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Maldives government must end use of excessive force against demonstrators

Amnesty International is deeply concerned at the Maldives government's continued repression of protestors, including beatings, pepper-spraying, and arrests. Those attacked include peaceful demonstrators, members of parliament, journalists and bystanders.

The organization condemns the excessive use of force by police personnel and urges the Maldives government to ensure a full and impartial investigation is conducted into such attacks. Amnesty International also calls on the United Nations and its member states, and the Commonwealth of Nations to continue to monitor the situation very closely and press the government to ensure people can fully realize their right to protest freely.

On 29 May Maldives police used excessive force against protesters in the capital of Malé. Demonstrators and some bystanders were kicked, beaten on their arms, head and hips with police batons and riot shields, and pepper-sprayed in the face. Those targeted had been protesting against the police dismantling of the nearby Usfasgandu rally site of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). At least one journalist, Ali Fahud from Raajje TV, covering the events was ill-treated and pepper sprayed by the police.

Malé has been the scene of regular protest rallies since the forced resignation of the former president Mohamed Nasheed of the MDP on 7 February 2012. His supporters have been protesting his ouster at the makeshift Usfasgandu rally site since 19 March, after police raided and dismantled their previous rally site in the Raalhugandu area on the outskirts of Malé.

The Maldives Police Force (MPS) has told Amnesty International that police "used the minimum required force to dismantle the area and arrest unruly demonstrators" and "deny the use of excessive force at the time of arrests and dismantling the area".

Some media reported that at one point during the protest, objects were thrown at the police. However, it is clear that by far the majority of demonstrators were not using violence, and any such incidents cannot be used by police as an attempt to justify the ill-treatment of bystanders and those rallying peacefully. Amnesty International believes that the police response to the demonstrations on 29 May was a clear example of excessive use of force.

One woman protesting peacefully in Majeedee Magu Street told Amnesty International that police officers suddenly pushed into them, and hit her and other peaceful demonstrators with their riot shields. Police hit them repeatedly on their back, and then pepper-sprayed them, aiming at their face and eyes. She said that police grabbed one demonstrator by the neck, shouted at him to open his mouth, and sprayed directly into his mouth.

These latest reports of pepper-spraying by the Maldives security forces are consistent with many other testimonies Amnesty International has gathered previously. Amnesty International therefore urges all countries which have supplied or continue to supply pepper spray to the Maldives, to ensure that the security forces do not use them to commit human rights violations. Any country that knowingly supplies police or military equipment to a force that uses them to commit human rights violations is itself partly responsible for those violations.

Police also beat bystanders who showed no signs of violence. An eyewitness saw a man sitting on a stationary motorbike taking no active part in the demonstrations. Police went for him and hit him on his head with their batons. He lost consciousness. His friends took him to a nearby house where they arranged private medical treatment for him – they did not take him to hospital straight away as they were afraid he would be arrested.

Police sources have told Amnesty International that a total of 58 people were arrested and only a few remained in custody. Most of the detainees were released without charge.

Among the detainees was Mana Haleem, the wife a former minister in Mohamed Nasheed's cabinet. She was walking home with her female friend in Majeedee Magu Street when police stopped them and began beating them repeatedly with their batons on their arms, back and hips before taking them in a van to the police station.

In her testimony Mana Haleem says: "I asked why we were being held, but received no answer. Later, they [police] told us it was because we had not obeyed their orders. We asked them how we could have disobeyed their orders if they had not given any, but they were not interested. I have bruises on my shoulder, my back and my hip."

Imthiyaz Fahmy, a MDP member of parliament, told Amnesty International that he was standing peacefully at the rally site on 29 May when police came for him. He said he offered no resistance but police manhandled him and verbally abused him. He was detained, handcuffed and taken to Dhoonidhoo, an island detention centre close to Malé. He said he and other detainees were all handcuffed during the boat ride to the detention centre.

He said police in Dhoonidhoo told him he was arrested for "disrupting peace". The next day, in court, police stated that he had been detained for "physically attacking a woman police officer". The court nonetheless found no grounds for his detention and he was released without charge.

Several detainees told Amnesty International that they and others were told they must undergo a urine test to determine any drug use, although the police had at no time said that their arrest was drugs related.

Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that when police eventually moved away from Usfasgandu, a group of angry men on motorbikes entered the area and began to vandalise and harass demonstrators. Nearby police took no action to stop them.

This is not the first time Maldives police have beaten peaceful demonstrators. It is high time the government enforced police accountability and stopped these human rights violations.

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Maldives to:

- halt attacks on peaceful demonstrators including beating and pepper-spraying;
- bring to justice any police personnel who have used excessive force;
- ensure that security forces in the Maldives receive comprehensive training on what constitutes human rights violations, which they should not commit.

Amnesty International is also calling on countries supplying police or military equipment to Maldives to ensure they are not used to commit human rights violations.

Background

Official permission was issued by the Malé City Council to the opposition MDP to use Usfasgandu as their rally ground. They have been holding rallies on this site since 19 March.

The government tried to obtain a court order to terminate that permission but the court refused to issue that order. The government then sought a search order from the court on the grounds that the MDP site at Usfasgandu was being used for criminal activity.

As police were dismantling the Usfasgandu rally ground, the MDP went to the Civil Court and obtained an injunction against its dismantling. Police personnel nonetheless continued to dismantle the site saying they had not received the order. After they had almost finished dismantling the site, they said they had received the order and withdrew.

An unofficial English translation of the court order gives three reasons for the search: “Suspicion that the current tenants of Usfasgandu area, having installed containers for use as shelter for habitation, were committing crimes within the area, and were causing damage to passers by and transiting vehicles in adjoining areas, and were engaging in sorcery and witchcraft.”

There is no indication in the order that the police had the authority to dismantle the site of the rally.