

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



**Keynote Address by
His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom
at the
Special Session to Commemorate World Press Freedom Day 2007**

*Dharubaaruge, Male'
Thursday, 3 May 2007*

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Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen;

May I, first of all, extend my sincere felicitations to all the distinguished delegates and to all the members of the press present here on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day.

I thank AMIC and UNESCO for giving us the opportunity to bring this important regional gathering to the Maldives. We are indeed proud to host this meeting in Male', and I thank you, Mr. Banerjee for requesting that this meeting take place in this country this year.

Looking at the issues that have been addressed at this special session, I am confident that the discussions have made an important contribution to the

development of a free press in South Asia, and have also provided the Maldives with a further yardstick in our efforts to introduce wide-ranging media reforms as part of the democratic reform agenda that I had announced three years ago.

Distinguished Delegates:

Press freedom in the Maldives is a fast-moving work in progress. It is nourished by the country's promising social and economic development, the facilitation measures introduced by the Government and the rising assertiveness of the media community.

The result is a burgeoning media and press, replacing the comparatively docile press of a few years ago, with a predominantly critical press, even if overly politicised.

Clearly, the announcement of the democratic reform agenda is a watershed event. It commits the Government to developing a modern legal framework to strengthen fundamental rights, including the development of a raft of reforms to encourage media freedom.

The promising socioeconomic progress of the Maldives has today created an enabling environment for strengthened fundamental rights and the promotion of a free press. The country's per capita income, which was less than US\$ 300 in 1978, is now at well over US\$ 2,600.

In recent decades, the literacy rate in the Maldives has increased to 99 percent. We reached universal primary education at the turn of this millennium. Our school enrolment ratios have vastly increased and the level of public discourse has been significantly strengthened by the educational achievements of the population.

These have naturally improved the human resources in all walks of life, including the area of journalism, while at the same time creating markets for news, views and information.

Distinguished Delegates:

The single most important step in this endeavour has been the announcement in 2006 of the Roadmap for the Reform Agenda, which among others shows a commitment to modernising the legal framework to promote a free press in the country.

Other significant measures to build confidence include the de-facto suspension of the provisions of the penal code which criminalises defamation, speeding up the registration process for newspapers and magazines, and a greater stress on fundamental rights.

The Government has always facilitated the work of the media, but with the introduction of the reform agenda and the pace of national progress in recent years, the need was apparent to further strengthening our relationship with the media.

As such, in 2004, a Strategic Communications Unit was established, to increase transparency and openness within the Government, and to promote Government communication with the media. The Unit is headed by the Chief Government Spokesman, whose mandate is to strengthen Government communication with the local and international press and all other stakeholders.

The recent transformation in the media sector of the Maldives has been nothing short of remarkable.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have a soft spot for journalism, because I pride myself as being a journalist. My love affair with journalism began many, many years ago, when I was a student in Egypt., in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I took part in some of the Arabic newspapers that were produced by our University. Later, we formed, I mean the Maldivians students living in Cairo, formed an association called the Maldivian Student Association, and we published a magazine called Reynis. The interesting aspect of that magazine was that there was a discussion about a tourism potential in the Maldives, that was well before a tourist set his foot on our soil. Many, many years before that. But now tourism is one of our main industries. It's giving us a lot of revenue, helping our development in various fields.

Later on, when I returned to Male', I myself tried my hand at journalism. I in fact, established some newspapers. In one newspaper, that was called the Maldives News Bulletin, which was registered in the early 1970s, I was the editor. I was the staff reporter and I was the typist.

Those days we didn't have the benefit of computers. We didn't have word processors, any mistake you made, you had to either wipe it out, or retype it again. That was a very tedious job. I found that I could not do it alone. So I had to stop publishing that newspaper. Anyway, I was involved with many newspapers in that era. Both in Dhivehi language and in English. Including, oddly enough a magazine about cricket, which was called Cricket Scene. So my interest in journalism and in strengthening press freedom is not open to question.

In fact I remember, in the early 1970s, I was accused of criticising the Government, in the confines of my own sitting room, in the confines of my own dining room, I was put on trial and I was sentenced for four years of banishment to a remote island. I served four and half months before I was released. A year later, I was put in prison. I spent fifty days and nights in solitary confinement.

So we have come a long way. Now you find in our newspapers, articles openly criticising the Government. As the Minister has just said our press is very free. They can write about anything. They can criticise the Government, condemn the Government, and put forward all sorts of allegations, unfounded allegations about the Government. But all our journalists are now

free; they are enjoying their lives at home, in the society. Nobody is even questioning them. That is how far we have come in the road towards strengthening freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

I am at the moment, the editor of a weekly periodical, which has been in circulation for the past 20 years. It's a very small newspaper, very small journal, maybe the smallest in the world, but is continuously being published, week by week, every Friday. I have just finished my article for tomorrow's edition, in which I speak about freedom of expression in Islam, because that is a periodical oriented towards the Islamic outlook on things.

It was not long ago that we had only three registered dailies. I must add that there was very little investigative journalism and even fewer full time journalists.

Today, though, we have no less than seven dailies, fifteen weekly magazines and seventy other regular publications, the vast majority of which carry strong political reporting. It is also interesting to note that most publications in the country are independently owned, and carry highly critical comments on the Government.

We must also not forget the rise of internet reporting with many news and views website on politics in the Maldives.

Distinguished Delegates:

Training has been another focus area in the Government's efforts to strengthen the country's media sector. The "Press Forward Maldives" campaign which was launched on 21st January this year is designed to conduct monthly training programmes and media sensitization workshops.

I am pleased to note that UNESCO is teaming up with the Information Ministry to conduct training sessions in community based broadcasting.

A white paper is also in the pipeline for the creation, later this year, of a Maldives Institute of Mass Communication.

Distinguished Delegates:

Over the past two years, a package of six bills related to the media were formulated and tabled before the Parliament. They include bills on the right to freedom of information, press freedom, broadcasting, registration of publications, cable TV services and creation of a Maldives Media Council.

Even if these bills have not been passed by Parliament to date, they point to an era of strengthened media freedom, and reflect the vision, intention and direction of the Government.

I wish to acknowledge here the dedicated efforts made by the Minister of Information and Arts, Mr. Mohamed Nasheed, in developing the legal

framework, facilitating training and streamlining procedures to promote a new era of press freedom in the Maldives.

Mr. Nasheed is a lawyer by profession. What he said about forgetting the law is not true. In fact, he is one of the best legal minds that we have today. Not only that, he is also one of the best public speakers that we have today, as he already established by his brilliant speech this morning.

Speaking about public speaking, I would like to tell you a story. There was an Asian leader who visited Egypt when I was a student there in the 1960s. He had a public speaking engagement. It was a well attended meeting, thousands of people were there. He had a prepared text; he read a few lines from the text and then threw it away. He spoke off the cuff. It was a very powerful and passionate speech about his country's struggle for independence.

After the speech, everybody gave him applause; it was a standing ovation that he received after the speech. Later on, he was asked by a journalist, whether he had done that on purpose, whether he had planned it to throw away his text and to speak off the cuff to arouse the people in the room. He said I want to tell you a secret. Don't tell anyone. I had forgotten my reading glasses, and I could not see a word of the print. So I am happy that I brought my reading glasses today.

Distinguished Delegates:

The strength of the media or its impact on democratic transition can never be overestimated. Over the past three years, we in the Maldives have witnessed the strength of the media in shaping public opinion, increasing accountability of government, and extending greater opportunities for public participation in the reform debate.

Many of you in this room can be proud to be important stakeholders in our reform programme. I wish to, therefore, thank you for your tireless efforts and assure you of my Government's continued commitment to providing you with an enabling environment for your work.

Distinguished Delegates:

State broadcasting too has reached new and previously uncharted territories. Both Television Maldives and the Voice of Maldives have undergone a tremendous transformation in recent years, and the Government is firmly committed to making them modern state broadcasting organs.

On the 28th March this year, the Maldives opened for private broadcasting. In addition to the state broadcaster, we will soon have private and community broadcasters. This will no doubt be a giant leap forward in our efforts to strengthen press freedom in the country.

It is heartening to note that our international stakeholders provided important technical expertise and support to this process, and that our journalists had also made a significant contribution to it.

Distinguished Delegates:

Information is vital to human progress. Not only do they open our minds and advance intellectual achievements, but they also provide the basis for social and economic organisation. In the area of governance, the right to information is the modern standard. Holding governments accountable, as well as advancing the public interest, requires transparency. A free press is a watchdog of the public interest.

In many parts of the world as in South Asia, it is important to improve the legal frameworks that strengthen the right to information and media freedom, as well as promote values of peace and progress.

It is a state obligation to promote media freedom, because the media are there to protect the public interest. From this, it follows that there are ethical and moral standards and values that must be upheld by a free and responsible press.

Thank you