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**Statement by H.E. Ambassador Hassan Sobir
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Maldives to the
United Nations Office at Geneva**

**Responding as a Concerned Country to the Report of Ms. Asma Jahangir,
Special Rapportuer on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

27 March 2007



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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Maldives, I am pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms. Asma Jahangir, following her visit to the Maldives from 6 to 10 August 2006.

The Government of the Maldives warmly welcomes Ms. Jahangir's report which we believe makes a balanced assessment of freedom of religion in the Maldives and makes a number of important and useful recommendations for future improvement. We are studying the report, its findings and recommendations carefully.

Mr. President,

As Ms. Jahangir recognizes in her report, the Maldives is currently embarked on a sweeping programme of constitutional, democratic and human rights reform guided by the Roadmap for the Reform Agenda. When completed, the Reform Agenda will engineer a political transformation to match the economic and social developments achieved by the country over the past thirty years.

Our objective with the political reform programme is clear: to create a model democracy in the Maldives founded upon the promotion and protection of human rights.

From the very outset of this reform programme, the Government has made it clear that political changes must take place in *full view of* and *in cooperation with* the international community. The Government has therefore been energetic in its efforts to engage with relevant international actors. In addition to extending an open invitation to Ms. Jahangir and all other UN Special Procedures to visit the country, the Government has also:

1. Signed, in September last year, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights together with its optional protocol, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
2. Become the first country in Asia to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture;
3. Become one of the original 57 State signatories of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances;
4. Cooperated with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to establish an independent National Human Rights Commission, compliant with the Paris Principles;
5. Invited the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to appoint a permanent human rights advisor in the Maldives; and
6. Invited a range of different international groups including the European Union, the Commonwealth, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and others to visit the country, to report on progress, and to offer support and advice on key elements of the reform programme.



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Mr. President,

Ms. Jahangir's visit to the Maldives was the first to be carried out by a Special Procedures mandate-holder, and follows the Government's decision, in April last year, to extend an open invitation to all UN Special Procedures to visit the country.

Since Ms. Jahangir's visit we have also welcomed to the Maldives the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Mr. Leandro Despouy, and are currently in discussions with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Mr. Ambeyi Ligabo about a possible future visit.

The Government is therefore pleased that the Special Rapporteur's report recognizes and welcomes these steps taken by the Government to engage with the international community and, in particular, to cooperate with United Nations Special Procedures. For its part, the Government hopes that sustained cooperation with Special Procedures will ensure that the international community both understands and recognizes the democratic reform process in the Maldives, and contributes to that process by ensuring that our new laws and practices conform to international standards.

Mr. President,

Turning to the Special Rapporteur's report, the Government of the Maldives would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank Ms. Jahangir for her visit and for her positive and constructive conclusions and recommendations.

As Ms. Jahangir recognizes in her report, the Maldives is a moderate and peaceful Islamic country with a proud Islamic heritage stretching back almost 900 years. The Maldives has always attached great importance to maintaining national unity and harmony, and Islamic belief and identity have played and continue to play a crucial role in that respect.

Mr. President,

It is of paramount importance to the Government of the Maldives to maintain this heritage and identity and to protect the national unity and harmony that flow from it.

The current challenge facing the Maldives is therefore to preserve our identity and unity while at the same time striving to conform to international standards and ensuring that our laws and practices do not discriminate against other religions.

Mr. President,

With this challenge in mind, the Government welcomes the conclusions and recommendations contained in Ms. Jahangir's report, and commits itself to carefully examine them over the coming months.

As those conclusions and recommendations acknowledge, the current reform programme will already bring about improvements in the protection of the right to freedom of religion or