

Brief on the Maldives' Efforts on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

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Thank you, Excellency,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen!

Assalam Alaikum, good morning.

I am LTC Ibrahim Naeem, Director at NCTC.

It is indeed a great honor for me to provide a briefing on the Maldives' efforts on counter terrorism and violent extremism in this important forum. I would like to give a very brief overview of the national approaches and progresses made in the area of counter terrorism in the last few years.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen!

The Maldives has long remained a peaceful and harmonious nation, often referred to as Paradise on Earth. However, as His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih have highlighted, "religious and political goals of a few, have resulted in the introduction of alien ideologies that promote terrorism and violent extremism, challenging community cohesion and our harmonious way of life, the very heart of our national identity."

The spread of treacherous ideologies such as that of Alqaida and ISIS, and the local movement of radicalization, motivating young Maldivians to travel to conflict zones to conduct so-called jihad, and to plan and execute terrorist attacks in the Maldives, remain as grave concerns to the unity, peace and security of the Maldives. In addition to the mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing challenges

of radicalization and violent extremism by worsening the socio-political, socio-economic and security environment, with extremists stepping up propaganda effort to target an audience under lock-down. Therefore, timely decisions and concrete actions to mitigate, contain, and degrade as well as to defeat these threats continue to be top priority for the government.

In this regard, for the first time in the history of the Maldives, government acknowledged this existential threat and adopted a ‘Zero Tolerance Policy’ on terrorism and violent extremism, which is exercised through a multi-disciplinary, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. Thus, the government of the Maldives is committed to programs that aim to reduce the risks of terrorism and violent extremism through a well-considered combination of traditional security as well as non-traditional security and preventive measures built on central themes of social cohesion, peace, respect and tolerance.

The first high level conference on peace and security held at the cabinet level in February 2019, was a watershed event in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. This conference provided much needed guidance to amend the Anti-Terrorism Act. The amendments resulted in defining “violent extremism” in the local context; designation and publishing of Conflict Zones and Foreign Terrorist Organizations; designation of intelligence agencies and legally mandating the sharing of intelligence at the national level; empowering and strengthening of Financial Intelligence Unit as well as facilitating effectiveness of investigation, prosecution and adjudication procedures.

Furthermore, it paved the way to establish the National Reintegration Center to institutionalize the de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration process, and set up the institutional mechanisms to deal with returning foreign terrorist fighters and members of their families.

The effort to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism, is conducted in two distinct prongs; namely, the kinetic response which is the traditional military and security responses, and the soft approach which focuses on preventing and countering violent extremism. The kinetic response is driven by the National Terrorism Response Plan, endorsed by the government in 2020, and is coordinated by the Counter Terrorism Steering Committee. Joint Inter Agency Operation Center was established in 2021 to spearhead the Kinetic Response in a well-established multi-agency setting.

In the soft approach, the guiding document is the National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, endorsed by the government in July 2020. The prevention effort is coordinated by the Counter Radicalization Committee, comprising of relevant government agencies. National Action Plan is implemented through a whole of nation approach involving government agencies, Civil Society Organizations and private actors. Top priorities in the prevention effort include reducing vulnerability of the Maldivian society through fostering resilience to radicalization and violent extremism. Special emphasis is given to addressing both the wider issues (push and pull factors) that might lead to radicalization and also to identify and prevent individuals moving towards religious or political violence.

In line with the National Action Plan on P/CVE, the Communication Strategy is formulated to guide the efforts to counter extremist narratives and promote the true message of Islam: peace and tolerance, and build resilience among local communities with a special focus on vulnerable groups. This strategy addresses three broad categories of audiences, namely, the society as a whole, those at risk of radicalization and those that are exposed to radicalization and violent extremism.

To understand the trends and patterns of the threats, and the driving factors of violent extremism in the Maldives, we conducted the Baseline Study on radicalization, which provided a comprehensive picture of the threat environment across the Maldives and a broader anatomy of the narratives used to spread the extremist ideology. Further assessments conducted in collaboration with universities and other stake holders include, “Youth Vulnerability Assessment” and “Women as Peace Builders and Agents of Change in the Maldives.” These important studies that have shed light on the broad spectrum of issues affecting the society. These studies have guided the multi-agency effort in preventing and countering violent extremism.

Based on the findings, various outreach and intervention programs are being initiated, especially targeting island communities and vulnerable demographical segments. In these programs, special importance is given to local community leadership, the education sector, women and youth leaders as well as civil society organizations. These programs are aimed at countering extremist ideologies, bringing about societal and attitudinal change, promoting the true message of Islam and campaigns for fostering resilience and building patriotic, cohesive and peace-loving communities.

Being a small nation with limited resources, we strongly believe that the fight against terrorism and violent extremism cannot be won without international collaboration and cooperation. Therefore, strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation and collaboration remain a critical pillar of our fight against terrorism and violent extremism to keep Maldives moderate, tolerant, peaceful and harmonious Islamic nation.

Thank you.