

Maldives ex-leader Mohamed Nasheed due to arrive in UK

Former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed is due to arrive in the UK for surgery after a stopover in Sri Lanka, according to his party.

Nasheed, who was controversially jailed last year, is seeking urgent treatment for his spinal cord.

The Maldivian government has attracted criticism for asking for a guarantor who would be criminally liable if Nasheed did not return.

After tense negotiations the government finally agreed to waive that condition.

Nasheed – the opposition leader – was jailed for 13 years under anti-terror laws. The government has said Nasheed must return after 30 days to serve the remainder of his sentence.

He left the Maldives on Monday and spent several days in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. He is travelling under what diplomatic sources called a deal brokered by India, Sri Lanka and Britain, according to the Maldivian government.

Mr Nasheed's supporters said he met with ambassadors of several Western countries including the UK, Norway, Australia, France and Canada in Colombo to discuss his country's political situation.



Controversial trip

The Maldivian government came under international criticism in recent months for not allowing Nasheed to seek treatment abroad.

It agreed to the trip last weekend, but days later it insisted that he nominate a family member

to stay in the capital Male to guarantee his return. Nasheed's party and lawyers called it "blackmail", but Maldivian foreign minister Dunya Maumoon said it was "standard procedure" for any prisoner travelling abroad for medical treatment to sign a guarantee.

A compromise was eventually reached and the government waived criminal liability for the guarantor. Nasheed's brother is acting as guarantor.

A former human rights campaigner, Nasheed became the nation's first democratically elected leader in 2008, ending three decades of rule by former strongman Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

In 2012, he was detained after being accused of ordering the arrest of a judge.

He resigned months later amid an army mutiny and public protests over the judge's fate.

Nasheed alleged that he had been removed by a coup, but this was denied by his vice-president, who replaced him.

The current President Abdulla Yameen was elected in controversial polls in 2013 and is the half-brother of Mr Gayoom.

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 a 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 described 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.

Maldives' main bank announces 1 bln Hulhumale home finance fund

Bank of Maldives (BML) on Monday announced its decision to establish a MVR1 billion home finance fund to help the growing population of the reclaimed suburb Hulhumale.

Speaking during a ceremony to mark the opening of a new 24-hour ATM centre in Hulhumale, BML CEO and Managing Director Andrew Healy said the new initiative is part of its plan to expand its presence in Hulhumale.

"We are proud of this fine ATM Centre and of our new look branch but this is just the start of our investment in Hulhumale". We recognize the city's growth trajectory and it is vital that Bank of Maldives is here on the ground to support this growth. Over the next year we will significantly step up our presence in Hulhumale'."

Healy also revealed plans to open a Business Center next year to support businesses that are setting up and expanding in Hulhumale.

"We are also establishing a MVR 1 billion Home Finance Fund to help the growing population in the city obtain the necessary finance to get on the property ladder," he added.

The CEO said the bank will add more ATMs in convenient locations in Hulhumale. BML's new ATM Centre, located beside the refurbished branch in Huvandhumaa Higon, contains three ATMs which allow customers to deposit and withdraw cash, deposit cheques, make payments and transfer money.

The country's main bank recently unveiled a large investment in Ibrahim Nasir International Airport where it has opened a new ATM Centre, including a US Dollar ATM, as well as a refurbished branch and new foreign exchange units in the international arrivals and departures areas.

BML is also supporting the financing of the visionary new Treetop Hospital which is currently under construction in Hulhumale.

Maldives polls body fines opposition over UN logo use

Electoral body fined main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and its ally Adhaalath Party Monday over events it had flagged as unlawful during a recent anti-government protest.

In a statement, Elections Commission said each party is required to pay MVR75,000 within a week. The fine was given due to the use of the logo of the United Nations by protestors and allowing children to take part in the demonstration, it added.

According to the commission, police were consulted before taking its decision.

MDP hit back at the Elections Commission on Monday, accusing it of discrimination when penalising political parties.

Elections Commission warned MDP last week after the UN logo was used in some banners during the anti-government protest in capital Male on November 27.

The commission had also asked MDP to not allow children into protests.

In response, MDP insisted that that party had not encouraged the participation of children and noted that the party was being penalised over the actions of individual protestors.

If the commission penalises parties for actions of individual members, then the commission must take action against the ruling party over president Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom's decision to snub the UN panel ruling urging the government to release jailed former president Mohamed Nasheed, MDP said.

MDP began using the UN logo following the ruling in late September by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that Nasheed's imprisonment was arbitrary.

Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison in March after he was convicted of the arbitrary detention of Chief Criminal Judge Abdulla Mohamed while he was president.

The former president was transferred to house arrest in July due to health reasons but late August he was taken back to prison. The opposition accused the government of backtracking on its decision to commute the ex-president's sentence.

The government has faced mounting international pressure to release Nasheed whose incarceration has been ruled as illegal by a UN panel.

Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) had also criticised opposition supporters who participated in the extended protest for bringing along children to the demonstration.

Maldives again hails climate pact as big victory for small nations

Maldives on Monday hailed the recently concluded global climate summit in France as a big victory for small island nations like the Maldives.

Environment minister Thoriq Ibrahim, back from the French capital where he had represented the Maldives at the COP21 summit, told reporters that small nations like the Maldives had worked tirelessly to make their voices heard. Three important demands by island nations – maintaining the average temperature at 1.5 degree Celsius, setting up a fund worth USD\$100 billion for climate change adaptation and mitigation, and giving special status for small nations – were included in the final agreement, he said.

“The biggest challenge was to align the stand of all the small nations in the same direction,” the minister said, during the press conference at the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport (INIA) Monday evening.

Thoriq, however, stressed that some big nations were against including the demands made by small nations.

According to the minister, his delegation held several events on the sidelines of the summit in order to raise public awareness about the effects of climate change. Maldivian officials also participated in an event held by the World Bank and briefed attendees about renewable energy projects being carried out in the archipelago, he added.

The environment minister’s comments follow similar remarks by him a day earlier when he had declared that as the chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Maldives’ endeavours have brought a victory and smiles to small nations.

Shedding light on the COP21 summit held in Paris from November 30 to last Friday, the minister noted that the climate deal reached in the conference was a great triumph for small states.

Cheering envoys from 195 nations on Saturday approved a historic accord in Paris to stop global warming, offering hope that humanity can avert catastrophic climate change and usher in an energy revolution.

The post-2020 Paris Agreement ends decades-long rows between rich and poor nations over how to carry out what will be a multi-trillion-dollar campaign to cap global warming and cope with the impact of a shifting climate.

With 2015 forecast to be the hottest year on record, world leaders and scientists had said the accord was vital for capping rising temperatures and averting the most calamitous effects of climate change.

Without urgent action, they warned, mankind faced increasingly severe droughts, floods and storms, and rising seas that would engulf islands and coastal areas populated by hundreds of millions of people.

Aasandha employs 11 with special needs

Aasandha, which offers the national healthcare insurance scheme of the Maldives, employed 11 special needs individuals and awarded them employment certificates on Monday.

The certificates were awarded by First Lady Fathmath Ibrahim, who was the Chief Guest in the ceremony held at the presidential residence of Muliaage Palace.



The new employees of Aasandha include visually and speech impaired staff. Aasandha's venture is in collaboration with the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) and The Sadaqat Foundation. The latter was founded by the First Lady to provide aid for people with special needs and disabilities.

Speaking at the ceremony, First Lady Fathmath declared that the path is being paved to provide people with special needs with the same work opportunities as the rest of the community.

NSPA CEO Mujuthaba Jaleel also stated that the agency is working to establish such an environment. He said that Aasandha's offer of employment has brightened the futures of such youth, describing it as the most important step to empower special needs people withi



in the community. Mujuthaba added that the future will see more doors of employment being opened.

The new staff of Aasandha have been employed to work in the Data Process Department of the office.

Mujuthaba assured that their responsibilities and salaries will be no different from other employees.

Maldives govt moves to calm outrage over scholarship cap

Government on Tuesday moved quickly to calm outrage over the decision to limit the number of president's scholarships awarded to A-Level examinations' National Top 10 with a top official saying that president Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom gave eminence to provide education opportunities to youth.

The constraint awards the scholarship to only 15 students of the A-Level National Top 10 toppers, whereas previously it was awarded to all first placers.

The decision sparked outrage by some students on social media.

In response to a question from Haveeru over the decision, government spokesperson Ibrahim Muaz Ali insisted that the president's responsibility was to come up with a policy which would be implemented by the line ministry.

According to the policy released by the education ministry two months prior, the fifteen recipients will be chosen based on the number of points all the applicants receive.

The point system awards 12 points to each "A" grade and 15 points to each "A+" grade.

The ministry's notice added that scholarship applicants will be interviewed by a special panel of judges.

However, shortly after the news broke on mainstream media, the announcement has since been removed.

When asked if the increasing cost had prompted the decision, Muaz deflected the question to the education ministry.

The new policy has also changed the previous principle of allowing all the scholarship recipients to pursue any field in any country of their choice.

The current change grants the choice of pursuing education in any country only to the top five students of the chosen fifteen. The remaining ten students are offered choices of developing or slightly developed countries.

However, choices are not offered to any slightly developed country should its education expenses equal that of a developed country.

In 2014, 23 students had topped the A-Level National Top 10.
