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Maldives: Harassment of human rights defenders must stop

Human rights activists in the Maldives are frequently the targets of arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, as well as other retaliatory measures such as the filing of apparently unsubstantiated criminal charges against them.

Among those targeted is Jennifer Latheef. A criminal charge has been brought against her which alleges that she committed acts of violence during the civil protests of September 2003 in the capital, Malé. Jennifer Latheef was one of thousands of people who peacefully took to the streets in Malé at that time to protest gross human rights violations in the country. Although some acts of violence occurred during the protest, there has been no strong evidence that she was amongst those responsible. President Gayoom acknowledged their legitimate demand for a thorough investigation of the human rights violations which had triggered the protests, and promised to reform the political and judicial system.

"It is ironic that the government has accepted the call by the protesters for reforms, but at the same time has targeted people like Jennifer Latheef for voicing their demand for such reforms," said Amnesty International.

Jennifer Latheef's trial ended in July 2004. Earlier this week, she was summoned to appear before a judge to hear her sentence. She had fallen ill and informed the authorities that she could not go to court, but the police insisted on taking her. Her illness worsened, and she was admitted to hospital for treatment yesterday. Nevertheless the police continued to demand that she should go to court with them. It was only after several rounds of representation by her family to the authorities and advice from doctors that she was allowed to remain in hospital.

Amnesty International opposes the continued harassment of Jennifer Latheef, believes the charges against her are politically motivated and considers her not to have received a fair trial.

Jennifer Latheef has been the subject of harassment and intimidation in the past. She was detained for a long period as a prisoner of conscience in 2004 and subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment while in detention, for which no one has been brought to justice.

"In our view, the promises of reform and the limited measures the government has so far taken to implement them are in sharp contrast to the continued harassment of those who seek to express views critical of the government," concluded Amnesty International.

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