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Maldives must investigate police actions during music festival

Amnesty International is calling on the Maldivian authorities to investigate the actions of the police during and after a raid on a music festival on 20 April 2014, including reports that police used unnecessary force. Police action at what they said was a drugs raid raised a number of additional human rights concerns, including:

- The arbitrary arrest of 79 festival goers on claims of possession and use of drugs, despite tests having not been carried out by the police;
- The alleged ill-treatment of detained festival goers in police custody;
- The denial of festival goers' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.

The music festival, which was attended by 200 youths, was a private event held on an uninhabited island, Anbaraa, located some 40 miles south of the capital, [Malé](#). The organisers sought and received the approval from the authorities, including the Ministry of Tourism, to hold the festival from 18 to 20 April 2014. However, in the very early hours of 20 April, the police raided the island from the sea in full riot gear and masks, shot off flares and rubber bullets, and rounded up festival goers.

The festival's participants with whom Amnesty International spoke after the raid said police manhandled many of them, verbally abused them, threw them to the ground and forced them to lie face down. They said police also ransacked and looted their belongings.

The United Nations basic principles on the use of force and firearms states that in carrying out their duty, law enforcement officials "shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms" (Principle 4). The information received by Amnesty International suggests that the police use of force was unnecessary, as festival participants were acting peacefully.

One participant told Amnesty International that she was kicked hard in the back by a policeman for not putting her hands up when ordered to, because in a state of shock she did not know what she was supposed to do. "I was so shocked and scared. I still have nightmares about that night," she said.

Another participant told Amnesty International that her cousin, also at the festival, was sprayed in the face with pepper spray by a police officer without provocation. The same eyewitness saw her friend being taken away by policemen from the crowd. When her friend was returned to the group, he told her that he was beaten up for asking the police to explain why they were arresting festival goers.

There are also credible reports of the detainees being ill-treated in police custody. A lawyer who represented a number of the detainees reported that many of his female clients were threatened with sexual abuse at the time of their arrest and in custody, with police allegedly saying they would "shove their batons up them."

The 79 detainees, who included 19 women and a 17-year-old girl, were left in plastic handcuffs

for 14 hours continuously. One of the women who was detained said:

“We were separated from the men and then the police draped the women, some of whom were wearing shorts and shirts, with material because they said we were not decent. They also filmed us. They meant to humiliate us and refused to say why we had been arrested. We spent the night in handcuffs, with little water and no food until morning.”

The next day, the 79 were taken to court, where they learnt in remand hearings that they had been taken into custody for the possession and use of drugs and would be placed in police detention for 10 days. However, at the time police had not yet performed urine tests on those arrested to substantiate this.

The detainees with whom Amnesty International spoke said that drug tests were only performed after the court hearings, at Dhoonidhoo detention centre where they were being held, contrary to police statements that all detainees had tested positive for drugs at the time of arrest.

The 17-year-old girl was placed under house arrest, while the remaining detainees were kept at Dhoonidhoo detention centre. One woman told Amnesty International that while in the detention centre, she was separated from the other female detainees without explanation and placed in a small, cramped room with little ventilation. The lack of air worsened her asthma, but she was not given vital medication for over eight hours. Only when her lawyer intervened the next day was she returned to the other women, who were all kept in one cell.

A few days later, the women detainees were released from the Dhoonidhoo detention centre and placed under house arrest but the men remained at the centre. According to a lawyer representing some of the detainees, all detainees have since been released without charge except five men, who remain in Dhoonidhoo detention centre. None of them have been charged as yet.

Background

Police in the Maldives have frequently used unnecessary or excessive force against demonstrators. Concern about this has been raised by Amnesty International, the Maldives National Human Rights Commission and the National Inquiry Commission that was set up to investigate the February 2011 events during and after the transfer of presidential power at that time. No police officer in the Maldives is known to have been held accountable for the excessive use of force.

The police said they raided the Anbaraa festival because the participants were using drugs. However, the delay in carrying out drugs tests, and the fact that no one has been charged with any offence, raises concern that this was only a pretext. Although there are no laws banning music in the Maldives and Islamic dress is not mandatory, police action appears to have focused on stopping the music festival and forcing women wearing skirts and shirts to cover themselves.

Maldives is a popular holiday destination for people all over the world. The number of tourists each year constitute around three times the total population. However, Maldivians are not allowed to enter holiday resorts. Maldivian youths say they feel deprived of venues on habitable islands to enjoy music as the authorities do not permit it, apparently on religious grounds and under pressure from Islamic parties. However, holding festivals on uninhabited islands has not been a problem in the past.