

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PUBLIC STATEMENT**

Index: ASA 29/5925/2017
21 March 2017

Maldives: Alarming crackdown on protests and media ahead of Saudi Arabian King's visit

The Maldives authorities have launched a troubling crackdown on peaceful protests and media workers ahead of a visit by the King of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, which was meant to take place this week. Although the King's visit has been postponed indefinitely, Amnesty International urges the Maldives government to respect the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression, and to not suppress public debate about any development plans in the country.

There have been persistent rumours in Maldives that the government is planning to sell the whole of Faafu atoll - a group of some 23 islands southwest of the capital Malé - to Saudi Arabia for around USD10 billion, and that this deal would be announced during the King's visit. On 17 March, the government announced that the visit had been postponed indefinitely, citing an outbreak of swine flu in Maldives.¹

Activists and opposition parties have raised concerns over the possible environmental impact of such a deal, the lack of transparency about the terms and conditions, and what would happen to the estimated 4,000 inhabitants in Faafu. While the government has confirmed that there is a large-scale development project planned in Faafu with Saudi involvement, they have denied that the entire atoll will be sold. The government, however, has also said that the specific details of this project will only be made public once the deal has been finalised.²

Restrictions on media and activists

The Maldivian authorities have sought to suppress critical reporting around the Faafu deal and have harassed media workers and activists. On 2 March, a relative of a ruling party MP allegedly threatened to assault and destroy the equipment of two journalists from the *Maldives Independent*, Hassan Mohamed and Hassan Moosa, when they were visiting Faafu. After the incident, police took the journalists into "protective custody" for nine hours, during which they confiscated their phones and refused to let them contact their editors or families. The *Maldives Independent* in a statement said they were "extremely disappointed" with the police's conduct: "The police claimed [the journalists] were held in

¹ "Saudi King's visit postponed," Statement by the Maldives President's Officer, 17 March 2017, available at <http://www.presidencymaldives.gov.mv/Index.aspx?lid=11&dcid=17737>

² The potential deal follows a constitutional amendment introduced in in 2015 which allows foreign ownership of land in Maldives as long the investment exceeds USD1 billion. On 16 March, media outlets in Maldives published a leaked recording where an MP with the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives claimed the amendment had been pushed through by the government to pave the way for the sale of Faafu to Saudi Arabia.

protective custody but they were treated like suspects.”³

A day before, on 1 March 2017, the opposition-linked privately owned TV station Raajje TV stated that it had received repeated death threats over the phone against a team of its reporters visiting Faafu. The channel has reported the threats to police. More recently, on 19 March, the Criminal Court issued a statement threatening “legal action” against journalists whose writings “disrupt the stability and peace in the Maldives” or “incite sedition and strife”. Although the statement made no mention of specific media outlets or the Faafu project, a number of sources in Maldives told Amnesty International that they believe it was a direct threat against journalists who cover this issue.

Authorities have also sought to silence debate online. On 16 March, the well-known social media activist Thayyib Shaheem, who has been an outspoken critic of the Faafu project, was arrested by police in Malé on suspicion of spreading false information on social media, and “creating panic” through his tweets about the swine flu outbreak. He was remanded for eight days on 17 March, and is currently being kept in a high-security prison on Dhoonidhoo island. He risks up to one year and three months in prison if convicted under the sections in the penal code listed on his arrest form. Amnesty International believes that Thayyib Shaheem has been detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression, and therefore considers him a prisoner of conscience.

On 13 March, police also confiscated the phone of Shammoon “Lucas” Jaleel, another influential social media activist who has criticised the alleged Faafu sale.

Restrictions on protests

Maldives authorities have also taken harsh steps to suppress peaceful protests around the visit of the Saudi Arabian King. On 2 March 2017, police published a statement threatening legal action against anyone carrying out “demeaning” actions against visiting “foreign dignitaries”, while the criminal court issued a search warrant authorising police to confiscate “banners and all related items”. Later on the same day, police in Malé raided the meeting hall of the opposition Maldives Democratic Party, which had announced plans to stage mass-protests around the King’s visit. Police have since raided the same building a further two times (on 7 and 16 March), and confiscated paint, rolls of paper and banners.

Police also broke up a peaceful protest on 3 March against the sale attended by some 100 people on Biledhdhoo island in Faafu atoll, and briefly detained at least four protesters.

Recommendations

The human right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and the closely related rights of

³ “Statement on ‘protective custody’ for journalists in Faafu atoll”, *Maldives Independent*, 2 March 2017, available at <http://maldivesindependent.com/feature-comment/press-statement-on-protective-custody-for-journalists-in-faafu-atoll-129143>

freedom of association and freedom of expression, are provided in human rights treaties to which Maldives is a party, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). As such, Maldives state officials must not impose excessive or arbitrary restrictions on the exercise of these rights. Only restrictions on specific, restricted grounds, specified in the ICCPR, are provided by law, and implemented in a manner that is necessary and proportionate, are allowed. Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the restrictions imposed in this case fail to meet these standards.

The Maldives authorities' actions over the past weeks amount to a clear attempt to curb peaceful protests and critical media reporting around the visit of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud and the development project on Faafu. Amnesty International calls on the Maldives authorities to:

- Fully ensure that the human rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are respected, protected and promoted in the country and that media workers can carry out their peaceful work without fear of reprisals;
- Effectively respect and protect the right to peaceful protest, even when they themselves are the focus of demonstrations;
- Immediately and unconditionally release Thayyib Shaheem from detention, and drop any criminal proceedings against him; and
- End all attempts to arbitrarily restrict the rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly or to limit public debate around the plans to develop Faafu atoll with Saudi Arabian investment.

Background

At home the Saudi Arabian authorities are carrying out their own ruthless campaign of persecution against peaceful activists in a bid to suppress any criticism of the state. Human rights defenders and activists are routinely harassed, arrested, and prosecuted in connection with their activism, and many are currently serving lengthy prison sentences. The authorities do not permit the existence of political parties, trade unions or independent human rights groups, and all public gatherings, including peaceful demonstrations, are prohibited. Those who have broken the ban have been charged with “participating in or calling for demonstrations” and “disobeying the ruler” and sentenced to imprisonment accordingly.

For background see Amnesty International Report 2016 / 2017 - Saudi Arabia:
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabia/report-saudi-arabia/>