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RTM-Riots

TWO RTM STAFF TRAPPED IN GUIANA RIOT ESCAPE UNHURT

By: Azman Ujang

KOUROU (French Guiana), Nov 13 (Bernama) -- Two Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) staff had a close shave with death when they were trapped in a riot which broke out in Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana, late Tuesday night (Wednesday afternoon Malaysian time).

Reporter Yazid Naim and technician Nawi Abdul Ghani, who escaped unhurt, were on their way in a taxi to the French Guiana Radio and Television (RFO) station to transmit a visual recording of the arrival of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad earlier in the day when they ran right into a group of rioters throwing stones and carrying torches.

"They were setting fire to buildings and cars," said Yazid, 38.

He said as their taxi was nearing the RFO station around midnight, it was suddenly caught in the riot and the driver ordered them to get out.

Riot police then told them to take refuge in the nearby Amazonia Hotel, saying it was safer there as it was popular with foreign tourists.

"Some tourists at the hotel asked us not to go out as it was risky. But we were determined to get to the RFO because otherwise we had to miss our booking for satellite time to transmit our pictures to Kuala Lumpur," Nawi said.

According to Reuters, local police have been overwhelmed by the rioting, which last Thursday and Friday nights left one dead, at least six injured and caused millions of dollars in damage to government buildings and shops in Cayenne.

Violence raged for several hours late on Tuesday with police firing tear gas grenades to disperse the crowds. Fresh violence erupted when a magistrate's court convicted seven people arrested during riots last week, witnesses said.

Bands of youths began to overturn garbage cans, break store windows and attempted to charge the local courthouse. Police fired several rounds of tear gas to disperse the crowd, which had massed near the courthouse all day.

Yazid said a passing motorist offered to take them to the station for 200 francs (about RM100) which they accepted.

The motorist drove away from the rioters and managed to get them to the station in time.

"In our haste to catch our deadline we didn't realise at the time the danger we went through, but thinking back we could well have been beaten up. We thank God that we are still alive," added Nawi.

Dr Mahathir and some 200 other Malaysians, including journalists, however are safe as they are staying at hotels in Kourou, 60km from the scene of the riots, sparked by protest against unsatisfactory conditions in schools.

The Malaysians are here for the launch of Malaysia's second satellite, Measat-2, scheduled at the Kourou Space Centre at 7.40pm on Wednesday (6.40am Thursday Malaysian time).

Yazid said the riots apparently erupted a few hours earlier and had intensified when they passed through the area.

"We heard explosions here and there. Just like on the television," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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