**End of mission statement of the**

**UN Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable International Order, Dr Livingstone Sewanyana,**

Official Country Visit to Maldives

21 March 2024

I am addressing you today at the conclusion of my official country visit to Maldives, which I undertook at the invitation of the Government from 12 to 21 March 2024, in my capacity as UN Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of Maldives for the invitation to undertake this visit and for its cooperation before and during the visit. I am also thankful and give particular appreciation to the UN Country team for their valuable support and assistance.

I would like at the beginning to commend the continued engagement of Maldives with this mandate during my tenure as Independent Expert.

During my visit, I met with Government officials at their highest level, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Economic Development and Trade, the Minister of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts, State Ministers at the Ministry of Social and Family Development, the Minister of Higher Education, Labour and Skills Development, the Minister of State and Deputy Minister of Finance, the Minister of Cities, local Government and Public works, the Minister of Climate change, Environment and Energy, and the Attorney General. I also met with the Senior State Counsel, Human Rights and International Affairs Division of the Attorney General's Office, as well as members of the Parliamentary committees on Human Rights and Gender and on Foreign Relations. I also met with the President and Commissioners of the Human Rights Commission of Maldives.

I would like to express my gratitude to the representatives of the civil society organizations with whom I was able to meet and engage in an open discussion on Maldives’s efforts in promoting, protecting, and strengthening and democratic and equitable international order. My sincere thanks also go to academia, in particular the Islamic University of Maldives for hosting my delegation during the visit.

This end of mission statement highlights my preliminary findings from the visit. It will be followed by a full report with a thorough analysis and assessment, observation, conclusions, and recommendations which will be presented at the 57th session of the Human Rights Council in September 2024.

1. ***General Context***

Maldives, a small island state with a chain of islands scattered across the Indian Ocean holds a significant strategic position due to its location sitting astride crucial shipping lanes linking the Middle East with East Asia.

As an emerging democracy grappling with the unique challenges faced by Small Island Developing States (SDIS), Maldives is still solidifying its democratic institutions and practices. It also faces environmental threats directly linked to climate change such as the rising sea levels, and a dependence on one main economic sector: tourism.

As an island state, Maldives faces unique challenges in achieving inclusive and sustainable development, which ensures that everyone benefits from economic growth, and inclusive governance promoting equal access to opportunities and resources.

Inclusive governance, where all citizens have a voice in decision-making, is closely interrelated with inclusive development, that is key to achieving equitable distribution of resources.

Maldives has a good record of ratification of international human rights treaties, by ratifying eight out of the nine core international human rights instruments, along with five optional protocols. I invite Maldives to take steps towards the ratification of the International Convention on the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and members of their families.

1. ***Peace and security including international cooperation***

Maldives’s position as an archipelago nation in the Indian Ocean shapes its approach to maintaining peace and security. Maldives’ foreign policy prioritizes peaceful coexistence with its neighbours including India and Sri Lanka who play a significant role in regional trade and security.

While the question of maritime security is not regulated through a legislative framework, I would like to commend the country’s efforts in addressing the issues of maritime security through international cooperation such as the joint patrols and capacity building for the Maldivian Coast Guards. Such efforts help sustain and maintain a peaceful maritime environment.

In this regard, I invite the Government to consider strengthening its maritime security through a comprehensive and specific legal and policy framework in addition to the Maldives Maritime Zone Act 6/96 as well as equipping the Maldivian Coast Guards with the adequate resources.

With regards to the issue of radicalization of foreign fighters transiting to the Middle East, I welcome Government’s efforts towards deradicalization.

Maldives' policy concerning the return of foreign fighters from other countries emphasizes a multifaceted approach that prioritizes both security concerns and the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. Understanding the complexities involved, the Maldivian Government advocates for international cooperation to effectively address this issue. Measures such as intelligence sharing, capacity building, and legal frameworks for prosecution or rehabilitation are key components. Collaborative efforts with other nations and international organizations are crucial to exchange information, coordinate efforts, and develop comprehensive strategies that mitigate the risks associated with returning foreign fighters while also promoting long-term stability and security. By maintaining international partnerships, the Maldives aims to confront this global challenge collectively while upholding human rights principles and addressing the root causes of radicalization.

1. ***Economy***

Considered as upper middle-income country, Maldives experienced an economic rebound in 2023 following the setbacks of the COVID-19 pandemic, with tourism and fishing being its main sectors of economic activity. According to the World Bank Development Update released in 2023, the Maldivian economy grew by an estimated 6.5% surpassing pre-pandemic levels. However, some challenges persist, including high cost of living in big cities such as Male, which is too high for the local population; the prevalent debt burden; high import tariffs; high cost energy and a limited access to international finance.

While acknowledging the persistent challenges posed by the country’s debt burden, Maldives has taken commendable strides towards advancing economic rights, particularly to improve access to adequate housing and to health and social protection schemes. Through strategic policy initiatives and targeted investments, Maldives has demonstrated a commitment to improving housing conditions and enhancing the overall standard of living across the archipelago. Such initiatives show Maldives' dedication to addressing socio-economic disparities and promoting inclusive development. Furthermore, collaborations with international partners and organizations have played a pivotal role in strengthening efforts to provide affordable housing options and improve living standards for vulnerable populations.

The country's debt burden has been a persistent concern, affecting its ability to invest in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Despite the existence of commendable social and health services schemes, the debt burden in Maldives has strained public healthcare systems, leading to inadequate infrastructure, shortages of essential medicines, and limited access to quality healthcare services, particularly in remote areas.

The debt burden has also hindered the country’s ability to invest adequately in education, resulting in insufficient resources for school infrastructures, teachers training and educational materials, in particular in the remote islands.

Furthermore, the debt burden contributes to economic instability, exacerbating poverty and inequalities in Maldives. Specific groups of the population requiring specific attention, such as women and children and marginalized communities can be disproportionally affected, facing challenges in accessing necessities such as housing and clean water in the remote areas.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes human rights-based policies, sustainable development strategies, and international cooperation to alleviate the burden of debt and promote inclusive economic growth in Maldives.

In view of the existing challenges, I recommend to the Government to adopt economic measures towards the better prioritization of investments and public expenditures to meet basic needs of the population in the atolls.

In addition, I encourage the Government to take steps to diversify the economy beyond the tourism sector, for example by investing in sectors such as renewable energy, ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, and IT.

1. ***Social Protection and welfare including poverty reduction***

Maldives has demonstrated a commitment to poverty reduction and enhancement of social welfare of its citizens through its existing social protection scheme. The establishment of the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) represents a step forward in this endeavour. Through various initiatives such as the medical welfare programme, the disability allowance programme, the single parent allowance programme, the food assistance programme, the universal pension scheme for elderly beyond 65 years old, and the social health insurance scheme (Aasandha), the NSPA has played a vital role in providing essential support to vulnerable groups, the elderly, persons with disabilities and marginalized groups. Besides the social protection scheme, the provision of free education, free health care for persons with a national ID is exemplary.

Notwithstanding this progress, efforts should be made to improve access and sustainability of these social protection measures across the country. Geographical disparity remains a barrier, with remote islands and rural areas often lacking adequate infrastructure and resources to deliver essential services effectively. This geographic marginalization may exacerbate inequalities, in particular for vulnerable communities who may already face systemic barriers in meeting basic needs.

Furthermore, the sustainability of social protection scheme may be hindered by other factors, including insufficient funding, and bureaucratic registration procedures.

Additionally, I invite the Government to take measures to enhance accessibility of social protection programs for vulnerable groups. Such targeted interventions, such as outreach programs, community-based services, and affirmative action would ensure that no one is left behind.

By adopting a holistic approach that prioritizes sustainability and inclusivity, Maldives can build a resilient model for social protection that benefits all segments of its population and contribute to its long-term development goals.

1. ***Migrant workers***

Migrant workers constitute a third of Maldives’ population and labour force. They play a significant role in the country’s tourism, construction and informal sectors. However, about one-third of them are undocumented, which adversely affects their living conditions (access to healthcare and social protection).

The regulatory framework governing migrant workers is the Employment’s Act (Law 2/2008) under which employers are required to adhere to specific procedures for recruitment and employment of migrant workers including obtaining work permits.

However, concerns over inadequate enforcement mechanisms and gaps in monitoring remain, requiring further efforts to strengthen their protection.

Reports of poor living conditions of migrant workers who often live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions with inadequate access to housing persist. In addition, legal and administrative barriers that prevent them from accessing justice or seeking redress for labour rights violations, fearing retaliation from employers or deportation, are apparent.

Undocumented migrant workers are equally vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. As such, measures are necessary to address their plight including regularization.

Moving forward, I invite the Government to strengthen the legal and regulatory framework governing migrant workers, including by ratifying the International Convention on the protection of migrant workers and their families; and enacting and enforcing comprehensive specific labour laws that protect the rights of migrant workers. Such legislation should provide a guarantee to ensure safe working conditions and mechanisms to address labour rights violations.

In addition, I recommend establishing a robust mechanism for monitoring migrants’ admissibility into the country in a fair and equitable manner, improve their registration process, and access to justice. Promoting public awareness and a culture of inclusion to challenge stereotypes against migrant workers would help in integrating them into the Maldivian society.

1. ***Public participation and good governance***

*Public Participation of women in decision-making*

Public participation in public institutions is crucial for ensuring inclusive governance and equitable representation. As of the most recent data available, women’s participation in public institutions remains limited. Currently, their representation in decision-making bodies such as the Parliament, and executive positions remains disproportionately low. Women only hold 4.6% of seats in the People’s Majlis, (the Maldivian Parliament), and only 3 women are members of the Government out of 22 ministers. For the upcoming parliamentary elections, out of 368 candidates, only 42 are women.

Due recognition is hereby made of the amendment of the Decentralization Act (2019), introducing a quota of 33% for the representation of women in local councils, and the introduction of such quotas in all public institutions mainly at the decision-making level is encouraged. The establishment of the Women's Development Committees (WDCs) at the local level is a step in the right direction. These committees, which provide vital platform for addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by women, fostering inclusivity, and promoting their active participation in decision-making processes is highly commended. However, for these committees to function effectively, adequate resources, both financial and logistical are required.

Relatedly, the introduction of the “Startup Loan Scheme” for women entrepreneurs, amounting up to MVR 100 million (approximatively USD 64.520 million), is a welcome initiative.

Furthermore, there is a need to strengthen institutional capacities and resources for gender mainstreaming initiatives, including training programmes for policymakers and public officials on gender responsive governance and leadership. Establishing support networks, mentorship programs for aspiring female leaders can facilitate their professional development and enhance their effectiveness in public roles.

*Youth participation*

Encouraging youth participation in decision-making processes stands as a pivotal endeavour towards achieving inclusive and effective governance. As a nation comprised of 49,95% young people between 18 and 35 years old, taking young people’s perspectives, aspirations is imperative for sustaining a vibrant democratic culture. Recognizing this, Maldives have implemented different initiatives aimed at empowering youth voices in recent years. Among these, is the establishment of the Presidential Youth Council. Through such platforms, young Maldivians are not only given a seat at the table but also encouraged to actively contribute to policy formulation and implementation.

Youth participation in decision-making serves as a cornerstone for inclusive governance, ensuring that policies reflect the diverse needs and realities of the population. By amplifying youth voices, policymakers can gain valuable insights into emerging challenges, innovative solutions, and areas requiring attention. Moreover, involving young people in decision-making processes nurtures a sense of ownership and responsibility among them towards the nation's development trajectory. This, in turn, fosters a culture of accountability and transparency, which are essential pillars of good governance.

However, one key challenge facing young people is ensuring a good living wage. Whereas a minimum wage exists, this does not ensure an adequate standard of living for the youth.

Furthermore, efforts towards promoting vocational training programs and educational reforms would promote competitiveness and better employability for the youth.

*Persons with disabilities*

Ensuring the active participation of persons with disabilities, in decision-making processes is an important step towards equal participation for all. Their inclusion is not merely a matter of equity but a necessity for fostering a truly inclusive society. In view of this, the creation of a disability allowance is a positive development.

1. ***Civic space***

Maldives has made commendable strides in nurturing its civic space, creating an environment where citizens can actively engage in democratic processes and civic affairs. Despite facing historical challenges, including periods of political unrest, the Maldives has demonstrated a commitment to strengthening its civic space, evident in recent reforms aimed at enhancing democratic institutions and freedoms. Maldives has a state-led civil society regulatory framework that requires CSOs to register before they operate with the exception of community-based groups.

Article 43(e)(3) of the Association Act (3/2022) which provides that each member of the executive committee of an association shall not be a member of the executive committee of another association; is restrictive and therefore requires reform.

While we commend the Government for the creation of an NGO fund support at the Government level, I recommend that improvement should be made on its accessibility and enforcement.

1. ***Climate change***

Maldives is comprised of low-lying atolls in the Indian Ocean, stands as a poignant symbol of the existential threat posed by climate change. With its highest point barely reaching 2.4 meters above sea level, Maldives faces the challenge of rising sea levels, considered a consequence of global warming. The country's vulnerability to climate change is exacerbated by its geographic location that adversely affects access to clean water shortage in many remote islands.

Government’s proactivity in advocating at the international level for climate action, leveraging its position as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) to raise awareness of the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable countries, is commendable. Maldives is also the first country to have established a road map following the call from the United Nations Secretary General on Early Warning for all.

It is also encouraging to learn about current efforts in framing of the national adaptation plan as well as the environmental strategic national plan as part of the implementation of the Climate Emergency Act (2021).

Despite these progressive measures, the Maldives continues to face formidable challenges in combatting climate change. Rapid urbanization and unsustainable development practices exacerbate environmental degradation, while limited financial resources constrain the implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures. Furthermore, Maldives' reliance on imported fossil fuels for energy generation presents a significant barrier to achieving carbon neutrality. In this regard, I commend the Government’s target to attain by 2028 the 33% of the energy consumption through renewable energy and having among the lowest carbon emission currently at 0.0035%.

To address these challenges, I invite Maldives to continue with efforts in engaging with the international community to meet its commitment under the Paris Agreement.

Thank you for your attention.

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