



**Findings of the Report on the Disappearance of Maldivian  
Journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla**

**22 September 2014**

**Maldivian Democracy Network**

22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2014 (Monday)

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) was established in accordance with Law Number 1/2003 (Societies Act), and is registered under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The objectives of MDN include protecting and promoting human rights in the Maldives. In this regard, during the past decade, this non-governmental organization has undertaken a variety of initiatives pertaining to the criminal justice system, the Maldives Police Service (MPS), the Parliament and the judiciary.

MDN is extremely concerned about the mysterious disappearance of Ahmed Rilwan on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2014. Due to these concerns, MDN decided to investigate the disappearance of Rilwan; a specialized foreign investigator was tasked with it. As the investigation is now complete, its preliminary findings have been shared with MDN.

This report has been made with a view to share the essential information – contained in the final report – with the general public. This report outlines serious questions MDN has with regard to actions of the law enforcement authorities in light of the aforementioned information. Furthermore, we also highlight the information recommended by the investigator to be issues that require additional insight and investigation.

The purpose of this report is to publicise the work undertaken by MDN, and where applicable, provide any and all assistance to the law enforcement authorities. If the police so wishes, we take the opportunity to offer assistance of the investigator who provided recommendations to MDN regarding the investigation of Rilwan's disappearance.

Since enforced disappearances and abductions are wholly new criminal acts in the Maldives, MDN believes that it may be likely that the Maldives Police Service (MPS) does not have the sufficient capability or experience to deal with such cases. It would be

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our pleasure to share with MPS assistance and mechanisms of MDN and other humanitarian organisations it is affiliated with. We have not the slightest doubt, that as all Maldivian citizens and MDN, the main objective of MPS is to find Rilwan and bring him back to us, safe and sound.

Since the following questions arise due to the points raised by the investigator's report, these questions have been sent as a letter in order to obtain answers from MPS:

- ❖ Sub-article (a) of Article 2 of Law Number 17/2010 (Prohibition of Assault and Offensive Weapons Act) states that threats to kill or cause bodily harm to a family member, relative, or person under one's guardianship is a criminal offense. Sub-article (a) of Article 126 of the Penal Code 2014 states that it is a criminal offense to make physical contact with anyone without consent.
1. Since the investigator's report states that there is information of an incident around 02:00 near Rilwan's apartment on the night he went missing, has MPS detained anyone with regard to the incident? Has a case against anyone been sent to the Prosecutor General's Office for prosecution?
  2. MPS has noted that a knife was seen at the alleged crime scene and that the type of knife was a 'Bayonet,' which was found under unclear circumstances, and is usually used by criminal gangs. What has been revealed to investigation regarding the aforementioned knife? What are issues worth highlighting with regard to its forensic analysis report?
  3. It is known that a red car was illegally entered into Hulhumalé on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2014, and that the car was brought to Malé on a date between 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> August 2014. Clarify actions that have been taken against those actively involved in transporting the car, and what the owner of the car says regarding the reason it was transported to Hulhumalé. What is the status of the investigation in relation to those inquiries?
  4. The investigator's report notes that Rilwan and others have received death threats on a number of occasions. Since it is not known that MPS has taken any action regarding the aforementioned cases, while there have been incidents of many persons – including Rilwan – receiving death threats from gangs and radicals recently; why haven't these attacks been investigated as a special case and sent for prosecution at the Prosecutor General's Office?

5. The investigator's report states that gang members kidnapped a person named Hamza. Has MPS investigated the aforementioned incident? If it has been investigated, what is the status of the investigation, and does it have any relation to Rilwan's enforced disappearance?
6. As the investigator's report states that many people have been subject to intimidation and threats numerous times, has MPS ascertained whether any such incidents have occurred? If aforementioned incidents were investigated, what actions have MPS taken in relation to it? To any extent, has MPS looked into the alleged existence of a list of people labelled as "irreligious or anti-religious"? What actions have MPS taken regarding the aforementioned list?

The following is the report made by the investigator regarding the alleged forced disappearance of Rilwan, made at the request of MDN.

## **FINAL REPORT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla (the **Subject**) (National Identification Card Number A046218, DOB 18 January 1986) is a Maldivian reporter based in Malé, Maldives.

The Subject was last reported as being seen around 01:00-01:30 hours on 08 September aboard the ferry from Malé to Hulhumale. There has been no direct or indirect reported sighting of, or contact with, the Subject since that date.

Witnesses report a possible abduction outside the Subject's apartment block on the same evening, at a time that would fit with the Subject's arrival back at his accommodation.

### **REPORT OBJECTIVE**

This report will seek to clarify the circumstances leading to the Subject's disappearance and indicate persons and organisations of interest for further investigation.

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## **METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH**

In conducting the research, both open and closed Sources of information were established, examined and analysed to gain contextual and factual answers to the story behind and possible motives for the Subject's disappearance.

Eyewitnesses and stakeholders were individually interviewed and cross-referenced. The information gathering exercise used a snowball sampling and data collection approach - an investigative technique where existing interviewees lead to further Sources of information who were, in turn, interviewed.

This approach is often used in populations that may be difficult or cost-prohibitive for researchers to otherwise access. By targeting the most knowledgeable or influential individuals, the approach is subject to certain bias, which has been flattened through analysis and cross corroboration with other Sources.

The methodology required the identification of known contacts and subsequent leveraging to add individuals to the network. In adopting this process it was further identified that a process of information verification and validation was required. Broadly speaking the intent was to balance theory and conjecture with fact. For example, at the level of government and ministries, there is usually a tendency towards presenting data in the most favourable light.

All interviews were conducted in English as a common language.

## **THE SUBJECT**

The Subject was a well known freelance Journalist and Blogger, commenting on local political matters, cultural issues, human rights and critical of religious fundamentalist.



*Photo 1: The Subject.*

The Subject's income was MVR10,000 (approx. US\$650) per month. On the day of his disappearance the Subject had been handed a cheque for US\$500. This cheque has not been cashed.

The Subject is divorced with no children.

The Subject was heterosexual. There is no evidence to support the fact that the Subject was in any form of relationship at the time of his disappearance.

The Subject had a monthly income similar to mid ranking civil servants and he had no known debts or addictions.

The Subject was an avid social networker, using the Twitter handle 'Moyameehaa'. Despite evidence that, up to 2004, he was a radical Islamist and member of a Wahhabist organisation known as 'Dot', he is now known as an open critic of both government policy and of radical Islam.

## **SUICIDE THEORY**

Although he was suffering from clinical depression and gastritis (and was receiving regular medication for both conditions), there is no indication that the Subject had suicidal thoughts or that he had previously committed self-harm. No suicide note or body has been found.

On the evening prior to his disappearance, the Subject spent time with his sister and his friends in Malé, where he was playing Ingress (a GPS location game) and watching a Baibala (Maldivian rugby) match. None of the people who last saw him report a change

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in normal demeanour or the fact that he was in some way saying ‘farewell’ or putting his affairs in order which might indicate an intent to commit suicide.

### **SELF-DISAPPEARANCE THEORY**

Sometime before his disappearance the Subject voiced a wish, to close friends and his employer that he would like to visit the islands where he could study cultural poetry. Although his passport was not found during a subsequent search of his apartment, there is no record of him departing the Maldives. No clothes or personal effects were removed from his apartment that might indicate travel.

The Subject’s telephone handset was last recorded as data connecting with a Malé based mast at 02:36hrs on the day of his disappearance. This is not suggestive of his position at that time as being on Malé, as phones often flip masts depending on a number of technical variables. His handset and his personal computer have not been recovered.

The lack of data activity and that he had not cashed his cheque or prepared funds, and that he did not take personal effects from his apartment or, if he commuted, he did so during silent hours, indicate that it is extremely unlikely that he willingly ‘disappeared’ himself.

### **THE SUBJECT’S RESIDENCE**

The Subject resided on a top floor apartment of a block of flats on Hulhumale.

### **THE SUBJECT’S ROUTINE**

Living on Hulhumale and reporting from Malé required twice-daily commute aboard a regular ferry service. The route from the Hulhumale ferry terminal to the Subject’s apartment is not illuminated by night and CCTV coverage is not present. The Subject would have the option of taking a more public paved route of around 700m or a faster foot route, through completely dark scrubland, of around 500m. Friends report that the Subject always took the longer route for reasons of personal security. It is unlikely that the Subject would have been able to vary this route option by much or that the Subject was surveillance aware.

Although the Subject owned a red Honda Cheer motorcycle, he usually left this parked at the Malé to Hulhumale ferry terminal and boarded the ferry as a foot passenger as he believed that it was much easier than struggling on board with a motorcycle. The

Subject's motorcycle was subsequently recovered at the Malé to Hulhumale ferry terminal.

The Subject's family and friends were aware that he was undergoing treatment for

depression. It was not uncommon for the Subject to 'go offline' for days at a time and it was therefore not considered to be unusual when the Subject failed to show up for a few days. It was only five days after the abduction before he was missed enough and attempts to contact him had failed sufficiently to raise the alarm.

### **EVENTS OF 07/08 AUGUST**

On the evening of 07 August, the Subject spent time with his sister before meeting friends and playing Ingress (a GPS location game) and watching a Baibala (Maldivian rugby) match.

At 00:44 hrs on 08 August, the Subject entered the Malé ferry terminal and purchased a ticket to Hulhumale. The next boat was due to depart around 0100hrs. This is verified by CCTV footage and by the presence of a friend who sat next to him on the ferry.

The ferry trip takes approximately 30 minutes, which means the Subject would have arrived at Hulhumale around 01:30hrs.

Witnesses report that the Subject did not board the local bus and it was supposed that he travelled on foot to his apartment. This is not unusual as using the bus can take a lot longer than on foot.

There is no local area CCTV at the Hulhumale terminal or on the route the Subject may have walked.

The Subject would have arrived at his apartment shortly before 02:00hrs having walked the street route, avoiding short cuts across open ground.

At approx. 02:00hrs witnesses living near to Subject's apartment, heard an altercation outside. The area is dark at night making identification difficult and there is no CCTV in the area other than a security camera outside a restaurant approx. 50m south of the apartment. Investigation reveals this camera has been out of service for at least 3 months. The witnesses report seeing two unidentified males struggling with each other and one male was forced into a red car. The witnesses were unable to identify either of the men,

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as it was fully dark. As both males entered the car, it sped off immediately, indicating at least a further suspect as a driver.

Huhlumale' is a good choice of location for abduction as there is little to no outdoor lighting at night and no public CCTV system.

Despite this testimony, other reporting indicates that it was a drunken female being helped into the red car and that *it was the Subject who reported it to the police*. The Subject's mobile phone records do not support this.

The Subject's living on the island and relatively predictable routine would have made him an easy target.

## **EVIDENCE AT SCENE**

### **Knife**

Local police recovered a knife and scabbard from the scene. It was described as being of 'bayonet type'. To the date of this report, the local police claim that the knife had no evidence on it but cannot elaborate on what, if any tests were undertaken. They claim the knife's presence was circumstantial and was probably on the ground before the abduction.

### **The Red Car**

The red car was subsequently identified as one of the two cars of the brand, of which only two such cars are registered in the Maldives. One is owned by Ibrahim Firaq (a member of the Jumhooree Party) and one owned by Arliph Rauf. Rauf is a member of a notorious crime family and was allegedly connected to the 2012 murder of Dr. Afrasheem Ali.

Rauf is also a member of the radicalised gang, Kuda Henveyru. His Facebook alias is Ahmed Arliph.



*Photo 2: RAUF – pictured centre.*

The case of Rauf's car is being investigated by the police, as having been illegally imported to Huhlumale' on 04 August 2014 and returned to Male during the period 13-15 August 2014. As of the date of this report, the local police will not elaborate on what, if any tests were undertaken or even if the car is still in their possession.

Police has stated that, although the car was once owned by Rauf, it had been sold 'some time back'. It was suggested that it is common practice in the Maldives for people to avoid re-registering vehicles as it negates the requirement to purchase expensive parking permits. They will, instead, drive the car for a few months before then selling it on again.

### **POSSIBLE HOSTILE SURVEILLANCE ON THE SUBJECT**

CCTV footage at the Malé ferry terminal on the night of the Subject's disappearance shows evidence of possible hostile surveillance being undertaken by two known gang members.



*Photo 3: Suspect 1*

- Ahmed Shiran Saeed (Suspect 1) is a known violent drug addict with links to Kuda Henveiru gang.

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*Photo 4: Suspect 2*

- Suspect 2 is seen on CCTV (big Afro hair) and is a known member of Kuda Henveiru but has not yet been identified by name.

The Suspects are known to each other and are friends. Indeed, Suspect 2 is seen on CCTV at the ferry terminal, arriving on Suspect 1's red motorbike in the lead up to the arrival of both Suspect 1 and the Subject.

Despite this, they deliberately disassociate from each other whilst at the Terminal and do not demonstrate that they have an existing relationship.

Suspect 1 arrives ferry terminal 0042hrs (two minutes before the Subject's arrival) – looks around then heads back outside.

At 00:46hrs, Suspect 2 enters toilets and returns in under 10 seconds – despite him using toilet less than 30 mins earlier. 00:47 hrs Suspect 1 and 2 cross paths but show no recognition of each other. Suspect 1 boards the ferry with the Subject.

Cell phone data, at the time of Subject 1's arrival at the Terminal shows a flurry of SMS activity between Suspect 1's phone and a second handset, registered to Ahmed Husham, a resident of Malé. No further details re Husham are known at this time.

A further number called Suspect 1's handset whilst he would have been waiting at the Terminal and a series of SMS and calls between Suspect 1's handset and these two numbers takes place in the moments leading up to the Subject's arrival at the Terminal and his boarding of the ferry.

The Suspects' behaviour is indicative of probable hostile surveillance. It is entirely possible that their task was to provide advance notification of the Subject's arrival at the terminal and confirmation of his boarding of the ferry. It is possible that the flurry of

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communication was an effort to coordinate activity with any reception team in Huhlemale.

Police comment, following survey of the CCTV footage, is that they do not recognise that the Subject boarded the ferry despite a further witness stating that he sat next to him on the boat.

The police have confiscated Suspect 1's (Saeed) passport along with three others but no arrests have been made. No explanation has been given as to why the other three passports have been confiscated or how there may be a link to the investigation.

## **MOTIVES**

### **Gang Involvement**

It is claimed that three major criminal gangs in the capital, Malé, have become increasingly radicalised in recent years as gang leaders have been exposed to radical Islam during incarceration in prison. There is often open and vocal support for the actions of the Islamist State (aka ISIS) and for the recruitment of Jihadists to serve in Syria and Iraq. It is also reported that gang members have become increasingly involved in a series of violent attacks against those preaching religious tolerance or secularism. They are justifying their attacks by labeling such individuals as anti-religious.

The three gangs referred to in this report are, BURU (senior figure – 'Ahandhu'), BOSNIA (senior figure Gut MUA – aka Muaz Hammer) and KUDA HENVEYRU (senior figure – Arliph RAUF). All gangs network together and do work together when needed. Gang members live in each other's territory and grew up together. It is reported that the gangs' constant recruitment and growth in numbers is due to the lack of employment for Maldivian youth and that the gangs provide both an identity and a source of 'employment' in the community.

There are reports that gangs are networking via radical Islamic social networking sites, and such sites are regularly used to send direct threats, quoting the Qur'an, to those who they disapprove of. Gang members respond that they are simply Muslims who do not wish to see an end to religious unity, and its inherent stability, on the islands. They see themselves as the self-appointed guardians of religious morality and take responsibility for the education and gentle guidance of those who may openly undermine Islamic principles and teachings.

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A series of abductions of Maldivian citizens who were members of the Facebook group 'Colorless', took place in June 2014. Colorless was established in 2012 to provide a platform by which Maldivians could discuss a variety of issues. The group has over 2,000 members. The group was hacked, and some members were abducted and questioned on their beliefs as well as on the identity of the site admins. All abductees were released. In June 2014, a blogger 'Hamza' was contacted by senior members of Buru and Bosnia. He was asked to meet with them at which point he was taken to a nearby house. Some sources report that, at this point, Hamza was beaten, intimidated and forced to hand over his phone so that his friends lists could be accessed which would help with further targeting efforts. People who admit to their presence deny this, claiming that Hamza was simply spoken with before being released.

Hamza is now in self-imposed exile on an island. Sources claim that Hamza was a member of 'Colorless'. They claim it is possible that, as the Subject had similar beliefs and was known to voice out against religious fundamentalism, he might have become a target for these gangs.

### **Political Involvement**

It was widely reported that senior Maldivian Ministers are covertly supporting radicalised criminal gangs in an effort to suppress a free press and a growing movement for religious tolerance. This is being done in an effort to intimidate government critics whilst being able to point a finger of blame at criminality.

It was reported that senior government Ministers often task the gangs with the silencing of targets who pose a threat to the government or to their own (the Ministers') interests. This provides a degree of separation that, the often inexperienced, under-resourced and radical infiltrated police force are unable to penetrate. Many sources claimed that target lists of anti-government individuals have been distributed to radical gangs for intimidation and abduction. No evidence of the presence of such a list or lists has been identified.

There were reports that the personal laptop of the Tourism Minister (TM), Ahmed Adheeb, was stolen from his personal office in June 2014. It is claimed that this laptop contains sensitive information that implicates Minister Adheeb in a number of corrupt activities involving the purchase of islands by people linked to European organized crime. The TM's rise to political power has been inexplicably rapid. He was the Vice President of the Maldivian Chamber of Commerce with vocal anti taxation policies, which won him much support and is a former footballer that studied business in Sri Lanka. It is reported that he comes from a steady middle class background (Father –

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Prison Warden, Mother – Customs Officer). Sources report that he was involved an attack upon the then President of the Maldivian Chamber of Commerce and had paid a known gang member in both cash and drugs to undertake the attack.

A Source with direct access to gang activity at a senior level, confirmed that Adheeb has paid gang members in the past to undertake ‘tasks’ on his behalf.

An independent reporter and known critic of the Tourism Minister (Adheeb) received a number of threats to his life by unknown third parties. Following the Subject’s disappearance, in August 2014, it was reported that Ahmed Nazim, the former Deputy Speaker of the Parliament contacted the said independent reporter and informed him that the Subject had been working on a story to expose Minister Adheeb for corrupt activity. It was suggested that if the said independent reporter were able to link the Subject’s disappearance with Minister Adheeb, Nazim would provide him with evidence of Minister Adheeb’s corruption.

A further Source reported that the Defence Minister (Mohamed Nazim) and the Tourism Minister (Ahmed Adheeb) are close and that both share a common dislike of the Home Minister (Umar Naseer). This Source claimed that the Former Deputy Speaker (Nazim) had handed the Subject damning information regarding the Tourism Minister and elements of the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF) and the police force that were involved in corrupt activity related to the establishment of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the murder of Dr. Afrasheem Ali. The Source claimed that Ali was murdered by radical elements of the MNDF and that supporters in the police assisted in diverting the investigation onto other suspects.

There is no evidence that the Subject was working on such a project. It is possible that, because the conversation took place after Rilwan’s abduction, this could be an attempt by the Former Deputy Speaker to draw political capital from an unrelated event.

Former Deputy Speaker Nazim and the Home Minister Umar Naseer are both actively opposed to the growing influence of the Tourism Minister over the President. As the Tourism Minister’s influence has grown, theirs has declined. Nazim and Naseer were not available for comment, despite numerous attempts to establish contact during the course of the investigation.

Open sources report that the Home Minister (Naseer) and Minister of Islamic Affairs (Shaheem) both met with Muaz (reportedly a senior member of the BOSNIA gang) at separate meetings in June 2014. Muaz’s concerns included the growth of secularism, which he believed would eventually destabilise the Maldives as rifts between Islamists

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and Secularists erupt into open violence. It was reported that although Muaz was granted the audience, his requests for assistance were ignored. Other Sources claim that Muaz was in possession of a list of names of ‘un-religious’ people.

Sources claim that this list was compiled in conjunction with the Home Minister (Naseer) and/or the Minister of Islamic Affairs (Shaheem) and its size varies between 150 and 1500 names.

Muaz denies all knowledge of such a list and points towards members of an ‘atheist’ social networking site which, he believes, could be the list referred to.

There are also unsubstantiated claims that Muaz is linked to MP Qasim Ibrahim (Former Finance Minister and businessman - Jumhooree Party).

### **Religious Involvement**

The Subject was once an openly conservative Islamist and previously a member of a group widely known as ‘Dot’. Sources claim that this group name is not something by which they themselves refer to; rather it is a name by which non-members refer to the group. They pray separately from other groups at the Dharumavantha mosque. They do not work with others and are very internalised. It is suspected that they receive funding from Saudi Arabia. Persons stated that ‘Dot’ has further infiltrated the MNDF.

The Subject was followed regularly in July. He claimed to friends that ‘they (his followers) looked like Islamists’. The Subject had previously been followed (Feb 2014) by Ismail Abdul Raheem who was implicated in a stone throwing attack on Hilath Rasheed, a known blogger, during a rally at the Artificial Beach in 2012. Hilath later had his throat slit – recovered and is now living in Sri Lanka. As Hilath’s throat was being slit – he was reportedly told, ‘this is with the compliments of the Islamic Minister’.



*Photo 5: RAHEEN. Note he now has facial hair and a short hairstyle.*

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The Subject was in regular receipt of clear threats to his life claimed to be due to his involvement in 'atheist' and 'un-Islamic' social networking sites.

An Islamic group, Bilad Al Sham (BAS), has a public face on a religious social media site. There are, unconfirmed, claims that BAS was headed by Abu Dujana (aka Yamen Naeem) – a deceased suicide bomber killed in September 2014 in Syria. Mohammed Ameen may presently head BAS. BAS claimed on its Facebook site that 'they had taken a break during Ramadan' and were now back on the scene.

BAS made a clear and unambiguous threat to the Subject's life shortly before his disappearance in which they stated that 'the day was close'.

It should be noted that the Subject, as with many reporters and open critics of radical Islam and government policy was in regular receipt of threats. Sources claim that such threats are taken with a 'pinch of salt' as, 'they are just so many and so regular'.

On 04 August, a friend of the Subject received an SMS from a third party asking for an urgent meeting. He claimed that 'there were threats and that he should let people know'. It was claimed that these threats originated from Dot and were directed to him and his associates, as vocal critics of religious fundamentalism. This Source claimed that there was a list of 400 people who 'need to go' as they were considered 'anti-religious'. It was reported that 'BAS have the resources, funding, boats and ability/intent to abduct people, even from their homes.'

Sources claim to have been in the presence of BAS members when they were on the phone to Syria but they could not understand what was said as 'they were speaking Arabic'.

## **REMAINING LINES OF ENQUIRY**

The following are questions that should continue to be asked of persons with relevant access:

- Is this an attack against the free press/expression, or simply the Subject?

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- Did the Former Deputy Speaker involve the Subject, directly or otherwise, in an investigation that might have led to his disappearance? Exactly what was the Subject allegedly investigating?
- What level of influence do the Tourism Minister (Adheeb), Defence Minister (Nazim) and Home Minister (Naseer) have over the MNDF, police and the gangs in order to pursue their own interests?
- What is the membership of 'Dot'? How are they organised? How do they coordinate activity? What is their tasking authority? What level of infiltration into the security services do they have? How are they funded and resourced?
- What linkages exist between BAS and 'Dot'?
- Why have the police not undertaken a network linkage analysis between the mobile phone correspondence from and to Shiran Saeed within the hours of interest? Who owns these unknown numbers? Did those numbers further contact others as a form of 'call tree'? What is the content of the SMS messages sent/received?
- Exactly what forensic tests were undertaken on the knife and the car? When were these tests undertaken? Why are the results not being made public?
- Did the police undertake forensic examination of the Subject's apartment? What tests were done and what were the results?