

Fast-tracking trade

By MAHDI IMAD

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MAHDI IMAD holds a Master's Degree from the World Maritime University and a Bachelor's Degree in Business and Economics from Charles Sturt University, NSW Australia. He joined the port authority in 1986 serving in many positions in the company. As well as CEO of Maldives Ports Limited he also serves as the Managing Director of Hithadhoo Port Limited and Kulhudhuffushi Port Limited and as Chairman of the Transport Authority.

Created in 1986, Maldives Ports Limited is a state corporation and the country's sole port authority, located in Malé, the capital city. The Port of Malé comprises an inner harbour, used by pleasure craft, the fishing industry, and coastal trade; as well as an outer harbour for container ships and other large cargo vessels.

Prior to 2012, port activity at Malé consisted of moving goods from anchored ships and manual unloading and warehousing. In 1983, Maldives Transport and Contracting Company was formed as a state corporation, and in 1985, under the Malé Commercial Harbour Project, work began to rebuild and modernise the port, dredging and reshaping the harbour, and constructing new jetties, office buildings and container terminals. The current port operator and authority, Maldives Ports Limited, was formed shortly after in 1986.

Maldives Ports Limited (MPL) was incorporated on 31 July 2008 as a fully government-owned company. The purpose of corporatising MPL to an autonomous entity has been to enhance trade and commerce by means of good management practices and to provide an efficient cargo handling service nationally. The regulatory function of the port authority was reassigned to the Ministry of Transport and Communication.

The commercial and business function of MPL is managed by the Chief Executive Officer and the executive management team. As a commercial service provider the key business approach is to fast-track our services without compromising on time and quality, keeping pace with the dynamic and evolving business environment and to identify opportunities that strengthen the economy and sustainability of business growth.

Responding to the country's growth needs, the government's Maldives Economic Diversification Strategy (MEDS), has highlighted ten key steps to diversify the economy and make the Maldives one of the Asian "miracle" economies such as Singapore. Transport was singled out as the primary element of the ten factors, and the government has pledged to boost the importance of transportation services to the economy by increasing their value to US\$500 million by 2025.

In keeping with this remit, the government of the Maldives has signed an agreement with Dubai-based port operator DP World for the latter to build an up to US\$300 million deepwater port complex on the

industrial island of Thilafushi.

The first phase of the project will include the construction of a container terminal, and then the next phase will see the construction of a free trade zone. Breakbulk and transshipment cargo facilities will be built in the final phase. The deepwater port will later be expanded to include facilities for break bulk and transshipment cargoes.

Total investment over the three phases of the project is estimated at US\$250 million to US\$300 million. The FTZ will be completed within two years. The port on Malé Island has six berths, the largest only 328-feet long, with a 34-foot draft. There is space for 60,000 containers, but this will be insufficient if government plans to develop 50 new tourist resorts on outlying islands are realised.

The DP World/MPL project will involve moving all commercial port activities from Malé to Thilafushi, an island created from waste landfill. When complete, the new deep-sea facility will compete for transshipment business with Colombo, in Sri Lanka.

Considering growing trade volumes and projections for growth in businesses, a new expanded port for the Maldives and the Malé region is a necessary piece of infrastructure to deliver the government's economic vision.

With existing economic growth rates, inbound cargo is expected to grow at an annual average rate of 16 per cent, reaching 1.9 million tons by 2032, even by the most conservative of estimates. The new port will become the central logistical and distribution hub for all inbound international cargo into the country.

MPL currently has seven major development propositions focused on projects directly related to port functions, diversification projects, CSR projects and equity investment.

The management of Maldives Ports Limited is committed to implementing integrated programs for the planning, development, financing and port operations, and providing safe and economically viable services. Our job is to provide efficient port and port-related services to facilitate trade and commerce within the region by adhering to International best practices. In short, Maldives Ports Ltd focuses on what matters most to our customers, our people and our country. We reach out to deliver exceptional service, safe working conditions and continuous improvement. **F**