

Mr Ahmed Hamza
Chairman,
Parliamentary Legal Committee
VA Private Ltd, VA Tower,
Dilkushaa Goalhi, Machchangoalhi,
Male, Maldives

16 December 2005

Dear Sir

Re: Support for drafting of Maldives freedom of information law

I am writing from the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), an international non-government organisation headquartered in New Delhi. CHRI's Right to Information (RTI) Programme works throughout the Commonwealth to promote the right to information, in particular, by assisting governments to develop strong right to information legislation and to support implementation of access laws.

I recently read in the *Haveeru Daily Online* news dated 27 November 2005 that a draft Maldives Freedom of Information Law has been sent to the Law Commission for its approval. The report also stated that the Attorney General's Office intends to begin implementing the draft law prior to its approval by the People's Majlis. I also note that in 2004, in an interview with the *Haveeru Daily Online* news, the Attorney General, Dr Hassan Saeed, stated that the draft bill would be sent to Parliament in 2005.¹

CHRI commends the Government for supporting the enactment and speedy implementation of a national right to information law. As you would be aware, recognising and implementing the right to access information - from government, and private bodies where they affect people's rights - is a simple, but extremely useful, step to open, effective and responsive governance and meaningful participatory development. For a relatively small cost and investment of time, the entrenchment of an effective access to information regime empowers people to more meaningfully engage in development and democratic processes. It also increases government transparency, increases accountability and reduces corruption, and thereby supports economic growth. (For a more detailed discussion of the value of the right to information for the Maldives, please see Annex 1)

I wanted to take this opportunity to offer the support of CHRI's RTI team to the Parliamentary Legal Committee of which you are the Chairman. I understand that the Committee is likely to be made responsible for reviewing the draft Bill, once it is submitted to Parliament, and providing recommendations to the Parliament for its improvement by amendment. CHRI's RTI team is always available for undertaking comparative legislative research or to review the draft Bill against international best practice standards. (For a more detailed discussion of the principles which should underpin an effective right to information law at Annex 2). We have already written to

¹(2004) *Maldives to have Freedom of Information Act*, *Haveeru Daily Online*, 27 May

President Gayoom and Dr Hassan Saeed, Attorney General and Chairperson Law Commission to offer similar support.

Notably, CHRI has considerable experience in this area. Our RTI team has already reviewed a number of draft right to information bills throughout the Commonwealth, including most recently, Government Bills produced in India and Kenya and civil society Bills in Malawi and Sierra Leone (please view our website at http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/international/laws_&_papers.htm for more). In India, we also have considerable implementation experience, as CHRI has been called on by more than 10 State Governments and the national government to assist with training of officials and various other discrete implementation tasks.

I would be very grateful to hear from you to advise how CHRI could be of most use in the process of developing and enacting a strong right to information law for the Maldives. More generally, CHRI would strongly encourage the Government to adopt a participatory approach towards the drafting process by consulting widely with the public and other key stakeholders before the Bill is finalised and tabled in Parliament. Experience has shown that a participatory law-making process can be a major factor in laying a strong foundation for an effective right to information regime.

For your information, I am also enclosing a copy of a comparative table of Commonwealth right to information laws, which summarises the key elements in the 12 RTI laws which are currently in force in the Commonwealth. I am also enclosing a copy of the new Indian Right to Information Act 2005, which was passed in June 2005, because it provides one of the most recent and best examples of right to information legislation in the Commonwealth. The Government may wish to use it as a model for the new Maldives law.

I would be very grateful if you could send to us a copy of the draft Maldives Freedom of Information Bill so that CHRI can begin to support the law-making process. If we can be of any other assistance in respect of entrenchment of a strong Maldives right to information law, please do not hesitate to contact me on + 91 9810 199 745 or +91 11 2685 0523 or via email at majadhun@vsnl.com. Alternatively, please contact Ms Charmaine Rodrigues, Co-Coordinator, Right to Information Programme at charmaine@humanrightsinitiative.org.

Yours sincerely



Maja Daruwala
Director

Encl: CHRI Report: *Open Sesame: Looking for Right to Information in the Commonwealth.*

- CHRI Comparative Table on Commonwealth Right to Information Laws.
- Indian *Right to Information Act 2005*

Annex 1 Arguments in support of the right to information

In 1946, more than fifty years ago, the United Nations General Assembly recognised that “Freedom of Information is a fundamental human right and the touchstone for all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated”.² Soon after, the right to information was given international legal status when it was enshrined in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and *to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*” (emphasis added).

Over time, the right to information has been reflected in a number of regional human rights instruments, including including the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights³, the American Convention on Human Rights⁴ and the European Charter of Human Rights⁵. This has placed the right to access information firmly within the body of universal human rights law.

In addition to the overarching significance of the right to information as a fundamental human right which must be protected and promoted by the state, the following arguments in support of the right should also be recalled when advocating the right to parliamentarians and other key stakeholders:

- ***It strengthens democracy:*** The right to access information gives practical meaning to the principles of participatory democracy. The underlying foundation of the democratic tradition rests on the premise of an informed constituency that is able thoughtfully to choose its representatives on the basis of the strength of their record and that is able to hold their government accountable for the policies and decisions it promulgates. The right to information has a crucial role in ensuring that citizens are better informed about the people they are electing and their activities while in government. Democracy is enhanced when people meaningfully engage with their institutions of governance and form their judgments on the basis of facts and evidence, rather than just empty promises and meaningless political slogans.
- ***It supports participatory development:*** Much of the failure of development strategies to date is attributable to the fact that, for years, they were designed and implemented in a closed environment - between governments and donors and without the involvement of *people*. If governments are obligated to provide information, people can be empowered to more meaningfully determine their own development destinies. They can assess for themselves why development strategies have gone askew and press for changes to put development back on track.

² UN General Assembly, (1946) Resolution 59(1), 65th Plenary Meeting, December 14.

³ See Article 9(1), *African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights*, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), 27 June 1981.

⁴ See Article 13(1), *American Convention on Human Rights*, 1969, Costa Rica, OAS Treaty Series No. 36, 1144 U.N.T.S. 123.

⁵ See Article 11(1), *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, 2000, Nice, Official Journal of the European Communities, C 364/1.

- ***It is a proven anti-corruption tool:*** In 2004, of the ten countries scoring best in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index, no fewer than eight had effective legislation enabling the public to see government files. In contrast, of the ten countries perceived to be the worst in terms of corruption, only one had a functioning access to information regime. The right to information increases transparency by opening up public and private decision-making processes to scrutiny.
- ***It supports economic development:*** The right to information provides crucial support to the market-friendly, good governance principles of transparency and accountability. Markets, like governments, do not function well in secret. Openness encourages a political and economic environment more conducive to the free market tenets of 'perfect information' and 'perfect competition'. In turn, this results in stronger growth, not least because it encourages greater investor confidence. Economic equity is also conditional upon freely accessible information because a *right* to information ensures that information itself does not become just another commodity that is corralled and cornered by the few for their sole benefit.
- ***It helps to reduce conflict:*** Democracy and national stability are enhanced by policies of openness which engender greater public trust in their representatives. Importantly, enhancing people's trust in their government goes some way to minimising the likelihood of conflict. Openness and information-sharing contribute to national stability by establishing a two-way dialogue between citizens and the state, reducing distance between government and people and thereby combating feelings of alienation. Systems that enable people to be part of, and personally scrutinise, decision-making processes reduce citizens' feelings of powerlessness and weakens perceptions of exclusion from opportunity or unfair advantage of one group over another.

Annex 2: Best Practice Legislative Principles

In CHRI's 2003 Report, *Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth* (see enclosed), which was launched in the margins of the 2003 CHOGM, the RTI team captured the key principles which should underpin any effective right to information law, drawing on international and regional standards and evolving State practice. Article 19, an NGO which specifically works on right to information, has also developed "Principles on Freedom of Information Legislation" which were endorsed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur in 2000.⁶ The Commonwealth of which the Maldives is a member - has also endorsed minimum standards on the right to information.⁷ These various generic standards have been summarised into the five principles below.

Maximum Disclosure

The value of access to information legislation comes from its importance in establishing a framework of open governance. In this context, the law must be premised on a clear commitment to the rule of maximum disclosure. This means that there should be a presumption in favour of access in the objectives clause of any Act. Every member of the public should have a specific *right* to receive information and those bodies covered by the Act therefore have an *obligation* to disclose information. Any person at all should be able to access information under the legislation, whether a citizen or not. People should not be required to provide a reason for requesting information.

To ensure that maximum disclosure occurs in practice, the definition of what is covered by the Act should be drafted broadly. Enshrining a right to access to "information" rather than only "records" or "documents" is therefore preferred. Further, the Act should not limit access only to information held by public bodies, but should also cover private bodies "*that carry out public functions or where their activities affect people's rights*". This recognises the fact that in this age where privatisation and outsourcing is increasingly being undertaken by governments, the private sector is gaining influence and impact on the public and therefore cannot be beyond their scrutiny. Part 3 of the South African *Promotion of Access to Information Act 2000* provides a very good example to draw on.

Bodies covered by the Act should not only have a duty to disclose information upon request, but should also be required to proactively publish and disseminate documents of general relevance to the public, for example, on their structure, norms

⁶ Hussain, A. (2000) Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression submitted in accordance with Commission resolution 1999/36, Doc.E/CN.4/2000/63, 5 April. See also Ligabo, A., Haraszti, M. & Bertoni, E. (2004) *Joint Declaration by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression*.

⁷ See (1999) Commonwealth Freedom of Information Principles, in *Promoting Open Government Commonwealth Principles And Guidelines On The Right To Know*, Report of the Expert Group Meeting on the Right to Know and the Promotion of Democracy and Development, Marlborough House, London, 30-31 March 1999.

and functioning, the documents they hold, their finances, activities, any opportunities for consultation and the content of decisions/policies affecting the public. Section 4 of the new Indian *Right to Information Act 2005* provides a useful model.

In order to support maximum information disclosure, the law should also provide protection for “whistleblowers”, that is, individuals who disclose information in contravention of the law and/or their employment contracts because they believe that such disclosure is in the public interest. Whistleblower protection is based on the premise that Individuals should be protected from legal, administrative or employment-related sanctions for releasing information on wrongdoing. It is important in order to send a message to the public that the government is serious about opening itself up to legitimate scrutiny.

Minimum Exceptions

The key aim of any exceptions should be to protect and promote the public interest. The law should therefore not allow room for a refusal to disclose information to be based on trying to protect government from embarrassment or the exposure of wrongdoing. In line with the commitment to maximum disclosure, exemptions to the rule of maximum disclosure should be kept to an absolute minimum and should be narrowly drawn. The list of exemptions should be comprehensive and other laws should not be permitted to extend them. Broad categories of exemption should be avoided and blanket exemptions for specific positions (eg. President) or bodies (eg. the Armed Services) should not be permitted; in a modern democracy there is no rational reason why such exemptions should be necessary. The law should require that other legislation be interpreted, as far as possible, in a manner consistent with its provisions.

Even where exemptions are included in legislation, they should still ALL be subject to a blanket “public interest override”, whereby a document which is presumed exempt under the Act should still be disclosed if the public interest in the specific case requires it.

Simple, Cheap and Quick Access Procedures:

A key test of an access law's effectiveness is the ease, inexpensiveness and promptness with which people seeking information are able to obtain it. The law should include clear and uncomplicated procedures that ensure quick responses at affordable fees. Applications should be simple and ensure that the illiterate and/or impecunious are not in practice barred from utilising the law. Officials should be tasked with assisting requesters. Any fees which are imposed for gaining access should also not be so high as to deter potential applicants. Best practice requires that fees should be limited only to cost recovery, and that no charges should be imposed for applications nor for search time; the latter, in particular, could easily result in prohibitive costs and defeat the intent of the law. The law should provide strict time limits for processing requests and these should be enforceable.

All public bodies should be required to establish open, accessible internal systems for ensuring the public's right to receive information. Likewise, provisions should be included in the law which require that appropriate record keeping and management systems are in place to ensure the effective implementation of the law.

Effective Enforcement: Independent Appeals Mechanisms & Penalties

Effective enforcement provisions ensure the success of access legislation. In practice, this requires that any refusal to disclose information is accompanied by substantive written reasons (so that the applicant has sufficient information upon which to appeal) and includes information regarding the processes for appeals.

While internal appeals provide an inexpensive first opportunity for review of a decision, oversight by an umpire independent of government pressure is a major safeguard against administrative lethargy, indifference or intransigence and is particularly welcome where court-based remedies are slow, costly and uncertain. The fear of independent scrutiny ensures that exemption clauses are interpreted responsibly and citizens' requests are not unnecessarily obstructed. While the courts satisfy the first criteria of independence, they are notoriously slow and can be difficult to access for the common person. As such, in many jurisdictions, special independent oversight bodies have been set up to decide complaints of non-disclosure. They have been found to be a cheaper, more efficient alternative to courts and enjoy public confidence when they are robustly independent, well-funded and procedurally simple.

Best practice supports the establishment of a dedicated Information Commission with a broad mandate to investigate non-compliance with the law, compel disclosure and impose sanctions for non-compliance. Experience from a number of Commonwealth jurisdictions, including Canada, England, Scotland and Western Australia, has shown that Information Commission(er)s have been very effective in raising the profile of the right to information and balancing against bureaucratic resistance to openness. Of course, there are alternatives to an Information Commission. For example, in Australia, the Administrative Appeals Tribunal has appeal powers and in New Zealand and Belize the Ombudsman can deal with complaints. However, experience has shown that these bodies are often already overworked and/or ineffective, such that they have rarely proven to be outspoken champions of access laws.

The powers of oversight bodies should include a power to impose penalties. Without an option for sanctions, such as fines for delay or even imprisonment for willful destruction of documents, there is no incentive for bodies subject to the Act to comply with its terms, as they will be aware that the worst that can happen is simply that they may eventually be required to disclose information.

In the first instance, legislation should clearly detail what activities will be considered offences under the Act. It is important that these provisions are comprehensive and identify all possible offences committed at all stages of the request process – for example, unreasonable delay or withholding of information, knowingly providing incorrect information, concealment or falsification of records, willful destruction of records without lawful authority, obstruction of the work of any public body under the Act and/or non-compliance with the Information Commissioner's orders.

Once the offences are detailed, sanctions need to be available to punish the commission of offences. International best practice demonstrates that punishment for serious offences can include imprisonment, as well as substantial fines. Notably, fines need to be sufficiently large to act as a serious disincentive to bad behaviour.

Corruption – the scourge that access laws assist to tackle – can result in huge windfalls for bureaucrats. The threat of fines and imprisonment can be an important deterrent, but must be large enough to balance out the gains from corrupt practices.

Monitoring and Promotion of Open Governance:

Many laws now include specific provisions empowering a specific body, such as an existing National Human Rights Commission or Ombudsman, or a newly-created Information Commissioner, to monitor and support the implementation of the Act. These bodies are often empowered to develop Codes of Practice or Guidelines for implementing specific provisions of the Act, such as those relating to records management. They are usually required to submit annual reports to parliament and are empowered to make recommendations for consideration by the government on improving implementation of the Act and breaking down cultures of secrecy in practice.

Although not incorporated in early forms of right to information legislation, it is increasingly common to include provisions in the law itself mandating a body to promote the Act and the concept of open governance. Such provisions specifically require that the government ensure that programmes are undertaken to educate the public and the officials responsible for administering the Act.
