**3rd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review**

**36th Session of the UPR Working Group** - **Review of Maldives**

**Intervention on Migrant Workers and Human Trafficking by**

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4th November 2020

**Madam President, Distinguished Members of the UPR Working Group, Esteemed Delegates,**

The topic of migrant workers and human trafficking has posed numerous challenges to Maldivian policymakers over the past few decades. The foreign labour management practices have been in dire need of modernisation and reform, to combat exploitation and to ensure that the welfare of the migrant workforce is guaranteed.

The current administration, which assumed office just under two years ago, took the bold step of tackling these issues as a national priority, and is committed to identifying the root causes, and implementing consolidated efforts to address the many issues prevalent within the system. The Government’s Strategic Action Plan plays a key role in identifying key policies and strategies that will be developed to ensure the welfare of the migrant workforce.

There have been many interventions taken by our Government in a very short period of time, keeping in mind the difficulties faced because of the COVID-19 crisis.

A National Task Force on Issues Related to Migrant Workers was established in 2019 to formulate policy on all issues relating to migrant workers, with representation from key stakeholders at the policy level.

A nationwide regularization program was initiated in early 2019 to provide a pathway for undocumented workers to register within the system and transition to legal work. During this period, over 40,000 undocumented workers were registered during the first phase, which amount to around two thirds of the estimated undocumented workforce. In addition, we are assisting the workers that approach for regularization through job matching facilities with potential employers and to aid their re-entry to the labour market as smoothly as possible.

The Ministry has carried out significant work in reforming the labour quota and employment approval system which has been prone to extensive abuse in the past. There has been a move to data-based identification of needs within the labour market and matching economic growth requirements for external manpower.

Expatriate Employment Regulation was completely overhauled in August this year, to address registration of employers for the use of hiring migrant workers, issuing of quota and employment approvals and to introduce mandatory security deposits in favour of the migrant worker. The Regulation also demarcates the responsibilities of both parties; the employers and employees, and clarifies a grievance mechanism through which contravening parties may be penalized. Following commencement of the regulation, all the local councils have now been mandated to maintain an Expatriate Workers Registry to facilitate timely data collection.

The Government has been working closely with stakeholders to implement important interventions aimed at the most vulnerable members of the expatriate community.

To improve welfare of the workforce, a significant amendment was brought to the Employment Act, to set the minimum standards of employee accommodation. The Ministry has since formalized a set standard for worker accommodation, and has increased resources for regular inspections to ensure that employers adhere to the regulations in place.

While accession to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families currently presents a challenge to the Maldives, I assure our international partners, that the Maldivian legal framework affords adequate protection, and that Maldives is committed to the provision of fundamental rights and basic necessities to all migrant workers within our jurisdiction.

Reflecting on the difficult situation with COVID-19, Maldives embarked on a voluntary repatriation programme for undocumented workers. Over 7,200 undocumented workers have been voluntarily repatriated to date. The workers are provided a safe passage home, back to their families. Participation in the programme does not involve any penalization on the worker.

Moreover, the Government has provided medicals, food and accommodation free of charge, to those who chose voluntary repatriation. This programme will also assist the reintegration of workers back at their home countries and resume work.

**Madam President,**

Since 14 September 2016, Maldives has been a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons and the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act has been in force in the Maldives since 2013.

However, challenges remain in this area, and Maldives recognises the need to strengthen our efforts to successfully prosecute traffickers and extend adequate protection to victims.

To that end, our Government has invested in separate facilities to accommodate men, women and child victims of trafficking, and has undertaken efforts to enhance the available support and welfare services for victims. We continue to coordinate with relevant local and international organisations, and pursue diplomatic channels to ensure proper and safe reintegration of victims to their home countries.

The Government’s efforts to combat human trafficking are steered and coordinated by the multi-sectoral National Steering Committee on Human Trafficking. Our Government has successfully restarted the works of the Committee, and has finalised the National Anti-Human Trafficking Action Plan. This Action Plan endorsed by the Cabinet in February 2020 came into effect on 30th March 2020, aiming to accelerate the elimination of trafficking in persons in Maldives.

Due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19, the Government had to reprioritise the action points in the plan. However, several key initiatives are still underway. The Committee’s current priorities for 2020 include setting up a dedicated office for Trafficking in Persons, setting up a permanent shelter for Victims of Trafficking and conducting a public awareness campaign against Trafficking in Persons in association with multiple stakeholders.

Most importantly, a draft bill is under development to revise the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act to align the definition of human trafficking with that of the Protocol.

The Government has also taken a stricter stance on foreign labour quota requests, integrating systematic verification mechanisms in collaboration with several Government agencies to minimize suspected fraudulent recruitment activity as well as flag possible human trafficking operators that are exploiting the system.

Further, in collaboration with multilateral partners, efforts are underway to formulate the National Migration Policy. The legislation to Prevent and Combat the Smuggling of Migrants have also been earmarked to be submitted to the Parliament this year.

**Madam President,**

The Government is firm in its commitment to provide a safe environment for expatriate workers to reside in the Maldives.

While key actions have been taken to safeguard expatriate workers, we have more to do to address their existing vulnerabilities within the labour market.

The administration will continue to bring reforms to the system to address these challenges. It will not be an overnight solution as the issues within the system have been inherited over years of neglect and misuse.

However, the direction and stance of the current administration is very clear. First and foremost, we have approached this issue as a humanitarian issue. At the same time, we will pursue vigilant and strict policies against offenders to curb exploitation and human trafficking.

Thank you.