

## **Maldives' Contributions to the High Commissioner's Report in relation to the Human Rights Council resolution 44/2**

### **1. The human rights challenges experienced in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including in relation to the measures taken as part of the health response.**

- 1.1. The Government of Maldives has been resolute in managing the pandemic in a manner that upholds all the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives and the international human rights instruments to which Maldives is a party to. However, Maldives also faced and still faces several challenges in responding to this extraordinary crisis.
- 1.2. Like all other countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Maldives had to impose temporary restrictions on basic rights including freedom of assembly, travel (both internal and external) and movement. However, these restrictions were imposed within the ambit of the powers afforded under Law No: 7/2012 (Public Health Protection Act) and subsequently, under Law No: 20/2020 (Public Health Emergency Act), enacted specifically to address pandemic issues.
- 1.3. As a result of the travel restrictions, there was a risk of justice being delayed. The travel restrictions impacted access to courts and appearance before trials, as the superior courts, High Court and the Supreme Court of Maldives are all located in the capital Male', which was locked down. However, the Government worked with the Judiciary, to overcome these difficulties by facilitating remote online hearings and trials, as well as introducing videoconferencing services in detention facilities.
- 1.4. The right to education was also impacted due to the closing of schools and universities, and moving classes to online platforms within the Greater Male' Region. During this period, not all households had the same level of internet accessibility, and they further differed in the quality of the existing learning environment. While arrangements were made to provide students and teachers with free data packages, this still remains a challenge. Further, many islands outside the capital region lack adequate internet connectivity and if a community spread had occurred in the islands, it would have been a challenge for the Government to facilitate online learning in those regions.
- 1.5. The Government made a concerted effort to ensure that every single resident in the Maldives had their healthcare needs attended to, despite the severe strain COVID-19 caused to the healthcare system. This included migrant workers regardless of their status. The restrictions imposed, however, did cause several delays in the provision of medical care and referrals. The Government remains committed to its goal of decentralizing the health sector, so that people outside the capital region have their healthcare needs properly attended to, without having to come to the capital Male'.
- 1.6. The Government also worked tirelessly to ensure continuity of healthcare provision to residents in all islands, including specialized medical services such as oncology related care. However, Maldives continues to depend on other countries for much of our medical supplies and pharmaceuticals. As a result, Government had to facilitate access to countries otherwise closed off for travel, for individuals with specialized medical needs.

- 1.7. Immediately following the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the Maldives, the Government was quick to increase the number of critical care facilities, by building facilities and transforming existing tourist/guesthouse facilities to make them suitable for isolation and quarantine. 7 (seven) fully equipped COVID-19 facilities were established across different regions of the Maldives. Additionally, considerable effort was put into procuring medicine, equipment, and essential medical supplies such as masks and personal protective equipment.
- 1.8. The Government also worked to ameliorate financial difficulties experienced by the people through passing an Economic Relief Package, part of which was devoted to providing financial assistance to individuals who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. The Government provided financial assistance in the form of subsidizing the cost of utilities for households for several months. Income support allowance was given to those who were on no pay leave, who had their salary deducted, or had their earnings affected, including self-employed or freelance workers. Part of the recovery scheme funds were also disbursed towards Small and Medium Enterprises. Furthermore, the Government eased student loan repayments for over 4000 (four thousand) individuals, and facilitated deferring of loan payments through support of State-owned enterprises.
- 1.9. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses were closed or were operated at a loss. Several workers lost employment or had their wages reduced. Many tenants also had difficulties in meeting their rent obligations, and subsequently some were evicted. This issue is mostly relevant to the capital region, where a combination of centralized developmental policies, resulting influx of population and lack of a comprehensive housing policy exacerbated by a shortage in housing supply, had contributed to the crisis.
- 1.10. The increase in evictions during this period contributing to increased homelessness. Difficulties were also experienced by individuals such as victims of drug abuse and recently released criminal offenders, whose families did not want to cohabit with them. The Government set up temporary shelters and set up temporary detoxification centres to continue assisting narcotics abuse victims during this time. Additionally, as a result of the sudden lockdown, many islanders were left stranded in Male', who were taken care of at the temporary shelters established by the Government.
- 1.11. During the three-month lockdown imposed in the Greater Male' Region, there was an increase in reports of gender based domestic violence, with women disproportionately impacted. The Government is currently in the process of building shelters for victims of domestic abuse while trying to address underlying harmful, patriarchal attitudes that contribute to violence against women.
- 1.12. The pandemic also exacerbated long-standing human rights issues pertaining to migrant workers' rights that the Government has committed to address. During the initial wave of community spread in the Greater Male' Region, migrant workers were disproportionately exposed to the virus. Issues faced in relation to migrant workers and efforts made are detailed below:
- Many migrant workers, several of whom are undocumented, had been living in cramped and unsanitary accommodation which precluded the possibility of social distancing. Due to the poor

living conditions, several large COVID-19 case clusters were observed in migrant groups. A separate facility was subsequently established for them to prevent community spread.

- It was challenging to conduct contact tracing and case investigation in these cases, partly due to the language barrier and also unwillingness to share information, due to the ingrained fear mostly related to their immigration status. Many were also unwilling or unable to seek medical help until their symptoms exacerbated. While migrant targeted awareness materials and activities were successfully carried out, it was still a challenge to reach all of the migrant population, as not all guidelines and information were translated to multiple languages.
- Furthermore, during this period, migrant workers working in certain businesses did not receive wages for their work and took to protesting in response. The Government, while sympathetic to their concerns, was forced to halt some of these protests in the instances where they turned violent or violated mandatory social distancing guidelines.
- There were challenges with ensuring their basic needs, such as food and water, were being met during the quarantine/isolation period by their employers. Alternative arrangements were made where the employer was not identified.
- The Government is resolute in addressing the underlying issues that contribute to the violation of migrant workers' rights. Minimum standards for expatriate accommodation has been published, and Government continues to work on its regularization programme initiated in September 2019 (under which, previously undocumented migrants can voluntarily be repatriated or go through legal channels to seek employment in the Maldives). Since the beginning of the pandemic, Government has facilitated over 7200 (seven thousand two hundred) migrants to voluntarily repatriate to their country of origin free of charge.
- Under the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP), Government will continue to develop proper accommodation, facilitate targeted relocation to avoid congestion, and legislate and implement policies on occupational hazard and safety.

## **2. Technical support needed to address the challenges identified, including the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and response measures.**

- 2.1. The NRRP gives special focus to further digitizing the Maldives' court system and technical support in this area could minimize the challenges faced in access to justice.
- 2.2. The Maldives, like all developing countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, also requires support to build the country's healthcare capacity so that adequate medical facilities and equipment are accessible, and numbers, skills and knowledge of medical personnel are increased.
- 2.3. The Government's ability to provide adequate social protections and uphold human rights effectively is very much dependent on economic resilience. Hence, technical assistance in the areas of budgetary and debt management are vital. The COVID-19 pandemic also illustrated the risk of the economy being overly dependent on a single sector, tourism, and the negative effect it has on workers. Technical support is required to diversify Maldives' economic sectors.

- 2.4. Maldives also requires support in mainstreaming attitudes that are non-harmful to women, building and operating shelters for victims of domestic abuse, and building up the capacity of social workers, while increasing their numbers.
- 2.5. Maldives wishes to learn from global best practices to ensure that all migrant workers coming into the country do so using the appropriate legal channels. This would also go a long way towards addressing the cross-cutting issue of human trafficking. Technical support could upgrade the capacity of its customs services and immigration and help security services to better patrol our vast exclusive economic zone.
- 2.6. The pandemic has also shown that there is a need for additional human resources for pandemic response at all levels, in order to ensure effective response and better monitoring of situations, to prevent the several human rights issues that occur as a result of response measures.

### **3. Good or promising practices in these areas, including examples of international cooperation.**

- 3.1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in coordination with international governments arranged relief flights carrying care packages for Maldivians living abroad. Repatriation arrangements for Maldivians stranded in foreign countries were also made, along with repatriation arrangements for migrants living in the Maldives.
- 3.2. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a profound social, economic, and health crisis for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as the Maldives, given our narrow economic base, vulnerability to external challenges, and climate-induced threats. The crisis has further exacerbated these vulnerabilities, risking the gains in development and progress towards achieving SDGs.
- 3.3. The pandemic has also weakened the constrained fiscal space of Maldives and many other SIDS amid sharp declines in tourism revenue and severe domestic economic contractions due to measures taken to contain COVID-19. Given the magnitude of the crisis in the tourism sector, uncertainty, and its long-term effects, sustainability of tourism requires an international effort that supports national initiatives, including travel bubbles.
- 3.4. Many SIDS are excluded from international financial support designed to cope with crises such as COVID-19, including debt relief, due to the existing eligibility criteria based mainly on per capita, without fully taking into consideration their inherent vulnerabilities.
- 3.5. The Maldives welcomes the decision of the G20 countries to provide debt relief for developing countries. This has extended fiscal space and goes a long way in Maldives' efforts towards building back better, greener, and more resilient.
- 3.6. At the same time, the unprecedented circumstances brought about by COVID-19 provide a rare opportunity to reform the international debt architecture. It is also vital that there continue to be coordinated interventions to ensure that the long-term impacts of the pandemic are addressed.