

Expatriates in the Maldives: The Untold Story

Maldivians have been noted as hospitable people by various visitors. While Maldives is enjoying a lucrative income as a tourist destination, recent reports have raised doubts about the level of hospitality we extend to foreigners.

Maldives has always maintained a close relationship with Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans. This did not necessarily exist only between governments of the two countries, but between the people who visited from one country to the other for trade, education and other needs.

Since English-medium education was introduced to Maldives, a number of Sri Lankan teachers had come and stayed in the Maldives, some of them staying for a very long time. Several schools in Male' as well as the students who emerged from those schools, are indebted to the services of those teachers.

Yet, during the second week of December 2002, hundreds of people protested in Colombo over the plight of Sri Lankan prisoners in Maafushi detention camp in the Maldives. They called for the closure of Maldives High Commission in Sri Lanka. News reports covering the event and the inhuman treatment expatriate workers are facing in Maldives jails made headlines in Sri Lankan media.

Sources say a second protest was organized even more recently. An association, Parents and Guardians of Sri Lankan Prisoners in Maldives, has been formed to secure the release of Sri Lankan prisoners in Maafushi. The association has highlighted the atrocities the Maldivian police commit on jailed expatriates.

Recently the prison system in the Maldives has received a lot of attention. Its irregularities, the tortures that occur inside the prison walls and the violation of basic human rights have been exposed to an extent.

In October 2002 the government of Australia intervened asking for the release of an Australian surfer, Mark Scanlon, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in 2000 for bringing 57 grams of cannabis oil to the Maldives. Scanlon, 47, was arrested on July 7, 2000 and was kept in jail in the Maldives for over two years in miserable conditions before he was released due to pressure from Australian government.

His wife, Mandy Andrews, worked hard to secure his release, writing a letter for people to send to the government of the Maldives and to Australian Prime Minister. The letter was circulated through surfing magazines and websites and played a key role in securing Scanlon's release.

The news was covered in The Sun-Herald on December 8, 2002 and later in Sydney Morning Herald website.

"Scanlon was held with 85 other prisoners - including rapists, murderers and Sri Lankan revolutionaries - in a cell about the size of three classrooms. It had only three toilets and the prisoners were not allowed outside. Scanlon also spent time in solitary confinement.

While in jail he lived on a diet of rice and watery curry and was allowed no phone calls or letters and only the Koran to read.

His only contact with the outside world was an hourly visit once a month from his wife, who had moved to the Maldives to support him," the report in The Sun-Herald said.

The prisons in the Maldives have also received attention because of the death of a young Maldivian boy in January 2003

following intense torture by the police.

"A young Maldivian man has died in a coma at Malé's Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, after being bashed while in NSS custody at Maafushi island prison. Ali Shaahir, 19, from Maimagumatheege house in Malé's Maafannu ward, was arrested on a minor charge after an altercation with other young men. He was held in custody for 25 days, and when the family reported him as a missing person they were told Ali was in a coma in Maafushi prison. The boy is believed to have been bashed by NSS staff after he refused to sign a statement," MaldivesCulture.com reported.

"Ali was still comatose when he was sent from Maafushi prison to hospital in Malé in a dhoni vessel. The trip to Malé from Maafushi takes approximately 2 hours and there were no medical facilities on the boat. At the hospital a senior Maldivian doctor, Ahmed Razi, is believed to have signed the death certificate. People who prepared the body for burial are believed to have seen bleeding from Ali's nostrils and ears. There were allegations that the x-rays of the body were deliberately distorted to hide evidence of Ali's injuries," Maldivesculture.com, which is blocked in the Maldives for its highly critical stance on the government, said.

President Gayoom is said to have visited the Maafushi detention centre following the incident. An investigation is supposed to be going on, and Maldivesculture.com said a Corporal, Mohamed Shahdhee, is believed to be in police custody over the matter.

The recent events show that torture and human rights violation is an inherent part of Maldives prison system and that atrocities are committed not only against expatriates but against Maldivians as well.

The prisons in the Maldives are run by Department of Corrections, a department under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Police does not come under the Home Ministry but the influence of police on jails is significant. Some of the places where people are detained are directly under police control while Department of Corrections has control over prisons in which only sentenced prisoners are kept.

Recently the administration of Department of Corrections was handed over to a lawyer. Even though the media did not verify it, there have been reports that the previous person in charge of Department of Corrections, Isthafa Ibrahim Maniku, was removed from his post. Isthafa has earned a bad reputation as a ruthless man and some people also believe he was involved in major embezzlement of government funds.

The removal of Isthafa, and putting a man whom the public will accept more, may be a tactical move by President Gayoom, when he realized that the dirty tales of Maldivian prisons were making sensations in neighboring countries and among the local public.

Reports in Sri Lankan media mention forced confessions, regular beatings and lack of adequate medical care. The association working for the release of Sri Lankan prisoners claimed that two Indians had died recently in Maldives prisons while another committed suicide following intense torture.

The association also alleged the Maafushi jail is maintained by funds from the UN and that part of the money had become a lucrative source of income for the Maldives government.

Expatriates in Maafushi jail are not the only ones who are suffering. In February 2003 local daily Haveeru reported the

plight of the expatriates who came to the Maldives looking for jobs. Some of them have not been paid wages for months while medical care and other benefits have been denied. Some of them suffer from intense hunger as employers do not provide them with adequate food. Lousy accommodation is given. Some of them come after selling their homes to raise funds to come to the Maldives. They come with the hope that they could send some money to the families back home. But they have to suffer miserably in the Maldives while their dependents back home suffer as well.

The recruiting agents have made a lucrative business out of it, charging from the expatriate workers outrageous amounts. Sometimes the agents demand a percentage of the wage the foreign worker receives. The employers are negligent in paying for the visa of the foreign workers, making their stay illegal in the Maldives.

It is for such offences as the overstaying of visa that many foreigners are first arrested. Then they are tortured and made sign false statements. Then they are sent to the hell of Maafushi.

The Labor Ministry in the Maldives does not take firm action against the people who ill-treat the expatriates. Often the poor foreigner has to leave without getting the wages. The Labor Ministry tells the poor workers that they could be sent to their home countries if they wish. If they want to get their due wages, they have to go to court. For the semi-skilled and unskilled workers, some of them barely literate, filing the cases at court and claiming for their wages is not a very easy option. Even for Maldivians the courts of the country are not very pleasant.

There are reasons to believe there is negligence on the part of the government in tackling this problem. Recruiting expatriates is a profitable business for the recruiting agencies. However, the fees that have to be paid to Labor Ministry for visa and permits are high and there are multiple procedures one has to go through before an expatriate worker could be hired. The high fees are supposedly for discouraging importing foreign labor. However, it is reasonable to think that the recruiting agencies would pay a commission or bribe for the officials of Labor Ministry to speed up the lengthy procedures. For companies, a quota is allocated for hiring foreign workers, once again to restrict the import of foreign labor, and sometimes certain companies have worked around this quota hiring more workers than allowed. All this is done through a favor or a bribe involving the Labor Ministry officials. Depending on the level of corruption in the Maldives, this is hardly surprising.

Hence, it is clear that the employers - mostly business firms - and the recruiting agencies have excellent relations with Labor Ministry officials. Thus a complaint by a poor foreign worker against the employers will not make much impact.

There are 30,664 expatriate workers currently employed in the Maldives. Most of them are from neighboring countries. The continuous ill-treatment of the foreign workers at the hands of their employers and the torture of foreign prisoners by police have serious implications. Many Maldivians visit countries such as Sri Lanka and India regularly for medical care, business and other reasons. A number of Maldivian students are also staying in Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh. Even though not all Maldivians treat the expatriates badly, retaliation for the actions of some Maldivians could be faced by any Maldivian visiting the said countries.

What protection could our government give for us if something like that happens? Will it ask the governments of those countries to protect us? Already things are reaching a sensitive state at diplomatic levels. High Commissions of the neighboring countries based in the Maldives are at a loss as what to do with the hundreds of complaints filed by expatriate workers in the Maldives. Immigration officials in India recently threatened to

deport a Maldivian, apparently based on a false report. When he asked for a reason, he was told whether the Maldivian authorities give a reason for numerous deportations of foreign workers.

The expatriate workers had protested in front of the High Commissions and the Labor Ministry on at least two occasions during the past three years. They were arrested and most of them are believed to have been deported. Demonstrations and protests are not allowed in the Maldives, and the expatriate workers were believed to have set bad examples for Maldivians. The regime in the Maldives has a perpetual fear of public gatherings.

The past few years have also seen an increase in expatriate-bashing in the media. Some of the articles that were published in Monday Times were of that nature. The government may be deliberately highlighting the expatriates as a group to direct hatred. The regime regularly employ wag-the-dog tactics and bringing to the front the expatriate labor as a problem may be in line with some of the extreme racist tendencies adopted by certain political parties in certain countries. Key government officials have publicly spoken about the economic effects of hiring foreign labor such as the outflow of foreign currency.

Yet, it is ironic because a number of government offices have hired expatriates even for jobs for which Maldivians could be available. At Theemuge, the Presidential Palace, a number of Nepalese workers are employed. For a good pay, several Maldivians would be willing to work in the same jobs at the Presidential Palace.

It is true that social problems arise because of the expatriate workers. However, this is unavoidable when we bring people from different cultures and societies. It is true that some of the foreign workers go peddling drugs on our streets. However, there are many Maldivians, some of them even in high posts, who are involved in the lucrative drug trade. According to Sandhaanu, an underground email newsletter circulated during 2001, even the Commissioner of Police Adam Zahir is one.

It is true that three expatriates were implicated on gang raping and murder of a Maldivian girl. Yet, it was three Maldivians, all ex-cops, that the court found guilty for the brutal murder of a girl, Azleena Nafess, employed at Maldives Chamber of Commerce. Similarly, an old woman was killed when she discovered some Maldivian youth drinking and using drugs.

When we speak about the expatriates as evil monsters are we actually trying to cover up the problems created by us? Are we trying to put a veil on the social problems that are poisoning our own society? Our young generation is lost to drugs and sex. Our civil servants are trapped in a vicious circle of corruption.

It is the bourgeoisie Maldivians who are hiring expatriates as babysitters. Would our young people be willing to work in the dump trucks and Ufuli, the barge that carries garbage to Thilafushi, the paradise island of Umar Zahir? Would our own workers go and pave our own streets?

The wealthy Maldivians are hiring the poor, illiterate workers of South Asia and treating them like garbage, in violation of fundamental human rights. While the accounts of the wealthy Maldivians located at foreign banks grow, the families of the expatriate workers are struggling hard to survive in one of the most pathetic region of the world. The Maldivian police torture is equally horrifying.

The President of the Maldives is currently in Saudi Arabia for a Hajj pilgrimage. It is a pilgrimage in which people of different color, race and ethnicity walk side by side, casting aside all racial and ethnic prejudices and enhancing the message of human dignity and equality. But while he is at Mecca, his police are inflicting inhuman cruelty on prisoners, and his government is continuing lending a deaf ear to the plight of expatriate workers.

They come to the Maldives with high hopes, but then face misery

By Ahmed Abdulla, Haveeru, 6-7 February 2003

A Maldivian who went to a neighboring country with his family for a medical treatment was held at the airport because of a false report by some people. After sometime the immigration officials told him that he will be deported. The Maldivian asked why he was going to be deported and he received a short reply. "Do you know how many people are deported from your country in each day's flight? Are they given reasons?"

The immigration official was referring to the workers who come to the Maldives from that neighboring country. The people who are sent back home a few days after they arrive in the Maldives with the excuse that they are not fit for the job. In reality, this is a problem that has to be paid attention. Behind these cases lie questionable treachery and fraud.

Even though the people who bring the expatriate workers to the Maldives and those who hire them are involved in the scam, the fingers will be pointed at the Maldives. The bad reputation will also be earned by this country.

"That is done by a few numbers of people. They should really be blamed for that. But if many people start talking about it they will first point to the Maldives. The names of the actual people will come later. So this is creates a bad reputation for the Maldives," a person who had had a long career in a diplomatic field said.

Everyday complaints

The number of expatriate workers in the Maldives had reached 30,000 by the beginning of this year. Similarly the problems related to expatriates have also increased. The number of complaints by them has also increased such as non-payment of wages and benefits and failure to pay for the visa. Other complaints concern lack of adequate food, failure to provide medical care when the workers are sick, and many such things.

The High Commissions of neighboring countries in the Maldives said thousands of people have officially filed complaints regarding employers' failure to pay wages and other benefits for a long term.

The High Commissions of India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the countries from where most foreign workers come, said those are 'everyday complaints'.

Some High Commissions say the laborers who are brought to the Maldives from those countries face a lot of misery and hardship.

Haroon Rasheed who spoke on behalf of the High Commission of Bangladesh regarding the issue, said on average the High Commission receives hundreds of complaints per month.

"There are people who have not received three to five months' wages. Complaints are there about failure to pay for visa, provision of accommodation and food," Haroon said. "These are problems that are related to humanity."

By the end of October there were 5,704 Bangladeshi workers in the Maldives.

People come for jobs in helpless state

The High Commissions say workers from their countries come for jobs after making huge sacrifices. They are forced to sell jewelry, mortgage homes and agree to pay a percentage of salaries and wages for the recruiting agent, all because they have to pay a large sum to the agent in order to get a job. A solution has to be found for the problem of treating such workers with injustice and in violation of humanity when they come in such pathetic conditions looking for jobs.

"The recruiting agencies and employers might give different excuses for that. But that is unacceptable," an expert of foreign relations said. "It might become difficult even to recruit foreign labor because of these problems."

An official representing the High Commission of India said out of 13,000 Indian workers in the Maldives more than 200 people have officially filed complaints seeking their rights.

"In addition to failure to pay wages and other benefits by companies and visa problems, complaints have been received about cases involving seizure of passports and lack of food," he said. "What can we do?"

Returning home empty-handed

The High Commission of India said such problems are sent to Labor Ministry without delay. However, in the official replies (from the ministry) there is no protection for the foreign laborer who had come to the Maldives after selling personal possessions.

"They (Labor Ministry) say the workers could be sent back home if the workers wish to do that. They say the issues concerning wages and benefits should be sent to court. How could they (workers) do that? So some people go back home, crying, and empty-handed," the official said.

Counselors' assistance from some High Commissions

Some High Commissions have also sought the assistance of counselors to listen to the plight of foreign laborers and help them.

Sri Lankan High Commission's Counselor for Employment and Welfare, Wickramatunga, deals with several people everyday. When I went for interview, he was having a number of files with him. When I questioned he showed me the files.

"All these are complaints of workers and the stories of their sufferings. Just now a 23 year-old young man had sat in that chair and had cried for a long time. He does not receive wages. He had mortgaged his home back in the country so the bank is putting pressure on him," Wickramatunga said.

Wickramatunga said, in addition to cases of default in paying wages, cases regarding treachery by local recruiting agents is also common.

"People who are brought as a carpenter are given the job of a cook. Then they are sent back home after about three months because they are not fit for the job. When a new person is brought for the remaining days (of the initial contract) the agent gets about 300 dollars. However, this is what some agencies do," Wickramatunga said.

He said some agents get the work permits and passports of some workers at Male' airport. Then they are given a wage that is less than the previously agreed amount and a work permit that had been made for a different job.

"Most people are illiterate. So they have to do whatever the agents ask. Some people are going through a lot of suffering. Without having received the wages for two years, and not having paid for the visa for a long time, they are believed to be staying illegally in the country," he explained.

Wickramatunga said because of the escalating problems the Sri Lankan government has started taking action against the Sri Lankan agents who creates problems.

"The permit for such agents is revoked immediately," he said.

Sri Lankans protest false charges and torture in UN funded Maldivian jail

Maldivesculture.com special report from the Sri Lankan press 2003

During second week of December 2002, there was a protest by hundreds of people in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, organised by the parents and loved ones of 41 Sri Lankans jailed in Maldivian Maafushi prison.

They called for the closure of the Maldivian High Commission in Sri Lanka, and one mother gave an interview to local television reporters, claiming there was no justice in Maldives. It was broadcast on the television news.

An article about the prisoners' plight appeared in the Sinhalese language newspaper 'Raavaya' on 22 December 2002, and was also reported in English in 'The Island' newspaper articles on 20 and 26 January 2003.

The Sinhalese language reports also mentioned the life sentences suffered last year by Maldivians caught publishing and distributing the Internet newsletter Sandhaanu. The reports claimed that writer Ahmed Didi was held by Sri Lankan airport security when he was in transit to India for medical treatment for a heart condition. He was branded falsely as an Al Qaeda member, charged with holding a false passport and returned to the Maldivian police in Malé.

The sea surrounding Maafushi island is brimming with their tears. They left for the Maldivian islands with thousands of expectations for employment and greener pastures, but they ended up imprisoned in Maafushi island, and subjected to inhuman tortures. Though they have learnt there is no force under the sun to redeem them, almost every morning they pray to Almighty Allah. Do we leave their lot to the mercy of Allah, and turn a blind eye? These 41 men are fighting for their lives.

Maafushi island is 75 km south of Malé, the capital of Maldives. This jail is maintained by funds received from the United Nations. US\$9 is paid for each prisoner, and these payments have become a lucrative source of income for the Maldivian government. The jail building were originally designed for storing dried Maldivian fish, and is now being used as a profitable place to imprison human beings.

False charges

Over 2000 of the people incarcerated in Maafushi island are expatriate workers from Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Philippines and China. Comparatively few of the prisoners are Maldivians. Only the Maldivian immigration authorities are privy to the charges against these expatriates. 41 young Sri Lankan men have been charged on various counts such as use and possession of drugs, murder and sexual crimes.

However, they were originally taken into custody on minor offences such as disputes with employers over unpaid salaries, drinking alcohol, visa overstaying, playing cards, and taking a banana without prior payment. It is difficult to understand how these minor offences were converted into the more serious offences they are now charged with. One Sri Lankan who went to Maldives as a food and beverages manager, was jailed for overstaying his visa but now finds himself charged with drug possession.

Another Sri Lankan who went to Maldives as a computer instructor, was arrested on suspicion of sabotage and

sent to the torture camp at Maafushi. A civil engineer was charged with sexual abuse, and another Sri Lankan national was arrested for drug possession the day he arrived.

Court decisions are delivered according to the whims and fancies of the Maldivian police. Magistrates are expected to authenticate decisions already made, by adding their signature at the court house. There is no trial or presentation of evidence in Maldives. Authorities do their best to ensure that people are jailed in Maafushi on bogus charges. Promotion for police and immigration officials is dependent on them taking people into custody for minor offences. Things have reached a low level when the police have to harass people and obtain signatures for imagined crimes.

Police gimmick

People arrested on minor offences are detained for about two weeks in a place called the 'Welfare Jail' where they are subjected to interrogation and forced to sign charge sheets. Prisoners are harangued into thinking they will be released if they sign. The only prisoners who refuse to sign are those who understand the real intentions of the police and despise the idea of admitting offences they have not committed.

Those naive prisoners who trust the Maldivian police, pave their own paths to hell. In Maafushi, there are Sri Lankan workers serving 5, 10, 15, and 20 years to life imprisonment on bogus charges.

The so-called 'suspects' who refuse to sign the charge sheets for the police, are transferred into the hands of investigation officers. These policemen also try and make them sign the charge sheets, but they use different methods. Now the 'suspects' are held in a place called the 'Investigation Jail' where they have luxury facilities and receive excellent food. Here they are asked to sign their charge sheets, and given the false impression they will be released immediately.

If they still refuse to sign, the police use inhuman tortures on them. They are ordered to do somersaults with their right leg manacled to their hands. People who become exhausted and faint, are dipped in the sea. This can continue for up to 45 days. Even an animal cannot bear this sort of treatment.

The young Sri Lankans in Maafushi prison are those who believed the fraudulent words of the Maldivian police, or those who signed charge sheets because the harassment became unbearable. One prisoner whose was jailed for 25 years, had been tortured for about twenty-five days, and when he still refused to sign, the Maldivian demons in police uniforms placed his finger mark on the document by force.

Sri Lankans have also signed charge sheets they don't understand which were written in Dhivehi thaana script by Maldivian officials and police.

Maafushi incarceration camp

This jail consists of several buildings not more than 10 feet wide, covered with corrugated iron sheets. The cells have been partitioned with iron to accommodate the 110 prisoners who are compelled to sleep on the inadequate concrete benches.

The prisoners are given only a cup of rice with a piece of boiled fish and soup called 'garudhiya'. Four litres of water are

