

Venue allotment for World T20 raises eyebrows

The Indian cricket board's (BCCI) decision to award almost half of the ICC World T20 matches next year to only two venues -Dharamshala and Nagpur -has raised eyebrows. These two venues - which will together host 17 out of 35 games in the tournament -belong to state associations from where the board secretary and president belong.

Bangladesh cricket team will play their three qualifying matches at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium at Dharamshala. Tigers start their journey on March 9, 2016 at the picturesque Dharamshala against Netherlands. On March 11, Ireland will be Bangladesh's next opponent. The third match of the qualifying round for Bangladesh will see Oman take the field on March 13.

Nagpur, the home association of BCCI president Shashank Manohar, is set to host nine games while Dharamshala -home to board secretary Anurag Thakur-run Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association -will stage eight.

Five other venues will host the other half of the tournament.Chandigarh, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Delhi -all traditional Test venues -will host a total of 18 matches, including the final at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

There are 20 international cricket stadiums in the country , of which 15 are certified Test venues now. However, the BCCI decided to shortlist and finalize only these seven venues to host the World T20 matches, to be held from March 9 to April 3.

The biggest surprise is that the marquee game of the tournament -India versus Pakistan -has been awarded to Dharamshala, which has a capacity of only 23,000. Some other venues across India which were ignored boasts capacities ranging from 30,000 to 55,000.

"It is not even in rotation that Dharamshala has been awarded the game," a senior board functionary said, adding: "If you had a choice between 23,000 people watching India play Pakistan and 40,000 or 50,000 people watching, which option would you choose?" Clearly, outside of Maharashtra, where Pakistan are not welcome to play, there are several venues that could have been considered for this big-ticket game.

G Gangaraju, the BCCI vice-president from South Zone and also the chairman of the board's tour programme and fixtures committee, was not forthcoming on the reasons behind allotting 17 matches to Nagpur and Dharamshala and shortlisting only five other venues. "I'll have to look into it and get back to you. I'm in Parliament right now," Gangaraju said.

Only a month ago, BCCI had added six new venues to its list of certified Test centres. Of those six, only Dharamshala has been awarded eight World T20 games while the remaining five -Pune, Rajkot, Indore, Ranchi and Visakhapatnam -have been ignored altogether.

Some other traditional centres like Chennai -the power centre of the previous regime in the BCCI -have also been snubbed. Chennai will host only four women's World T20 games instead of the expected big-draw men's matches.

Officials from the grounds and pitches committee were also contacted to ascertain if there were particular reasons why so many possible venues were ignored. "Not that I know of," a senior committee member said. Two state association presidents also pleaded ignorance on why their venues, recently upgraded to Test centres, were not considered.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) will pay the BCCI Rs 55.2 cr to host the entire men's

World T20, which works out to Rs 1.6 cr per match for 35 matches.

It is understood that the BCCI will pay the hosting association the gate money for each game, which sources say is between Rs 2-3 cr per match depending on capacity and ticket sales.

Even for a venue with minimum seating capacity, hosting eight matches would mean earning a little more than Rs 8 cr from the board.

Surprisingly , there is nobody in the BCCI who is willing to explain the reasons behind the venue allotments.

Lionel Messi out of Club World Cup clash with Guangzhou Evergrande

Lionel Messi will miss Barcelona's Club World Cup semifinal with Guangzhou Evergrande due to renal colic, the club has announced.

Barca will face Luiz Felipe Scolari's Asian champions at the International Stadium Yokohama on Thursday as they look to book their place in the final on Sunday.

However, they are expected to be without Neymar as he builds up his fitness following a groin injury and Messi has now been ruled out.

A statement on the club's official website read: "Leo Messi will not be playing in today's Club World Cup semifinal against Guangzhou Evergrande.

"The Argentinian striker is suffering from renal colic, a type of abdominal pain commonly caused by kidney stones, and will be absent for the 11:30 a.m. CET kick-off against the Asian champions.

"His future availability will depend on the outcome of further medical tests."

European champions Barcelona won the Club World Cup in 2009 and 2011 and are aiming to become the first club to win the competition three times.

They will face South American champions River Plate in the final after the Argentine side beat Sanfrecce Hiroshima 1-0 in their semifinal.

The losers of Thursday's game will face Sanfrecce in the third-place playoff.



Lionel Messi (C) vies with Las Palmas' goalkeeper Javi Varas and defender Pedro Bigas Rigo (R) prior to getting injured during the Spanish league football match. Photo: AFP

Pakistan confirms participation in Saudi-led anti-terror alliance

After initial ambiguity, the Pakistan government confirmed on Wednesday its participation in a Saudi-led military alliance for 'fighting terrorism', but said the scope of its participation would be defined after Riyadh shared the details of the coalition it was assembling.

"Pakistan... is awaiting further details to decide the extent of its participation in different activities of the alliance," a statement issued by the Foreign Office said.

Saudi Arabia had announced on Tuesday that it had forged the 34-nation alliance of Muslim countries for fighting terrorism and extremism, which included Pakistan. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir had later explained that the participating countries would



Members of Saudi special forces take part in a graduation ceremony held in Riyadh on May 19, 2015. Photo: Reuters.

themselves decide about the extent of their participation.

The coalition was envisaged to serve as a platform for security cooperation, including provision of training, equipment and troops, and involvement of religious scholars for dealing with extremism.

Senior officials at the foreign ministry initially expressed surprise at Pakistan being included in the new group, and said that Riyadh had not taken Islamabad on board. But subsequent developments revealed that Saudi Arabia had been given a secret commitment regarding joining the alliance, about which the Foreign Office was not aware.

There were speculations about who had given that assurance.

The military had started in October a new phase in the bilateral defence relationship by training Saudi special forces personnel in countering terrorism. Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif visited Saudi Arabia after the special exercises for discussions on counter-terrorism efforts.

The Foreign Office statement tried to brush off the embarrassment caused to Riyadh because of the reports that it had included Pakistan in the coalition without its prior knowledge by saying that it welcomed the formation of the counter-terrorism alliance.

It impliedly conceded that some information had been shared with it before the announcement from Riyadh, as the statement noted that it was awaiting 'further' details.

The Foreign Office said it consistently supported all efforts at fighting terrorism and a

resolution adopted at the 42nd session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation had called on members to “join regional and international efforts to fight terrorism and extremist thought”.

Anwar Iqbal adds from Washington: The United States said on Wednesday that the new coalition supplemented its efforts to defeat terrorism and it had long been urging its Muslim allies to form such an alliance.

“It certainly is in line with what we have long been saying and urging countries in the region to do, which is to coalesce around the need to deal with the terrorist threat there in the region,” US State Department spokesman John Kirby said at a news briefing.

“We welcome, as we have welcomed, any intensification of the effort against ISIL (the militant Islamic State group) in the region, as well as against other terrorist networks. Any effort to increase pressure on those networks is a welcome effort.”

He said the US was waiting for details on how this force would operate but noted that the Saudi announcement had given a broad outline.

“I would only point you to what the deputy crown prince himself said, which is that they’re not ruling anything in or out at this point in terms of what it could mean,” Mr Kirby said.

“There’s every expectation and anticipation by this coalition to work with neighbours and partners in the region in ways that collectively they think is most appropriate to go after terrorist threats,” he added.

Asked if it would be a parallel alliance or work with the US-led international coalition, Mr Kirby said those 34 nations were already part of the 65-plus-member coalition against the IS.

“This is something separate and distinct that they have done themselves and have arranged for themselves, ... but they are already part of the coalition countering” the IS in the region, he said.

Neymar, Suarez, Messi worth billions to Manchester clubs

Manchester clubs all in for Barca stars

Transfer Talk devotees will have noted in recent months that much speculation has focused on Barcelona, and whether the Spanish giants can afford to keep their ridiculously talented trio of Lionel Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez at Camp Nou given their financial constraints.

The Blaugrana have repeatedly said they do not intend to sell any of the three players, but both Manchester clubs will test the Catalan club’s resolve next summer in a “£1 billion battle,” according to The Sun.

The paper reports that United’s executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward is “desperate to land Neymar,” while “Woodward’s rival at City, Khaldoon Al Mubarak, is working just as hard to pull off the biggest transfer coup in history for Messi.” With “money no object” for either Premier League club, it will apparently be a straight competition between City and United as to which side can tempt one of MSN away from Spain to England.

The figures on offer – a total outlay of £195m for Neymar and £550m for Messi if he also decides to join City's sister club, New York City FC, in the MLS after a stint at the Etihad – are mind-boggling. But The Sun insists the sums “really do stack up” when factoring in huge new TV rights deals and sponsorship agreements. With managers Pep Guardiola and Carlo Ancelotti also up for grabs, Manchester could be the centre of world football's next transfer battle extraordinaire.

Paper Round

Ozil eyes huge contract

Mesut Ozil has graced these pages of late with reports that Real Madrid want to re-sign the German playmaker following his stunning form for Arsenal, though Los Blancos fans may be denied a reunion if the Gunners act fast.

The Sun reports that Ozil has begun talks with Arsenal regarding a new contract, with the 27-year-old World Cup winner wanting a £20,000-a-week increase to hit £160,000 a week. An Arsenal source is quoted as saying that Ozil's fine form is a result of “being played in the No. 10 role on a consistent basis.” Who would have thought it?!

However, Arsene Wenger's hopes of landing Spanish forward and Barca target Nolito seem to be off after the 29-year-old was quoted as telling Marca: “The truth is that I am happy in Vigo and that is why, some minor details pending, I will be renewing with Celta soon.”

Nolito picked up a knock during Saturday's 1-0 Primera Division victory over Espanyol and is expected to miss up to a month.

All change in Manchester

As if talk of Messi and Neymar wasn't enough for fans of both Manchester clubs, the futures of Louis van Gaal and Manuel Pellegrini are decidedly unclear, as well. Free-scoring Javier “Chicharito” Hernandez has revealed that he was unceremoniously booted out of Old Trafford by Van Gaal, and The Sun reports that the Dutch coach has now “started to lose the dressing room ... as players have begun to openly question his tactics.”

Pellegrini may be sitting pretty in the last 16 of the Champions League in comparison to his neighbours' Europa League draw, but The Sun suggests that City “are on tenterhooks over Pep Guardiola,” and will go “all out” to land the Catalan coach should he decide to leave Bayern Munich next summer – that's regardless of whether Pellegrini guides the club to another Premier League title.

What's more, former Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has told Swiss paper Blick: “My reading is that Pep will leave Bayern because City will loosen the purse strings even more.” Tough break, Manuel.

More misery for Mourinho

Jose Mourinho is now merely surviving at Chelsea on past glories, with Monday's defeat at league leaders Leicester City cementing just how far the defending champions have fallen. The Daily Star reports that despite Mourinho suggesting his players have “betrayed” him, Roman Abramovich “has no intention of splashing out again in January's transfer window” to allow the Portuguese coach to “buy his way out of trouble.” The Sun suggests that mutiny is in the air with a “frosty atmosphere” and players “turning on each other and Mourinho.”

Worse still, the Daily Mail reports an “emergency board meeting” has been prepared for Wednesday. Abramovich could always use Mourinho’s potential £40m payout on John Stones instead, with the Express reporting that Chelsea will lodge a bid of that figure with Everton in January to beat Man United to the centre-back. However, Toffees boss Roberto Martinez has emphatically stated: “It doesn’t matter if Chelsea come back in for him ... January doesn’t come into consideration.”

Meanwhile, The Sun reports that Juventus are keen on Oscar, but are “willing to wait” until next summer in order to secure both the Brazil international as well as Juan Cuadrado – currently on loan at the Bianconeri from Stamford Bridge – in a double deal.



Leicester City’s Algerian midfielder Riyad Mahrez (2R) shoots and scores past Chelsea’s Cesar Azpilicueta (R) and goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois during the English Premier League football. Photo: AFP

Klopp faces fight for Serbian starlet

Jurgen Klopp is busy looking for players to join him in saluting the Anfield crowd after heroic home draws against West Brom, though the Liverpool coach is apparently facing competition for Marko Grujic.

The Mail reports that the 19-year-old Red Star Belgrade midfielder has held talks with Anfield officials regarding a £4.3m offer which would see Grujic stay in Serbia on loan until the end of the season, although Stuttgart are said to have launched a £5m offer plus bonuses.

With Inter Milan also reportedly after the player, Klopp may need to work his considerable charm to try to push through a deal in the face of such interest.

Tap-Ins

-The good news, Leicester fans? Riyad Mahrez says he will not leave the Foxes in the January

transfer window. The bad news? The 24-year-old star does not think the club will win the title.

-Pablo Dani Osvaldo has, like any good hipster, shunned conformity for a career on the edge. But one club who seem more than happy to accommodate a large ego and extra locker space for bespoke tailored outfits are Boca Juniors, with president Daniel Angelici saying of their former loan star: "We are going to bring in a forward and the priority is Osvaldo."

-Regarding negotiations for highly rated 22-year-old striker Jonathan Calleri to join Inter Milan, Angelici added: "It is almost a done deal. The negotiations are very far along."

-Aston Villa need changes fast, and The Times reports that club captain Gabriel Agbonlahor could be out in January after "falling foul" of new coach Remi Garde.

-Where next for Andros Townsend? The Sun reports that Southampton are the latest club to consider saving the England winger from his "Tottenham hell" – a fate the damned are presumably forced to endure by sitting down and watching football for thousands of pounds a week.

Maldives joins Saudi-led anti-terrorism military alliance

The Maldives is among 34 countries that have joined a Saudi Arabian-led Islamic military alliance formed to combat terrorist organisations.

According to a statement from the state-owned Saudi Press Agency, "a joint operations centre shall be established in the city of Riyadh to coordinate and support military operations to fight terrorism and to develop the necessary programs and mechanisms for supporting these efforts."

Announcing the new coalition at a press conference last night, Deputy Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, also the kingdom's defence minister, said the coalition will "target all terrorist organisations in the Islamic world."

The campaign would "coordinate" efforts to fight terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

"Every country will be participating according to its capabilities and we will not only fight [the Islamic State], but any terrorist group," he said.

More than 100 Maldivians are thought to be fighting with militant groups in Iraq and Syria, including the Jabhat al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State (IS). At least seven Maldivian fighters have been killed in battles and local media reports suggest a steady outflow of would-be jihadis, including entire families and members of Malé's criminal gangs.

Details of the Maldivian army's participation in military operations remain unclear. The government has yet to officially comment on the decision to join the military coalition.

Ibrahim Muaz Ali, the president's spokesperson, declined to comment and directed *The Maldives Independent* to the foreign ministry and the military. The spokesperson of the Maldives National Defence Force was not responding to calls at the time of publication.

The countries participating in the new alliance include Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Turkey, Chad, Togo, Tunisia, Djibouti, Senegal, Sudan, Sierra

Leone, Somalia, Gabon, Guinea, Palestine, Comoros, Qatar, Cote d'Ivoire, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Malaysia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia's regional rival Iran and its allies Syria and Iraq are not part of the alliance. But the joint statement said "more than ten other Islamic countries have expressed their support for this alliance and will take the necessary measures in this regard, including Indonesia."

The kingdom has been engaged in a nine-month-long conflict with Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and has carried out airstrikes against IS fighters in Syria.

IS, which controls large swathes of Iraq and Syria, has vowed to overthrow the monarchies of the Gulf states. The militant organisation has also targeted Saudi Arabia's Shia minority and killed dozens in bomb attacks on mosques.

The formation of the new military alliance comes after the US urged Gulf Arab states to do more to aid the campaign against IS.

Meanwhile, since assuming office in November 2013, President Abdulla Yameen's administration has fostered closer ties with Saudi Arabia and China. The president has regularly criticising alleged interference in domestic affairs by Western powers amidst persisting criticism of the government's human rights track record.

Saudi Arabia and Maldives recently penned an agreement hailed as a "[religious bridge](#)" to maintain religious unity here. The kingdom's Islamic Affairs Minister Saleh bin Abdulaziz visited the Maldives last month and agreed to help improve the collection of Zakat, an Islamic tax, publish books on Islam in English, expedite ongoing mosque projects and train Imams.

The visit came after Saudi Arabia hosted a conference on moderate Islam in Malé. Islamic Minister Dr Ahmed Ziyad said at the time that the Saudis will help maintain the Maldives' 100 percent Muslim status.

"A lot of Maldivians may not be aware of this, but there is an organized effort to sustain Western influences here. Those in power in Saudi Arabia understood that it will not do to leave Maldives like this," he said.

The Saudi government has since agreed to send scholars to Maldives on a regular basis.

In August, Saudi Arabia established a diplomatic mission in the Maldives for the first time. The kingdom also granted US\$20 million for budget support earlier this year, and agreed to provide a US\$80 million loan for the development of an urban centre on the artificial island of Hulhumalé.

The government has also revealed that during Yameen's September visit to Mecca, the Saudi government had agreed to provide cheap crude oil to the Maldives. The crude is to be refined in Singapore.

Two senior ministers meanwhile traveled to Riyadh earlier this month to negotiate with the Saudi Investment Fund on investing in the northern iHavan transshipment port.

Government denies limiting presidential scholarships after public outrage

Following a public outcry, the education ministry today denied limiting the number of presidential scholarships awarded annually to A' Level top achievers.

Citing a two-month-old announcement by the department of higher education, newspaper *Haveeru* reported this week that the scholarships will be limited from 2016 onward to 15 students from the 1st place achievers in the A' Level national top ten. A special panel would select 15 students based on interviews and a point system.

All students who earn first place in the top ten were previously awarded scholarships. Some 23 students achieved first place in the national top ten last year.

The announcement has since been removed from the higher education department's website.

Dr Abdulla Nazeer, state minister for education, told the press today that the ministry has not finalised a decision on limiting the scholarships. The announcement reported by the local daily was a discussion paper or a proposal on improving the grading criteria, he added.

"In 2010, the English grading system was modified to set A+ as the highest grade. There are ongoing discussions to increase the grading system in Maldives as well. The announcement on the DHE website was an initial paper of one of the proposed models. It is far from final and definitely not a decision to limit the scholarships to students finishing A' level next year."

Nazeer said he was "deeply saddened" that the paper was made public, adding that it was uploaded by mistake.

According to the removed document, of the 15 students chosen for the scholarships, only five could study in a country of their choosing. The other 10 students will be awarded scholarships to study in developing countries.

Under the proposed points system, 12 points will be awarded to each A grade and 15 points to each A+ grade.

The *Haveeru* report prompted a flurry of social media posts from students and parents expressing outrage and frustration.

"My only motivation for as long as I can remember was to get the president's scholarship and make my parents proud. I know I'm not the only with this dream. I know I'm not the only one studying to make their parents proud. The question is, do you know this? Or is it just that you do not care about the youth?" wrote one student.

He added that the decision was "demotivating and a huge thumbs down for all the students."

"You're taking away the dream we've had for the past 11 years. You're taking our only hope for a better future."

Another student wrote: "Apparently the economy is thriving and we're making so much money due to the booming tourism industry and other forms of income. Yet they do this? Why? Because they have less money to spend on diversifying the opportunities our students have?"

Speaking to *The Maldives Independent* yesterday, former Education Minister Dr Mustafa Lutfy expressed grave concern over the decision, which he said would be detrimental to the country's

human resource development.

“The top of the top ten are the highest achievers of our higher education system, our best and brightest. Limiting opportunities for their higher education is limiting the development of our country’s human resources,”

Lutfy, also a member of the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party’s education committee, said limiting government scholarships would demotivate hardworking students and parents.

Elections Commission fines MDP, Adhaalath over Nov 27 protest

The Elections Commission has slapped a fine on both the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party and the religious conservative Adhaalath Party over “unlawful activities” carried out during a three-day anti-government protest in late November.

“They were fined because they had involved children in their protest and also for using the UN emblem against the regulations,” EC member Ahmed Akram told *The Maldives Independent* today.

The opposition parties were fined MVR75,000 (US\$4,800) each. Akram said the parties will have seven days to pay the fine.

The MDP had printed the UN emblem on t-shirts and banners urging President Abdulla Yameen to release former President Mohamed Nasheed as recommended by a UN human rights panel in September.

The MDP insists that it had followed the UN’s guideline in using the emblem and denies involving minors in the protest.

The UN office in the Maldives had said in a tweet that impartiality is a key UN principle and reminded political parties to refrain from using the logo. The tweet on December 1 referred to a [guideline](#) published in 2013 on the use of the UN emblem.

Speaking to *The Maldives Independent* today, Shidhatha Shareef, a council member of the Adhaalath Party, called the EC’s move “irresponsible” and unwarranted.

“This is very irresponsible of the commission. The lawful and peaceful protest was held at a public place, so senior citizens and children will be around. However, I never saw any encouragement to involve children in the protest,” she said.

Shidhatha said the party has not yet decided whether to pay the fine.

Riot police had cracked down on the November 27 protest with tear gas and pepper spray, arresting 13 individuals and beating several protesters. The home ministry subsequently [banned street protests](#), a move the MDP and human rights groups desecrated as unconstitutional.

The MDP has also been at loggerheads with the EC since the appointment of new members to the independent body by the ruling party-dominated parliament earlier this year. Last month, the party [sued](#) the commission over a new requirement for all political parties to [re-register](#) members with fingerprinted forms.

In a letter sent to the EC this week, the MDP said: “If taking action against the whole party

for the actions of any one individual is the commission's policy, we inform you that as the government is acting against the UN's ruling directly because President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom himself is hesitating to act as per the ruling, action should be taken against the party the president represents."

The EC had told the party that it is looking into issues related to the November 27 and considering punitive action. As the "guardian of political parties," the EC advised the MDP to ensure that its activities take place within legal bounds.

The commission had also fined the MDP and Adhaalath Party by MVR47,000 and MVR33,000, respectively, in March over alleged incitement to violence at daily street protests.

The allied opposition parties were protesting over the imprisonment of ex-President Mohamed Nasheed and ex-Defence Minister Mohamed Nazim as well as the targeting of Jumhooree Party leader Gasim Ibrahim's business interests.

The parties at the time refused to pay the fines and asked the EC to review its decision, but the commission said it had the authority to deduct the sums from the state funds paid out annually to political parties.

The November 27 protest was the fourth mass anti-government demonstration staged this year. Adhaalath Party President Sheikh Imran Abdulla is facing trial on a charge of inciting violence at the 20,000-strong mass rally on May 1.

Supreme Court to consider UN ruling on Nasheed's imprisonment

The Supreme Court will consider a UN human rights panel ruling on former President Mohamed Nasheed's imprisonment when it hears the opposition leader's appeal of his 13-year jail sentence on a terrorism charge, the foreign ministry said today.

In a [statement](#) welcoming Nasheed's decision to file an appeal, the foreign ministry said that the government has "consistently maintained the position that the former president should seek to argue his complaints before the appropriate judicial body."

"Further, the government has maintained the position that the opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention is one that should be considered by the Supreme Court," the statement continued.

"This will now be done given that the Court has accepted the appeal already filed by the Prosecutor General, with substantive arguments to be heard at a later date."

Nasheed's legal team announced the decision to appeal at the apex court on Saturday. Lawyers said the former president has always called for a "political solution" to his jailing, but President Abdulla Yameen has [repeatedly insisted](#) that Nasheed must exhaust the appeal process to be eligible for a pardon.

The lawyers had previously maintained that Nasheed was deprived the right to appeal after the criminal court refused to provide a full transcript of the trial within a shortened 10-day appeal period.

But the foreign ministry said today that Nasheed "has not at any time been precluded from

filing an appeal, and has consistently been reminded of his right to do so, and further, encouraged to embark upon this course of action.”

In the face of growing international pressure, the Prosecutor General had appealed the conviction at the High Court in September. But the appellate court refused to hear the case on the grounds that it was submitted by the state and not the former president.

In late November, the Supreme Court [accepted](#) the state’s appeal of the High Court decision.

“The appellate courts, including the Supreme Court, are the appropriate forum for the former president’s legal arguments concerning his trial and sentence to be made,” the foreign ministry said.

“The government of Maldives respects the rule of law, and reaffirms the position that its judiciary is fully independent and impartial. The fact that the former president is now seeking to file an appeal reaffirms this position.”

The UN WGAD, a specialised agency comprised of five independent experts, had ruled that Nasheed’s imprisonment in March was illegal and politically motivated. But the government called the WGAD judgment “flawed and premature” and said it “will not be made to act on the basis of a non-binding opinion.”

The foreign ministry also said that the government anticipates “those calling for sanctions and other such extreme measures will now allow the judicial process to take its natural course, and refrain from seeking to criticise and undermine the process further.”

Following the WGAD ruling, Nasheed’s high-profile international lawyers Amal Clooney and Jared Genser launched a campaign lobbying world leaders to impose targeted sanctions against senior officials of the state.

But President Yameen [declared](#) he would not bow down to foreign pressure and release Nasheed, whose imprisonment had triggered a political crisis with daily street protests and mass anti-government demonstrations. The UN secretary general and human rights as well as UK Prime Minister David Cameron and several international human rights organisations have called for his release.

The 19-day trial at the criminal court had drawn widespread international condemnation over its apparent lack of due process.

The WGAD had found that the criminal court’s refusal to allow Nasheed to call defence witnesses and the absence of legal representation during key points of the trial constituted violations of due process.

The WGAD also said the Maldivian government was [unable to demonstrate](#) the legal basis for the terrorism charge. Nasheed was found guilty over the military’s detention of a judge in January 2012.

Facebook amends 'real name' policy after protests

After passionate and at times angry pleas from various vulnerable communities, Facebook has announced it is to amend its controversial “real name” policy.

On Tuesday the site said it was to test new tools that allowed people to share any special circumstances they felt meant they could not use their real name.

The tool is intended to help people who may have suffered domestic abuse, or in cases where their sexuality could put them in danger.

However, Facebook stood firm on insisting people use “real names” in all but the most unusual situations.

“We require people to use the name their friends and family know them by,” the company said.

“When people use the names they are known by, their actions and words carry more weight because they are more accountable for what they say.

“We’re firmly committed to this policy, and it is not changing.

“However, after hearing feedback from our community, we recognise that it’s also important that this policy works for everyone, especially for communities who are marginalised or face discrimination.”

Intense pressure

The company is also adding a new tool for reporting fake names, requiring anyone who is reporting another user to provide more context for their complaint.

Facebook said it received hundreds of thousands of reports of fake names every week.

“In the past, people were able to simply report a ‘fake name’ but now they will be required to go through several new steps that provide us more specifics about the report,” the company said.

“This additional context will help our review teams better understand why someone is reporting a name, giving them more information about a specific situation.”

The social network had faced intense pressure from rights groups over its hard-line stance on real names.

Founder Mark Zuckerberg was heavily criticised after he suggested that people that use two names, or have an alias, showed a “lack of integrity”.

Drag queens

Last year, prominent drag queens in San Francisco had their Facebook accounts deleted as they were deemed to be violating the real name policy.

After considerable uproar, including a planned protest outside Facebook’s headquarters, the company acknowledged that it had been a mistake to delete the accounts, but said it faced a challenge in verifying people on the network.

It argued that insisting on real names played a role in preventing bad actors on the site has it made people more accountable for what they posted.

“The stories of mass impersonation, trolling, domestic abuse, and higher rates of bullying and

intolerance are oftentimes the result of people hiding behind fake names, and it's both terrifying and sad," the site said.

"Our ability to successfully protect against them with this policy has borne out the reality that this policy, on balance, and when applied carefully, is a very powerful force for good."

A group of civil liberties organisations and rights groups formed the Nameless Coalition which has been leaning on Facebook to change its policies.

The new tools announced on Tuesday fall short of [the group's complete suggestions](#), but representatives from Facebook are met members of the Nameless Coalition at a public event in San Francisco.

[News Source](#)

Republican candidates clash over how to counter IS

Republican presidential hopefuls sparred over how to stop the so-called Islamic State (IS), in the first debate since attacks in California and Paris.

The national security focus yielded heated exchanges between Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio who clashed on surveillance and immigration policy.

Jeb Bush also sought to revive his struggling campaign by forcefully attacking front-runner Donald Trump.

"You're not going to be able to insult your way to the presidency," he said.

Mr Trump was on the defensive early in the debate for his proposed ban on Muslims entering the US, saying, "We are not talking about religion, we are talking about security."

However the debate quickly expanded to broader issues of foreign policy and national security.

The candidates repeatedly addressed heightened fears of terrorism in the US on the same day an emailed threat shut down Los Angeles' school system.

Analysis: Anthony Zurcher, BBC News, Las Vegas



The audience was outspoken during the debate

The big question going into this last Republican debate of 2015 was how Donald Trump's competitors would try to take the front-runner down.

It seems, however, that only Jeb Bush got that memo. He alone among the candidates engaged the New Yorker directly, and if he had been as forceful several months ago as he was on Tuesday night, his campaign might be in much better shape.

Instead, most of the fireworks during the Las Vegas event occurred between the trio of first-term senators – Marco Rubio, Rand Paul and Ted Cruz.

On the issues of national security and immigration, Mr Rubio faced off against his two congressional colleagues in often acrimonious exchanges.

Barely mentioned over the course of an evening that focused on foreign policy was Mr Trump's call to close the US border to all Muslims.

Given how all the candidates assiduously avoided the subject, one would never have guessed that it was a story that merited global headlines and ignited a firestorm of controversy.

[What Trump doesn't get about the net](#)

[Republican debate: Winners and losers](#)

[Four ways Republicans might take on Trump](#)

But the top nine candidates disagreed over the scope of government surveillance and how to end the civil war raging in Syria.

"If terrorists strike again... the first question will be, 'Why didn't we know about it and why didn't we stop it?'" said Mr Rubio, taking aim at Mr Cruz, who had voted to curtail government surveillance powers.

Another of Mr Trump's proposals – "closing that internet up" to stop IS recruitment – has been hotly debated, with the candidate saying, "I don't want them using our Internet".

Image copyright Reuters

Image caption Mr Carson has seen his support dip in recent weeks
After defending it, he seemed confused by loud booing from the audience, and replied: “These are people that want to kill us folks.”

It was not the only time that the crowd played a part in the programme; on several occasions the audience’s cheers and jeers forced a pause in the candidates’ conversation.

At one point, a heckler interrupted Mr Trump with inaudible comments.



Image caption Mr Kasich called for the country become more united

Other highlights from the debate included:

- Despite expectations of a confrontation between the top candidates – Senator Cruz and Mr Trump – the men avoided directly criticising each other
- Mr Trump said that he would not pursue a third-party campaign, saying he had “gained great respect” for the party’s leadership
- When asked whether he could order air strikes that could kill civilians or children, Ben Carson pointed to his experience as a paediatric surgeon and having to tell children about brain cancer
- Kentucky Senator Rand Paul stuck to his strong libertarian foreign policy beliefs, despite stark differences with the other candidates
- New Jersey Governor Chris Christie repeatedly stressed his executive experience as a governor and prosecutor and took a swipe at senators like Mr Cruz and Mr Rubio saying they were all talk
- Ohio Governor John Kasich said world leaders would have been better off discussing terrorism than climate change at a recent summit in Paris
- Former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina said help from the private sector should be sought to fix an “incompetent” government

The Republican contest – in depth

[How to dump Trump](#) – four ways his rivals might beat him at the debate

[Muslims on Trump](#) – Muslims in Las Vegas reflect on Trump ban plan

[Cruz on the rise](#) – five things to know about Trump's biggest threat

[Clinton's secret agent?](#) – Conspiracy theorists claim Trump is Hillary Clinton's plant

Mr Trump loomed large over the so-called undercard debate, with the four candidates split over the efficacy of his proposed ban.

Senator Lindsey Graham apologised to US-allied Muslim leaders saying: "I am sorry. He does not represent us".

Democrats debate on Saturday night, and both parties will hold debates in January.

The state-by-state primary contests in the presidential election begin in six weeks in Iowa on 1 February and will last for months.

Each party will formally nominate their candidate over the summer, with Hillary Clinton the favourite to win the Democratic nomination.

Americans will finally go to the polls in November, and the newly elected president will assume office in late January of 2017.

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