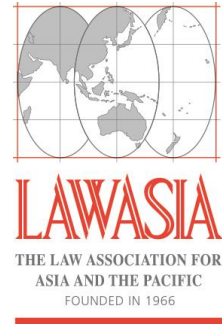


MEDIA RELEASE



27 February 2018

LAWASIA RESPONDS TO REPORTS CONCERNING FACT-FINDING TEAM'S DENIED ENTRY TO THE MALDIVES

LAWASIA is the law association for Asia and the Pacific, and its Council comprises of the peak national bar associations and law societies in the United Nations ESCAP Region. Due to the reported situation in the Republic of Maldives, the Council of LAWASIA had decided to establish a fact-finding team for the purpose of ascertaining the situation with regard to:

- i) The independence of the judiciary in the Maldives
- ii) The independence of the Judicial Services Commission, and the transparency of the process for appointment of judges and investigations of complaints regarding judicial conduct
- iii) The independence of the legal profession, and whether members of the legal profession are able to perform their professional duties unhindered and free of harassment or intimidation
- iv) Due process in the administration of justice in the Republic of Maldives
- v) The Rule of Law and rights-related issues.

The LAWASIA fact-finding team, led by Christopher Leong, President of LAWASIA, is an independent team with an objective mission which is not to be sponsored by any parties, organisations or individuals from the Maldives.

In the course of the fact finding team organising and planning the mission, the Government of Maldives issued a statement on 7.2.2018 via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that “the Maldives would like to invite its development partners and representatives from international organisations and associations to visit the Maldives to assess the situation in the Maldives and witness the safety and security of Male, for their own citizens as well as to engage with the Government and key stakeholders in the country.”

The LAWASIA fact-finding team had written to various persons, parties and stakeholders seeking meetings relevant for the purpose of the fact-finding mission. These persons, parties and stakeholders included lawyers, present and former members of the People’s Majlis (Parliament) from the opposition and government benches, Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Maldives, members of the judiciary, representatives of Government (former and present) including the Attorney-General, and members of civil society organisations. Meetings were to take place between the 24.2.2018 to the 28.2.2018. We had received confirmation from several of these persons, parties and stakeholders for the meetings requested.

On the 11.2.2018 we wrote to the Immigration Department of the Maldives informing them of the fact-finding mission, its objectives and its planned visit and purpose to the Maldives and inquiring as to the relevant requirements for visa for the fact-finding mission. The provisions in this regard found in the Foreign

Ministry website were unclear since parts of it were in Dhivehi (the official language of the Republic of Maldives). A reminder email was sent on 13.2.2018.

Not having received any reply, we then wrote to the Foreign Ministry on 15.2.2018 providing them with the same information and seeking their guidance and advice as to the visa requirements. On the same day we received a reply from the Foreign Ministry thanking us for the email and informing us that their Asia Division would provide us with guidance in relation to the visas for the Maldives. The said email was copied to the Asia Division of the Foreign Ministry. Having not heard further from the Foreign Ministry and the Asia Division, we had followed up with a reminder on 19.2.2018. There was no response.

On 23.2.2018, we had duly informed by email the Immigration Department and the Foreign Ministry, as well as its Asia Division, that “given the impending arrival dates of the delegation and the indeterminateness of response to our requests, we are writing to inform the department that the arriving delegation will be proceeding with its plans on the understanding that the thirty day visa issued on arrival is applicable for the purpose of the visit, namely to attend several meetings to ascertain the situation in Male’, unless we receive direct advice to the contrary.” We received no response to the contrary.

Four members of the fact-finding team arrived at the Velana International Airport, Maldives in the evening of 25.2.2018. Each had declared the purpose of the visit upon arrival. Instead of providing guidance and facilitating the mission with a visa as would have been consistent with the open invitation issued by the Government of Maldives to international organisations, the Maldivian authorities had instead refused entry to the members of the team, detained and kept them at a closed detention facility under guard and surveillance, and subsequently deported them. Although the actions taken by the authorities were inconsistent with their public statements of invitation, and unnecessary, the immediate officials who attended to us were courteous.

By such action, the Government of Maldives deprived itself of the benefit of an independent and impartial assessment by a fact-finding team not sponsored by any individuals, parties or organisations in the Maldives. Although disappointed, the LAWASIA fact-finding team will nevertheless continue with its mission and carry out its mandate. In this regard, it remains the hope of LAWASIA that the Government of the Maldives and key stakeholders in the country would take meaningful steps to assist and participate with this task.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a long horizontal line with a small loop and a downward stroke at the end.

Christopher Leong
President