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Speech by

His Excellency Dr. Ahmed Shaheed,

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives

at the

Inaugural Session

of the

**Human Rights Council of the
United Nations**

21st June 2006



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Mr. President,

On behalf of my delegation, I would first of all like to congratulate you on your election as the first ever President of the Human Rights Council and to wish you and your colleagues every success in ensuring that the Council builds on the accomplishments of its predecessor, the Commission on Human Rights.

Mr. President,

The Maldives warmly welcomes the inauguration of the new Human Rights Council and its stated aim of “promoting universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind and in a fair and equal manner”.

The inauguration of the Human Rights Council comes at an important time in the democratic history of the Maldives. The country is embarked on an ambitious reform programme designed to bring its political institutions into line with modern democratic and human rights standards. The international community has played and continues to play a key role in this reform process, offering invaluable advice, support and expertise.

Building on this trend of international engagement, it is our sincere hope that over the coming years, we will be able to work closely with the newly inaugurated Human Rights Council to bring about real and lasting improvements in human rights protection in the Maldives.

Mr. President,

The Maldives has achieved an incredible level of economic and social development over the past twenty years. The economy has grown by an average rate of 9 percent per year since 1978, with the result that the Maldives now has the highest per capita GDP in South Asia. This robust economic performance has in-turn allowed the country to invest in its social development. Since 1978, infant mortality has been reduced from 120 per thousand live births to just 14, life expectancy has increased from 48 years to 72 years and the literacy rate now stands at 98%, the highest rate in the South Asia and Indian Ocean regions. These achievements together mean that, even taking account of the devastating



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effects of the Asian Tsunami on the Maldives, the country remains on course to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

These economic and social achievements have been made possible thanks, in no small part, to the committed support of the UN system and our other partners in the international community. As assembled delegates will be aware, the Maldives is a small country with limited resources and a dearth of technical expertise. In such circumstances, the help and advice of our international partners is both vital and gratefully received.

Mr. President,

The Maldives is now experiencing similarly rapid change in the political sphere.

The country is engaged in a sweeping reform agenda that, when completed, will create a new, modern democratic system built upon and dedicated to the protection of international human rights standards.

Important steps have already been taken along this path including: the establishment of a Human Rights Commission; the introduction, for the first time ever in the Maldives, of a functioning multi-party political system; accession to the Convention Against Torture and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture; new regulations to improve prison conditions and facilities; the signing of an agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross to facilitate visits to prisons and detention centres; and the establishment of a Judicial Services Commission to strengthen the independence of the judiciary.

Despite these steps, much remains to be done if the Government is to achieve the target, as laid down by the Roadmap for the Reform Agenda, of holding multiparty elections, under the framework of a new Constitution, by July-October 2008. To use the distinction made by Freedom House, what we seek is not merely an electoral democracy, but a liberal democracy where human rights safeguards meet international standards.

Mr. President,

As with the country's impressive economic development, the Maldives firmly believes that the international community has a key role to play in helping the country achieve its goals in the fields of democracy and human rights. Indeed, a



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myriad of international actors including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Development Programme, the Commonwealth and others have already offered invaluable support and expertise on issues ranging from political pluralism to the establishment of the first ever Maldives Human Rights Commission. As Woodrow Wilson once said: "I not only use all the brains I have, but all that I can borrow". The Maldives strongly agrees with that sentiment and is extremely grateful for all the support it continues to receive from its international partners.

Mr. President,

It is our fervent hope that the newly inaugurated Human Rights Council will advance and build-upon this tradition of international engagement with the democratic and human rights reform programme currently underway in the Maldives. Promoting and strengthening the protection of human rights is central to the goals laid out by the reform agenda and, without doubt, our chances of meeting those goals will be immeasurably enhanced by working closely with the Human Rights Council and associated UN bodies.

That is not to say that this should be a one-way relationship. The Maldives fully recognises that it must play its part by working actively, constructively and openly with the Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Indeed, I am proud to announce today that we have already taken important steps in this regard. In April of this year the Maldives extended a Standing Invitation to visit the country to all UN human rights special procedures. This was followed in May, by the expedition of personal invitation letters to all UN Special Rapporteurs with a particular interest in the country. The Maldives is also in the process of establishing its first ever Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office at Geneva in order to better coordinate and cooperate with the human rights organisations based here. Finally, the Government has made a public commitment, in its roadmap for the reform agenda, to sign up to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by December of this year.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate the firm commitment of the Maldives to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We seek a



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world in which all human beings can live in freedom, dignity and equality; a world free of discrimination, deprivation and despair, where all can enjoy the inalienable rights that the creator endowed upon all human beings.

The Maldives commits itself to working with its international partners in the UN system to uphold and promote these principles.

Thank you Mr. President.