

Interview with the President of Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed

By AIR correspondent, Sarita Brara.



SB: Mr. President, Sir, very warm welcome to our programme. You drew the world attention to how grave the threat your country faces due to Climate Change by holding Cabinet meeting under-water. You have also come out with a declaration that you plan to present at Copenhagen summit?

Nasheed: For us, climate change is a very serious issue. Maldives is just 1.5 metres above the sea level and if the sea level rises, as they have been predicted, by even 70 or 80 centimetres, that would create serious challenges to Maldives. Even now, we have people having to move homes; water tables have been contaminated and fishing because of ocean temperature and is getting difficult and difficult. We also make a living on one per cent tourism and the wealth of the coral reefs are very very important for us.

So, there are a number of challenges that are already very very pressing and if difficult points happened, climate aberration can be very very serious. So, we thought that this is a very important and serious issue, especially it has a profound threat on our country, and we somehow have to bring the message across to the people. So, in that sense, we have been trying to say that this is the plight of the Maldives. And if this happens to the Maldives today, you can't stop it, it can happen in any other country tomorrow. So, Maldives is, in a sense, frontline country and we have to be able to give this message to the rest of the world, to say what is happening to the world.

SB: Do you think the developing countries are going to get a fair deal at the Copenhagen?

Nasheed: In my mind, we are all in it together. This is not just an issue for developing countries or the developed countries. So this is going to suffer and climate aberration and the results of that would be very strongly also felt in many western countries. So this is everyone's problem, we should all sit together and find a common solution. It is difficult to see how successful Copenhagen will be and developed countries and developing countries all of them have issues with each other and they are unable to they have to be enabled to get out of that and find a solution. I think, it is very important that we find a solution.

SB: Are you satisfied with the deliberations at the Delhi meet that focused mainly on the technological aspects like the transfer and development of green house technologies to combat climate change?

Nasheed: If we are going to reduce carbon emissions, we should be able to switch to more greener and renewable energy. To do that developing countries have to be able to produce cheaply, renewable plants and solar panels and wind mills and so on. They need that technology and also more of it, if we are to become carbon neutral. I think what technology transfer meeting suggested was that transfer of technology should be more widely possible and smoothly arrangeable and, therefore, the Prime Minister gave an example of the AIDS medicine, and so the copyright of these technologies is very very expensive. So, therefore, the capital cost of building the plants becomes so expensive. We need to find a solution to the problem.

SB: You also suggested at that conference that India can take lead in green power revolution. Could you elaborate on that?

Nasheed: My point is that there is no other country, or there are very few other countries, who have the social strength to take on something as big as saving the planet. I find it very difficult to find any other country who has more moral authority, in fact, to do or to attempt something like that. If you have a look at the strength of India, and Indians have been able to beat one of the biggest European empires empty handed, and in the process found freedom for a number of countries in the world, and soon after that, establishing the biggest democracy in the world, and now becoming one of the richest countries. So, India has so much capacity to take this on instead of becoming more defensive, in a sense, reactive, or the idea of pointing finger at someone. I think, India has the capacity to take it on. They have done in many instances and I am sure, India will rise to the occasion. So, from where I stand, I see that here is a possibility for India to actually lead in this.

SB: Maldives is a very strategically placed as far as India is concerned. A few months back our Indian Defence Minister had visited your country. How do you feel the cooperation between the two nations as far as area of defence is concerned. And there has also been some talk of security threat from Maldives.

Nasheed: Maldives' security and the Indian security is very much common and linked. So, Maldives being a small country as well, we would always need assistance in many many areas of our nationhood and statehood. Of course, Maldives is strategically placed in the Indian Ocean and India's security is very much dependent on how secure the Maldives is. So, there is a common denominator. So we requested India to supply us with radar stations, but that was mainly because we want to look after our fishing fields. I am sure that can work to look after any other vessel coming in or going out of our own territory. Just recently, a few days back, we were able to capture two fishing boats who were illegally fishing there. You would know that again, a few days back, Somali pirates have, kind of captured, some Indian fishing vessels, and also a Chinese ship. So, Indian Ocean has to be peaceful and people have to be able to travel through the the Indian Ocean, people have to be able to travel safely through the Indian Ocean. So, for India there is, there is room for us to develop a common policy of how we may be able to best defend the Indian Ocean.

SB: You have also said that Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat to your country as well. What steps have your Government taken and how can India and your country can fight this menace especially now that terrorism like in the Mumbai attack through

the sea route; sea piracy is also becoming more and more dangerous?

Nasheed: You see, Maldives is a Muslim country and we have a serious situation. People are being recruited from the Maldives by groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They go to Afghanistan or Pakistan. They are sometimes trained. They sometimes take part in whatever religious war that is happening in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is again a very serious issue for us. They come back home, therefore, they can destabilize our society. In fact, we have a number of people who have already come back from Pakistan and Afghanistan and there is a thriving separatist ideology, living separately, having a lot of differences in the culture, in the way they pray and the way they practise their religion. So, these are stressing the society and they are creating for us a number of other issues. So, we come up with a rehabilitation programme to start with. We have to be able to identify why young Maldivians are going to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their mothers are unaware of where they are going. They simply feel that they are going for higher studies or this is an education opportunity.

So one of the things we really have to do is to make higher education and high secondary education, more widely available for most Maldivians all throughout the country. And also, because we do not have that much capacity in this kind of delivery and that kind of education, we can rely upon Indian institutions to give us placements for these students.

In one sense, you have to go on rehabilitating them. I don't think, arresting them is a solution. Previous Government went on arresting everyone during the 1990s. It did not solve the problem at all. At the same time, we have to be very vigilant. We have to observe what is going on. We have to have the necessary information. We have to have the necessary framework of

national, how we collect data, how we gather them and how we use them. All that is going on. It is not an easy thing. It is a challenging issue. But, we feel that we have the grips of it. I should not say this, but Maldives has been fairly intact, we hope to remain intact. There has been no attack. We have to be vigilant and we have to be very very strong and are properly thinking about what is going on. There is an issue, but we are dealing with it.

SB: Of course, Maldives is interested in more Indian companies investing there. Which are the areas you would want Indian companies to invest and what has been your feedback?

Nasheed: There are even now Indian companies investing in tourism. Return from tourism to these companies would have been good. But, we want to attract more investments in housing, in transport, in education, in water and sewage, in utilities, in electricity, in airports, ports. So we have been advertising for that and GMR has shown an interest in developing one of the regional airports to an international airport. We are also hopeful that Tata will start building homes in the Maldives. So, there is interest and there is cooperation going on, especially between private sector companies. And we want to see how best that engagement can work out.

SB: Sir, Maldives has perhaps the highest per capita income in South Asia and one of the main drivers of your country's economy is tourism. And there is more scope for the two countries to get together on this.

Nasheed: One of the new policies of our Government is to create a mid-market. Right now, tourism in Maldives is very very

expensive. But, because we are so close to Mumbai and Delhi and especially if we are able to develop a northern airport, then India can become fairly fairly close, within two hours reach. If we can develop some amount of rooms with not such high costs, I think there can be very good traffic, a market from India. So, there is a lot of room for development and I think, Indian companies do see that. We will be able to seriously get the projects and the programme going in the next few months.

SB: Sir, now that the democracy has been ushered in your country, how is it progressing and what have been the main challenges since you took over?

Nasheed: We still have to strengthen all the independent institutions. We have the Human Rights Commission which is functioning, but also civil services commission, the judiciary and so, strengthening the independent institutions that work has to go on. But, at the same time, we lack capacity, particularly in judiciary. The new Constitution separated powers and the formulation of these powers; we had the Presidential election to create the executive. And then we had the parliamentary election to create legislature. But, we have not done anything to actually reformulate or reform the judiciary. All that we have done is just to say that you are independent. There is a Supreme Court now. There is a transitional Supreme Court. So, we need to be able to strengthen the judiciary and most of the judges who are on the judiciary now are from the past rather from the previous administration. They are finding difficult to become more and more professional while even the legislature, the Parliament, is very active and robust and also we have the legislature now, gone through the elections and we have received a mandate from the people. But, nothing is happening in the judiciary. So, we think,

that this is an area where we should concentrate and try to build capacity in the judiciary. And also in the Police, we need better policing. We have a serious heroin problem. We need to improve the police force. Of course, we are working on that. Our country also lacks a comprehensive transport system. So, we are in the process of establishing a transport system. When you do not have a proper transport system, you have strains on the health services. There is a lot of work still to be done - building the nation brick by brick and we hope to do it with the limited resources we have as best as we can and, of course, we are thankful for the international community, especially India who has been assisting us in trying to build democracy in the Maldives.

SB: So, we all wish you well in that endeavour. I believe that you have grown up listening to All India Radio. Tell us a little about that

Nasheed: When we were, even when we were little, you could tune into All India Radio in the Maldives. We had Radio Maldives. But, of course, All India Radio had a number of much better programmes. So, we have grown up listening to All India Radio. I actually was at times banished to Islands and then sometimes all what I had, there was a radio somewhere on the island and did listen to a lot of All India Radio. It is such a pleasure to be here.

SB: Thank you so much talking to us.

Nasheed: Thanks you very much for having me
