

# National Counter Terrorism Centre



NCTC Newsletter - Volume 38: May 2020

## Maldives Strengthen National Unity during COVID-19

“As we head for the surge, the #ActionPlan’s ready, each Agency assigned tasks, dedicated #COVID19 treatment facilities almost done, manpower being trained, logistics setup. It’s a 24/7 effort in a very difficult setting. On behalf of NEOC I thank ALL!

May Allah bless our efforts!”

- Hon. Minister Mariya Ahmed Didi -





children around the country.



Vice President Faisal Naseem had deliberated on changes to the education sector and the continuity of teaching amidst the COVID-19, with senior representatives and officials of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education and other stakeholders.

Parents fullest contribution and support is vital for the children's wellbeing regardless of the challenges being faced due to the global and national prevalence of COVID-19. All individuals and institutions should work together with fresh energy to build better capacity and resources.



There is no doubt that national unity has unveiled true spirit and the efforts of today's heroes starting from the health professionals testing and caring for

the sick, waste management, people suiting up for regular cleaning and disinfecting areas, those delivering essential needs and other supplies, volunteers collecting and distributing charity to those in need, Emergency Response Units and those providing Psychosocial Support, expert teams making strategic decisions, ports services, security services and law enforcement agencies working around the clock defending, protecting and serving the people.

Furthermore, crucial areas have been attended with the assistance of security forces. "MoH RRT and MRC along with MNDF is conducting rapid health and needs assessments of expatriate dwellings by setting up Mobile Medical Camps" - Chief of Defence Force.

Maldives Police Service (MPS) continues to assist in the stay at home campaign during the lockdown.



Amidst the pandemic, Police and Defence Force are also engaging to assist the people affected by seasonal storms in the country.



Reference: [presidency.gov.mv](http://presidency.gov.mv), [moe.gov.mv](http://moe.gov.mv) and other medias

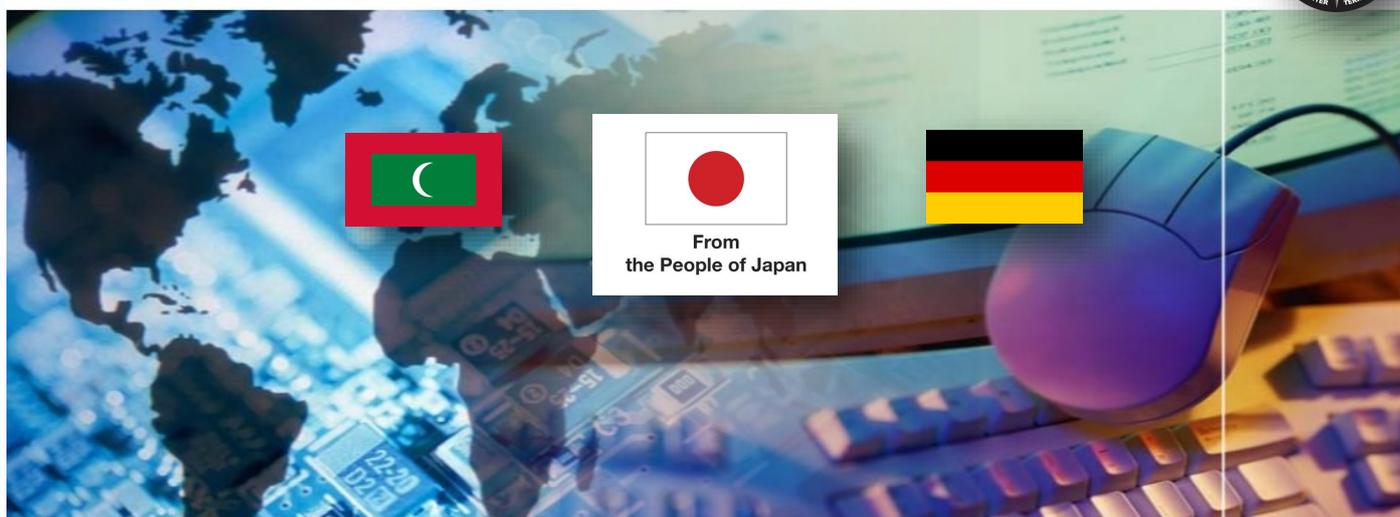
# NCTC and Stakeholders Participated in the Online Consultation Meetings Hosted by UNODC

11 May 2020



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



During COVID-19 internet is a powerful tool, and it is often used by for terrorist purposes. With contribution of UNODC in the capacity building of Maldives stakeholders for *Counter Terrorism* (CT) and *Preventing Violent Extremism* (PVE) has amended its national anti-terrorism legislation, prohibiting the use of violent extremist propaganda.

Following this from 11 to 12 May 2020 a regional PVE network consultation meeting was held and were attended by 54 participants from NGOs, CSOs and government stakeholders.

It is highly appreciated for the generous funding and support contributed by the Government of Germany for this meeting.

Experts from UNODC and Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) EU presented their sessions about how to operate South Asian Regional Network based on the experience of EU RAN and followed by information on aligned and different needs of the network and lastly

information and aligned needs of CSOs.

On 13 May 2020 a second national consultation meeting was held on “Developing a multi-disciplinary national plan and strategy for CT and PVE and addressing returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) and their families in the context of COVID-19”, a generous funding and support contributed by the Government of Japan.

This session included a presentation by NCTC on current status on Maldives' national action plan and strategy for countering terrorism, PCVE and addressing returning FTFs and their families in the context of covid19. During this presentation the ongoing work for the National Reintegration Center was discussed by Maldives Police representative. The meeting was concluded with a comprehensive round table discussion on the challenges and threats in global and local context during the COVID-19 pandemic .

Source: [nctc.gov.mv](http://nctc.gov.mv), [unodc.org](http://unodc.org)

# Youth Leadership and Volunteerism in crisis situation

By: Mr. Ahmed Irash



We all agree the world is facing an unprecedented situation due to the fast spread of a global pandemic known as Corona Virus or COVID-19. The world has closed down most of its borders and imposed travel restrictions in an effort to overcome the situation, entire world has come to a standstill. Maldivian borders were closed on 27th March 2020 putting a historical halt to the 47 years long tourism industry which the majority of youth depended on.

While the number of affected cases has reached over five million and deaths reaching four hundred thousand globally. COVID-19 does not care who we are, where we live, what we believe or about any other distinction. It continues to unleash a numerous issues and concern which are directly affected to youth and the communities they live in. As such their leadership and volunteerism is critical at such an important time.

In Maldives we have significantly one of the largest youth population amongst other countries worldwide with almost 40% of the total population under the age of 35 years. We see a lot of youth volunteers and youth-led organisations proactively assisting in combating the spread of the virus and working to mitigate and address the pandemic's impact. For example, youth are involved in different awareness programs enhancing connections and supporting the community efforts. Whilst others are addressing the economic and food security impact and more immediate assistance required during the crisis.

There is, however, an increasing demand for more improved conditions which will see increased youth joining the national and global movement to combat this pandemic and also coming out safe on the other side.

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We also have numerous challenges which needs to be attended, proper health care, safety and security are of utmost importance. Economic means such as assurance of employment opportunities and seeking their participation in decision-making processes are important. Most of these issues are non-negotiable; because the youths are no longer the leaders of tomorrow but of today.

How to recognize the value of their actions and their potential to advance during crisis situations, and; how to understand the specific impacts such pandemic has and will have on youth, ensuring that any related responses uphold and address mental health, human rights and other specific needs connected with youth.



We are overwhelmed by the increased number of stories coming from around the world including within our own community where we see youth are working together to protect themselves and their households from this pandemic, to support their communities, and to prevent the spread of an outbreak. Within frontline support staff, Doctors, Nurses, Lab technicians, emergency support staff, authorities in the front line, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Maldivian Red Crescent, Police, MNDF, Scouts, Girl Guides, National Cadet Corps, Media, Shops &



Restaurants providing support, each and every one we salute and appreciate their work.

We have initiated a lot of volunteer programs here in Maldives lead by the Minister of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment, staff and volunteers helping vulnerable families, persons with disabilities, people who needed food and other essential supplies including medicines and many more.

This is the time for youth to take action. Youth can do many things to keep the community safe, including staying informed, fighting misinformation, doing your part to flatten the curve, and most importantly - letting your friends know what they can do, too.

#Wearinthetogether and we will win the fight against the invisible enemy. We hope that you Stay Safe and Stay United.

### **Acknowledgement**

*Mr. Ahmed Irash works in the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment as the Political Head of Youth Department. As a permanent member of the Counter Radicalisation Committee of NCTC, his insight in promoting peace and security gives a great contribution in strategic communications for PCVE efforts by the government of Maldives.*

# UN Resident Coordinator to Maldives Calls on Director General NCTC

21 April 2020

## Online Conference



Amidst the COVID-19 restrictions NCTC continues its collaborations with stakeholders. Hence, NCTC officials held their initial conference with the United Nations Resident Coordinator (RC) to Maldives, Ms. Catherine Haswell and her team through online call on Thursday, 21st May 2020.

All staff of NCTC acknowledges the dedication by the United Nation's leadership in contributing their efforts for peace and security of Maldives.

During this meeting discussions focused on future areas of collaborations and assistance to the CT and PCVE efforts in the Maldives.

RC's focus on to support NCTC to consolidate national CT/PCVE efforts as well as UN and partner nations (donors) efforts.

Secondly, UN support to NCTC in building capacity behind for Criminal Justice Response mechanism, enabling them to win the CT cases

Most importantly, focus of RC to meet with Hon. Minister of Defence, with the aim to see what Hon. Minister would like to focus and need from UN. Identify key needs in the area of CT and PCVE in order to fill the national capacity gaps.

**"I want you to know that  
you are not alone and that  
the UN stands with you."**

**VLADIMIR VORONKOV**  
Under-Secretary-General, UN Office of Counter-Terrorism

 UNITED NATIONS  
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM  
UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCT)

Source: [un.org](http://un.org)

# COVID 19: Incubator for Online Extremism

*By: Dr. Mariyam Shahuneeza Naseer*

## **Introduction**

Over the past few years, it has become increasingly and more broadly recognized that the internet and social media platforms which transcended geographical borders are being utilized by extremist groups to recruit, radicalize, and promote violent extremism (Conway, 2017; Lee, 2020; Neo, 2019). The bitter truth is extremists are well ahead of time and technology savvy. A handful of studies show that extremists have been using technology since 1990s not only to convey their cause and attract supporters but also to engage and recruit individuals (Conway, Scrivens, & McNair, 2019; Noor, 2020; PBS, 2017). By early to mid-2000s innovative internet strategies were used to organize, coordinate, and collaborate attacks in addition to communication, recruitment, and propaganda (Conway et al., 2019; Noor, 2020).

In this article “extremists” is not used to represent those who hold extreme religious views but to represent in general any individual or a group holding any extreme views including that of social, religious, political, and those who encourage violence, crimes, or any other extreme action. Therefore, at this point it is important to acknowledge that these individuals or groups could hold diverse or opposing views yet they are unified in their strategic intent to distort the nature of reality and to sow disorder.

The emergence of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is adding fuel to the fire by forcing millions of people to stay mostly at home, which, has made people to spend more time online making them easier targets and potential victims of violent extremist groups or individuals acting alone (Cellini, Canale, Mioni, & Costa, 2020; Koeze & Popper, 2020; Swartz, 2020). COVID-19 is not only a health challenge but also a psychological challenge. People are in an uncertain frame of mind; morally weak and susceptible to radicalization. The purpose of this article is to examine the efforts of extremists in using internet and social media platforms to promote their agenda amid COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative meta-synthesis

approach drawing on a mixture of academic and grey literature published by local as well as international organizations.

## **Cyber Attacks**

Since the majority of the world’s population are relying on internet to access services which were otherwise accessed offline, a cyber-attack directed against critical infrastructures including key strategic government organizations could potentially cause significant disruption and damage, conceivably leading to destabilization and shutdown of countries (Erez, 2018; Maliukevičius, 2015; Radoini, 2020). Extremists have stepped up their efforts amid COVID-19 increasing the number of cyber-attacks worldwide principally targeting health sector at large (Radoini, 2020; WHO, 2020; Stein & Jacobs, 2020). It is noteworthy that recent cyber-attacks in the Maldives were targeted to health sector and other agencies that are directly involved in COVID-19 response. For example, it was reported that unauthorized access to Health Protection Agency (HPA)’s official website, the official twitter account and Facebook account of Tourism Ministry, and the twitter account of Indhira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) were gained recently (Dhuvas MV, 2020; Malsa, 2020; Munavvar, 2020; Shaany, 2020). In addition, Malsa (2020) reported that police “confirmed a large scale cyberattack against frontline workers, particularly doctors” which is similar to what is being reported all over the world as acts of online extremism amid COVID-19.

## **Spreading Disinformation**

in Increased dependency and time spent on internet combined with sense of confinement, uncertainty, and fear generated from COVID-19 lockdown has presented itself the perfect opportunity for the extremists to resort to spreading disinformation in attempts to radicalize like-minded individuals, threatening public safety, and causing undue panic among the general public through calls for violence (Fordham, 2020; Murphy, Radoini, 2020). Murphy and colleagues (2020) reported instances where extremists had been purposely

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spreading false information related to COVID-19 in an attempt to spread hatred towards the government. For example, in Australia, rumors claiming the preventive measures taken against COVID-19 was to control the people were spread through social media (Avis, 2020). This is clearly an attempt to stoke distrust in government and divide the society.

Let us now take a closer look at the Maldives. It was reported in The Edition that the hackers left a clip on HPA website which claimed the government is not “free to make decisions based on what is right for its people” as the government “taken charge” by another country (Munavvar, 2020). Furthermore, Munavvar (2020) reported “in the video, a masked individual is seen speaking in English, criticizing precautionary measures implemented to contain COVID-19 and issuing a threat” to the government, demanding their needs be met, otherwise threatening to continue the attacks which would jeopardize the peace and harmony of the Nation. Dubey (2020) published the screenshots of messages hackers left on the twitter account of Ministry of Tourism which questioned the government regarding the “free aid given to Maldives” claiming they “got more info about the dirty jobs...” which clearly falls under attempts to spread hatred towards the government through planting the seed of doubt in the minds of general public. On 29 May 2020 a picture was circulated all over social media claiming that a person who was in a quarantine facility was found dead in bathtub which was later debunked as a hoax by Ministry of Health (Mihaaru, 2020). This raises serious questions in relation to the purpose of spreading this particular piece of disinformation at height of pandemic particularly concerning a person who was in a quarantine facility (these facilities are managed by the government).

### **Radicalization, Recruitment and Calls for Violence and Hate Crimes**

Online propaganda, radicalization campaigns, and recruitment methodologies used by the extremists are of same standards (if not better) that of the world’s best marketers (Sultan, 2017). Avis (2020) explored how previous pandemics affected radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist groups and predicted that the current crisis created the perfect conditions for recruitment and radicalization. For example, unsupervised screen time makes it easier for extremists to exploit the grievances of children and

youth at an uncertain time like present where in most cases the entire family is in distress or confusion (Avis, 2020; Cellini et al., 2020; Koeze & Popper, 2020; Swartz, 2020).

Avis (2020) proclaimed that chat forums have been used to discuss COVID-19 including using virus to infect people, attacking medical centers etc. An article published by an online newspaper on 26 May 2020 claimed that a Maldivian was encouraging on social media to spread COVID-19 (Nawaz, 2020a). At this point, a critical open question is whether, in the Maldivian context, this incident can be classified under “calls for violence”. Of course, on the same day it was also reported that the individual apologized for calling to spread COVID-19 (Nawaz, 2020b). Not forgetting that the person is also a human, this raises a few questions such as the genuineness of the apology, is this a cry for help? Could he be an easy target? How do we protect him from such or address the issue before it becomes an emergency?

According to NPR (2020) FBI intelligence report predicted an increase of hate crimes against Asian Americans during the pandemic. The Indian Express (2020) and the China Global Television Network (2020) reported that in fact hate crimes against race and ethnicity spiked in the US amid COVID-19 outbreak. To my knowledge, in the case of Maldives, there is no substantial literature discussing hate crimes amid COVID-19 (or at least my search failed to locate any such literature). Absence or lack of evidence does not necessarily prove the absence of something, which leads to the question: did any one of us witness any hate crimes or hate speech or anything that can be classified as such against the expatriate workers on any of the social media platforms?

### **Preventive Measures**

Evidently, preventing and countering any form or kind of extremism successfully requires a balanced approach between security-related strategies and initiatives, and those that address the underlying motivations and causes for participation in, and support of, a violent extremist organization or an individual (Siegel, Brickman, Goldberg, & Pat-Horenczyk, 2019). Extremist activities have shifted from physical world to virtual world, and are fully immersed in social media.

Traditional, security-oriented ...continued on page 10

approaches are insufficient to effectively address the threat extremism, particularly in the medium- and long-term as today radicalization exists in cyberspace (Fenstermacher, Leventhal, & Canna, 2011; Ranstorp, Gustafsson, Hyllengren, & Ahlin, 2016; Siegel et al., 2019; Sultan, 2017). Keeping in mind that their power structures, organization, and the processes are commendable, new strategies are needed to combat this online extremism.

Briggs and Feve (2014, p 3-5) put forward three areas government should focus its efforts in countering online extremism:

1. *Strengthening digital literacy and critical consumption among young people:*

Government could support to raise awareness on how to identify and deal with fake news and hateful rhetoric by conducting age-appropriate goal-oriented programmes in government schools and other government institutions. Moreover, government could also provide in-kind support and funding to those Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working with youth and vulnerable communities to conduct such programmes.

2. *Increasing counter-messaging, counter-narrative, and alternative narrative activity:*

Briggs and Feve (2014) suggested the involvement of NGOs and recommended the government to invest a significant amount of funding to support NGOs that are able to offer credible alternatives as government alone is not enough to “play an active ‘messenger’ role in counter-narrative” (p. 3).

3. *Building the capacity of credible messengers:*

Once the credible messengers are identified, assistance could be provided to educate and train them in technology, production, communication, and campaigning as online radicalization is on the rise and undoubtedly those extremists see online platforms an important tool to promote their agenda (Briggs & Feve, 2014).

I believe little things matter and can make a positive difference. In my opinion, instead of suppressing information, openly addressing the concerns raised by the general public could also help in securing the public trust. For instance, let us consider a hypothetical situation. An individual asks an authority to verify information that is being shared on social media. One response is to tell the individual not to ask

such questions while the other is to address the concern by simply stating whether the information shared is true or false. In this situation, I believe by not addressing the question, one is creating room for doubt. However, if the question were addressed, it would have comforted the individual or the group of individuals who were keen to know the truth. Well, that is my opinion. Now, I will leave it up to the readers to judge the situation and decide which one of the responses would have made a positive difference...

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urges-vigilance

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