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Maldives' Migrants The Other Side of Paradise: Economic Exploitation, Human Trafficking and Human Rights Abuses


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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Introduction

It is difficult to dissociate Maldives from idyllic images of a high-end tourist paradise made of white sandy beaches, pristine waters thriving with aquatic life, and luxurious resorts. Tourism is effectively the first economic sector of the archipelago, with 1.7 million visitors in 2019 (Ministry of Tourism Maldives, 2019a), generating an estimated revenue that increased from US\$375 to US\$468 million between 2014 and 2018 and made up approximately 25% of Maldives' GDP [gross domestic product] and 35% of Maldives' total government revenue in 2018 (Ministry of Tourism Maldives, 2019b). As a result, the country, which was registered in 1971 on the list of "Least Developed Countries" (LDCs), has become over the last ten years one of the most prosperous economies in Asia in terms of per-capita income.¹ Rarely mentioned is the fact that what made this success story at all possible were migrant workers. Yet, rather than being celebrated as contributors to Maldives' economic growth, most migrant workers continue to face discriminations and suffer human rights abuses.

It therefore comes as no surprise that, when they do come into the limelight, it usually has to do with their plight. Examples include the unchecked development of human trafficking, repatriation of irregular migrants, threats against migrant workers who participate in any political activity, accidents on the work site, denial of healthcare for undocumented workers, the mistreatment and unsuitable living conditions of migrant workers, a new tax on remittances [the expatriate remittance tax, which came into effect on 1st October 2016], migrants queuing up in Malé's national stadium awaiting regularisation and, more recently, migrants' increased vulnerability to infectious diseases such as Covid-19, as well as to the economic consequences of the current pandemic.

This note focuses on the precarious situation of migrant workers in Maldives and offers an analysis of the different measures taken over the years by Maldivian authorities to manage imported labour in the country. The migrants' vulnerability is multifaceted and includes, among other aspects, economic exploitation, human trafficking and human rights abuses. Various actors are involved, such as employers, traffickers, Maldivian authorities, non-governmental organisations (e.g. the Maldivian Red Crescent and Transparency International – Maldives) and Maldivian media outlets. The current government recently announced new efforts to tackle migrants' complex situation, starting with dire working and living conditions, but Covid-19 has put these laudable efforts on hold.

We will briefly recall the history and geography of labour migration to Maldives, before analysing the recent decisions and laws regarding migrants in Maldives, some of which have played a significant role in the development of human trafficking. We will then turn to the living and working conditions of migrants in the country, focusing lastly on human rights violations.

This note, based on a fieldwork conducted in November-December 2019, aims at shedding a new light on the reverse side of one of the most prosperous countries in South Asia and one of the most prestigious tourist destinations in the world. It highlights the socio-economic position of migrant workers as cheap, docile and disposable labour imported to Maldives to fill up the gap between, on the one hand, the insular population, who is under strict governmental control in the name of Islam, and, on the other hand, the local elite and foreign tourists who benefit from a permissive 'laissez-faire' attitude from the Maldivian authorities.



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Short History of Migrant Workers in Maldives

When President Maumoon Gayoom (1978-2008) decided to invest in tourism as a means to develop the country in the 1980s, uninhabited islands were turned into luxurious tourist resorts. However, in order to consolidate his grip on the population, he simultaneously transformed the country into a conservative Islamist Republic under his dictatorship. Religion provided him with the perfect justification to try and preserve Maldivians from the influence of supposedly dissolute foreign tourists: contacts between islanders and foreigners were strictly forbidden from the very beginning of tourism development. Maldives thus had to import foreign workers in vast quantities to sustain the tourism industry. If they accounted for 3.9% of the country's population in 1990, they made up 9.7% and 22.1% of the country's population, in 2000 and 2010 respectively (World Bank, 2015).

In 2008, following the election of pro-democratic President Mohamed Nasheed (2008-2012), a new policy was adopted to allow for the construction of hotels on inhabited islands. Since then, contacts between Maldivians and foreigners have become possible, but remain frowned upon. Most tourists arriving at Velana International Airport go directly to a resort-island without visiting the capital city of Malé, which nonetheless holds a few touristic attractions, or meeting with any local inhabitants. And many Maldivians continue to object to the presence of foreigners: Maldives is an Islamic Republic where alcohol, pork, and bikinis are forbidden, except in tourist resorts, and where foreigners, mostly tourists, are met with indifference or respectful distance. Both the authorities and the population are not keen on seeing young Maldivians, especially women, work in contact with tourists, who are still perceived as deprived. This cultural and religious factor alone is not sufficient however to explain why migrant workers have been on high demand for the past forty years. Another reason is that foreign workers undoubtedly constitute a cheap and docile labour force compared to local workers. They are turned into submissive employees by unscrupulous employers who do not hesitate to confiscate their papers and threaten not to let them travel back home if they do not follow suit.

A decade ago, the country set on a development path, which rapidly turned into a 'construction frenzy.' Massive new buildings, such as Dharumavantha Hospital (partly opened in April 2019), and infrastructural achievements, such the Sinamalé China-Maldives Friendship bridge between Malé and Hulhulé (which opened in August 2018), suddenly mushroomed in the already-crowded capital of Malé. Many new resorts popped up on untouched atolls, and man-made islets emerged from the ocean, such as Hulhumalé, a suburban extension of Malé connected to Velana International Airport, or Waldorf Astoria Ithaafushi, an artificial island hosting a resort developed by the eponymous company. This 'construction frenzy,' which required a diversification of migrant workers' profiles, had a strong impact on Maldives' total demand for foreign workers. The number of migrant workers registered in the XPAT Database (a Maldives Immigration-managed online registry of individuals and companies seeking to bring foreign workers into the country) thus increased by 44% between 2013 and 2016, from 57,424 to 83,136 (Plewa, 2018: 51). Maldives' two main sectors of employment, tourism and construction, have henceforth both been very demanding in terms of labour.

To satisfy the needs of manpower in the hospitality and construction sectors, the government and the tourism industry turned towards neighbouring countries, preferably Muslim, for both skilled and unskilled workers. Given the high rate of unemployment among young people in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal or Sri Lanka, Maldives was able to impose cheap wages and harsh working and living conditions to the imported workforce. Deceptive recruitment practices, wage theft, passport confiscation, unsafe working conditions, denial of health care and human rights protection are common practices.

It is not easy to assess the number of migrants living in Maldives: not only do figures vary from one source to another, but there is an important number of undocumented workers. The XPAT Database only provides information about legally registered foreigners. The most recent estimates found in newspaper articles and official documents indicate a population of 150,000 to 170,000 migrant workers, some 65,000 of whom are undocumented (Sun and TIP 2020). The latest official figures given by the Immigration Department are of an estimated 63,000 foreign nationals working in the Maldives illegally out of a migrant worker population of 144,607 (Controller of Immigration Mohamed Ahmed Hussain 'Hanafy' quoted in Maldives Independent, 2019a). This is considered quite a high proportion for a country whose current population is estimated to be 436,330.



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Rise in Human Trafficking

“People working in Bangladesh recruit workers there. They ask Bangladeshi workers a huge advance to organize their work visas / contract for the Maldives. People coming from farming areas sell their land and all their belongings to pay for their ticket. Once they come to the Maldives, they have nothing left, they are indebted. They have to accept any kind of low-paid job to reimburse their debt. They are documented when they arrive, but then, their visa expires, or their passport gets confiscated, and they have to reimburse their debt so they stay longer, illegally. They cannot go back to their country. The authorities let it happen.” (Interview with journalist from Maldivian Independent, 26 November 2019, Villingili) A journalist from Maldivian Independent thus explained to us the vicious circle that underpins labour trafficking in Maldives.

A government report in 2011 revealed human trafficking to be the second most lucrative industry after tourism – worth an estimated US\$123 million a year (Maldives Independent, 2019a). Since Maldives has not signed the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers, there is no international safeguard for migrant workers in Maldives. Furthermore, countries such as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, to name some of the main providers of the foreign workforce in Maldives, are not particularly keen to step in to defend migrant workers' rights. Most of Maldives' migrants have indeed been trapped by an unethical recruitment process starting in the home countries. Nepal, for instance, introduced a unique 'Free Visa: Free Ticket' policy to exonerate migrant workers from the heavy recruitment fees imposed by manpower agencies, but this policy has remained poorly enforced, and prospective Nepalese workers are still compelled to pay exorbitant fees for jobs abroad (Mandal 2019). Migrants do not fare any better once in Maldives. When they reach Maldives, their countries of origin are, most of the time, either unable or unwilling to step in to defend their rights, nor do they request the Maldivian government to respect them. Economic interests and inter-state relations are given priority over the condition of South Asian migrant workers. Migrants thus find themselves in an extremely precarious situation: not only are there no international safeguards, but there is also next to no protection coming from the migrants' home countries.

However, Maldives has adopted the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act (PHTA), which entered into effect on 8th December 2013. This step seems to indicate a willingness on the country's part to provide some minimal protection to migrants.² The question nonetheless remains as to whether this measure was taken to actually prevent human trafficking, or rather to improve the country's international image at a time when the harsh treatment suffered by migrant workers, which was being increasingly mediatised, had also started to be denounced by human rights watchdogs. Ever since the coming into effect of the act, Maldives has been under scrutiny by the US State Department: the yearly Trafficking in Persons Reports show that Maldives has been on the 'Tier 2 Watch List' in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020.

'Tier 2 Watch List' means that the reports indicate a rise in the trafficking of foreign workers in Maldives. The notion of 'trafficking' is further explained in the report: “Traffickers subject an unknown number of [...] foreign workers in Maldives – primarily Bangladeshi and Indian men in the construction and service sectors – to *practices indicative of forced labor, including fraudulent recruitment, confiscation of identity and travel documents, withholding or non-payment of wages, and debt-based coercion*. Migrant workers pay approximately \$2,500 to \$4,000 in recruitment fees to work in Maldives, contributing to their risk of debt-based coercion upon arrival.” (US State Department, 2020: 334, our emphasis) These practices of forced labour, which corroborate the explanations given by the journalist from Maldives Independent we interviewed, are highly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century indentured labour system, when recruitment practices, the confiscation of identity documents, the withholding of wages and the debt-trap combined to put workers in a slave-like situation. The 2020 report mainly deals with labour trafficking, but it was acknowledged by the journalist we interviewed, as well as in the previous report, that sex trafficking also takes place and goes unsanctioned Maldives – “there is sex trafficking too, young girls are imported from Thailand to satisfy Bangladeshis' needs as these men come for many years with no family” (Interview with journalist from Maldivian Independent, 26 November 2019, Villingili); “girls from Maldives and Bangladesh and – to a lesser extent – women from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe are subjected to sex trafficking in Maldives” (US State Department, 2019). However, it seems difficult to properly assess the trafficking situation in Maldives, not only because of the



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collusion of local and foreign traffickers, but also because of the lack of transparency and limited or unsuited efforts made by the Maldivian authorities (US State Department, 2020).

Indeed, the incentive for traffickers to engage in human trafficking, which is connected to the high demand for foreign workers, was also reinforced by some of the recent laws introduced by the Maldivian government. These laws tend to complicate the legal recruitment of foreign workers, thereby (although perhaps unwittingly) further encouraging illegal practices. One such law was meant to curtail youth unemployment in Maldives by introducing a quota system.³ Employers in tourist resorts have thus been requested to recruit 45% Maldivians for 55% foreign workers since 2017, which is no easy task considering the unwillingness of Maldivians to work in tourist resorts.⁴ Other employers are compelled to request a quota from the immigration authorities to employ foreign workers. As a consequence, foreign workers are assigned to a given employer, to perform a specified job on a pre-established worksite. In other words, construction companies can get a quota of foreign workers for the construction of one specific building and, when the job is done, migrants are expected to go home, while the construction company has to ask for a new quota to start the construction of another building. This system led to the practice known as 'quota-trading': employers who had managed to get an important quota would lend foreign workers to another company for a price. The quota system was eventually suspended and replaced by a prohibition to employ new migrants. In practice, both the quota system and the prohibition to employ new migrants, which made it more difficult and then impossible for employers to recruit foreign workers, have had the effect of fostering human trafficking.

However, Maldives' poor record in human trafficking also has to do with the failure to meet the minimum standards for elimination of trafficking, such as, first and foremost, indictment of employers. The first cases under the 2013 anti-human trafficking law were prosecuted in 2016, when three Bangladeshi men were sentenced to ten years in jail for sex trafficking. If trials seem to be ongoing in four other trafficking cases, no more convictions have been secured since then (Maldives Independent, 2019d). It has also been noted that the Prosecutor General's office was unable to provide information on the progress of human trafficking cases at the beginning of 2019 (Maldives Independent, 2019a). Furthermore, the Immigration Department has found itself under criticism later that year for deporting two Bangladeshis suspected of human trafficking without an investigation, and for failing to arrest any Maldivian accomplices (Maldives Independent, 2019d). This poor indictment record does not send the right signal to employers, and especially not to Maldivian employers, who can continue to operate with impunity.

The only reason why Maldives was not downgraded to the 'Tier 3 Watch List' in 2020, as it should have been given the rules set by the US State Department, is because of the establishment of the National Anti-Human Trafficking Steering Committee (NAHTSC), which is part of the Maldives National Anti-Human Trafficking Action Plan 2020-2022.⁵ It still remains to be seen whether this newly constituted committee, which may well be simply another gesture to improve the country's international image, will have a real impact on the reduction of human trafficking.

In the meantime, human trafficking continues to weigh on the working and living conditions of migrants, especially undocumented workers, in Maldives.

Working and Living Conditions of Migrants

The Human Rights Commission (HRCM), an independent body created by the Maldivian government to tackle human rights violations, regularly deplors the mistreatment and unsuitable working and living conditions of migrant workers in the Maldives (Maldives Independent, 2018b).

The most dramatic example of Maldives' harsh treatment may be the case of foreign workers on Thilafushi. This artificial islet, which has been dubbed "rubbish island" or "toxic bomb," hosts the national waste disposal plant and is located 7km West of Malé. On Thilafushi, workers, mostly from Bangladesh, are at the very bottom of the social ladder. A photo reportage on migrant workers published in *Maldives Independent* portrays a Bangladeshi working on Thilafushi: "Saiful Islam is a 26-year-old Bangladeshi who has been in the Maldives for two years. He works on Thilafushi, an island where waste is dumped and burned. He earns a monthly salary



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of \$250. 'I send money to my three kids and wife,' he says, struggling to string together the few Dhivehi words he has learned during his time in the country. He cannot afford to pay rent with the money he earns so he sleeps on a construction site." (Majeed, 2018) Migrants on Thilafushi, whether documented or not, could not find themselves in a worse situation. They live and work on the island where they are exposed to toxic fumes, they get a very low salary and no health protection, they are bound by up to seven-year contracts and they have no way to go home during that time.

One of the major problems regarding working conditions remains the lack of safety on the construction sites, resulting in injury and death of migrant workers. Selena Moshin, the Bangladesh High Commissioner between 2008 and 2010, remembers that: "The work is arduous and the danger of death is quite prevalent. The situation is dreadful. As High Commissioner (2008-2010) I found that on an average one Bangladeshi worker died each week. For instance one died from poisonous fumes while cleaning a well. He was just 22 years of age. While Bangladeshi labourers were constructing a resort villa, over a lagoon, a wooden pole fell over one of them and he died from head injury. Such events occurred regularly..." (quoted in Merrett, 2015) This is not a thing of the past: the then Bangladesh High Commissioner noted in 2017 that there had been 30 deaths among Bangladeshis in the first six months of 2017 (Maldives Independent, 2017c).

"Anyone walking the back streets of Malé is likely to find cramped, makeshift accommodation for foreign labourers of Bangladeshi origin at frequent intervals. Whether in the partially built insides of a construction site or a windowless iron shed housing dozens of workers in battery farming-style conditions, a migrant worker's sanctuary often consists of nothing more than sheet metal roofs and some crudely erected walls." (Merrett, 2015) This is how a foreign journalist depicts the living conditions of migrants in Maldives. *Sun's* reporters have visited one of the accommodation quarters on a construction site. They remarked that there were only one kitchen, two portable toilets, and three showers in an open area offering no privacy – in quarters which accommodate 60 workers confined by 5 to 10 to small cubicles separated by wooden partitions (Hussain, 2020h). The living conditions of migrants are deplored by artists too. Mariyam Omar created an installation for the "Others" exhibition [an exhibition on migrant workers organised by Transparency Maldives in 2015]. The installation included a paper box with an electricity switch which, when turned on, brought to light a small cage with livestock. She explains: "Corrugated tin cages is what comes to mind from both a visual and a sensory perception when looking at the living quarters of migrant workers in Maldives. [...] The absolute control most employers hold can be depicted literally in a switch that can be turned on and off if the workers refuse to work and live under inhumane conditions. [...] [W]e must realize that their living conditions are somewhat parallel or worse than that of livestock [...]"⁶ These depictions, whether real or artistic, all underline an ongoing disregard for migrants' accommodation, which journalists and activists have regularly denounced.

Recently, migrants' living conditions in Maldives have once again been under the limelight in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, when it was found out that foreign workers were more vulnerable than the rest of the Maldivian population. They were more exposed to the virus due to their sharing of congested living quarters, which got even more congested when Malé faced an influx of migrant resort workers who had found themselves displaced following the closure of resorts in April 2020 (Hussain, 2020c; see also South China Morning Post, 2020). At the beginning of June 2020, according to the Maldivian health authorities, the country had recorded 1,829 coronavirus cases, 32% of whom were Maldivians, while the remaining 68% were foreign nationals. 1,003 people – making for 54% of total coronavirus cases – are Bangladeshi (Hussain, 2020g). This prompted two reactions: Maldivian Red Crescent set up a fund to assist Maldives' migrant workers,⁷ while, at the beginning of May 2020, the government began moving migrant workers living in the Greater Malé Region, who were particularly at risk, to a quarantine facility established in Gulhifalhu by National Emergency Operations Center (NEOC).⁸ The situation in such quarantine facilities is particularly difficult, as can be seen from outbreaks of violence between migrant workers (Sun, 2020a). This, together with the fear of deportation, even prompted some migrants to try and escape the quarantine facilities (Hussain, 2020i).

The risk of deportation may well be the most serious fear of undocumented workers. Their illegal status puts them at the mercy of human traffickers, who confiscate their passport on arrival, exploit them at work and then threaten them with deportation if they complain about their situation. Deportation is a two-step process which involves first being held in a detention centre in Malé or Hulhumalé and, from there, being sent back to the country of origin. Migrants know that this is not just an empty threat: the Maldivian



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government had set a target to repatriate 20,000 migrants by the end of 2020 and, by October 2020, a total of 7,884 Bangladeshi had already been repatriated to Bangladesh (Hadi, 2020c).

However, the Maldivian government has also recently committed to regularise undocumented migrants, whose numbers were on the rise following the increase in human trafficking. A six-month programme was officially launched in September 2019 by the Economic Development Ministry, which took over the mandate for setting quotas and granting employment approvals from the Immigration Department (Maldives Independent, 2019c). After long lines stretched outside the registration office, it was decided that the Galolhu (national) stadium should be used to that effect (Interview with staff member from Transparency Maldives, 2 December 2019, Malé). Thousands of undocumented migrants filled up the national stadium in Malé one Saturday morning, as the Economic Development Ministry resumed the “regularisation programme” after a week-long hiatus (Maldives Independent, 2019f).

The various measures taken towards migrants not only epitomise hesitations regarding the treatment of migrants, especially undocumented workers, but also reflect recent changes in leadership. It is during the presidency of Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018) that, in an effort to curtail the number of migrants admitted in Maldives, the quota system was introduced – a measure which, as could be expected, increased the recourse to human trafficking. It is also during his mandate that the country maintained a poor record in both reduction of labour and sex trafficking and indictment of traffickers, leading to Maldives’ position on the ‘Tier 2 Watch List.’ Ibrahim Solih, the current President (2019-), has shown encouraging signs of reversing the trend. He launched a new action plan, the Maldives National Anti-Human Trafficking Action Plan 2020-2022, the results of which have yet to be seen in curtailing human trafficking. While he did not open the country to more migrants, maintaining instead the prohibition to employ new foreign workers, he embarked right after his election on the huge task of regularising the undocumented migrants already living in Maldives.

Other Human Rights Violations

Changes in leadership can also be accounted for in other human rights violations against migrants. In the general context of an authoritarian regime under President Yameen, it was to be expected that migrants, just like the rest of the Maldivian population, would be prohibited from staging political protests.

What differed in cases of curtailment to freedom of expression and demonstration was that all migrants, even privileged migrants, i.e. highly skilled workers such as teachers, doctors and accountants, were also targeted. In February 2018, during nationwide protests demanding the release of high-profile prisoners, migrants were discouraged from participating in any political activity by Maldives Immigration. They were reminded that “[p]articipation in any political activities will violate the conditions in which the visa is issued for expatriate workers” and that, as a result, “any expatriate [...] found violating immigration laws and participating in any political activity will be subject to strict penalties irrespective of nationality, or capacity of employment.” (Maldives Independent, 2018a)

There are other such examples of planned protests that were cancelled. In March 2015, migrant workers in Malé attempted to stage a protest following the murder of two Bangladeshis, but the demonstration was called off after the Department of Immigration threatened to cancel visas and take action against the employers of the migrant workers participating in the protest (Maldives Independent, 2015c; Maldives Independent, 2018a). A walk to mark the International Migrants Day was likewise cancelled in December 2015. The march had been planned by the Department of Immigration, diplomatic missions and the Maldives branch of the International Organisation for Migrants (IOM), but was called off at the last minute, either due to lack of preparations (per the Department of Immigration) or because the police refused to issue a permit for the protest (per the would-be protestors) (Maldives Independent, 2015c).

The election of President Solih was followed by an increase in the number of protests staged by migrants. This can be accounted for not so much by a worsening of the migrants’ situation under the new leadership, but by a renewed respect of freedom of expression and demonstration. The last cases of migrant protest concerned unpaid wages. A violent strike occurred on B. Bodufinolhu, an island under development, in July 2020 (Hadi, 2020a). Transparency Maldives reported that the case involved human trafficking, wage theft, confinement in an uninhabited island and failure to provide adequate meals (Sun, 2020b). This was the beginning of a



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wave of protests and unrest among migrant workers in the country. Migrant workers employed by Island Expert [the contractor for the housing project for security services in suburban Hulhumalé] staged a protest in early July 2020 over unpaid wages (Hussain, 2020h), while another violent strike in V. Atoll was put to a hold with the immediate arrest of two dozens of migrant workers (Hadi, 2020b).

These new protests were not suppressed as before, but prompted President Solih to meet with relevant stakeholders for discussions (Sun, 2020c). The fact that protests may lead to negotiation is an encouraging sign as regards to freedom of expression and demonstration. However, Maldives has again imposed restrictions on public gatherings, this time for sanitary reasons, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Himal, 2020). It is possible however that this may be just a parenthesis in an otherwise more respectful stance towards basic human rights.

Migrants suffer from other human rights violations in Maldives. The “Others” exhibition was put on to raise public awareness with regards to the treatment of migrants, but one of the goals was also to try and change the public’s outlook in an effort to fight racism and xenophobia in Maldives. South Asian migrants are looked down upon by Maldivian society. This general mindset has led to a number of discriminatory decisions. For instance, the decision to charge an entrance fee for expatriates to the redecorated Rasrani Park (renamed Sultan Park) in Malé was not targeted at tourists, but was meant to keep migrant workers away (Maldives Independent, 2017b). Another such example would be Ihavandhoo council’s new orders towards migrants. The council forces them to register within five days, subjects them to a 10pm curfew, bans them from public gatherings with the exception of Friday afternoons, prevents them from fishing, collecting wood, fronds or coconuts, and stops them from participating in events without an invitation (Maldives Independent, 2017a).

Such discriminatory treatment, as well as the persistent human rights violations towards migrants, prompted the Human Rights Commission (HRCM) to create an information card for expatriates. This card was created with the help of Indian and Bangladeshi embassies in Malé and the support of the International Organisation for Migration. It explains worker’s rights in three languages and provides the number of a hotline to report cases of human trafficking, withholding of payment, termination without notice, discrimination or unlawful arrest (Maldives Independent, 2018b). This is one of the latest attempts to empower migrants.

They may be more aware of their rights as a result, but this does not mean that they will use the hotline. The experience of Transparency Maldives’ legal camps for migrants is revelatory in that regard. There, migrants were provided with free legal aid, along with a translator. But they were afraid to come: they feared that, if they reported an issue with a manager, they would lose their job (Interview with staff member from Transparency Maldives, 2 December 2019, Malé).

Conclusion

The outbreak of Covid-19 has exacerbated a number of pre-existing issues regarding the treatment of migrants in Maldives and has served as an excuse to curtail the limited efforts made by President Solih since 2018 to have migrant rights respected. The vast regularisation programme was put on hold, while quarantine facilities specifically dedicated to migrants were being built in the Greater Malé Region. There has been encouraging news, most recently when the Defense Minister paid tribute to migrants on the occasion of International Migrants Day 2020 (Hadi, 2020d). Promises were then made again about the government’s commitment to improve migration management, so as to ensure safer and more orderly migration. More guarantees were offered regarding the fight against human trafficking. Yet much remains to be done in that domain: Maldivian employers and traffickers have so far been able to continue to impose harsh working and living conditions to migrants with impunity. This is especially true for undocumented workers, who are increasingly regarded as the figures of a twenty-first-century indentured labour system, that is, as the new coolies. Their plight regularly, but still too rarely, makes national and international news. It usually takes a dramatic incident, a protest or some charitable gesture from a local organisation or, on rarer occasions, a politician, to reveal some of the most gruesome aspects of life as a migrant in the Maldives. Tourists who aim straight for Maldives’ luxurious resorts on uninhabited islands and man-made



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islets offering white sandy beaches and striking blue waters therefore remain mostly unaware of what is going on the other side of Destination Paradise.

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¹ With an HDI [human development index] of 0.74 in 2019, the country ranks 95th in the category of high HDI countries. Per capita GNI [gross national income] increased from US\$7,481 in 1990 to US\$12,064 in 2000, then to US\$17,417 in 2019 (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020).

² By doing so, Maldives is in fact tackling the provision of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers which stipulates that “appropriate action should be encouraged in order to prevent and eliminate clandestine movements and trafficking in migrant workers.”

³ Youth unemployment in Maldives is quite high, with current estimates reaching one third of young Maldivians. This contains a part of voluntary unemployment, as the young Maldivians' qualifications do not match the country's economic needs, which are linked to the tourism and construction sectors. There is also a religious and societal aspect to it, as Maldivians tend to disapprove working in contact with tourists, on isolated resorts. This is the very reason why, historically, migrants have been recruited in Maldives.

⁴ See note 3. The Maldivian quota has already been reduced – the ratio was 55%-45% in 2012.

⁵ See: <https://www.gov.mv/en/files/maldives-national-anti-human-trafficking-action-plan-2020-2022.pdf>.

⁶ See: <http://transparency.mv/files/media/726a687000c2ee6144b754e6b58ba7f2.pdf>.

⁷ The fund has been opened up for donations for the one-month period from May 1 to 31 and has collected MVR 1.3 million in donations. The purpose of the fund is to expand the existing humanitarian efforts by Maldivian Red Crescent to aid migrant workers in distress, most notably by providing food for migrant workers whose livelihoods have been affected by the pandemic (Hussain, 2020f and Hussain, 2020g).

⁸ The quarantine order issued by the Director General of Public Health applies to: migrant workers who have no established place of employment or accommodation, migrant workers who are being monitored by Maldives Police Service, migrant workers among primary or secondary contacts of confirmed cases who are deemed to be vulnerable, and also migrant workers who do not fall within the aforementioned categories but are deemed to be vulnerable regardless (Hussain, 2020e).