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Statement by H.E. Dr. Ahmed Shaheed
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Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

I often hear people question whether the Human Rights Council really makes a difference to the lives of ordinary people. Does our work have a measurable impact on the enjoyment of individual rights and freedoms? Do we help people benefit from a more secure, just and happier society?

There are those who argue not and certainly we must listen to those views as we look for ways to strengthen the Council as per the review called for by resolution 60/251. Yet overall, I would respectfully beg to differ. I do so because I have personally witnessed the role this Council has played in the transformation of my own country – the Maldives.

The very same year this Council was born – 2006 – Amnesty International issues a press release entitled “Protests in Paradise: Repression in the Maldives”. The statement began, rather bleakly: “The Maldives is a popular holiday destination, but is also a country with limited political freedom, where people who are arrested are beaten up...are held in detention for long periods without charge and are sentenced in unfair trials”. The same year, UN Special Procedures wrote to the Government of the Maldives expressing concern at the arrest, detention and trial of Mr. Mohamed Nasheed, an Amnesty Prisoner of Conscience, on charges of terrorism.

And yet 2006 also saw the Maldives take a step which would have critical implications for efforts to address the difficulties it faced. In May that year, the Maldives opened a Permanent Mission here in Geneva with the express purpose of engaging with the newly-established Human Rights Council, with Treaty Bodies, with Special Procedures, and with Geneva-based NGOs. The mandate was simple: be honest about the challenges the country faces and cooperate fully and transparently with the Council to bring about change. Our goal, in short, was to use our presence here not to defend the *status quo*, but to acknowledge our shortcomings and address them.



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Mr. President,

Five years on, while the human rights situation in the Maldives is still very much a work in progress, it is self-evident that much has been achieved. And for that, both the country and the Human Rights Council can take much credit.

In November 2008, Mohamed Nasheed, the same Amnesty Prisoner of Conscience who had been the subject of Urgent Appeals only a few years before, was elected President of the Republic in the country's first-ever free and fair democratic poll. What is more, the country which President Nasheed governs today is almost unrecognisable from the one Amnesty criticised back in 2006. While significant challenges remain, especially in terms of consolidating civil and political rights and entrenching them in the national consciousness, there have been many notable achievements including: the ratification of a brand new Constitution guaranteeing a full separation of powers and the full enjoyment of human rights for all; reform of the judiciary including the creation of new Supreme Court; the introduction of a party political system; the emergence of a vibrant free press; the holding of regular free and fair elections – the most recent of which saw a voter turnout of 85%; the establishment of an array of independent oversight bodies including a national human rights commission; the establishment of the constitutional right to freedom of assembly without prior permission; and the emergence of a thriving NGO community.

Mr. President,

While our democratic transition and the related strengthening of human rights are principally a home-grown achievement, made possible through the dedication and sacrifice of ordinary Maldivians, it is also true that our success is your success. Quite simply, the achievements of the past five years would not have been possible without



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the strong, mutually-respectful and cooperative relationship that has evolved between the Maldives and the Human Rights Council.

That cooperative relationship has taken many forms. For example, following our decision to extend a Standing Invitation to Special Procedures – also in 2006 – four mandate-holders have visited the country. We have also moved to sign and ratify eight of the nine core human rights conventions, and have dramatically improved our treaty reporting performance. And in 2007 we invited the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to establish a permanent presence in the country. What is more, all of these steps have been more than mere gestures - they have all resulted in real on-the-ground progress and change.

Mr. President,

The Maldives' own positive experience with the international human rights system lies behind our decision to run for a seat on the Human Rights Council in elections to be held in May in New York. We believe in the Council and the work that it does. We understand, through first-hand experience, its value and its capacity to bring about change. We also, because of that experience, understand as well as anyone, how the Council's work can be improved and strengthened so that other peoples around the world can benefit as we have benefited.

Mr. President,

If elected, I believe the Maldives will bring a unique perspective to the work of the Council.

First, as I have explained, the Maldives, in only five years, has completely changed the human rights landscape of the country. We therefore understand the human rights challenges faced by national authorities; we understand the kind of external support



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that is helpful; and we understand how to forge partnerships between national and international stakeholders.

Second, the Maldives is proud to be a Small Island State. Small Island States have, until now, been grossly underrepresented in the Council despite making-up over 20% of the UN's total membership. And yet such States bring a range of advantages to the international system. We tend to be fiercely independent and take principled stances on matters we deem important. We are ardent multilateralists – believing in dialogue, cooperation and common enterprise. We tend to take balanced, sensible positions based on a wish to build bridges rather than construct walls. And we have good relations with all countries, meaning we can help forge consensus on key issues.

And third, after participating actively since 2006 as an Observer, the Maldives has many ideas about how the Council can work better and more effectively, and about how the body can be made more accessible for Smaller States and smaller delegations.

Mr. President,

As well as bringing fresh-thinking and a new dimension to the work of the Human Rights Council, if elected, the Government has also committed to use our membership to help consolidate democracy and human rights progress at home.

The down-side of the rapid and far-reaching changes that have been introduced since 2006, especially to the constitutional and institutional framework of the country, is that it will necessarily take time, care and perseverance to bring the secondary legal framework up to speed and to change perceptions and practices in-line with the new, fairer society we are trying to build.

For example, the Parliament, which officially reconvened earlier today, has the somewhat unenviable task of debating and adopting a backlog of around 120



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legislative bills – bills designed to implement the changes introduced by the new Constitution. This daunting legislative agenda includes many bills with important human rights implications, including: a Bill on Persons with Disabilities; a new Penal Code; an Evidence Bill; a Drugs and Rehabilitation Bill; a Bill on the Right to Information; a Prison Bill; and a Bill on Violence against Women. I am pleased to also inform that Council that, as of this week, these bills will be joined by draft legislation removing one of the Maldives' reservations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Moreover, as the Council is aware, adopting new laws is not an end in itself. Equally, if not more important, is the need to enforce those laws, to change perceptions within key agencies of government, to explain the responsibilities that come with greater political, social and economic freedom, and to educate the population about human rights and what they mean in practice.

None of this will be easy, however I would like to assure the Council of the Maldives Government's determination to use its time in Office to ensure that the progress we have made across democracy, human rights and the rule of law will be consolidated and will become, in time, irreversible. Once again, Mr. President, I call on the Human Rights Council to help and support us in this regard, only this time – I would quickly add – with the Maldives as one of its Members. Thank you.