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Maldives: Yet another crackdown on peaceful political activity

The Government of Maldives carried out a wave of arrests of peaceful political activists this morning ahead of a rally called by businessmen, civil society groups and the opposition. This happened despite President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's recent pledges of political reform and his commitment to respect the right to freedom of expression.

"President Gayoom's promises of reforms to protect human rights are in sharp contrast to the arrests made by the police this morning," Amnesty International said today.

The rally planned for 14 February is to protest the government's failure to curb a rising tide of criminal activity in the country. One of the sponsors of the rally is the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), which was recently formed in defiance of the government's refusal to allow political parties to function. MDP supporters have planned to carry a letter on a march from the parliament building to the President's office, to inform the President of the formation of the party and to recommend measures to strengthen the protection and promotion of human rights.

The exact number of those detained is not known. Among those arrested are the entire family of an MDP political activist, Ahmed Falah. Police came to his house at around 3am this morning and said that they had instructions to arrest his entire family. Ahmed Falah was not at home and his family ran into the street to look for help. However, the police caught Aishath Najib, his partner, and their two sons, Shafeen Ahmed, 18 and Habhin Ahmed, 17. Aishath Najib was grabbed by several police officers and thrown onto the rear deck of a police van.

Others arrested this morning include: Abdulla Najib, Nazim Abdul Sattar, Mohamed Miyamon Naseem, Abdulla Saeed and Ali Hashim.

They have all been taken to Dhoonidhoo Detention Centre for interrogation. The reason for their arrest is believed to be their involvement in the election of the Governing Council of the MDP, which took place some three hours before the riot police came to arrest them. Among those detained are Governing Council members, as well as some people who took part in the elections.

"We urge the government to act immediately to ensure that none of the detainees are subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment," said Amnesty International. "We consider them to be prisoners of conscience and we are calling for their immediate and unconditional release."

"Our message to the government is clear: release these detainees now; ensure their well-being while in custody; reform the laws that allow the detention of prisoners of conscience; and ensure that no

such arrests take place in the future", continued Amnesty International.

According to a BBC report, the government has said "the raids targeted burglary and traffic offences and only eight people were held". To Amnesty International's knowledge, none of the prisoners mentioned above are known to have been involved in "burglary" or "traffic offences".

"These people have only been exercising their right to freedom of expression in a peaceful manner. They were holding an election to the Governing Council of their party. There is no justification for arresting them."

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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