



Migration Profile

MALDIVE ISLANDS

A. Executive Summary

The Republic of Maldives is an archipelagic country located in South Asia, in the Indian Ocean. It includes a chain of nearly 1,200 islands, most of them unpopulated.ⁱ It is the flattest country in the world, with a maximum altitude of only 2.4 metres above sea level on Villingili island. It is made up of coral islands, reefs, and living coral barriers.ⁱⁱ

Regarding the immigrant population in Maldives, most of them come from Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka. A small percentage of them are from China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Nepal; however their number has been steadily increasing.ⁱⁱⁱ Conversely, the oldest Maldivian diasporas are settled on Minicoy Island, India, and Kerala.^{iv} In 2019, the main destinations for Maldivians were Sri Lanka, Australia, the United Kingdom, India, and South Africa.^v There is no data available regarding refugees in the country or the existence of national refugee protection programs.^{vi}

Despite a sharp fall in economic activity during the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2021 it recovered quickly.^{vii} The main source for the Maldivian economy is tourism, which makes it highly vulnerable to macroeconomic and external shocks. Its economy is also heavily import-dependent, and the rise in global commodity prices has had a heavy impact on the country.^{viii}

In 2021 its GDP was US\$ 5,405,576,240,^{ix} experiencing an annual growth rate of 41.7% compared to the one from the previous year, which had decreased -33.5%.^x Foreign Direct Investment net inflows amounted to 8.2% of its GDP.^{xi} Moreover, the inflation rate was 0.5% of its GDP, experiencing an increase since the previous year (-1.4%).^{xii}

Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The Maldives is an archipelago located in the Indian Ocean (bordering Sri Lanka to the southwest) which comprises 1,192 islands, of which only 203 are inhabited.^{xiii} It is one of the world's most densely populated and flattest countries, with a maximum altitude of 2.4 metres above sea level on Villingili Island.^{xiv} Maldives is made up of 26 natural atolls organised into 20 administrative atolls, and its capital city is Male (with 103,693 inhabitants).^{xv} It has a total surface area of 300 sq. km and a total population of 522,464.^{xvi} Besides the capital, only two more urban areas are officially recognized as city dwellings: Addu City (33,700 inhabitants) and Fuvahmulah (8,000 inhabitants).^{xvii}

The official language is Maldivian (also known as Dhivehi), although English (widely used), Arabic and Hindi are also spoken.^{xviii} Regarding its ethnic distribution, there is a “homogenous mixture of Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab, Australasian, and African.”^{xix}

Islam is the state religion as established by the 2008 constitution, and Non-Muslims cannot be or become citizens.

II. International and Internal Migrants

The geographical disposition of the Maldivian Islands makes equal access to essential services difficult, including education and healthcare.^{xx}

In 2021, there were 182,666 international migrants registered in Maldives, and only 9% of them were women, while the remaining 89% were men.^{xxi} 57% of the migrants are Bangladeshi, 24% are Indian, and 11% are Sri Lankan. Their median age is 33 years old. In a small percentage, Chinese, Philippine, Indonesian, and Nepalese have also arrived in the islands and lately their presence has been increasing. Most of them are male (88%) compared to women (12%). In the case of Bangladeshi migrants, 99% of them are men.^{xxii}

40% of migrant workers live in Male island, where 8.8% of Maldives’ population is at risk of poverty. Migrants residing here often face violence and discrimination.^{xxiii} They account for approximately a quarter to a third of the country's population. They live in congested areas and are mainly lower-skilled workers employed in the construction and tourism business. In addition, many of them work in agriculture and in the domestic and care sectors.^{xxiv} The latest census dates back to 2014, indicating that 27% of the immigrants typically dwelt in the country for only one or two years, whereas 21% of them remained for a shorter period of time (less than one year). In 2016, a large group of Chinese arrived in Maldives to complete specific projects and left the country as soon as the job was completed.^{xxv} During the Covid-19 outbreak, the government planned to relocate 5,000 migrant workers to Hulhumalé to work in the construction sector.^{xxvi}

Public health insurance does not cover foreign nationals, and most of them can only afford basic insurance packages, which were ineffective during the Covid-19 pandemic.^{xxvii} Over all, the irregular migrant workforce is estimated to be approximately 60,000 people. For this reason, in 2019 the Government implemented a regularisation process aiming to help especially the many Bangladeshi workers.^{xxviii} Most irregular workers were initially legal visa holders; however, employers typically failed to comply with work visa requirements requesting to pay a monthly fee and inform authorities when a worker had been transferred to a new employer.^{xxix}

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, Male, Felidhu, and South Nalindhe became the main destinations for internal migrants.^{xxx} Moreover, a large group of internal male migrants relocated to take on jobs in construction and in resorts on deserted islands. About 40% of internal migrants also migrated to Male in search of educational opportunities.^{xxxi} In addition, many Maldivian returnees living abroad decided to relocate to Male. Between 2000 and 2006, local authorities made significant efforts to develop regional centres to increase the availability of social services and communication infrastructures in Dhuvaafaru, Gan, Kudahuvadhoo, Maamigili, and Vilufush.^{xxxii} Nevertheless, this initiative was unsuccessful as

most Maldivians continued to move to Male, whereas its residents did not show any interest in moving to these regional centres.^{xxxiii}

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

The oldest Maldivian diasporas abroad settled on Minicoy Island, India, and Kerala. The former prompted the creation of a Maldivian consulate in the capital in 2005.^{xxxiv} Historically, emigration from the Maldives has experienced different peaks. The first one came about in 1990 when they mainly migrated to India and Australia.^{xxxv} Women also moved to New Zealand, Germany, and Kyrgyzstan, while men mostly relocated to South Africa, Switzerland, and New Zealand as preferred destinations. There was another migrant flow after 2000, followed by a relatively stable period between 2010 and 2015.^{xxxvi}

Until 2000, the emigration phenomenon mostly involved males, but afterwards, women exceeded men, surpassing them by approximately 10%.^{xxxvii} In 2019, according to the United Nations, there were 3,053 Maldivians abroad.^{xxxviii} The key destination countries were Sri Lanka (1,409 emigrants), Australia (645), the United Kingdom (402), India (194), and to a lesser extent, South Africa (95).^{xxxix}

As far as emigrants to the European Union, 79% of work permits issued between 2008 and 2016 were allotted to regular workers, while highly skilled people or involved in research were a very small number.^{xl} Most of the Maldivians employed overseas are seafarers working on foreign vessels.^{xli} In addition to job opportunities, another push factor for them is education.^{xlii}

In comparison with other neighbouring countries, remittances to Maldives are extremely low.^{xliii} They have widely varied since 1983, peaking in 2007 (amounting to nearly USD 8 million transferred to Maldives). In 2015, Australia and India were the major sources of remittances to the country.^{xliv} The last recent data from 2021 indicated that remittances represented 0.1% of Maldives' GDP.^{xlv}

The Maldivian government lacks a diaspora engagement policy.^{xlvi} Due to limited capacity and coordination, it does not collect data on the Maldivian diaspora.^{xlvii} There are problems of smuggling and human trafficking of migrants in the South Asia region,^{xlviii} therefore Maldives cooperates with neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka to counter them.^{xlix}

IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees, climate displaced people)

No data regarding the number of refugees in the country or asylum applications are available in the Maldives.^l It should be noted also that the government is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, nor are there any national refugee protection programs in place.^{li} Furthermore, UNHCR is not physically present in the country and operates remotely from New Delhi.^{lii}

Maldives does not have an asylum seekers protection program in place. Thus, they are held in immigration detention centres until UNHCR finds another practical solution for them.^{liii} Furthermore, UNHCR lacks essential information about the number of asylum seekers present in Maldives, and whether they have been deported or have travelled to other

countries, as there has been no exchange of information between UNHCR and the Maldivian government for this matter.^{liv}

Maldives has also experienced many negative effects from climate changes and natural disasters, due mainly to the rise of the sea level.^{lv} Thus, the Maldivian government has established a relocation fund to help its citizens buy land abroad and eventually move permanently there.^{lvi} In 2022, 84 refugees and 109 refugee claimants were registered coming from the Maldivian Islands.^{lvii} The main destinations were the United Kingdom (52.38%), Australia (22.61%), France (7.14%), India (5.95%), and New Zealand (5.95%).^{lviii} Moreover, 300 internal displacements were recorded in 2019 due to climate change.^{lix}

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

The Maldivian Islands are Tier 2 in the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report. In Maldives foreign migrants from Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka are exploited in the construction and service sectors, while South Asian women usually become the victims of forced labour in domestic service. Traffickers use fraudulent recruitment methods, like confiscation of documents, non-payment of wages, debt-on work visas, and counterfeiting passports is also perpetrated by traffickers. Maldivian children are victims of trafficking of criminal gangs, forcing them to become their drug couriers. Sometimes, Cuban doctors have also been exploited by their government. Traffickers further exploit women and girls from Maldives or others arriving from South Asian countries. Some impoverished families exploit their children for financial assistance. Traffickers recruit under the pretext of employment as massage therapists or tourism and often force victims into commercial sex. The local police have noticed an increase in Bangladeshi women recruited on tourist visas. Traffickers also exploit Maldivian children in child sex tourism or domestic work, where employers sexually abuse them.

In 2021, the Maldivian government amended the Prevention Human Trafficking Act to criminalise all forms of sex and labour trafficking and removed the transportation requirement to constitute a trafficking offence. It investigated one trafficking case, prosecuted three alleged traffickers for forced labour, and continued prosecuting three cases for sex trafficking and two for unspecified exploitation still pending from the previous year. Since the previous year it kept investigating 27 recruitment agencies for criminal and civil violations and suspended the licences of all of them. The government made efforts to investigate trafficking-related corruption, though official complicity remained a significant concern, and it did not report any convictions of government officials. Sri Lankan police arrested a former senior Maldivian government, and the Maldivian Police filed charges against a ruling Parliamentarian and a police officer involved in a potential trafficking case.

Maldives also conducted training for police officers and maintained a trafficking case management system that allowed potential victims to submit cases to the police online. In 2021 officials identified three trafficking female victims from Thailand exploited in sex trafficking. They all received repatriation assistance to Thailand. It has Standard Operating Procedures for the identification of victims. The new shelter was inoperative due to structural damages caused by the heavy rain. Nevertheless, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Office provided temporary shelter, food and medical care in guesthouses to three victims. The Maldivian government continued its regularisation program, registering approximately 1,700 migrant workers. It carried out 124 inspections, identifying 23 potential cases of child labour. Moreover, it launched awareness campaigns in several languages through social media.

However, officials did not report any convictions for the second consecutive year. Financial and personnel resources were used for the pandemic, thus weakening its ability to combat trafficking. The Police did not initiate any investigation into child commercial sex exploitation compared to the 291 incidents in the previous year. There are concerns about court delays, and some blacklist recruitment agencies and employers with serious labour violations have continued their operations. In 2021 the government did not make any efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts or child sex tourism.

VI. National Legal Framework

The Maldivian migration law is included in the Maldivian Citizenship Act No. 12 of 1976, last amended by Act No. 31 of 2002, and in the provisions of the 2008 Constitution of Maldives.^{lx} A person may be a citizen of the Republic of Maldives by birth, descent, or marriage to a Maldivian citizen or through naturalisation.^{lxi}

The Maldivian Immigration Act lays down the rules for the departure and entry of Maldivian nationals, as well as the entry, exit and deportation of foreign nationals.^{lxii} The Act repeals Act Number 2/92 (The Act on Fees Chargeable for Foreign Nationals with a Resident Permit in the Maldives).^{lxiii} The national legal framework does not provide sufficient clarity on the treatment of asylum seekers, victims of trafficking and migrants, as there is no specific system in place to identify the different categories.^{lxiv}

The Maldivian Constitution regulates in its 25 provisions the prohibition of slavery or forced labour.^{lxv} It recognises the right not to be held in slavery or servitude or be required to perform forced labour.^{lxvi} The government enacted amendments to the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act No. 12/2013, last amended in 2021, which aligned the Maldives' definition of human trafficking with the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.^{lxvii}

At the regional level, Maldives is one of the eight members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985 to provide a platform for the peoples of South Asia to cooperate and work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding.^{lxviii} It aims to accelerate the process of economic and social development.^{lxix}

Maldives is not a Party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.^{lxx} The country has no asylum adjudication and no national refugee protection systems set up.^{lxxi} Maldives is also not a party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, nor the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.^{lxxii} There is no national legislation regarding the prevention and reduction of statelessness or the protection of stateless persons.^{lxxiii}

VII. Main Actors

The State

The Ministry of Economic Development handles all of the official permits needed to recruit expatriates for employment in the Maldivian Islands, which are issued under the Employment Act and regulations.^{lxxiv} It is responsible for Immigration and Emigration, Labour, Maritime and Land Transport Sectors.^{lxxv} The MED is a key institution in the field of migration. Since 2014, its mandate has also included labour and migration management, as well as anti-human

trafficking victim support services.^{lxxvi} The Maldivian Immigration and the Labour Relations Authority also fall under the umbrella of the MED.^{lxxvii}

The Maldivian Immigration Department safeguards national security by providing quality, convenient and professional immigration services to ensure legitimate travellers, proactively detect immigration-related crimes and provide reliable international travel identification for Maldivian citizens.^{lxxviii} As for national citizens migrating abroad, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs helps them out through the Consular Services Department to obtain visas from Missions accredited to the Maldives.^{lxxix}

The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Office (ATO) provided temporary shelter in guesthouses to three victims, in addition to food and medical care.^{lxxx} The National Anti-Human Trafficking Steering Committee, made up of senior government officials and overseen by ATO, remained the leading interagency committee responsible for coordinating the government's efforts to combat human trafficking and held several virtual meetings during the reporting period.^{lxxxi} The Ministry of Defense continued to host a specific office space for ATO staffed by the director of anti-trafficking and a consultant for policy and outreach.^{lxxxii}

International Organisations

Most international organisations with direct or indirect migration mandates oversee the Maldivian Islands from Sri Lanka.^{lxxxiii} This is notably the case for IOM (which has one staff member based in Male), ILO, and the World Bank.^{lxxxiv} UNDP and UNICEF have representatives in Male, even though they have not conducted any international migration-related work in the country.^{lxxxv}

IOM supports migration management building national capacity to develop and implement effective migration policies and procedures through various programs.^{lxxxvi} It carries out various activities in collaboration with the Maldivian Government, NGOs, international organisations, and the private sector.^{lxxxvii} It provides direct assistance to migrants in vulnerable situations and conducts nationwide awareness-raising campaigns.^{lxxxviii} IOM also organised capacity-building workshops on countering trafficking and labour exploitation for the Labor Relation Authority (LRA) in the Republic of Maldives.^{lxxxix} Aimed at helping the country's labour inspectors to better monitor and regulate labour recruitment agencies and employers, the workshops contributed to ensuring a safer and more regular framework for labour migration.^{xc}

The UNHCR India office oversees Maldives, working mainly on capacity-building efforts, inclusion, and the international protection needs of those forced to flee their countries.^{xcii} UNHCR supports the efforts of the Indian Government and its people in assisting refugees across 11 states, working closely with different stakeholders, including line ministries, community groups, and NGOs.^{xciii} The office focuses on protection needs, conducts registration, and promotes solutions and self-reliance.^{xciii} UNHCR is not physically present in Maldives and operates remotely from New Delhi.^{xciv} On two occasions by family members of asylum-seekers detained in the Maldivian Islands for illegal entry/exit, UNHCR had to approach the government requesting access to conduct refugee status determination.^{xcv}

NGOs and Other Organisations

UK-registered NGOs are operating in the Maldivian Islands in the field of prevention and poverty relief, as well as assistance to vulnerable groups of people such as victims of human

trafficking, refugees and migrants, including the International Foundation for Children's Education (IFCED)^{xcvi} and Sustainable Hospitality Alliance^{xcvii}. Other UK-led organisations, such as Disaster Response Logistics,^{xcviii} operate in Maldives in disaster prevention and management.

Other organisations, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), have highlighted the difficulties that foreign workers have gone through since the Covid-19 pandemic. Access to water and food, or other essential items such as soap, has even endangered the condition of construction workers arriving from India and Bangladesh. The HRW's report also mentions coercive and exploitative labour practices and increasing racism targeting migrants since the lockdown.^{xcix}

Mission for Migrant Workers Maldives is a local-based non-profit organisation with its headquarters in Male, aiming to ensure equal rights and fair treatment to migrant workers suffering exploitation and xenophobia.^c

Furthermore, organisations like Global Detention Project shed some light on the immigrant detention situation. There is only one detention facility on the island, with a capacity of 50 persons. However, many detainees are retained for more than a month without a court order. Moreover, there is no asylum system nor any national refugee protection programs in effect.^{ci}

The Catholic Church

There is currently no presence of Catholic actors in Maldives.^{cii} However, the Diocese of Colombo, with its headquarters in Sri Lanka, is responsible for the whole territory of the Maldivian Islands. This arrangement dates back to 1886.^{ciii}

The Diocese of Colombo has developed awareness programmes and aims to listen to the stories of the migrant population and support an international solidarity march.^{civ}

In this regard, Caritas provides free legal assistance, psychosocial support, and counselling to migrant workers and their families from the Diocese of Colombo.^{cv}

February 2023

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