

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety

MALDIVES

Aminath Najeeb (f), human rights defender; editor of newspaper *Minivan*

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Human rights defender Aminath Najeeb is the editor of the newspaper *Minivan*, which has been critical of the government. The authorities are now preparing to detain her, which would put her at risk of severe ill-treatment. If she is detained for two weeks or more, she will not be legally able to continue as the editor of a national newspaper: the government appears to be attempting to silence one of the few newspapers in the country that dares to criticise it.

In the past few weeks, masked men have been circling her house keeping a constant watch on her movements. On the evening of 16 May she narrowly escaped an attempt by another motorbike rider to push her off her motorbike in the capital, Malé. A few hours later she received a summons to appear before the criminal court on 17 May. The charge against her was the vague offence of "disobeying an order", a charge used by the authorities to silence journalists; the summons appeared to be part of the government's attempt to close *Minivan*, which has gained unprecedented popularity in the Maldives for the quality and range of its reports. Some of its journalists are critical of the government, and the authorities appear to be moving to close down the newspaper.

On 17 May, minutes before Aminath Najeeb's trial was to start, the senior Administrator of the Criminal Court reportedly told her that she had received last-minute orders from the Attorney-General's office to postpone the trial, but that the charge against Aminath Najeeb had not been withdrawn.

Four *Minivan* reporters, Abdulla Saeed (Fahala), Mohamed Yooshau, Imran Zahir and Ibrahim Manik, have already been detained. *Minivan* sub-editor Nazim Sattar has already been charged with "disobeying an order".

The charge against Aminath Najeeb arises from the legal action that the government has already begun against Nazim Sattar, who has been charged because of an August 2005 article in which he quoted an opposition politician who commented on police brutality during a wave of political arrests in the capital. He quoted this politician as saying that "what we should do to those in the Star Force [riot police] who beat us, is to seek them out individually and for us to act in such a manner that makes them feel that beatings result in pain, otherwise they will not be subdued". The government claims the article has encouraged violence against the police, and that a number of officers from the police's elite Star Force unit have been "traumatized" by its publication.

In recent weeks, Amnesty International has received frequent reports of people being severely ill-treated in custody after being arrested while taking part in political demonstrations in support of the opposition.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The charge of "disobeying an order" is one of the provisions of the Maldives Penal Code that facilitate the violation of the right to freedom of expression and assembly. Although the government has promised to revise it, in the light of mounting national and international concern, it continues to use this law (Section 88(a) of the Penal Code) against its critics.

Despite some improvement in the human rights situation, there is intense pressure on the media to refrain from publishing articles critical of the government. *Minivan* reporters who ignore this pressure have been

frequently harassed, detained or charged with politically motivated criminal offences. A recent fact-finding mission to the country by a number of human rights organizations concerned about freedom of the press in the Maldives, including Reporters without Borders, has strongly condemned arbitrary arrests, detention, harassment and intimidation of journalists in the country.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:**

- expressing concern at reports that human rights defender Aminath Najeeb has been harassed and attacked, and that the authorities appear to be preparing to detain her without good cause;
- urging the authorities to ensure that she is not harmed, and pointing out that if she were detained Amnesty International would consider her a prisoner of conscience;
- reminding the authorities that they have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of all human rights defenders;
- urging the authorities to drop criminal proceedings against any *Minivan* reporters who have been detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, and release them immediately and unconditionally.

**APPEALS TO:**

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom  
The President's Office  
Mulee-aage, Henvairu  
Medhuziyaaraiy Magu  
Malé 20-05  
Republic of Maldives  
**Fax: +960 3325500**  
**Salutation: Dear President Gayoom**

**COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of the Maldives accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 28 June 2006.