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Maldives: President must act now to end the cycle of systematic repression

The scale of civil protest in Malé last weekend and the targeting, by the protesters, of government buildings which are closely associated with endemic human rights violations, underlines people's anger caused by the blatant abuse of their human rights.

"In response to the recent wave of protests, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom must take urgent measures to stop the systematic repression of peaceful political activists, and radically reform the criminal justice system to safeguard people's human rights", said Amnesty International.

Endemic torture and unfair trials, abuse of power by the security personnel, and a lack of clear boundaries between the executive power and the judiciary are at the heart of the causes that sparked off the civil protest last weekend.

"By repeatedly dismissing reports of human rights violations in the country, the Government of President Gayoom has allowed perpetrators to continue to act with impunity. This has effectively perpetuated a cycle of repression eroding people's confidence in the state's institutions to protect their fundamental rights. It is high time that government authorities accept their own responsibility and failure to protect and promote human rights," Amnesty International stressed.

The killing of at least three prisoners by the National Security Service (NSS) last weekend and the injury of a dozen more in Maafushi Prison, is only the latest chapter in a catalogue of human rights violations in the country by NSS personnel who function under the President's command.

Amnesty International calls upon the Government of Maldives to establish a fully competent and truly independent and impartial investigation into the killing of prisoners in Maafushi Prison and ensure that those found responsible are brought to justice. This inquiry must be transparent and conform to international human rights standards.

The organization notes that President Gayoom has ordered an investigation into the alleged killing of one of the prisoners, Hassan Enaam Naseem, by NSS personnel. However, the scope of the inquiry is limited to an investigation of the death of one prisoner. No inquiry into the deaths of other prisoners and the shooting by NSS personnel at prisoners in Maafushi has been

announced.

Furthermore, the President appears to be too closely involved in the inquiry, which could undermine its independence. When President Gayoom went on television on 20 September appealing for calm, he promised a “full investigation” into the death of one prisoner. But he added: “The Presidential Commission established to conduct the inquiry is an independent Commission, and will not be subjected to influence of any Government authority”. However, he made it clear that he would give “directions” to the commission “personally” and “without any intermediary”.

“A truly independent investigation means independence from all government authorities, including the President”, added Amnesty International.

The organization is further concerned that the authorities have launched a wave of arbitrary arrests. Already, over a dozen people have been arrested and there are fears that more arrests may follow. Children are reportedly among those picked up and taken away.

Amnesty International is also concerned that the government may take severe retaliatory measures against prison inmates at Maafushi. Many prisoners were reportedly held in chains, or deprived of food for over a day following the shooting at prisoners at Maafushi Prison. Large numbers of prisoners have reportedly been sent from Maafushi to Dhoonidhoo detention centre for interrogation. The centre has been notorious for torture and ill-treatment of prisoners

Background

A fight broke out between two inmates of the Maafushi prison several days ago. One of the prisoners, Hassan Eemaan Naseem, reportedly hit a policeman who intervened. Naseem was then taken out of the prison by the NSS personnel, beaten severely and died, reportedly on 19 September, as a result of the injuries he sustained.

The NSS reportedly kept silent about his death and attempted to bury him secretly. The news of his death however reached other inmates and his relatives. This triggered unrest in Maafushi prison and protests in the capital, Malé, where the dead prisoner was to be buried.

Security forces reportedly opened fire at the prison inmates with AK47 assault rifles as a result of which another prisoner, Abdulla Amin, died from gun shot wounds reportedly on 20 September. Over a dozen other prisoners were injured in the shooting, some critically.

As of the evening of 22 September, at least 12 prisoners with serious gun shot injuries had been flown to Colombo in neighbouring Sri Lanka for treatment. One of them died in a hospital in Colombo bringing the number of deaths so far to three. He had bullet wounds in the chest. Another was kept in an intensive care unit with gun shot injuries in the stomach. Access to other injured detainees was not possible.

The protests were the first reported from Malé during the presidency of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Protesters attacked government buildings. The Elections Division office was reportedly set on fire, the parliament building was damaged by stones, and records at the High Court were destroyed by angry crowds. At least two police stations were reportedly set on fire. There were no reports of casualties during these riots.

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