

CNN denies being lobbied to interview Najib
Malaysiakini.com
August 4, 2011

International broadcaster CNN has denied an allegation that its recent interview with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak was a result of lobbying by an international public relations company.

A news report published by US-based media organisation Politico quoted a CNN spokesperson as saying the allegation made by whistleblower website Sarawak Report was not true.

"CNN's recent interview with the Malaysian Prime Minister was set up solely by CNN with the PM's office," Politico quoted CNN spokesperson Lauren Cone as saying.

Sarawak Report, founded by journalist Clare Rewcastle Brown, who is the sister-in-law of former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, claims that FBC Media Ltd, a UK-based PR company, was paid millions of ringgit by BN politicians to gloss up their image overseas.

It alleged that CNN was one of the many international news broadcasters that had aired TV news programmes produced by FBC to shore up the political positions of BN leaders and to counter critics.

This, if proven true, would be against international broadcasting regulations. Sarawak Report said CNN had carried a number of suspect shows made by FBC, including interviews with Najib by the company's president, John Defterios.

The latest interview was done earlier this month, during Najib's official visit to London, after the police crackdown on the July 9 Bersih 2.0 rally.

Although Najib was asked about the rally during the interview, critics said Defterios failed to challenge the rationale behind the high-handed clampdown against the rally.

Sarawak Report also claimed that Defterios, a former CNN business presenter, is also president and shareholder in FBC's parent company FBC Group Ltd.

Admitting Defterios' link with FBC, CNN, however, argued that Defterios "became a full-time employee with CNN in March, at which time he severed his affiliation with FBC".

CNN's Cone added that "there has never been a contract between CNN and FBC to carry any editorial content on CNN," and "the only FBC content CNN has carried is FBC advertorial, clearly labelled, in commercial time".

CNBC axes its flagship business series

On the other hand, British-based broadcaster BBC, which faced the same allegation from Sarawak Report, said it will stop airing FBC programmes pending an investigation into the matter.

Politico quoted a spokesperson from the broadcaster as saying it "was not aware of some of the information provided and we will examine the claims made as a matter of urgency".

All independent TV companies that make shows for BBC World News have to sign stringent agreements to ensure against conflict of interest, said the spokesperson.

"As a precautionary step, we will not broadcast programmes made by FBC whilst we look into these claims."

Following the expose by Sarawak Report, another international news broadcaster, CNBC, announced that its flagship business show World Business had been axed.

"In light of serious questions raised last week, CNBC immediately initiated an examination of FBC and its business practices and has withdrawn the programme World Business indefinitely," said CNBC vice president of marketing and communications Charlotte Westgate.

CNBC is also one of the broadcasters that is said to have aired programmes produced by FBC.

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