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*Speech by*

**His Excellency Dr. Ahmed Shaheed,**

**Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives**

*at the*

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*of the*

**Human Rights Council of the  
United Nations**

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Mr. President, Madam High Commissioner, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak before the Council, especially considering your busy schedule for the next two weeks.

Mr. President,

I am not here today to tell you how perfect things are in the Maldives but rather to talk to you about the challenges that we face and the efforts that we are making to address those challenges.

Beyond the picture postcard scenery of white sandy beaches and clear blue lagoons, the Maldives is a real country with real people, real hopes and real concerns. This in turn means that the Maldives, like all countries, is faced with real difficulties and challenges: from facing-down the risks posed by rising sea-levels to meeting the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals; and from "building back better" after the Asian Tsunami to creating a modern democratic system in the country that will effectively protect and promote human rights.

Mr. President,

Whiles all countries face such challenges, what I believe distinguishes and defines the Maldives is our willingness to recognise them and our determination to tackle them.

As an example, over the past thirty years, this openness and determination has been clearly in evidence in the area of economic and social development.

The Maldives faces unique development challenges. Over 99% of the country is made up of the sea - only 0.3% of its surface area is dry land. That dry land is in-turn divided among 1,190 small, low-lying coral islands. The population of 300,000 is spread widely and unevenly across 200 of these islands, creating significant problems vis-à-vis communication, transport, trade and social service provision.



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Yet despite these challenges, the Maldives has achieved a remarkable level of economic growth and development over the past twenty years. The economy has advanced by an average annual rate of 9 percent since 1978, with the result that the Maldives now has the highest per capita GDP in South Asia. This robust economic performance has in-turn allowed the country to invest in its social development. Since 1978, infant mortality has been reduced from 120 per thousand live births to just 14, while life expectancy has increased from 48 years to 72 years. Impressive progress has also been achieved in the field of education: the literacy rate in the Maldives now stands at 99%, the highest rate in the South Asia and Indian Ocean regions.

Mr. President,

This willingness to recognise problems and challenges, and determination to face and resolve them, is currently being applied, with equal vigour, to the area of human rights and governance.

In June 2004, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, announced plans to make sweeping changes to the constitutional, democratic and human rights framework of the Maldives. The goal was clear: to create a new, modern, democratic system that would fully comply with international human rights standards and norms. The path and end-game were equally clear: a reform roadmap was published with a detailed series of milestones and deadlines culminating in multiparty elections, under a new constitutional settlement, to be held during July-October 2008.

Mr. President,

With your permission, I would like to take this opportunity to provide the Human Rights Council with a brief update of progress towards these goals.

In the area of **constitutional reform**, the People's Special Majlis or constitutional assembly, which was convened in July 2004, is continuing its scrutiny of the President's 31-Point Proposals for Constitutional Amendment. Debates have been held and completed on a number of chapters including, *inter alia*, fundamental rights, the judiciary, and the legislature. However a considerable amount of work remains to be done if the Assembly is to complete its work by 31 May 2007 – as stipulated by the roadmap.



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In the area of **human rights protection**, a number of important steps have been taken including:

1. Ratification, in August, of the First Amendment to the Human Rights Commission Act, strengthening the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and bringing it into line with the "Paris Principles". Building on this step, I am pleased to announce today that the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the new Commission have been officially appointed with the advice and consent of the parliament. As I am sure you will agree Mr. President, the establishment of a robust, independent human rights commission is a key milestone for any country, and the Maldives is no different.
2. The right to assembly is now well established, with a provisional regulatory framework based on due notice, and reasonable hours and reasonable route limitation, pending the passage of the Bill on Freedom of Assembly which is before the parliament.
3. Accession, in September this year, to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its Optional Protocol, and to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
4. Ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.
5. The extension, in April, of an open invitation to all UN special procedures to visit the Maldives.

In the field of **criminal justice**, a similarly large number of important steps have been taken including:

1. The launch of a five-year Criminal Justice Action Plan to overhaul the country's judicial system and bring it into line with international standards.
2. The tabling in June of a new, completely revised and updated Penal Code, drafted in cooperation with the UNDP, and of a new Sentencing Bill.
3. The tabling in October of a revised Bill introducing a new Criminal Procedure Code.
4. The tabling in February of a National Security Service Bill and a Police Bill.
5. The establishment, in August, of a Police Integrity Commission to increase public confidence in the Police Service.



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6. The tabling in August of a Bill on Detention Procedures and a Parole Bill.
7. The establishment, last November, of a Judicial Services Commission to ensure the independence of the judiciary.

In the **political sphere**, in June 2005, the Government established a legal framework for the registration and functioning of political parties, paving the way, for the first time ever in the Maldives, for the introduction of a functioning multi-party political system. There are now four fully-functioning political parties in the Maldives.

And finally, in the area of **press freedom**, in March 2006, the Government tabled a media reform package before parliament consisting of: a Freedom of the Press Bill; a Freedom of Information Bill; a Media Council Bill; and a Bill on the Registration and Publication of Newspapers and Magazines. Moreover, on 31 August 2006 a Defamation Bill was tabled before the Parliament which aims to make defamation a civil rather than a criminal offence.

Mr. President,

These are just some of the many initiatives, projects, and activities currently taking place in the Maldives, under the umbrella of the reform agenda, designed to strengthen our democratic and human rights institutions and procedures.

Mr. President,

I am proud to note that, with the exception of the Criminal Procedure Bill, which was tabled two months later than envisaged because of the need to revise it in line with the Maldives' commitments under the ICCPR and ICESCR, all the above reform measures have been undertaken in accordance with the dates and deadlines laid down in the Roadmap for the Reform Agenda.

Mr. President,

In offering this update, my aim is not to bewilder or bore the Council with myriad facts and figures but rather to try to give some sense of the scale of what the Maldives is trying to achieve.



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The Maldives is a Least Developed Country, with a population of 300,000, a small civil service and a limited financial and technical resource base. Yet despite these constraints, we are attempting nothing less than the complete democratic transformation of our country in a little over four years – the kind of transformation, I would argue, that has taken many larger and more developed countries decades if not centuries to complete.

I say this not to engender sympathy but rather to act as a prelude to the message I would like to leave with the Council today:

Abraham Lincoln once said that one's own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing. The Maldives Government agrees with that sentiment and is absolutely resolved to oversee the successful conclusion of the reform programme. However, the Maldives cannot do it alone. The size and complexity of the task demands close cooperation between the Maldives and the international community, including the Human Rights Council. For our part, the Government stands ready to engage with the Council, in an open, constructive and positive manner.

In conclusion, Mr. President, I would like to wish you and your colleagues every success in your efforts to create a strong and just Human Rights Council that is willing and able to help States achieve their human rights goals. I can assure you that such an institution has a vital role to play in the Maldives.

Thank you Mr. President.