

Maldives: Democracy under 'all-out assault,' warns UN rights chief

7 February 2018 – The declaration of the state of emergency in the Maldives by President Abdulla Yameen and the resulting suspension of constitutional guarantees have undermined the checks and balances necessary in any functioning democracy, the United Nations human rights chief warned Wednesday.

“The suspension of several functions of the judiciary and Parliament, and the restrictions on a series of constitutional rights, create a [dangerous concentration of power](#) in the hands of the President,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in a statement release by his Office ([OHCHR](#)).

The state of emergency, which allows a government to perform actions normally not permitted, was declared on 5 February in response to a Supreme Court order to release and retry nine political leaders, and to reinstate 12 suspended opposition parliamentarians.

Effective, for 15 days, the emergency declaration suspended Parliament’s authority to remove the President and the top court’s jurisdiction to determine disputes concerning removal of the President. In addition, the entire criminal procedure code has been suspended.

“President Yameen has, to put it bluntly, usurped the authority of the State’s rule-of-law institutions and its ability to work independently from the executive,” Mr. Zeid said.

“The Maldives have seen in recent years attacks on political opponents, on journalists, on civil society and human right defenders, and what is happening now is tantamount to an all-out assault on democracy,” he warned.

Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was arrested on charges, including attempting the overthrow of the Government, and two Supreme Court judges, including the chief justice, have also been detained.

Following the arrest of the two judges, the remaining three judges on Tuesday overturned the Court’s previous unanimous ruling ordering the release and retrial of the nine political leaders.

Let Olympic Flame 'shine as a beacon

to human solidarity,' UN says ahead of Pyeongchang Games

7 February 2018 – This week the world will gather in PyeongChang, Republic of Korea, for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, unified in what United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres called “the Olympic Spirit: in solidarity; mutual respect; and friendly competition.”

“The Olympics and Paralympics showcase the best of the world’s athletic achievements, and the [best of humanity](#),” Mr. Guterres said in a message Tuesday ahead of the opening of the Games, which open on 9 January.

The ancient Greek tradition of the *ekecheira*, or ‘[Olympic Truce](#),’ began in the eighth century B.C., and serves as a hallowed principle of the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) renewed this tradition in 1992 by calling upon all nations to observe the Truce.

Emphasizing the Truce’s fundamental message that “our common humanity can transcend political differences,” the UN chief said: “This ideal has more resonance than ever on the Korean peninsula,” calling on all parties to conflict to observe the Olympic Truce during the 2018 Games.

Mr. Guterres concluded: “Let the Olympic Flame shine as a beacon to human solidarity. Let the Olympic Truce help spread a culture of peace.”

On 13 November last year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that urged Member States to observe the Truce individually and collectively throughout the period from the seventh day before the start of the Olympics until the seventh day following the end of the Paralympics.

The Assembly also expressed its expectation that “Pyeongchang 2018 will be a meaningful opportunity to foster an atmosphere of peace, development, tolerance and understanding on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.”

In a statement on 9 January, UN Secretary-General António Guterres welcomed the decision of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to send a delegation to the Olympic Winter Games.

More than 300 child soldiers released by armed groups in South Sudan – UN

[mission](#)

7 February 2018 – Some 300 child soldiers, including 87 girls, were formally released by armed groups in South Sudan, the United Nations mission in the country reported on Wednesday, calling on all stakeholders to support the young people on the journey back to their communities and help them build a future for themselves.

[“Children should not be carrying guns and killing each other.”](#) They should be playing, learning, having fun with friends, protected and cherished by the adults around them,” said David Shearer, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan, welcoming the release.

Undertaken in Yambio (south-western South Sudan), it is the first such release in over a year and marks the first phase of the overall programme which will see more than 700 children return back to their communities.

“They will have endured suffering, including sexual abuse. It is vital that they receive the support they need to re-join their communities and that they are welcomed home by family and friends without any sense of stigma,” added Mr. Shearer

At a formal ceremony, the children were disarmed and were provided with civilian clothes as well as medical screenings. In the days to come, agencies, such as the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) and local partners will provide them with counselling and psychosocial support as part of the reintegration programme.

According to UNICEF, the children with relatives in area will be reunited with their families, while others will be placed in interim care centres until their families can be traced. They will also be provided with three months’ worth of food assistance and with vocational training and age-specific education services in schools and accelerated learning centres to help reach their full potential.

“Not all children are forcibly recruited. Many joined armed groups because they feel they had no other option,” said Mahimbo Mdoe, the head of UNICEF programmes in South Sudan.

“Our priority for this group – and for children across South Sudan – is to provide the support they need so they are able to see a more promising future.”

Together with UNICEF, the UN Mission in South Sudan ([UNMISS](#)) and other UN agencies have been working to bring the release to light.

Given the volatile security situation, the UN Mission deployed peacekeeping troops to escort religious leaders into remote bush areas to make contact and negotiate with the armed groups. It also sent engineers to repair a road between Yambio and a vocational training centre nearby to make sure that the young people can travel safely for training programmes.

Noting in particular, the work of the religious leaders, Mr. Shearer added: “I would like to pay particular credit to religious leaders who travelled into conflict zones and risked their own lives to bring these children to safety.”

However, in spite of this release, some 19,000 children continue to be used by armed forces and groups more than four years after conflict erupted in December 2013. Release efforts have also been also complicated by fighting as the one witnessed in the region in July 2016 that stalled the momentum.

[Well-planned and managed cities can drive sustainable development – UN agency chief](#)

7 February 2018 – The head of the UN Human Settlements Programme ([/UN-Habitat](#)) has said that a week-long conference on sustainable urban development that kicked off Wednesday in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, will open a “global conversation about our cities and human settlements.”

“With its genuine openness and inclusive nature, the World Urban Forum [[WUF9](#)] is unique on the United Nations conference circuit,” said Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of the UN Human Settlements Programme ([/UN-Habitat](#)) in her remarks to the opening of the Forum, which runs through Saturday, 13 January.

“It is a chance for stakeholders from all over the world – from ministers, local government and urban planners, to civil society groups, the private sector, academia and the media – to contribute to the global conversation about our cities and human settlements,” she added.

Ms. Sharif called WUF9 a platform where people from all walks of life share their experience of finding homes, jobs and lives in urban spaces around the world and a chance for some of the world’s most marginalized to highlight their experiences in being denied some of the advantages cities pose.

For current and future partners, the UN-Habitat chief saw the Forum as an opportunity to showcase the innovative ideas and solutions to challenges being confronted in urban and rural human settlements – and to learn from experts in the field.

Ms. Sharif maintained that WUF9 is “the ideal platform to debate the contribution that positive urban development makes to delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), in particular Goal 11, and the [New Urban Agenda](#),” which was adopted in 2016 by the UN conference known as [Habitat III](#).

Recent debates and studies have indeed acknowledged that sustainable urbanization is an essential tool for addressing the global challenges of poverty, exclusion, conflict and climate change.

“The New Urban Agenda comes at a critical moment, when for the first time in history over half of the world’s population is residing in cities,” she said, which, if planned and managed well, can be “the main tool for sustainable development and a solution to many of the challenges our planet is facing today.”

WUF9 is the first major milestone after the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, which lays out the vision for future cities based on the science of urban development providing tools in crucial areas.

Barely three weeks into her tenure as the UN-Habitat chief, Ms. Sharif said it is “an honour and a privilege” that the Forum, which is held every two years in different parts of the world, was being hosted in her native Malaysia, saying “Kuala Lumpur will have the chance to showcase some of its own urban innovations.”

She concluded her statement with the assertion that she looked forward to joining “the global conversation on promoting socially, economically and environmentally sustainable cities for all.”

[UNICEF helping to restore health services for children and families returning to war-torn Mosul](#)

7 February 2018 – Warning about the “alarming” state of Iraq’s healthcare system, especially in war-ravaged areas in and around Mosul, the United Nations children’s agency has stepped up its support to help the Government provide critical medical services so that children and families affected by violence and displacement can resume their lives.

With less than 10 per cent of health facilities in Iraq’s Ninewah governorate functioning at full capacity, the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) said that as many as 750,000 children in the governorate are struggling to access basic health services although violence has subsided. Those facilities that are operational are stretched to the breaking point.

“The state of Iraq’s healthcare system is [alarming](#),” said Peter Hawkins, UNICEF Representative in Iraq, who has just completed a visit to the largest hospital in Mosul.

“For pregnant women, newborn babies, and children, preventable and treatable

conditions can quickly escalate into a matter of life and death," he said, warning that medical facilities are strained beyond capacity and there are critical shortages of life-saving medicines.

Three years of intense violence have devastated health facilities in Iraq. Over 60 health facilities have repeatedly come under attack since the escalation of violence in 2014, severely disrupting access to basic health services for children and families.

In Mosul, UNICEF has rehabilitated the pediatric and nutritional wards of two hospital centres, provided refrigerators to store vaccines for up to 250,000 children, and supported vaccination campaigns to immunize all children under five years old. Most health centres in the governorate have also re-started vaccination services for children.

UNICEF says the Reconstruction Conference for Iraq hosted by Kuwait next week is a unique opportunity for the Iraqi Government and the international community to put children at the heart of reconstruction, including through increased budget allocations to services for children.

Mr. Hawkins said what he saw in the hospitals in Mosul was both "heartbreaking and inspiring," explaining that the ingenuity and dedication of health workers who are committed to giving newborn children the best possible start in life in the most challenging of circumstances is remarkable.

"They too deserve support so that they can continue to save lives," he said.

UNICEF is appealing for \$17 million to support rebuilding health facilities for children in Iraq in 2018.