

Pak Lah, be tougher on Iraq invasion
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Opposition parties and non-government organisations (NGOs) today demanded that Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi take a tougher stance in decrying the Iraq war, now entering its fourth year.

The Malaysian Anti-War Coalition made their grievances known during a protest in front of the US embassy here in Kuala Lumpur this morning, where demands that Malaysia cease Free Trade Agreement talks with the "terrorist nation" were also made.

"Get out of Iraq! Stop the FTA!" chanted over 300 activists and opposition members during a noisy but peaceful two-hour protest, which began at 10am.

At least 30 police officers and an additional 30 Light Strike Force (LSF) units monitored the situation, but no untoward incidents were reported.

"The war violates all international laws and the United Nations charter... the war is about nothing except for Middle East oil," exclaimed Malaysian peace activist Ronald McCoy.

At least 31 groups were represented during the protest, including the newly inducted action committees of Kampung Berembang and Kampung Rimba Jaya; recently demolished villages deemed by the authorities as squatter areas.

The protest, held opposite the embassy, slowed, but did not disrupt traffic on both lanes. A semi-circle barricade was formed by the police at the entrance.

Groups carried banners and placards carrying such words as "How many lives per gallon?" and "Hands off Iraq! Hands off Malaysia!"

Anti-war catwalk

Children were not spared the fray. Ten-year-old daughters of Internal Security Act detainees, with face paint, plastic sunglasses and a tiny placard each, participated in an anti-war catwalk.

"We want Abdullah to stop the oppressors. The Americans have used cluster bombs, depleted uranium, Apache (helicopters), missiles, torpedoes and machine-guns on the Iraqis," said one protester.

Opposition politician Tian Chua said the government should be more aggressive in its anti-war stand.

"We must reject outright the war at the United Nations and at the world stage. We urge the prime minister to take a stance against the war. It is not enough to disagree," he said.

Abdullah has a global clout in his capacity as the chairperson of the powerful 56-member Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the influential Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) which has a membership of 116 developing countries.

The anti-war coalition quoted a report by medical journal The Lancet last October, which estimated that "more than 650,000 Iraqis have been killed" during the war.

Among the demands made in a declaration read-out by protesters were the shutting down of all US overseas military bases, for "major imperialist powers" to reduce their arms and that US "scrap its plan to attack Iran."

Cease FTA talks

Protesters also took the advantage to demand that the FTA-talks be ceased immediately.

The agreement, which workers unions here have opposed, is in limbo after missing a special 'fast-track' authority by US president George W Bush.

The government, which has engaged in five FTA talks with US lawmakers, however has not abandoned the negotiations, saying that it would bring economic gain to the country.

March 20 marks the fourth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. London-based war monitoring group Iraq Body Count estimated that nearly 60,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed since the war began. Over 3,000 American troops were killed in the same period.

In January, President Bush has ordered a 21,500-troop increase, to boost the 132,000 soldiers already deployed in Iraq, in a push to eliminate insurgents.

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