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MALDIVES

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Statement by
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of the Republic of Maldives
at the

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OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, Honorable Ministers, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure for me and members of my delegation to attend the twenty first Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly to review and appraise the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994.

I am especially pleased to convey to you Mr. President, and through you to this august assembly, warm greetings from the President of Maldives, His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Mr. President, Honorable Ministers and Distinguished Delegates,

The Maldives has closely followed the ICPD+5 process, from regional reviews to global reviews. We have been both impressed and greatly encouraged by the enthusiasm displayed by the international community in fulfilling the commitments made at Cairo. We believe that it is only by working together that the many important and inter-related issues confronting our peoples can be meaningfully addressed and resolved.

Mr. President. We have come a long way in our understanding about population problems. Today we all know that population is not about numbers; that behind each statistic stands a person. Today we are all agreed that the issues of population cannot be treated in isolation; that the life of each individual person is intimately linked to a wider process of development and change, a process that often goes beyond national boundaries. And we must applaud and congratulate the United Nations Population Fund for leading the way in achieving this new consensus on population.

The Maldives views issues of population with great concern. As a small island developing state, our problems are unique. Our population of just over a quarter of a million may not be big, but the challenges are daunting. About half of the population is below 15 years of age. The high population growth rate of 2.7 per cent is expected to double the population in twenty five years. The wide and uneven distribution of the population across vast expanses of ocean makes it difficult to provide basic infrastructure and social services. Limited space on the emerging urban centers has led to over crowding and housing shortages. The country's narrow economic base with tourism and fisheries contributing to about forty per cent of the gross domestic product, leaves the country excessively vulnerable to external shocks. The delicate environmental balance of our island ecosystem creates further vulnerabilities that are largely beyond our control.

However, despite these problems our economy has performed well and is projected to grow at an annual rate of around 6 per cent over the current period. Strong economic growth has enabled my Government to allocate approximately one third of capital expenditure to social services. Improvements in health services has led to a substantial

reduction in infant and maternal mortality and morbidity. Literacy rate has reached 98 percent, primary education is near universal and enrollment ratio is equal for both sexes.

While these are laudable achievements, much more needs to be done to cater for the growing numbers of youth, of which half are going to be in the reproductive age groups over the first quarter of the next century. We need to further reduce infant and maternal mortality and achieve higher levels of human resources development. In addition, we need to intensify our efforts towards protecting and preserving our environment on which we depend for our very survival.

Mr. President, Honorable Ministers, and Distinguished Delegates.

Our population policy and development programmes are aimed at enhancing the life chances of our population and improving their standard of living by providing better reproductive health care and educational services, the empowerment of women and strengthening the bonds of family and increased community participation in the design and implementation of development programmes. Consolidating the widely dispersed island populations and reducing the cost of providing basic infrastructure is an important part of our population policy. We are also taking active measures towards diversifying the economy and creating greater opportunities for income and employment for all. Further, environmental protection and promoting the rational use of natural resources form an important part of our overall development strategy.

In addition to providing the basic services for our society and improving economic performance, the challenges of the future would make it necessary to build bridges across generations and create a more understanding and progressive cultural milieu in which the young and the old together embrace the new values of our evolving societies while respecting the traditions that we have inherited from our forefathers. As we stand at the threshold of the new millenium, we need to rededicate ourselves to the goals of the ICPD and work towards building a society that is free from prejudice and inequality; a society where the rights of all are respected and revered.

Mr. President, Honorable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates.

In a globalising world, island nations such as ours, with limited natural resources and human capital urgently need the support and assistance of the international community in overcoming our inherent vulnerabilities and realising the hopes and aspirations of our people for achieving lasting and meaningful development. In this context, it is regrettable that the world community remains far from meeting the funding goals that were agreed at the ICPD. We look towards the United Nations to ensure the creation of a just social and economic order that will lead us to a future in which our children are free from hunger and disease; a future of hope and prosperity for all our peoples. I am confident that the United Nations will not fail us in helping to create that future.