

Don't 'reward' Najib, Amnesty urges Pope
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Amnesty International today urged UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Pope Benedict against according Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak the 'red carpet' treatment following his administration's suppression and "brutal" treatment of peaceful dissent.

Cameron (right), in particular, should instead tell his Malaysian counterpart that such human rights violations against peaceful protests calling for reforms are "unacceptable" when Najib begins his four-day official visit to the UK beginning today.

Amnesty cited the numerous reports, photographs and videos that are still emerging of police and riot personnel beating and kicking of, as well as the firing of tear gas canisters directly at, peaceful participants of last Saturday's Bersih 2.0 rally for clean and fair elections.

"The British government shouldn't reward this brutality by rolling out a red carpet for Malaysia's prime minister," said Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific at Amnesty International, Donna Guest.

"David Cameron should tell Prime Minister Najib (left) that these human rights violations against peaceful reform protesters are unacceptable.

"Prime Minister Najib's government rode roughshod over thousands of Malaysians exercising their right to peaceful protest," she added.

'Violent repression'

Guest cited the death of one protester, Baharuddin Ahmad, 56, who had collapsed after being exposed to teargas and was pronounced dead later in hospital and the injuries sustained by Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and PAS' Shah Alam parliamentarian Khalid Samad after tear gas canisters were shot directly at them.

"Amnesty International is calling on the Malaysian authorities to investigate claims that police failed to provide prompt assistance to Baharuddin Ahmad before his death, including reports that an ambulance arrived only an hour and a half after he collapsed."

She decried also the firing of tear gas canisters - although this was denied by the authorities - into the Tung Shin Hospital near Pudu Raya, by which the police had put the health of patients therein at risk.

"This violent repression by the Royal Malaysian Police flies in the face of international human rights standards, and cannot be allowed to continue. Any future peaceful demonstrations should be permitted and respected by the authorities," Guest added.

Amnesty also called on Pope Benedict to press Najib on human rights when the latter visits Rome later this week. "The use of force by police at this rally was excessive, unnecessary and designed to instil fear," said Guest.

While some of the 1,697 protestors arrested on Saturday have been released without charge, about 40 still face prosecution - including for possessing 'illegal' materials in support of the rally that the authorities had decreed was against the law.

'Release PSM Six'

Guest also called for the 'PSM Six', including Sungai Siput member of parliament Dr Michael D Jeyakumar, currently detained under the draconian Emergency Ordinance, to be released.

Also chiding the Malaysian government was United Nations human rights officials, who expressed dismay at its suppression and undermining of democratic rights and progress in the country over the Bersih rally.

"The right to freedom of opinion and expression, including in the form of peaceful protests, is essential for democracy.

"By declaring the demonstration illegal, sealing off parts of the capital in advance and responding in such a heavy-handed manner against peaceful demonstrators, the Government of Malaysia risks undermining democratic progress in the country," said Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

"Actions taken by the authorities prior to and during the rally unduly restricted the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association," said La Rue.

"Declaring Bersih illegal based on claims that it is trying to topple the Government or is a risk to national security and public order - in the absence of any credible evidence to substantiate such claims - is also an unnecessary restriction of civil and political rights," he added.

NONENoting the EO detention of the 'PSM Six', the UN's Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention El Hadji Malick Sow said they "remain deeply concerned about the detention of six individuals since 25 June under the Emergency Ordinance, which allows for detention without trial for up to 60 days."

The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention also reiterated its recommendation, made to the government of Malaysia following a visit to the country in June 2010 to repeal the EO and other preventive laws, on the grounds that they "significantly hinder fundamental human rights, such as the right to fair trial."

'Remain open to dissent'

UN experts also reminded the government of its obligation to fully respect the rights to peaceful assembly, association, and expression, as guaranteed under the Malaysian federal constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Malaysia has pledged to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, they said.

"Malaysia, as a dynamic, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and pluralistic nation, should remain open to legitimate political discourse on democracy, including the expression of dissent".

"We urge the government to allow all individuals to enjoy their human rights, and to address the problem of preventive detention. Likewise, we call upon the government to ensure that there will not be any punitive measures taken against peaceful demonstrators," said the statement.