

Solidarity Meeting with Maldivian Journalists

December 5, 2017
Colombo, Sri Lanka

NARRATIVE REPORT

In September 2017, the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) meeting in Kathmandu focussed attention on the Maldives and Kashmir, India as two zones in the region in need of urgent intervention to protect press freedom and journalists' rights. The meeting also proposed solidarity meetings with journalists in those zones to further understand issues and discuss strategies for national, regional and international solidarity to enable meaningful interventions in the public sphere, both inside and outside the beleaguered regions.

Because of the repressive and restrictive situation in the Maldives, a one-day meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on December 5, 2017. Because of the sensitivities and safety of the participating Maldivian journalists, the meeting and its schedule (*Annexure 1*) was kept low-profile. Participants included seven key Maldivian journalists and activists representing print, electronic and online media, as well as representatives from India and Sri Lanka, along with IFJ.

Recent developments

At the start of the meeting, after the welcome by Jacqui Park, Director, IFJ AP, and Dilrukshi Handunnetti, the SAMSN organizer based in Sri Lanka, IFJ South Asia Coordinator Ujjwal Acharya presented an outline of recent development in the Maldives regarding freedom of expression, press freedom and journalists rights. In a report (*Annexure 2 and 3*), he outlined the growing restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom in the Maldives, and noted that there are indications that things are only get more tough for critical voices.

The waves of restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom continue in the Maldives as its attempts to muzzle critical voices go unabated. The state's attempts to restrict press freedom are resulting in fear among the media and journalists at a scale that critical news is difficult to publish in media operated from within the Maldives. Self-censorship – especially in issues critical to the government and anything relating to the opposition – is increasingly apparent in media content.

The major issues, often interconnected to each other, highlighted during the presentation included:

- a) Arbitrary and repeated (mis)use of the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act 2016 to penalize critical voices, especially the opposition aligned *Raajje TV*, by the state-controlled Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC).
- b) The threat to critical voices with examples of editor Zaheena Rasheed forced to go on exile for her appearance in an *Al Jazeera* documentary; police summons to liberal bloggers living abroad; detention, questioning and warning to editors, journalists, advocates and social media activists for their writings, statements and even asking tough questions.
- c) State censorship of media content: MBC warning televisions against using footages of fights inside the Parliament.
- d) Violation of press freedom and journalist's rights: Arrests and cases against journalists during opposition rallies for "obstructing the duties of a law enforcement officer"; questioning of editors for headlines.

- e) New tougher law on the offing: Maldives Media Commission was tabled in the Parliament by a ruling party lawmaker for the creation of a new media regulatory body after dissolving the broadcasting commission and media council, the proposed regulator can impose hefty fines and temporarily shut down newspapers and TV stations. The commission has sweeping powers without judicial procedures, such as ordering print and online outlets to make corrections, issuing warnings, and imposing fines, and asking the police to stop publication or broadcast.
- f) Impunity to perpetrators in the disappearance of journalist Rilwan and murder of blogger Yameen Rasheed.
- g) Self-censorship by the journalists.

Understanding the situation in Maldives

Shihar Aneez, the Reuters correspondent for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and Amal Jayasinghe, AFP correspondent, and veteran journalist PK Balachandran talked about their experiences of reporting critical issues where there were difficult times in Sri Lanka and about their experience in the Maldives.

Aneez talked about tactics of survival drawing from his experience while the state was repressive. He stressed on the need to remain neutral and ensure that reporting is neither pro- or anti- anyone but cover both sides with neutrality. He said: “While reporting on sensitive issues, we allow readers to read between the lines - with enough background to give out information to public to find out what’s going on.” He shared how news agencies used the strategy to break sensitive stories with a byline and dateline that would not endanger journalists living in conflict zones.

He also talked about indirect ways of presenting facts such as shifting to reporting on economic issues from politics describing how economy changes going to impact. Aneez also stressed on the need of fostering unity between journalists, working together, updating each other regularly and do ‘collective bargaining’ while possible. This ensured that no one was targeted individually. “Your life is more precious than anything else,” he said, adding that while there is a threat, journalists should know what to do to stay safe.

Jayasinghe, who was the AFP bureau chief in Colombo when he was just 23, said that the Maldivian journalists are more at risk as due to their low number in the small population, and therefore they can’t be low-profile. He suggested that journalists should not be complacent regarding their safety even if they consider themselves close to powerful people. Recalling how Sri Lankan Lasantha Wickrematunga was killed despite being high profile and having contacts in high places, he suggested that journalists be careful and take precautionary security measures when necessary. He stressed the need to enhance professionalism in order to improve credibility.

Jayasinghe also suggested promoting regional and international solidarity, but said that although international pressure was good to have but it alone couldn’t change things. Jacqui Park concurred that an international campaign can be successful – for example in the case of Tissanayagam, but unless local organizations take the lead, there cannot be success.

Sudarshana Gunawardena, lawyer, activist and currently Acting Director General in the Government Information Department gave legal ways and possible strategies to cope with legal challenges. He noted that journalists were the first line of defence in a democracy, and said that though the regime had changed in Sri Lanka, the moral code had not really changed. The overall culture of impunity was difficult to challenge, and this applies to the Maldives as well.

Dilrukshi Handunnetti added that volunteer lawyers took up cases against journalists during the Rajapakshe regime, and this could be explored in the Maldives, where defamation and other legal cases are a major source of harassment. Networks of lawyers ensured that they were on speed dial to respond to any emergencies, and others ensured that there were trusted persons around to keep track of your whereabouts.

Sandhya Eknaligoda, wife of disappeared cartoonist Prageeth, talked about the disappearance of her husband, and her ongoing struggle for the justice.

Situation of Maldivian journalists

Maldivian journalist (Participant A) said that the new Media Commission Bill is the latest threat to journalism and press freedom in the Maldives as it gives rights to the Commission to call police and close doors of the media; and that the Maldivian journalists' threat is slightly different as the community is so small and there is no hiding. He stressed the need for regional and international support.

Participant B said that operating within the Maldives, it's impossible to remain anonymous or escape. He said the threat to the media is at the highest level and there is widespread self-censorship due to an atmosphere of fear.

Participant C said that the new bill, once passed, would target the print and online media. The current MBC can only target televisions and radios and the new Bill has been conceived so as to ensure that the print and online media come within the jurisdiction of the state-controlled authority.

Participant D said that although there are no exclusive threats to female journalists, they all face the same problems as their male colleagues; and work under an atmosphere of fear.

The participants stressed the need for unity among journalists, however unionism is difficult given the sharp division among journalists. The Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) tried to hold elections three times but couldn't due to the division; and currently the MJA is defunct. A union can operate from within the country, but it is still risky to speak on critical issues. The MJA needs strategic support in union building.

The participants also shared that there is a need for the campaign against the new bill and international solidarity and advocacy against the bill.

The participants also felt that there is a need to strengthen journalists as 'they need to understand the basic principles of journalism as well as the need for solidarity among journalists' for independent journalism and safety. Leadership and organizational capacity building and union building were also identified as needs.

At the end of the meeting, the Maldivian journalists identified top three issues as follows:

- a. Challenging the Media Commission Bill.
Strategies:
 - International support network to challenge the Media Commission, including IFJ, CLD and Article 19.
 - Translate the Bill, evaluate/critique it
 - Stand up comedy, videos etc.
- b. Justice to Rilwan and Rasheed
- c. Free reporting for Fair Elections (in the lead up to the elections scheduled for 2018)

Annexure 1

Program Schedule

9:30 am	Introductions/ Objectives of the program (Jacqui Park & Dilrukshi Handunetti)
10:00 am	Maldives overview (Ujjwal Acharya)
10:15 am	Shihar Aneez and Amal Jayasinghe- Understanding the situation in Maldives
11:00 am	Dealing with legal challenges- Sudarshana Gunawardene, lawyer and activist
12:00 noon	Lunch
1:00 pm	A woman's campaign for a missing husband (Sandhya Ekneligoda)
2:30 pm	Strategy for regional solidarity/identification of support needs
3:30 pm	Solidarity meeting with IFJ affiliates

Annexure 2

Country Report: Maldives (Updates since May 2017)

The waves of restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom continue in the Maldives as its attempts to muzzle critical voices go unabated. These attempts were the reasons behind the statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussain who said the Maldivian government was "increasingly cracking down on critical views" in September 12 during the meeting of the UN Human Rights Council.

The state's attempts to restrict press freedom are resulting in fear among the media and journalists at a scale that critical news are difficult to publish in media operated from within the Maldives. Self-censorship – especially in issues critical to the government and anything relating to the opposition – is increasingly apparent in media content.

The decisions of the state-controlled Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) indicate towards censorship and legal harassment on media. The MBC has imposed hefty fines on opposition-aligned Raajje TV thrice – each time immediately after the station paid the earlier fine. Raajje TV receives third defamation fine on October 8 when the MBC fined it MVR500,000 (USD 32,425) for airing comments made by MP Mohamed Musthafa on Raajje TV on July 28, calling them a "threat to national security". MP Mohamed Musthafa was not fined for defamation. It should be noted that the television has also been fined for airing a slogan chanted during an opposition rally in a live coverage.

The fines were imposed under the controversial Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act 2016 that was heavily criticized by local and international organizations as being restrictive and contrary to international standards. The MBC also slapped a fine of MVR 200,000 (USD12,970) on state-owned Public Service Media over defamatory remarks made by a ruling party lawmaker at a televised press conference.

The MBC has also fined the Medianet – the country's main cable television service provider MVR 500,000 (USD32,425) on June 17 for rebroadcasting an Al Jazeera corruption exposé in September. The 'Stealing Paradise' documentary, which exposed systemic corruption, abuse of power and criminal activity at the highest level of government, was deemed to pose a threat to national security and the Maldives government blacked out the documentary in the Maldives. After Al Jazeera announced the release of the documentary, the ministers and ruling party lawmakers threatened to take action against all of the film's Maldivian contributors. The government also launched a media offensive against the documentary, even before it aired, accusing Al Jazeera of a conspiracy to topple the government as well as economic sabotage. A prominent editor appearing in the documentary – Zaheena Rasheed of the *Maldives Independent*, left the country because of the threat and still lives in exile.

The Maldives' Majlis (Parliament) has been a bitter ground for dispute among ruling and opposition lawmakers with ugly scenes such as eviction of lawmakers, presence of high number of security personal and scenes of fist-fights between the lawmakers. However, the MBC denied the Maldivian peoples their rights to know what's happening in their parliament by warning TV stations against broadcasting footage live-streamed on social media by MPs who are inside the parliament chamber saying such videos contained "obscene language and content contrary to standards of public decency". It advised broadcasters to "ensure that scenes like this are broadcasted in line with the Broadcasting Act, regulations under the Act,

the Broadcasting Code of Practice, and the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act". Legal action will be taken against those who violate broadcasting laws, the commission warned.

Journalists in the Maldives are questioned over news content, and legally harassed over their mere presence at programs organised by opposition political parties. *V news* senior editor Ahmed Rifau was summoned for questioning at the police headquarters over a headline about the arrest of a senior opposition figure in June. The police contended that the headline, 'Adam Azim arrested on charges of trying to topple the government,' misrepresented the content of the arrest warrant. Azim was accused of speaking in a manner that encouraged the illegal overthrow of the government and of undermining public trust and inciting hatred toward the judiciary.

A number of journalists – four from Sangu TV and Three from Raajje TV, were arrested and others roughed up during an opposition rally held on the 52nd Independence Day in July. The detained journalists were Mohamed Wisam, Murshid Abdul Hakeem and videographer Ahmed Mamdhoo of Raajje TV, and Adam Janah, Ahmed Riffath, Mohamed Shanoon, and Abdullah Yamin of Sangu TV. Their treatment was argued on charges of "obstructing the duties of a law enforcement officer". They were later released.

Further media restrictions are likely to be imposed as the government-sponsored bill for the 'Maldives Media Commission' was tabled in the Parliament. Proposed by ruling party lawmaker Jafar Dawood for the creation of a new media regulatory body after dissolving the broadcasting commission and media council, the proposed regulator can impose hefty fines and temporarily shut down newspapers and TV stations. After investigating breaches of a new code of ethics, the Maldives Media Commission can order print and online outlets to make corrections, issue warnings, and impose fines of up to MVR100,000 (USD6,485) for repeated violations. If written or broadcast content is deemed to pose a danger to Islam, national security, public order or public health, the Commission can ask the police to stop publication or broadcast. The Commission can also seek court judgments to cancel the registration or broadcasting license of newspapers and TV stations.

International non-profit Transparency International Maldives condemned the government for proposing a bill that would merge two existing media watchdogs and "expand its sphere of state control on print and social media as well".

In May, the Maldivian police issued summons on Twitter to three liberal bloggers - Dr Azra Naseem, Muzaffar 'Muju' Naeem, and Hani Amir - living abroad to present themselves for prosecution over unspecified charges. The police said they would ask the Prosecutor General's office to press charges and try them in absentia if they refused. All three bloggers are known for their secular views and critical writing on Maldivian society and politics.

A positive development is the arrest and trial of seven suspects in the case of the murder of blogger Yameen Rasheed. The Criminal Court began the trial but it is closed to the public and the press, something Rasheed's family has expressed concerns about. Six of the seven suspects – Ismail Haisham Rasheed, Ahmed Zihan Ismail, Ismail Rasheed, Mohamed Dhifran, Hassan Shifaz, and Hussain Ziyad – were charged with felony murder and remain in state custody. The offence carries the death penalty.

**Country Report: Maldives
(From South Asia Press Freedom Report 2016/17)**

The brutal killing of blogger Yameen Rasheed in the early hours of April 23 was a result of long brewing intolerance against free thinkers in the Maldives. The 29-year-old blogger was found with multiple stab wounds on his body at the stairwell of his residence and died soon afterward as the country woke up to a shocking news. Rasheed was a bold voice against injustice, autocracy and extremism. He ran the popular 'The Daily Panic' blog, and had received multiple death threats over the past few years, which he duly reported to the police. He complained on social media about police inaction and tweeted that he wasn't 'particularly afraid of death, but dying at the hands of lunatics isn't the preferred death'. Rasheed was also a close friend of journalist Ahmed Rilwan, who disappeared in August 2014, and has been the leading voice in #FindMoyameehaa, a campaign demanding justice for Rilwan, whose whereabouts remain unknown. The murder of Rasheed is a serious setback to freedom of expression in the Maldives, which has already seen waves of restrictions under President Abdulla Yameen.

Waves of restrictions

Media freedom in the Maldives was on a downward slide in 2016 as the state continued to deal with media with an iron fist, introducing restrictive media regulations and harassing journalists of the opposition-aligned media. In this state of political turmoil, President Abdulla Yameen is accused of furthering his mission to tighten his grip on power, and not hesitating to use undemocratic measures to subdue opposition voices. In such a scenario, the media in the Maldives are under great pressure. It is a situation where critical voices are often absent, and self-censorship is high.

The state-owned Public Service Media runs two TV channels and three radio stations. There is just one print newspaper, *Mihaaru*, a new daily run on the strength of journalists mostly drawn from the country's oldest newspaper *Haveeru*, which was closed down by court orders due to ownership issues in March, 2016.

The constitution of the Maldives guarantees freedom of expression provided it is exercised in a manner "not contrary to any tenet of Islam." This clause leaves room for interpretation, leading to restraint and censorship by journalists and avoidance of critical reporting on religious issues. Maldives is ranked 112th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, after falling 60 places since 2010.

Serious setbacks

The Maldivian Parliament on August 9, 2016 passed the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act with 47 Members of Parliament voting in favour and 31 voting against. The Act was presented to Parliament despite widespread criticism at the national and international level for its restrictive provisions. The law criminalises defamatory speech, remarks, writings and actions and empowers the state authority to shut down media for its 'defamatory' content. The law includes a fine between MVR 25,000 (USD 1,621) to MVR 2 million (USD 130,000) or up to six months of imprisonment for slander, remarks or content that threatens national security or breaches social norms.

Individual journalists found guilty face fines between MVR 50,000 (USD 3,242) and MVR 150,000 (USD 9,727), a decision can only be appealed once the fine has been paid. In addition, journalists could be forced to reveal sources of information, which contradicts Article 28 of the Maldives Constitution. The USA, UK, EU, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands issued a joint statement prior to the vote on the legislation, saying that it was a “serious setback for freedom of speech in the Maldives” that would allow severe penalties to be imposed on those who exercise their democratic rights and freedoms.

The bill was proposed in March 2016, and was widely criticised by media workers in the Maldives. Large protests were held outside the Parliament and journalists were arrested. The Maldivian media community also launched a campaign against the bill, #27geDhifaauga (translated: “in defence of 27”) in reference to the constitutional article guaranteeing freedom of expression. The passing of the legislation is a major setback for the Maldives, which voted in November 2009 to decriminalise defamation under former President Mohammad Nasheed.

In the first punitive action under the Act, the regulatory body, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), slapped an MVR 200,000 (USD 13,000) fine on the opposition-aligned Raajje TV and a fine of MVR 50,000 (USD 3,200) on journalist Aala Ibrahim on March 7, 2017. The TV channel was fined on a complaint by a social worker who claimed a rape victim’s family had accused her on Raajje TV of trying to cover up the rape and influence the police investigation. The TV was found guilty for naming the social worker in three news bulletins on November 19 without contacting her, which the MBC said “adversely affected” the social worker and her family. Raajje TV raised the money through a fundraising drive and paid the amount on April 6, 2017.

On the same day, the MBC slapped an MVR 1 million (USD 64,850) fine on Raajje TV for airing a speech at an opposition rally in October 2016 that was deemed defamatory towards the President. The MBC said it concluded after an inquiry that the content “openly created doubts in the hearts of the people about the legal duties or responsibilities of the ruler of the Maldives and damaged his honor and dignity”. If the fine is not paid within 30 days, the commission can suspend or cancel Raajje TV’s broadcasting license. The fine must also be paid in full before the regulator’s decision can be appealed in court.

The fear instilled by the Act is so high in the Maldives that media and journalists are forced to self-censor. Some of the media have decided to close down instead of facing the wrath of the Act. Dhi TV, the Maldives’ first private TV station, shut down at midnight on August 10, after giving a short notice to the staff. DhiFM, a radio station affiliated with the TV station, DhiFM Plus, and the Dhivehi Online website were also shut down. However, the company continued operation of two music channels on radio. A memo on the shutdown stated that the channels could not be run in a sustainable manner under the current circumstances.

Closure and clampdown

In June, 2016, critical news website *Channel News Maldives* was forced to close after it exposed the first lady’s misuse of state resources. Directors of *Channel News Maldives* annulled its parent company at an emergency meeting citing political pressure by the government and took down the website.

The website had exposed how an NGO linked to the First Lady Fathimath Ibrahim was distributing dates donated by the king of Saudi Arabia. It also claimed that Fathimath had been given a share of government’s quota allocations for the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

CNM also published a letter sent to the finance ministry by the Islamic minister asking it to give half of the grant donated by Abu Dhabi to Fathimath's NGO, the Sadagat Foundation.

The website's editor-in-chief, Ismail Rasheed, who also held 49 percent of the company shares, claimed that the site was forced to close down. This was, he said, "because of influential government officials, who have been trying to erase this paper's existence when their first attempt at making us sing their praises failed." Established in 2011, the news site had a reputation for being critical of the government.

Earlier in the year on April 12, 2016, the Supreme Court upheld the August 2015 High Court decision splitting the ownership of *Haveeru*, the country's oldest independent daily. Widely perceived as politically motivated, the decision forced the newspaper to stop printing and close down its website.

Another critical news outlet, *AdduLive*, was banned by the Maldives government on April 26, 2016. Home Minister Umar Naseer ordered the telecoms regulator to block access to regional news website because it was unregistered. Maldivian law does not require registration of online news sites. *AdduLive* claimed that the block was prompted by an April 19 article linking First Lady to corruption on which an unnamed individual filed a complaint over the article with the print and media regulator, the Maldives Media Council (MNC). The MNC forwarded the complaint to the Home Ministry, as it did not have the mandate to look into complaints relating to unregistered news sites. Many other media houses have scaled down operations and are not covering critical news due to fear of reprisal. One of the fallouts of the closures is that several journalists have lost their jobs.

Critical journalists harassed

Harassment and intimidation of journalists has had a direct impact on the freedom of the press. Two journalists, Hussain Fiyaz Moosa, the chief operating officer of Raajje TV, and Ahmed Azif, an assistant editor of Sun Online, were arrested on July 27, 2015, while reporting the attempt by the opposition to perform prayers inside an Islamic centre in Malé. They were later released after being held at the police headquarters for about four hours. Fiyaz said he was accused of planning a political activity and of taking photographs inside the mosque. Azif was accused of obstructing police duty.

Azif was lucky to escape without a lawsuit as two journalists of Raajje TV were found guilty and fined MVR 28,800 (USD 1,868) on January 24, 2017, by the criminal court for 'obstructing the police on duty'. Journalists Mohamed Wisam, 21, and Leevaana Ali Nasir, 20, were covering a bomb scare in November, 2015 when they were arrested. Wisam and Nasir became the first journalists to be sentenced in the Maldives in more than a decade. Wisam, who was accused of obstructing police during an anti-government protest in 2015, was acquitted on March 28, 2017 because of insufficient evidence.

Some journalists of Raajje TV and the *Maldives Independent* received death threats for the proposed coverage of the development plan of the atoll. Faafu Atoll was in the headlines as the visiting Saudi King was expected to sign a controversial USD 10 billion deal to develop the atoll. Even before the Raajje TV team reached Nilandhoo, Faafu Atoll, the station started receiving phone calls threatening to kill the journalists.

The police took journalists Hassan Mohamed and Hassan Moosa of the *Maldives Independent* into "protective custody" in Faafu Atoll after ruling party supporters threatened them with assault after surrounding the guesthouse they were staying at and demanding that

they get off the island. The police rescued them from the guesthouse but instead of acting to protect them from intimidation, took away their phones and later combed through their notes and photographs. They were accused of “spreading hatred” on the island. They were held overnight and not allowed to make any phone calls. The police also arrested citizens who tweeted against the deal and confiscated their phones.

Foreign journalists screened

Elwira Magdalena Szczecian, a Polish freelance photographer, and her husband Santarosa Francesco, an Italian businessman, were arrested while taking photographs at an opposition rally in Malé in July 28, 2016, on charges of ‘practising journalism’ on a tourist visa, and were deported, despite the Criminal Court ordering their release.

The Department of Immigration in January, 2017, set new rules requiring background checks on foreign journalists and photographers visiting the Maldives. Under the new rules, foreign journalists and photographers arriving in country are required to undergo a vetting process in addition to applying for a business visa, which requires a Maldivian sponsor. They must provide details of their work and travel histories and education. Ahead of arrival, journalists must also submit bank statements dating back six months, a three-month medical report, and a one-year police report to show they have no criminal record.

Interestingly, in March, 2017, three foreign journalists who arrived in the Maldives on an invitation from the government were threatened with deportation for seeking to enter the country without undergoing the mandatory vetting process. A deputy editor from *Climate Home*, a writer from *The New Scientist* and a freelancer from *The Guardian* were held at the airport for three hours after immigration officials learned that they were journalists.

The Immigration rules were announced after the Maldives saw growing media coverage in the international press about the political crisis and news about the president. *Al Jazeera* broadcast the documentary *Stealing Paradise* on September 7, 2016, claiming that the Maldivian government "controls all the levers of state", often using its power for nefarious purposes.

A member of the ruling party also threatened to use the controversial defamation laws against anyone involved in producing or broadcasting what the party says are false allegations of corruption in an *Al Jazeera* documentary. Producer Will Jordan, was attacked for being a non-Muslim and also received death threats. A tweet he received on August 3 read: “U will die soon. We have hired some gunmens to shot u. & we r not afraid of f***** anyone or any country. See the bullet”, followed by a gun emoji.

Police raided the offices of the *Maldives Independent* just hours after airing of the documentary. They presented a search warrant, alleging a conspiracy by the news outlet ‘to overthrow the elected government, getting external help to overthrow the elected government, trying to create hatred between the public and the state institutions, and planning to create discord and unrest in Malé. Zaheena Rasheed, the editor of the *Maldives Independent*, who was interviewed in the documentary left the country before its broadcast fearing the backlash and has not yet returned.

No trace of Rilwan

Al Jazeera’s documentary also accused President Abdulla Yameen of instructing the home affairs minister to “not to be overwhelmed” by the case of Abdulla Ahmed Rilwan. The

Maldives Independent journalist went missing on August 8, 2014. Rilwan, 28, was last seen boarding a ferry travelling to Hulhumale Island from the capital Malé. The evidence indicates that Rilwan was abducted out the front of his apartment, as neighbours heard screams before a man was forced into a car. Police recovered a knife at the scene. Rilwan's family also received phone calls warning them to call off search efforts. The Maldives police have failed to unearth any clue regarding the abduction or his whereabouts and took more than a year to ascertain that it was an abduction. Five suspects were arrested in September that year, but were released by the courts weeks later. No one has been prosecuted to date over the disappearance.

The government on May 10, 2016, denied involvement in the disappearance of Rilwan. Responding to the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances in Geneva, the Maldivian foreign ministry said the government rejected any suggestion that it is responsible for the disappearance of Rilwan, or that it has any involvement as alleged.

In a statement, the ministry called the police's ongoing probe "thorough", "professional" and said the government has "treated the disappearance with the utmost urgency; each and every individual witness has been interviewed and all lines of enquiry followed to their conclusion."

Given the blockade of information from the police regarding the investigation, Rilwan's family filed a right to information request in the civil court in December 2016. However, with the police refusing in February 2017 to accede to holding talks mediated by the court, the case will now be heard in court.