Maldives crisis deepens: Mohamed Nasheed urges 'swift Indian action' as former Prez Abdul Gayoo

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The archipelago was plunged into chaos on Thursday when the Supreme Court called for the release of nine imprisoned opposition politicians, ruling that their trials were politically motivated and flawed.

A Maldives policeman charges with baton towards protesters after the government declared a 15-day state of emergency in Male, Maldives, early Tuesday on February 6, 2018.

Colombo: Exiled former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed has urged India to "act swiftly" to help in resolving the ongoing political crisis in the island nation that escalated after President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency and troops arrested the top judge.

The archipelago was plunged into chaos on Thursday when the Supreme Court called for the release of nine imprisoned opposition politicians, ruling that their trials were politically motivated and flawed.

The government refused to implement the ruling, prompting a wave of protests in the capital, Male, with angry clashes between police and demonstrators.

Yameen on Monday declared a state of emergency. Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and another judge, Ali Hameed, were arrested hours after the government declared a state of emergency. No details were given about the investigation or any charges.

Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has allied himself with the Opposition, was detained at his home.

Nasheed, whose Maldivian Democratic Party functions from Colombo, asked for India's help. He urged India to "act swiftly" to resolve the crisis.

"President Yameen's announcement which declares a state of emergency, the banning of fundamental freedoms, and the suspension of the Supreme Court is tantamount to a declaration of martial law in the Maldives. This declaration is unconstitutional and illegal.

Nobody in the Maldives is required to, nor should, follow this unlawful order," Nasheed said.

Nasheed also expressed concern over Yameen's deliberate delay in implementing the Supreme Court ruling to immediately release political prisoners.

"This deliberate refusal by the government to uphold the Constitution further destabilises the Maldives and wider Indian Ocean security," Nasheed said.

Nasheed, 50, the country's first democratically-elected leader -- was sentenced to 13 years in jail on terror charges in March 2015 over the arbitrary arrest of chief criminal judge Abdullah Muhammed during his presidency.

He was granted asylum in the UK after he was authorised to seek medical treatment there amid mounting foreign pressure.

Nasheed was narrowly defeated in 2013 by President Yameen. Nasheed says his conviction on terror charges was

politically motivated The Maldivian government holds that Nasheed is convicted for a crime and is wanted in the Maldives to serve a jail sentence. Nasheed said he will seek UN support to ensure he is allowed to contest.

What happened on Early Tuesday and Monday

The Maldives opposition leader and two Supreme Court judges were arrested early Tuesday hours after the government declared an emergency in the Indian Ocean nation that has been increasingly in turmoil in the days since the court ordered several jailed politicians to be freed.

The charges against opposition leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom include bribery and attempting to overthrow the government, his lawyer, Maumoon Hameed, said on Twitter. Gayoom was president from 1978 to 2008, when Maldives became a multiparty democracy, and is the half brother of the current president, under whose rule the archipelago has lost many of its democratic gains.

The 15-day emergency decree issued late Monday gives the government sweeping powers to make arrests, search and seize property and restricts freedom of assembly, officials said.

Soon after the declaration, security forces stormed into the Supreme Court building, where Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and judge Ali Hamid were arrested. The charges against them have not been specified. The whereabouts of the court's other two judges were not known Tuesday morning.

Since the surprise, unanimous ruling last week ordering the release of imprisoned opposition leaders, President Yameen Abdul Gayoom has lashed out at the court, opposition protests have spilled into the streets of the capital, Male, and soldiers in riot gear have stopped lawmakers from meeting in the parliament building.

In a statement issued after the state of emergency was announced on state television, Yameen said "though certain rights will be restricted, general movements, services and businesses will not be affected."

In a letter to the court released by the president's office, Yameen said the court's order to release prisoners had encroached on the powers of the state and was an "infringement of national security and public interest." He urged the court to "review the concerns" of the government.

The government has also said the court has not properly responded to letters citing problems with implementing its order, including that the cases against the political prisoners are at different legal stages. A Supreme Court statement on Sunday said "there are no obstacles in implementing the ruling ... and that this has been informed to the Prosecutor General's office."

The government did not comment on soldiers entering the Supreme Court building or on Gayoom's arrest, but the president's main rival, who lives in exile, urged people not to obey what he called an "unlawful order."

"This declaration is unconstitutional and illegal," former President Mohamed Nasheed, the country's first democratically elected leader, said in a statement.

Nasheed was one of the opposition leaders the Supreme Court had ordered freed, ruling that the guilty verdicts had been politically influenced.

How UN, world powers reacted

The United Nations, United States and other foreign governments have urged the Maldives to respect the court order.

The US also strongly criticized the emergency decree, which State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said also imposes travel restrictions.

Yameen has "systematically alienated his coalition, jailed or exiled every major opposition political figure" since his election in 2013, Nauert said.

She called on Yameen, the army, and police to comply with the rule of law, and for the constitutional rights of Maldivians to be restored.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said he was "gravely concerned" about the Maldives situation and asked "Yameen and Maldives government to peacefully end the state of emergency, restore all articles of the constitution, take immediate steps to implement in full the order of the Supreme Court, and to permit and support the full, free and proper functioning of Parliament."

Australian ambassador to Sri Lanka and Maldives Bryce Hutchesson said Australia "calls on all parties to respect the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and the Supreme Court's decision."

In addition to ordering the release of the political prisoners, the court also reinstated 12 lawmakers who had been ousted for switching allegiance to the opposition. When those lawmakers return, Yameen's Progressive Party of the Maldives will lose its majority in the 85-member parliament, which could result in the legislative body functioning as a rival power to the president.

The Maldives became a multiparty democracy 10 years ago after Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's rule, during which he was repeatedly the only candidate for the presidency.

Nasheed won the nation's first democratic election in 2008 but resigned during his term following protests over the arrest of a judge. He lost the 2013 presidential election to Yameen, then was convicted under Maldives' anti-terrorism laws over ordering the judge arrested. The trial was widely condemned by international rights groups.

He was granted medical leave while serving 13 years in prison and travelled to Britain, where he has lived since 2016 since being granted asylum.

Nasheed said last week after the court ruling that he would mount a fresh challenge for the presidency this year.

Yameen had been set to run for re-election virtually unopposed, with all of his opponents either jailed or exiled.

China, Australia and the United States updated their travel advice during the latest unrest. China urged people to avoid travel there and Australia and the U.S. told citizens to be cautious.

- (With inputs from PTI, AP)