

## **The Maldives: End the targeted harassment and intimidation of human rights defender Shahindha Ismail**

(Bangkok, 5 April 2018) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (an FIDH-OMCT partnership), Front Line Defenders, Amnesty International and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative call on the Government of the Maldives to immediately end the targeted harassment and intimidation of prominent human rights defender and Executive Director of the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), Shahindha Ismail.

The police have accused Shahindha Ismail of attempting to ‘disrupt the religious unity and create religious discord in the Maldives’ through Twitter. She has already been summoned twice and, on 2 April 2018, police questioned her for allegedly criticising Islam ‘with the intention to cause disregard for Islam’ under Section 617 (a) 1 and 2 of the Penal Code, which prescribes up to four months and 24 days of imprisonment for first time offenders. Shahindha Ismail has categorically denied the allegation.

These false allegations and the investigation against Shahindha Ismail appears to be only an attempt by the Government to obstruct her legitimate work as a human rights defender.

The allegations against Shahindha Ismail stem from a tweet she posted on 21 December 2017 in response to a statement by President Abdulla Yameen that said he would not allow any religion other than Islam. Shahindha Ismail tweeted in response that *‘Religions other than Islam exist in this world because Allah allowed for it. No other religion would exist otherwise, would it?’*

Police launched an investigation against Shahindha Ismail after the pro-government news website *Vaguthu Online* posted a series of articles on 28 December 2017 about her tweet. The online articles accused her of ‘indirectly calling to allow other religions in the Maldives’ and blasphemy, branded her an apostate, and demanded repentance. On the same day, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs issued a public statement that condemned anti-Islamic speech believed to be in reference to Shahindha Ismail’s tweet. These reports spurred an onslaught of threats, including death threats, against Shahindha Ismail on social media.

The authorities must instead launch a prompt, independent and impartial investigation into the online abuse and threats against Shahindha Ismail that she has received because of her legitimate human rights work and the peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression.

We are concerned that in an environment where online threats against human rights defenders, particularly against those who are seen deemed to be espousing secular views, have had dire consequences in the recent past, the authorities have ignored the serious threats against Shahindha Ismail.

In April 2017, human rights defender and blogger, Yameen Rasheed was killed after the police and other authorities failed to respond to reports of threats against him. Similarly, journalist and human rights defender, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, was abducted and remains missing since August 2014 after a number of reports of threats against him had been ignored by the authorities.

These false allegations against Shahindha Ismail will have a chilling effect on an already restrictive environment for freedom of expression and human rights defenders in the Maldives. This investigation will only serve to embolden those who peddle hate and threats against human rights defenders.

The Government of the Maldives has an obligation under the Constitution and international treaties to which it is a state party to guarantee the right to freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms.

We urgently call on the Government of the Maldives to close this investigation, and end all forms of harassment against Shahindha Ismail. The Government must ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders to carry out their legitimate work without fear of reprisals.