Commonwealth Observer Group

Maldives Presidential Election

8 October 2008

NEWS RELEASE

2 October 2008

ARRIVAL STATEMENT BY THE RT. HON. OWEN ARTHUR

CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP

Commonwealth Secretary-General, H.E. Kamalesh Sharma, has constituted an Observer Group for the 2008 Maldives Presidential Election following an invitation from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Maldives.

It is my honour and privilege to have been asked to lead this Commonwealth Observer Group and to be here in Maldives at this important time for the country. This election is the first to be held under the recently ratified Constitution and it is also the country's first multi-party election. It heralds the beginning of a series of elections, with later polls anticipated for the People's Majlis and Atoll authorities.

This election is an opportunity to build on the experiences of the 2005 Majlis elections and the 2007 referendum on the preferred form of Government - both of which were assessed by the Commonwealth. It provides an opportunity to take a significant step forward in strengthening the country's democracy.

The task of the Commonwealth Observer Group is to observe and report on relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the Presidential election**.** The group will consider all the factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole, and assess whether the election has been conducted according to the standards for democratic elections to which the country has committed itself, with reference to national election-related legislation and relevant regional, Commonwealth and other international commitments.

In this regard we will consider, among other things: the constitutional and electoral framework governing the electoral process and the general environment in which it takes place; the transparency of that electoral process; whether state apparatus and state media have been impartial; the ability of candidates to campaign freely, and whether voters have been able to express their will free of intimidation, and if that will is respected.

In conducting our duties and undertaking our assessment, we will be impartial, objective and independent. If we offer any criticisms, they will be constructive with the intent to help strengthen the democratic process in the country for the future.

Commonwealth Observers are invited in their individual capacities as eminent Commonwealth citizens. The assessment by the Group will be its own and not that of respective member governments or of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Before we deploy to various areas around the country, we will meet with the Election Commission, candidates or their representatives, relevant Government officials, civil society, media, Commonwealth diplomats and representatives of the international community.

We will issue a Preliminary Statement after the poll and a Final Report upon completion of our duties. If a second round of voting proves necessary, then the Commonwealth will also have a presence in the country to assess that process.

The Commonwealth has a long and rich tradition of supporting and promoting democratic development in member countries and our Group will conduct itself in this spirit.