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Press Release

18 February 2018

Police use of disproportionate, violent force against journalists and demonstrators on 16 February 2018:

We condemn in the strongest terms the conduct of the Maldives Police Service on 16 February 2018 by using excessive force to disperse demonstrators, especially the conduct against journalists covering the protests in the capital, Male' City. The law enforcement, oversight bodies of the State, the Broadcasting Commission and the Maldives Media Council must investigate these atrocities and take necessary action against perpetrators instead of allowing for this conduct and further restricting the media.

Press freedom in the Maldives has been attacked through extremely regressive legislation, defamation charges and several obstructive tactics in the past two years. The open brutality against journalists by the law enforcement only shows the level of impunity that the State has allowed to end transparency and flow of information to the public. It is absolutely intolerable and abhorrent that a law enforcement should be allowed to act in such barbaric ways against the press and peaceful demonstrators.

The journalists reporting from the demonstration for the live coverage were ordered to discontinue the live coverage and leave the area. When journalists continued to report from the scene the police used disproportionate force such as excessive pepper spray directly to the faces of the journalists, causing breathing difficulties. The police were also seen on live telecast to have manhandled, pushed and injured journalists before they were arrested.

According to eyewitnesses and media accounts, in addition to having been heavily pepper sprayed, Ahmed Zareer of Raajje Television was beaten on the chest and legs, and sexually abused by booted policemen; Hussain Hassan of the same TV station was manhandled and pushed to the ground and strangled before being taken into the police station where Hussain Hassan later informed colleagues that he was beaten before he was taken to the hospital when fallen unconscious.

Hussain Waseem, video journalist for V Media, in addition to having had his arm forcefully twisted, sustained injuries to his back and could not walk due to police beatings. Leevan Ali Nasir, video journalist for the same TV station was beaten and arrested while covering the demonstration. Mohamed Riyaz and Ismail Shafeeu, cameramen for V Media were injured due to police violence. Mohamed Rasheed, Ibrahim Fauzan and Ahmed Dilah, cameramen for V Media were heavily pepper sprayed and had difficulty breathing. Fayaz Moosa, cameraman for Sun TV was heavily pepper sprayed resulting in breathing difficulties.

Video journalist for Sangu TV, Abdulla Yaameen had a pepper spray canister placed inside his mouth and sprayed heavily resulting in breathing difficulty, and sustained a blow to his chest by a policeman with his knee. The police attacked Yaameen while he stood behind the police lines. Yaameen's colleagues asked the police and MNDF for assistance to take him to the hospital but was refused, and fell unconscious inside a taxi on the way to the hospital. Ahmed Ayaz, cameraman with the Sangu TV had to be taken to the hospital with a bleeding mouth after a policeman delivered a blow to his face with a knee.

In addition to the use of disproportionate force to disperse demonstrators calling to implement the Order of the Supreme Court and the resignation of president Abdulla Yameen, the police were seen using impractical and unacceptable means such as pushing demonstrators into the sea.

We urge all journalists to inform our organisation of any form of violence or obstruction to your duties by State authorities.

We call on authorities to be vigilant and observe that identities and photographs of alleged perpetrators of violence against the journalists that have been circulating in the public, and to use these resources and witnesses to fully investigate these crimes.

We also urge the hospitals and medical facilities that attend to the victims of police brutality to be mindful of the weaknesses in the requirement prescribed for medico-legal reports, and make efforts to include detailed and extensive information surrounding injuries sustained so that investigating authorities are able to carry out their duties effectively.

ENDS.