

Lawyer, activist named 'human rights defenders'
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A newly released report by two international groups named lawyer Malik Imtiaz Sarwar and labour activist Irene Fernandez as human rights defenders in Malaysia.

Apart from the duo, the report also named 23 villagers and activists who tried to stop the demolition of Kampung Berembang as human rights defenders.

The observatory report for the protection of human rights defenders: steadfast in protest by the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Geneva-based World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) was launched by local rights group Suaram in Kuala Lumpur today.

Speaking at the launch, Malik, who received a death threat for being involved in legal battles over apostasy, said human rights defenders always find themselves in a 'Catch-22' situation.

"On one hand, they feel compelled to highlight the issues but on the other, they are prevented by the system to do so," said Malik, who is also president of the Human Rights Society of Malaysia (Hakam).

"I don't think anyone of us can say we feel 100 percent safe in doing what we are doing, which simply means that we can't feel safe in doing nation building work in this country," he said, adding that the culture of 'might is right' prevails in Malaysia.

Malik, 37, had also drawn flak from Muslim groups for his involvement in the Article 11 coalition, which presses for greater religious freedom.

Speaking on his involvement in controversial court cases, he said: "We (the legal team) have been cautioned, advised, that there will be some sort of reprisal. Some people said we should step back, 'don't do this' but what else are we supposed to do?"

The report also cited the obstacles faced by Article 11 in organising a forum on freedom of religion when about 300 people staged a demonstration against it.

Mobilise international support

Meanwhile, activists S Arutchelvan and Lee Huat Seng spoke on behalf of the Kampung Berembang villagers and activists.

The incident saw 23 people arrested and Arutchelvan said there were more activists than villagers detained.

"The police were trying to portray the picture that those defending the village were outsiders [...] There is a continued attempt to discredit the work done by human rights defenders," he said.

Fernandez, who is director of labour group Tenaganita, was not present at the launch today. She has been named as a human rights defender by the two international groups since 2000.

In 2003, the 61-year-old activist was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment for 'maliciously publishing false news on the alleged torture and deaths in immigration detention camps.

The court later granted Fernandez a stay of execution pending her appeal.

The selection of 'human rights defenders' are done based on information that FIDH and OMCT receive from local groups.

FIDH deputy secretary-general Cynthia Gabriel who was present today pointed out that the programme was meant to prevent or solve the repression against human rights defenders and mobilise support from the international community.

Suaram executive director Yap Swee Seng urged the government to issue a standing invitation to Hina Jilani, the special representative of the United Nations secretary-general on the situation of human rights defenders.

The government has not responded to Jilani's request to visit Malaysia since 2002.

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