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Statement by

His Excellency Mr. Abdulla Shahid

**Minister of State for Foreign Affairs,
Republic of Maldives**

at the event

**Diplomacy Goes Virtual – Inauguration of Diplomacy Island
and Virtual Embassy in Second Life**

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, friends,

It is a pleasure for me to be here this evening to officially open the Maldives Virtual Embassy. You are all most welcome.

The Maldives is a small country with a unique geography, history and culture. This provides us with a special and valuable insight into crucial issues facing the world today, from climate change and sea-level rise, to sustainable development and security of small States.

It is therefore important for the Maldives and for the wider world that this unique insight and perspective is voiced and heard in the crowded corridors of international power and influence.

Unfortunately, while the potential value of our contribution – like that of all States – is not in doubt, what is in doubt is our capacity to deliver that contribution: in other words, to make ourselves heard in those crowded corridors!

Our small population (only 300,000 people) and economy is reflected in the limited resources – both financial and human – that the Maldives can bring to bear in the theatre of international relations.

As an illustration, until recently, the Maldives only had three overseas missions – in Colombo, New York and London – each staffed by a dedicated but small team of diplomats. Shocking as it may seem to all of you, we did not even have a mission here in beautiful Geneva – despite Maldivians' natural love of cold winters and alpine skiing!

So how, you may ask, can the foreign service of a Small Island Developing State like the Maldives make itself heard and ensure that international debates and decisions take due account of its interests and perspectives?

The answer, in short, is that we have to be forward-thinking and innovative; we have to rely on brains not brawn; and we have to challenge the conventional boundaries of international diplomacy.

As those of you who have visited the Maldives will know, two things that Maldivians are particularly fond of – apart from mountains and winter sports –



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are computers and mobile phones. And this perhaps gives a clue as to one way in which the Maldives Foreign Ministry is seeking to innovate and challenge convention: namely through the use of IT and High-T and, in particular, through the exploitation of the internet.

As any good blogger will tell you, the internet offers an unparalleled opportunity for one person, or entity, to communicate with millions of others through the simple click of a mouse. Companies, NGOs, lovelorn men and women, and many other groups have all been quick to exploit this potential. Government's too (and even people aspiring to government – witness for example the recent French elections) have not been slow to realise the importance of the internet, and the world now abounds with government web pages, government blogs, online chats with ministers, and myriad other e-government initiatives.

Today, with the generous and invaluable support of the Diplo Foundation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – both of which I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank, the Maldives aims to take this process one step further by launching the world's first ever fully functioning and staffed Virtual Embassy in Second Life.

I have been told by a reliable source that Second Life is an on-line virtual world that people can visit and explore. Land can be bought, houses can be built, friends can be made and businesses can be opened. In fact you can do just about whatever you like in Second Life which I guess is why over 6 million people (and growing) are using it every day and why companies like Toyota and Nike, news agencies like Reuters, and universities including Princeton and Harvard have all established themselves there.

The Maldives Virtual Embassy is, quite simply, a place in Second Life where visitors can come to find out about political, social or economic developments in the Maldives, where they can meet virtual Maldivian diplomats and ask questions on subjects such as visa requirements, where they can access information about holidays in the Maldives and trade and investment opportunities, where they can take a virtual tour around a real Maldives holiday resort – the Maldives Hilton – or where they can simply relax, listen to Maldivian music and meet friends.

Of course rather than listening to me, the best way to understand and explore the new Maldives Virtual Embassy – as well as the soon-to-be-finished Virtual



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Embassies of Malta, the Philippines, and Macedonia - is to go and see for yourself.

I look forward to seeing you all there.

Thank you.