

Protests in paradise: Repression in the Maldives**Date: 10/11/2006****Index: ASA 29/009/2006**

The Maldives is a popular holiday destination, but is also a country with limited political freedom where people who are arrested are beaten up. They are held in detention for long periods without trial and are sentenced in unfair trials. In recent weeks, the Government of the Maldives has been targeting journalists and members of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party to try to stop a planned demonstration on Friday 10 November asking for constitutional reform.

The authorities have claimed that these actions represent a threat to the government. In the face of repressive measures against those planning the 10 November demonstrations, the opposition has called off the rallies. This is not the first time the government has targeted protesters. In September 2003, people took to the streets after the killing of at least three prisoners by the National Security Service, which is under the President's command. Maldivian photo journalist Jennifer Latheef was one of the demonstrators.

The events of 20 September 2003 changed Maldivian photojournalist Jennifer Latheef's life forever -- and made political history in the Maldives. This is her story:

It was around two o'clock in the afternoon when I heard the news. Evan Naseem, an inmate of Maafushi Prison, set on an atoll 18 miles south of our capital, Malé, had died in prison the night before. He'd been the victim of a brutal beating by prison security guards. I decided to join the crowds already gathering in large numbers at the cemetery in Malé for his funeral.

The place was packed when I arrived -- people seemed to want to bear witness, to see for themselves the kind of things that can happen under a brutal regime. Torture is commonplace in Maldivian jails, and I have many friends and relatives who have lived in its shadow. My paternal great-grandfather and my grandfather were both tortured to death in jail under the previous regime -- that's why it's so hard to describe my feelings when I saw Evan Naseem's lifeless body. The simplest way to sum it up is to say that he became family from that moment on.

Then came more terrible news. Security officers at Maafushi jail, trying to quell an uprising in the wake of Evan's death, had opened fire on prisoners, killing three. Now the collective anger and horror slowly mounted until an entire community stood up to voice their protest against the brutality. People took to the streets; many vandalized and torched government property. Police stations and vehicles took the brunt of the anger.

My natural reaction to any kind of upset (in situations with family or friends, I mean) has always been to try to calm things down. Even before the rioting began, I had tried to talk to the police platoon of about 20 to 25 officers who had gathered near the hospital where victims of gun wounds were believed to have been taken. The entire area was crowded with civilians. There had already been isolated incidences of attacks against the police -- even those police in plain clothes. I felt that they were aggravating the situation by being there, and that they themselves were in danger.

When rocks started being thrown at the platoon, I headed for home -- but not for long. It was very frustrating not knowing what was going on, and I couldn't reach anyone on the phone because the entire network was -- conveniently -- down. So I walked back to the hospital, past a police station in the process of being trashed, along with the

police vehicles outside. Eventually, I managed to get a ride to a friend's house -- she agreed to come and meet me later back at the hospital, bringing other friends and a small, unobtrusive camera that I could use to document events. On my return, I passed another police station which had been also been systematically trashed. Everything inside had been dumped outside on the road and set on fire.

Later that evening, my friends and my sister in tow, we heard that another body was being taken to the cemetery in an ambulance. The main road, Majeedhee Magu, was already filling up with a long procession following behind. I wormed my way in through the crowd to the foot of the slow-moving ambulance -- and found my friend Zaid inside, hysterical and distraught because the dead body was his brother, Ameen, with a bullet through the back of his skull.

We got Zaid out of the ambulance and made our way back to our house. Inside, Zaid cried and we just hugged him. Then three of us took Zaid to the cemetery where we stayed for a while. Then curfew was announced and we had to be inside.

We decided to go to my friend Amani's house and stay up together. At her place, we watched BBC and constantly checked the internet. We also tried to tell as many people as we could outside the country about what had occurred. At six in the morning, when the curfew time was over, Marnie and I took Zaid back to the cemetery and we came home to sleep.

When I woke up, people were already saying that the police had arrested me. People had been calling my family and friends, saying that they had seen me being taken away. But I wasn't arrested until the next day, the 22nd of September, at 12:30pm. And little did I know that this terrible day was only the beginning ...

• Jennifer Latheef is a 33-year-old Maldivian photojournalist working for the daily Minivan News. She was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment on October 18, 2005, convicted of 'terrorism' for taking part in the protest described above. Prior to sentencing she had been arrested and detained several times for her work as a human rights activist and member of the opposition, and placed under house arrest. The main reason for her detention was her outspoken views critical of the Government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

In addition, her arrest was believed to be a measure by the government to limit the activities of her father, Mohamed Latheef, a Maldivian politician living in exile in Sri Lanka where he has been engaged in a campaign of peaceful political opposition to the Government of Maldives.

She was finally freed in August 2006, having again been placed under house arrest in December 2005. Amnesty took up her case in November 2003. To find out more, visit: The Republic of Maldives: Prisoners of conscience should be released (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA290052003>)