

For your kind attention

Male, 01st April 08: The Minister of Foreign Affairs, H. E. Mr. Abdulla Shahid has highlighted the significance of the resolution entitled "Human Rights and Climate Change" that was initiated by the Maldives and secured at the Human Rights Council with the co-sponsorship of 75 countries on 28 March. In an email interview to Minivan News Foreign Minister noted that the Resolution mandated the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to conduct an analytical study on the relationship between the impacts of climate change on the full enjoyment of human rights.

Minister Shahid further stated that the study was aimed at better understanding the effects of climate change on human rights, as an essential prerequisite for an informed debate in the HRC in 2009.

Below is the complete script of the interview.

"Why does the Foreign Ministry feel it is important for the UN Human Rights Council study climate change, given that several other UN bodies are already working on the subject?"

The Maldives, and our 75 cosponsors, feel it is important for 3 reasons: The UN Secretary-General has identified climate change as a UN priority, and has said that as a horizontal issue affecting the full range of human activity and human interaction; it is beholden on all relevant UN agencies to address the issue's impact on their sphere of activity. Hence, the Security Council has looked at the security implications, the ECOSOC and UNDP have looked at the implications on socio-economic development, the WHO is looking at the impact on health, the IMO is looking at the impact on migration etc. The major gap in this picture is the Human Rights Council. With the resolution we have sought to plug this gap.

Secondly, there is the simple point that climate change has a massive and immediate impact on human rights for millions of people across all countries and continents. No-one we have spoken to over the past 4 months denies that climate change is already having a massive impact on human lives, nor that it is (consequently) having a massive impact on human rights. Clearly when more frequent extreme weather events hit the Caribbean or Bangladesh, it has a significant impact on the right to housing. A warmer and wetter climate in many countries is causing the spread of mosquito-borne diseases, which has an impact on the right to health. If there is a consensus that climate change is having a significant impact on the human rights of millions of people, it is clearly beholden on the world's preeminent human rights body – the HRC – to look at the issue.

Thirdly, our overarching aim is to highlight the human face of climate change. We believe that part of the reason why there has been so little progress in tackling climate change over the past 20 years is that the global discourse has focused on the science or the physical impact of climate change. The real-world human impact has been largely neglected. We believe that if the world's climate change negotiators are to make the difficult but necessary decisions over the next 2 years (Bali Process) that can assist countries like the Maldives, then they need to understand the effects of climate change on the lives of millions of people today. A 2 degree rise in global temperatures is not just a statistic. It has serious implications for millions of lives as well as for the future viability of many States. The decision-makers need to be armed with this knowledge if they are to make the right decisions. When talking about the effects of Climate Change on human lives, it is clear that a debate on the effects on individual human rights is an obvious place to start and is an essential step towards moving the world towards decisive action.

Will the study initiated by the new resolution aim to establish a strategy for dealing with the human effects of climate change, rather than preventing climate change, or both?

The aim of the study is to better understand that effects of climate change on human rights, as an essential prerequisite for an informed debate in the HRC in 2009. No UN agency has looked at the effects of Climate Change on human rights before, so we are entering a whole new era. The study has the personal backing of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and will also be based on input from a range of sources including States, NGOs, academics, etc. It will therefore be a very important body of work and will serve to increase our understanding of the issue. As well as

informing the HRC debate, the study will also be passed to the UNFCCC COP to inform their efforts to reach agreement on climate change. This is the main aim. Clearly however, the conclusions of the study may also point towards ways in which the HRC and other bodies can address the human impacts of Climate Change. However for that, we will have to wait and see. The Maldives has no predetermined ideas of where the study should point. It is up to the international community as a whole to determine that. So the short answer to your question is both.

Is the Foreign Ministry seeking to establish agreements with other nations in case the Maldivian people become "climate change refugees"? Does the ministry believe such agreement may become increasingly necessary in future?

No we are not seeking such agreements. The Maldives believes in the ability of mankind, when faced with challenges, to respond in a positive way. The Maldives refuses to believe that the international community will allow any State to disappear under the sea purely because it was not able to change its manner of consumption. The world possesses the knowledge to act, we possess the tools to act, and we possess the technology to act. All that is needed is more political will. Climate Change is at the very top of the international agenda thanks, in part, to the efforts of countries like the Maldives. We now need to make the final push, and the Maldives is trying to contribute to that final push with its Human Dimension initiative.

Could you summarise the process by which the Resolution on climate change was developed?

The Maldives was conscious that for the resolution to succeed, it needed a cross-regional perspective, and also it needed the backing of other Small Island States. Regarding the latter, we therefore organized a meeting of Small Island States in the Maldives in November. The meeting adopted the Male' Declaration which provided a roadmap for taking the initiative forward in Geneva and elsewhere. Regarding the former, the Maldives established a group of like-minded countries in Geneva to help take the initiative forward. The group is cross-regional – with 2 countries from each regional group – and includes countries badly affected by climate change and countries that have taken a leadership role on CC internationally. This Group, which met for the first time in December, comprises: Uruguay, Costa Rica, Iceland, Switzerland, UK, Germany, Bangladesh, Maldives, Ghana, Zambia, and Serbia. This group, as well as supporting the resolution in their respective regional groups, also provided with a cross-regional perspective on what should be in the resolution.

Then, in January, we organized a first meeting of the Friends of Human Rights and Climate Change. This is a Group open to all States, which will regularly meet to discuss the issue and to drive forward the international debate. The first meeting was a chance to introduce the issue of human rights and climate change to the wider international community. The Maldives together with the UNDP, OHCHR and the World Bank presented information on the human effects of climate change and introduced the rights-based element. The meeting was a success, with over 70 countries participating.

After this introductory meeting, the Maldives circulated a first draft of the resolution. We also began meeting bilaterally with key partners such as India, Sri Lanka, US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Canada, China etc to understand their views. These bilateral meetings in Geneva were supplemented by meetings between key Governments and our respective Maldives Missions.

We then held a first Open Informal Consultation on the draft resolution in February. Based on comments received, a second draft was produced and circulated. There was then a second Informal Consultation in March. After that, plus a large number of further bi-laterals, a final draft was produced. This was tabled and voted on last week. The large participation in the various meetings by States was indicative of the interest in the issue. We also note that many Ministers, during the first week of the Council, expressed their strong support for the resolution. The only resolution that received such vocal support.

Throughout the process, the Maldives has been open and transparent, and has tried to deal with the concerns of all countries. This effort was clearly appreciated and undoubtedly led to consensus in the Council. The Maldives is very grateful for the flexible and constructive approach of all our international partners.

Is the Foreign Ministry's international action on the climate change issue matched by environmental action internally, and does the Ministry seek to share good practice from sustainability initiatives established at home?

The government has developed a comprehensive climate change adaptation program, titled the National Adaptation Programme of Action or NAPA, led by the Ministry of Environment. This includes investments in flood and tidal defences, engineering works to reinforce vital transport and communications infrastructure and to protect public utilities such as energy, water and sanitation. It also includes measures to minimize coastal erosion. The most innovative aspect of the Programme is the "safe-island" concept, designed to enhance our safety from climate change impacts and natural disasters by voluntary resettlement of communities from smaller islands that are more vulnerable onto larger and better protected ones. This enables the government to concentrate our limited resources on protecting the more viable islands. The Ministry shares this pioneering work with international partners, donor agencies such as the World Bank, and of course with our friends in other vulnerable nations across the world. Many of these nations are looking to the Maldives for guidance on how to adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change.

The Foreign Minister mentioned in the ministry's 28 March statement \"the massive impact that global warming is already having\". Could we have an example of this?

There are many examples of the immediate and far reaching impacts of climate change in the Maldives and all around the world. In the Maldives the storm surges that flooded nearly eighty of our islands simultaneously last year was a sign of the extreme weather events that will grow in intensity and frequency as global warming changes ocean and air temperatures. This increases the incidence of coastal erosion causing loss of homes, posing dangers to infrastructure and utilities, and diverting limited resources from strategic development to a cycle of destruction and reconstruction. Global warming also threatens unique and vulnerable eco-systems such as the coral reefs that are the lifeblood of the Maldivian economy. Coral bleaching is already taking place due to the rising deposits of CO2 and other greenhouse gases in the oceans. If the projected 2 degrees celsius temperature rise comes to pass much of the reef system will be irreparably damaged, threatening the tourism and fishing industries.

The fact that the Resolution in Geneva was supported by almost seventy countries demonstrates that we are not alone in feeling the impacts. In South America the disappearance of mountain glaciers is causing water stress in many Andean countries. A similar phenomenon in the Himalayas, coupled with more powerful cyclones in the Bay of Bengal caused a cycle of floods and droughts in Bangladesh and India last year. Australia and much of central and eastern Africa have also suffered from crippling drought as water and rain patterns have changed over recent years."

The adoption of the resolution on human rights and climate change is the latest stage in the Maldives Government's efforts to draw attention to the effects of climate change on human beings around the world.

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