Mr. President, this statement is delivered by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) in association with FORUM-ASIA and our long standing partner the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN).

Bold and independent journalism is vital in any democratic society. This sentiment was overwhelmingly supported during this Council’s Panel on the Safety of Journalists, as highlighted in OHCHR’s report. However, much of the Commonwealth and Asia remains a very dangerous place for journalists.

To take one example, we are now on day 38 since Mr. Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla of Minivan News, Maldives, disappeared. In these 38 days the Maldivian Police Service has failed to consistently keep stakeholders informed of progress, the resulting lack of public satisfaction would be much ameliorated by clear briefings on the steps taken in the investigation. Worryingly, Ahmed disappeared 4 days after 15 journalists in Maldives received death threats. While this suspected abduction is the first of its kind in Maldives, it follows a worsening trend of threats over the past year, which have included attempted murder, arson and the labeling of certain journalists and human rights defenders as un-religious.

However, harassment of journalists is not unique to Maldives. CHRI, FORUM-ASIA and MDN therefore fully endorse the conclusion of this report, that all States must ensure that their domestic legal framework is firmly grounded in international human rights law.

Moreover, as an acute fear prevails amongst the journalists of Maldives, CHRI, FORUM-ASIA and MDN urge the Government to be a leader in the region and in the Commonwealth by establishing a robust system of best practice, including by creating a rapid response mechanism, equipped with protocols on how to respond to a range of threats against journalists; provide training to national authorities on these responses; and ensure the eradication of impunity for all attacks. Moreover, we urge the Government to intensify efforts to find Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, including by requesting international assistance if necessary and ensuring that those who are responsible for his abduction be brought to justice.

Thank you.