

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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MALDIVES: BRING TO JUSTICE THOSE BEHIND ABDUCTIONS, DEATH THREATS AND VIOLENCE

The Maldives police must intensify efforts to find those responsible for death threats, abductions and violent attacks against journalists, politicians and civil society activists in recent months, and bring them to justice.

The death threats and attacks are allegedly the work of vigilante groups who want to stop people making comments critical of Islam.

Threats, abductions and attacks

In June this year a vigilante group abducted several young men, held them for hours, ill-treated them and warned them not to promote "atheism". Even though the identities of some of them are allegedly known to the abductees and the incident was brought to the attention of the police, so far the Maldives police has not announced that an investigation is underway.

At least 15 journalists reported receiving anonymous death threats for reporting on this incident. One such death threat read: "[We] will kill you if you keep writing inappropriate articles about gangs in the media."¹

Another journalist and blogger who reported on the abductions and the activities of vigilante groups in the Maldives, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, went missing on 8 August 2014. He is feared to have been abducted and has not been heard from since.

In 2012, Rilwan had been sent death threats for his coverage of the attack on blogger Ismail Hilath Rasheed. Hilath was stabbed and seriously injured in 2012, and had also been attacked in 2011 for advocating religious freedom.

Since Rilwan's abduction, others including journalists, politicians from the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and human rights activists have reported receiving anonymous text messages stating that they would be next to be abducted or be killed.

For example, on 18 September, MDP spokesperson Imthiyaz Fahmy received a message which read "We will kill you all. God is great."

Mohamed Nasheed, a former president who leads the MDP, has frequently spoken about the death threats he and members of his party receive.

¹ <http://minivannews.com/crime-2/15-journalists-receive-death-threats-over-gang-reporting-89404>

Eva Abdulla, an MDP MP, has raised similar concerns about the personal safety of MPs and journalists. She said a death threat recently sent to her and several other MPs read: “Don’t bring out your children on the streets these days. Stabbing season is about to begin. [We] will kill you.”²

Media outlets and MDP buildings have not been spared the threats and attacks. Journalists from Minivan News, Raajje TV and Haveeru newspaper received threats that they would be attacked for writing against the vigilante groups.³

On 25 September, a machete was lodged into Minivan News’ office door. A person – whose identity was widely known, including by staff at Minivan who shared this information with the police – was seen dismantling a CCTV camera outside the office before the incident happened.⁴

On 26 September, the MDP’s office was set on fire after it had been vandalised.⁵

These attacks followed the publication of a private investigation by a consultancy firm that implicated “radicalised criminal gangs” in Rilwan’s abduction. The report was commissioned by an NGO, the Maldivian Democracy Network.⁶

After Haveeru covered the attack on Minivan News, a Haveeru journalist received the following death threat: “You will be done for if you write the name [of the suspect arrested]. Keep that in mind.”

Impunity

Weeks later, the authorities have so far failed to find those responsible for these death threats and attacks despite persistent claims from civil society activists that the identity of some of the alleged perpetrators is not difficult to establish from victims’ testimonies or documentary evidence, such as video footage.

The Maldives police have been accused of not taking Rilwan’s case seriously. Rilwan’s family expressed serious concern in the weeks following his abduction that the police were slow to investigate, especially during the first few days after he had gone missing. Four men were eventually arrested in relation to the case; two were released from custody without charge and one has been placed under house arrest.⁷ There is as yet no statement from the police as to what exactly happened to Rilwan on the night of his disappearance.

² <http://minivannews.com/politics/mdp-mp-eva-abdulla-raises-concern-over-personal-safety-of-mps-journalist-with-ipu-human-rights-committee-90431>

³ <http://www.haveeru.com.mv/feature/56840>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2014/oct/01/journalist-safety-maldives>

⁵ <http://minivannews.com/politics/mdp-office-set-on-fire-amid-escalating-tension-90276>

⁶ http://www.mvdemocracynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Findings-of-the-Report-on-the-Disappearance-of-Maldivian-Journalist-Ahmed-Rilwan-English-Version.pdf?sm_au=iVVNM5vF7DqNs170

Furthermore, while the trial of the alleged killers of Member of Parliament Dr Afrasheem Ali in 2012 continues, no one has been brought to justice for the 2011 and 2012 attacks on blogger Ismail Hilath Rasheed. Afrasheem Ali was stabbed to death after voicing support for open debates on religious issues. Both men had received death threats prior to being attacked.

The Government of the Maldives is obliged under the international human rights instruments it has ratified to ensure the security and physical integrity of all persons. In particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, require ensuring the protection of all people from abductions, death threats and attacks.

Amnesty International urges the Maldives police to carry out prompt and rigorous investigations into all reported abductions, death threats and attacks and bring those responsible to justice.