

'Water cannon least hurtful way to disperse crowd'

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By Hazlan Zakaria

The use of chemically-laced water at demonstrations is the "least hurtful" means of crowd control, say the police, claiming that it is a method certified by experts and used the world over.

"The use of water-cannons is the least hurtful way to disperse the crowd," inspector-general of police Ismail Omar said in a speech during a meet-and-greet session with top media editors in Bukit Aman this morning.

NONEThe riot suppression technique, he said is not only in use by the Malaysian police but also by their counterparts overseas and has been certified by experts in the field.

Additionally, he related that the anti-riot Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) showed restraint prior to deploying their water-cannons at protesters last Saturday.

"They only utilised the water-cannons after the crowd had advanced 200 metres."

The IGP's statement follows that of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting last Sunday night, saying that the use of tear gas and water-cannons against the crowd is not harmful to health.

Sombre attire

The top cop was speaking to over 150 members of the media, including chief editors of major mainstream publications who were feted at the police headquarters Senior Officer's Mess hall for morning tea.

NONENearly half of the media in attendance wore black or dark coloured clothing, believed to be in protest of alleged police beatings of journalists documenting police actions against protestors during the Bersih 3.0 pro-electoral reform rally last Saturday in Kuala Lumpur.

The IGP expressed his "concern" over the claims of members of the media roughed up by police, vowing to investigate all reports and take punitive action against errant cops.

"If there are one or two who are bullies, we will find him...these are my orders. (We will) be professional and open investigations... transparent and earnest investigations."

"Jangan sebab kerbau seekor membawa lumpur, semuanya terpalit." (Don't let the actions of one bad apple spoil the entire barrel).

He also said that as history proves, there are cops sent to the gallows and some sent to prison for going beyond the law as the force does not play favorites and does not practice double standards.

However he said that all sides of the story must be looked at, including reports of police being beaten-up by protesters as well as property damaged, including four police vehicles.

NONE"We must be fair to all the victims... justice must be done for all, be it for civilians, cops or journalists."

In the meantime, he added, the media and other organisations were free to take whatever legal recourse they felt necessary against the force.

Ismail appealed to the media to let the wheels of the criminal justice system turn and find out the truth of the matter, urging the press not to jump the gun and come to any conclusions until investigations were completed and all evidence looked at.

"You must look at all the recordings of the incident, please look at all of it, how the crowd was, how the cops were... from 6am until 3pm when the breach occurred.

"A breach did happen, the barricade was lifted, moved and a group barged in. I can say that because I saw it happen from my office which overlooks Dataran Merdeka."

The "riot" he said was caused by that incident which happened about 2.59pm by his reckoning.

NONEHe said that everything was peaceful until then and cops showed great restraint in not engaging the crowd prior to the fracas at the Dataran Merdeka.

"We must look at the big picture, why did this rusuhan (riot) occur? What if the breach did not happen. They were already dispersing and we never stopped their leader from giving speeches."

He however justified police actions in barricading the Dataran as being in accordance with the law and supported by a court order which he said all responsible rakyat including himself must obey.

Ismail also repeated his justification of the police blockade as intelligence reports had told them that certain parties were looking to permanently occupy the iconic national landmark as was done by a previous group whose motives were questionable.

NONE"I am not making any assumptions, or going on bad faith, but you must look into such information in the context of the investigation," he said.

Last Saturday, what was initially a peaceful sit-in turned violent when a group allegedly breached a police cordon at the Dataran Merdeka prompting a backlash of police actions against protestors.

Claims of extreme and unnecessary brutality by cops against demonstrators abound, with even journalists allegedly targeted and beaten up after being warned not to document the roughhouse tactics employed by law enforcement officers.

