.

"An atmosphere of fear and intimidation has denied the country's intellectuals the chance to voice their opinions freely," the human rights organization said. "Many of them have been imprisoned simply for criticising the government and should be released immediately."

Some people expressing views critical of the government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has been in power since 1978, have been detained for long periods without charge or trial. Some have been held under house arrest with restricted access to telephone, books and visits. The only time they have been allowed to leave the house is when they are in need of medical attention or to attend court.

Some prisoners have received unfair trials before courts that appear to be prone to influence by government authorities. Court proceedings also appear to be based on arbitrary decisions by the judge who decides whether or not the prisoner has a right to legal representation.

Among prisoners of conscience currently imprisoned is Mohammed Nasheed, a freelance journalist sentenced to two years' imprisonment by a court in Malé on 3 April 1996. He was apparently sentenced for making comments about the 1994 general elections and the 1993 presidential elections in an article published in a magazine in the Philippines.

During his period of house arrest in Malé, he was not allowed to receive visitors or phone calls. After appealing to the high court, his sentence was reduced to six months' imprisonment -- some nine days short of his period under house arrest. The government did not, however, take into account his period under house arrest and sent him to Gaamadhoo prison for another three months.

Currently under house arrest is Ilyas Ibrahim, President Gayoom's brother-in-law, who sought to run as a presidential candidate in August 1993 and was subsequently charged with unconstitutional behaviour. He fled the country but was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment *in absentia*. Amid reports of assurances from the authorities that he would not be detained, he returned in March 1996 and was placed under house arrest.

Prisoners of conscience are believed to be among a group of more than ten people arrested in Fuvahmulaku island in January and February 1996, apparently in connection with a reportedly peaceful demonstration about a rise in electricity prices. They include Mohamed Didi, Hussain Shareef, Hussain Shakir and Ahamed Saeed. They are believed to be detained without charge or trial.

“President Gayoom should release all prisoners of conscience as a matter of urgency,” Amnesty International said. “Only when people can enjoy the freedom to express their opinion openly will they be able to fully celebrate the Republic’s national day.”  
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