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Media Coverage On Environmental Issues And Policies In The Maldives

By

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MEDIA COVERAGE ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND POLICIES IN THE MALDIVES.

28

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A. OPENING REMARKS

Environmental problems, issues, arguments and points of view have become very hot issues of debate throughout the world within the last four or five years. As issues take hold in our part of the world, both in the minds of the more-than-aware world of journalists and even the more complacent sectors of society in general, it becomes more the pet subject of the journalist than it ever was before.

In compiling this brief overview, I thank both the AMIC and Haveru for making this possible.

In addition, I thank my friend Ibrahim Waheed "Ogaru" for his moral and ideological support.

B. KEYNOTE

The Republic of Maldives, situated in the middle of the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean, comprises about two thousand coral islands, of which only two hundred islands are permanently inhabited. On these two hundred islands live the two hundred thousand persons who are normally called Maldivians --- Maldivians who have their own culture, speak their own tongue, and from time immemorial have been living in their own independent homeland which today seems to be next on the list of environmental victims!

Needless to say, the media does play an important role in disseminating information and heightening opinion on environmental issues. However, the media of the Republic of Maldives can only reach out to Maldivians. The time has come for us to reach out to our colleagues around the world.

Those in the Maldives are generally aware of an impending environmental crisis. President Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom, a man who thinks far and acts even in anticipation, himself a winner of the Global 500 Award of the UNEP, continues to call for global attention on environmental issues. We are right behind him! And justly so!

C. MAJOR ISSUES AT HAND

(i) The Greenhouse Effect

The Greenhouse Effect has become almost a household expression in our part of the world. In the Maldives, this is generally called the "Ozone Problem". As I do not desire to bore my colleagues with yet another description of the Greenhouse Effect, let it suffice for me to say that the highest natural formation on Maldivian soil is no more than three meters above sea level. Most inhabited land is generally below this. A sea-level rise of even 50 cm will certainly place more than half the population of the country in grave danger and kill off most plants.

In addition, groundwater, which some people still use for drinking, will turn for too brackish for consumption. All the beaches that tourists rave over shall surely disappear!

Anything above a two-metre wave-crest rise, ie about a one-metre rise in true sea level, shall definitely wipe the Maldives off the map!

(ii) Erosion

Already, global changes in weather patterns have affected our country. Coral islands formed thousands of years ago, and adapted to the two natural monsoons in the area, are now battered by highly unpredictable wave-surges, from directions least expected. Erosion of the worst kind has already taken viable and habitable land into the depths of the Indian Ocean.

(iii) Pollution and Waste Disposal

As is the case with most developing countries, rapid introduction of modern technology has brought with it its inevitable by-product --- pollution! In Male', the capital of the Maldives, the groundwater has been declared unfit for human consumption, partly due to salt water intrusion and partly due to disposal of waste. Reclamation of land from the sea by land fill has created highly infertile and chemically polluted land. Noise levels have gone up both from industrial machinery and mechanised transport. Gradually, yet steadily, this pattern is spreading to the outer islands despite various efforts to minimize the damage. Current legislation and public awareness programmes seem to work, though in some areas irreversible damage has been done.

(iv) Urban Overpopulation, Mining and Other Issues

Due to rapid development and the resulting sudden surge of economic activity in certain areas, overpopulation of these areas have led to serious problems in the availability of residential facilities, and the provision of basic services in the nature of health care, education and sewage and garbage disposal.

In addition, depletion of an economically population in the more rural areas have led to added difficulties in the further development of those areas.

In addition, mining of the coral reefs and sandbanks or beaches of rapidly developing areas for coral and sand, used in the construction of buildings, is now a serious problem.

These issues are now being seriously addressed by the government.

D. MEDIA COVERAGE

(i) By Television

The Maldives has one government-run TV station with only partial coverage of the country. On-air time is generally six hours per day in the evening. In this time, allowing for two newscasts, one in the local language and one in English, adver-

tisements, entertainment, and educational programmes, focused coverage of Environmental issues is not adequate by global standards. However, where most stations would use fill-in music, program guides and other forms of fillers, TV Maldives uses songs and messages aimed at increasing public awareness of environment-related issues. The response has been overwhelming.

(ii) By Radio

The Maldives has one government-run radio station broadcasting from early morning up until midnight on AM and FM. The AM frequency covers the country. The Voice of Maldives, in addition to between-programmes fillers of the nature used by TV Maldives, also runs a special programme on environmental issues. This has resulted in a tremendous response and heightened awareness within the population of the country.

(iii) By Newspapers

There are two daily newspapers in the country --- "Haveeru" and "Aafathis". The circulation of these papers is generally limited by geographical factors to the area round the capital. However, copies of these newspapers, especially of "Haveeru" are sent all over the country.

Though both papers run regular articles on the environment, "Haveeru" can already boast of having run a special page, on the environment, every day of the week for more than six years. This itself is a record in the country --- that of the longest-running page-feature under one major heading. The writer of this page also won the UNEP Global 500 Award.

(iv) By Magazines and Other Media

The Maldives has its own selection of magazines and leaflets. Generally the circulation of these is small. However, it is worth noting the "Thimaaveshi" and "Veshi" newsletters which focus expressly on environmental issues.

In addition, various NGO's and government agencies, especially the Ministry of Planning and Environment conduct their own programs aimed at increasing public awareness in the area of environmental issues. In addition to sponsoring and joining television and radio programs, they run regular campaigns, including information dissemination via posters, leaflets etc.

E. IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would note the following :

First, environmental awareness among the population of the country is generally high. Most people do understand that there is some danger posed by a damaged environment to the continued survival of the nation. However, most people do realise that there is hardly anything they can do about it themselves.

Next, it is felt that global attention is either not given, or is meager at best, to the dire fate awaiting us if the worst environmental danger facing us that of --- sea-level rise --- is not dealt with.

Thus, it is felt that increased media coverage of Maldivian environmental issues should now be extended globally and not just within the country. All genuine help given by any concerned agency shall be greatly appreciated.

I choose this particular medium, this particular workshop, to call on my colleagues in the universal league of concerned journalists to help disseminate this message.

Thank you.