



Regional Conference on Human Rights Institutions South Asian Countries  
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Note for Plenary, Day 1, Session 3, Thursday, 16 April 2009

At the very outset, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Indian National Human Rights Commission and its Chairman Justice Rajendra Babu, for having taken the initiative of organizing this workshop at a time democracy and human rights have become more relevant all over the world, including our own region of south asia. I think this meeting will not only bring all of us together for the first time in a spirit of cooperation and goodwill, but will also contribute enormously in finding ways and means of convincing our own governments the indispensable role human rights must play in shaping their policies and programmes.

Human rights promotion and protection in the Maldives have come in leaps.

Since the adoption of the constitution in August 2008, progress in this area has been especially significant, and even, perhaps, too fast. In the short space of a few months, a comprehensive catalogue of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights has been given constitutional protection, the branches of the state have been made independent, independent state commissions have been instituted, and generally the state made more democratic.

The Maldives is proud today to have excellent human rights inspired constitution, a strong, willful and competent national institution, and meaningful ties with the regional and international human rights community, to which my participation here at this gathering is testament.

The legal framework for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Maldives today is second to none. Today we hold the exciting potential of developing into a country with a free, fair and efficient human rights regime.

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In order to develop a culture of human rights and democracy, every actor in society should honor and perform their respective obligations and duties. Human rights awareness and respect should pervade throughout society. In spite of the fact that we are living next to India, the largest democracy in the world, the Maldives has never experienced democracy and human rights until very recently.

In a survey conducted by the HRCM in 2005, only 27% of the country could name three basic human rights. Taking this as a baseline, HRCM considers human rights education a fundamental function of its work. Since HRCM's establishment under the Paris Principles in 2006, we have conducted workshops in all 21 atolls of the country. HRCM initiated its workshop series by working with community NGOs. Last year, we carried this forward with human rights workshops for local government leaders, including judges, island chiefs, health workers, and police officers. Separate workshops were conducted in the capital Malé for deputy ministers and senior members of the civil service. Workshops in Malé have also been held for teachers, NGOs, and police officers. And this year, we will conduct human rights workshops to minister of state and deputy ministers of the new government. We intend to take stock of HRCM's awareness raising activities in 2010. I expect and hope to see vast improvements on the baseline survey.

Independence, as the most fundamental value of any national institution, is key to the future of HRCM. The HRCM Act largely ensures operational and policy independence for the Commission. Financial independence is also guaranteed in the Act. The Maldives experience with national institutions has been brief. However, it has, to be sure, been a learning experience.

The government/state distinction is new to the Maldives. It is vital for national institutions, or state commissions, to be financially independent from the government. These state commissions should be duly recognized as state agencies, distinct from government or other public agencies, a concept most people are still trying to understand. The functioning of such commissions must be streamlined into the state structure. HRCM faces the crucial task today of indentifying itself as distinct from the government and as an independent agency of the state working to promote and protect human rights. As the

first independent statutory body created in the Maldives, we have done everything in a way that everyone else can follow as an example.

I would say the ultimate success of the national institution of the Maldives depends on its record in building human rights awareness. This is a major challenge, not least because of outlying and sparsely populated atolls. Logistics and cost are in themselves important hurdles. Capacity building within the Commission is another. The recent developments in socio-politics necessitate that the Commission itself keep up to speed.

It is my belief that our deliberations in this session today will open up new approaches, policies and concepts of human rights awareness building. It is also my belief that by sharing our experiences we can build a diverse range of views, and identify areas for mutual co-operation and assistance. The need for locally attainable universal human rights has never been greater. While human rights are global, they must be enforceable at the regional level.

Thank you.

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