

Maldives warns coral bleaching could prompt reef closure



[©Reuters](#)

The [Maldives](#) government has warned it is considering closing off the spectacular reefs that lure millions of tourists to its resorts as a widespread outbreak of coral bleaching reaches its waters.

“We are just trying to see if there is that much damage and then if we need to close them we will,” Thoriq Ibrahim, the country’s environment minister, told the Financial Times in an interview.

The government was awaiting scientific reports on the extent of damage first noticed nearly three months ago, mostly on coral in waters about 1m to 4m deep, he said.

“Hopefully it will not happen,” he said, adding that if closures were needed they would probably not affect the entire reef system.

Mr Ibrahim’s comments come amid an alarming spate of coral bleaching on some of the world’s best-known reefs.

Authorities in Australia confirmed last week that 22 per cent of the country’s [Great Barrier Reef](#) had been killed by a summer bleaching event they said was the worst on record

there.

Researchers have also reported serious bleaching at Christmas Island, which lies south of the Indonesian island of Java, and some [diving sites in Thailand](#) have been closed to protect corals that suddenly turned white, officials told reporters last month.

Corals get their brilliant colours from microscopic algae inside their tissues, a source of food that can be expelled when waters warm or the reefs are subjected to other stresses such as pollution. When this happens, the corals turn white and sometimes die.

The latest bleaching follows a strong El Niño weather pattern that has raised temperatures in waters that scientists say are already warming because of climate change.

Although some corals can recover, a severe bleaching event is a concern for places that depend heavily on tourism income, such as the Maldives, which is visited by more than 1m tourists annually.

The Indian Ocean island nation was one of the first to formally ratify the global climate change accord struck in Paris in December, and Mr Ibrahim said he hoped bigger countries would swiftly follow suit.

The accord cannot come into effect until [55 countries](#) accounting for 55 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions ratify or join it.

“We really want to make sure the agreement is ratified and goes into early action because our economy is based on the environment and the environment is in great danger due to the effects of climate change,” said Mr Ibrahim.