



COALITION FOR OPEN GOVERNANCE (COG)

Joint Press Release

On the occasion of International Human Rights Day

10 December 2023

MALDIVES - As the world celebrates 75 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the most urgent human rights issue facing the Maldives is the existential threat to our nation and our people due to the impacts of climate change. The UDHR has inspired over seventy international human rights treaties, as well as paving the way for the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Maldivian constitution of 2008.

However, the realisation of human rights and dignity in practice, remains an elusive aspiration in the Maldives. Efforts by consecutive governments to combat the existential threat posed by global heating and the impacts of climate change, remain vastly inadequate. Concerningly development policies of consecutive governments have worsened the climate resiliency of the country.

Scientists globally are united in their concerns regarding increasing global heating – with 2023 being the hottest year on record¹. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s 2023 report predicts a dire future for the coral reef foundations of Maldives². The prediction of a major El Niño poses further danger to our coral reefs which are essential to the existence of our island nation.³

¹ '2023 shatters climate records, with major impacts', World Meteorological Organisation, 30 November 2023
<https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/2023-shatters-climate-records-major-impacts>

² 'IPCC Sixth Assessment Report - Summary for Policymakers', IPCC 2023,
<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/summary-for-policymakers/>

³ 'El Niño expected to last at least until April 2024', World Meteorological Organisation, 8 November 2023
<https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/el-nino-expected-last-least-until-april-2024>

The Maldives recognised its environmental vulnerability more than 35 years ago and continues to be a vocal advocate for climate action both regionally and globally — hosting the Thirteenth Session of the IPCC in 1997 and consistently advocating for accountability of big emitters and polluters at the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Valuing every grain of sand ... island resilience a priority

Addressing COP28 dignitaries in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in December 2023, President Mohamed Muizzu declared that:

*In our island nations, every coral, every grain of sand, every fish, and every palm tree, carry value. Their loss is a loss to our economy. For our country. ... Building resilience of our islands is a priority.*⁴

As civil society stakeholders concerned about the state of the environment of the Maldives, we agree with the President's position on valuing our environment. However, despite these declarations internationally, on the ground at home, consecutive governments have continued to cause irreversible damage to the nation's environment, biodiversity and wildlife habitats. These actions undermine the climate resilience of our islands and communities, exposing us to serious short and long term climate threats.

On 18 November 2023, one day into President Muizzu's administration, he announced that the government will initiate the reclamation of Fushi Dhiggaru lagoon in South Male' atoll within 30 days.⁵ According to news reports, President Muizzu's administration will also initiate plans within its first 100 days to build commercial ports in Haa Alif Atoll and Laamu Atoll, with Laamu Gaadhoo identified as one location. These developments are extremely concerning, as Gaadhoo island is one of the six marine protected areas of the atoll designated by the Maldives

⁴ 'Remarks by His Excellency Dr Mohamed Muizzu, President of the Republic of Maldives at the High-level Segment of the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change', President's Office, 1 December 2023, <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/29235>

⁵ 'The administration plans to initiate Fushi Dhiggaru lagoon reclamation in 30 days, says the President', President's Office, 18 November 2023 <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/29093>

cabinet in December 2021. Additionally Laamu Atoll was declared a biodiversity ‘Hope Spot’ by the international non-governmental organisation Mission Blue in October 2021⁶. Gaadhoo island is a biodiversity reserve which is the largest turtle nesting site in the country. The island is also well known for its rich terrestrial and marine ecosystems including mangroves, seagrass meadows and feeding grounds for manta rays and other marine wildlife.⁷

Land reclamation causes irreversible and permanent destruction to valuable ecosystems, with unknown and unaccounted losses to biodiversity and habitats. The country’s foundational reef systems and the multitude of natural ecosystems it sustains constitute the source of our economy, food security, wealth, wellbeing, natural defences and resilience to climate change. However, consecutive governments continue to engage in unchecked environmental destruction in the name of development, resulting in serious consequences including ecological and fiscal debt, short changing future generations.

We call on President Mohamed Muizzu to:

- Take urgent heed of the serious warnings of climate scientists and global earth systems research institutions regarding the unprecedented rise in global temperatures, and the developing El Niño increasing heat stress on our ocean and vulnerable coral reef systems;
- Revoke the decision to reclaim Fushi Dhiggaru lagoon which will cause widespread biodiversity losses, irreversible ecosystem degradation, loss and damage;
- Re-evaluate the planned infrastructure project in Laamu Gaadhoo which will destroy the rich ecological assets with wide-ranging consequences and potential cascading effects on the Laamu Atoll Hope Spot, as well as on the validity of protected areas nation-wide.
- Ensure environmental sustainability as a national priority in every development activity in line with Article 22 of the Constitution, and protect and conserve natural assets for the security and stability of present and future generations.

⁶ ‘Laamu Atoll Hope Spot in Maldives highlights harmony between marine conservation and economic development’, Mission Blue, 28 October 2021

<https://missionblue.org/2021/10/laamu-atoll-hope-spot-in-maldives-highlights-harmony-between-marine-conservation-and-economic-development/>

⁷ ‘International Biodiversity Day #SaveGaadhoo’, #SaveMaldives Campaign, 22 May 2021, <https://savemaldives.net/savegaadhoo/>

On this international Human Rights Day, there is no greater need for the people of Maldives than to protect and conserve our living environment, upon which all our lives, as well as the resilience of our islands and communities depend.

To prioritise island resilience, valuing the natural environment is essential.

END.