

**Ambiga: Tear gas aftermath, police responsibility**

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**By Hafiz Yatim**

The April 28 violence erupted when police began firing tear gas at the historic Bersih 3.0 rally participants, said Bersih co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan.

In an exclusive interview with *Malaysiakini* on the Bersih 3.0 rally, she said that she was glad the organisers did not accept the stadium Merdeka offer, as things may have turned differently if that type of incident had occurred there, people would have been trapped.

The lawyer and former Bar Council president said four hours earlier between 10am and prior to the firing of the tear gas in the afternoon, the 250,000-strong crowd had been well behaved.

"In any such public assembly it is the joint responsibility of the government and the organisers. Look we do not have batons and we do not have the means (weapons) to go to the extent the police can.

"As far as we are concerned, we did our best as things were under control until the tear gas.

"Even if the barricades were breached they (police and our volunteers) could have stopped it. However, when the tear gas was fired you cannot hold us responsible.

"What happens after police take action is their responsibility. I am not condoning violence but everything happened after that it is their responsibility. Everything went berserk after that," she said.

She added that police started shooting tear-gas canister after canister all over and continuously as the people were retreating. No warning given, she claimed.

Ambiga said she had earlier issued instructions three times for the crowd to disperse as the organisers felt that they had already achieved their objective and although opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim had come-out to talk, we were moving the crowd towards Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman.

She said as there was a huge turnout, we knew it would take some time for them to depart.

"It was true we wanted to be there until 4pm and there were events lined up, but the crowd was huge.

"It was beyond our expectation as you can see Jalan Tun Perak and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman filled (with people wearing yellow t-shirts) and we could not see to the end of the roads.

"I made a judgment call because of the (huge) numbers, I was worried people would start to faint

as it was hot, people had been to the event for a long time since 10am, and we had achieved the purpose. I know I am being criticised for that and I accept that," she said.

### **Independent inquiry necessary**

Ambiga said she or the organisers did not lend support to the breaching of the Dataran Merdeka barricades as certain areas were open, giving the crowd the impression that they could go in.

Asked as to their location, Ambiga said they are still gathering more information on this, and for that reason they wanted an independent inquiry.

She said the police were initially all right with the crowd having fun and a wonderful atmosphere with the ages of the attendees ranging from 20 to 70.

"I told you we control it fine - it is after firing the tear gas - it is their responsibility - I had already asked the crowd to disperse - you should have left them alone and they would have left."

As to conflicting reports over some leaders alleged to have urged the supporters to move forward, she emphasised she had indeed asked them to disperse, and she cannot answer for the leaders.

"When Anwar arrives as he is an elected MP we allow him to talk. If BN MPs were also there, they would also be given an opportunity to talk as Bersih is for everyone, and we cannot stop people from supporting it.

"Anyway as Anwar came, people were not dispersing quickly as we moved towards Batu Road (Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman). Then I saw someone run towards the barrier.

"Police then started firing tear gas. My bodyguard and I then ran towards Masjid India with two other steering committee members and we stayed there for one and a half hours. I heard the beatings done outside," she said.

### **In yellow 'we took KL'**

Ambiga said if the program had been allowed at Dataran Merdeka, it would have been different.

"I think it would have been fine there would've been no issue. There were standing crowds of Malaysians in yellow at each street, then there is a patch of green representing Dataran - you didn't give us Dataran - but we took KL," she laughed.

"But there were one patch of green (Dataran) - they (the authorities) were so stubborn in not allowing entry. I am still try to find answers to why we were kept out of Dataran Merdeka."

She also criticised the mainstream media for its misreporting of Bersih that day.

Ambiga said just look at the *New Straits Times* and TV3 describing it as Bersih riots.

"They did not give the whole story as they showed images of people lifting the police patrol car.

"What happened was the police patrol car had ploughed through the protesters and the public was worried that there could have been someone below the patrol car.

"I guess the agenda is to vilify Bersih as they must have been shocked by the numbers.

"But how do you undermine 250,000 people who were there. They have to change their tactics," she said, adding if you meet people in the streets they would know someone who had gone to the rally.

### **No basis for comparison**

When asked about Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak comparing the Umno 66th anniversary celebrations at the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil with Bersih's, Ambiga questioned its basis, pointing out that the police were on their (Umno's) side.

"What is the difficulty (with Umno) as police facilitated those events as compared with ours," she said.

Najib had in his London speech contrasted Umno gathering as peaceful in contrast to the Bersih rally.

Ambiga said the freedom of assembly issue is that you can go to any public space.

"The stadium is not freedom of assembly as it is half of what you are entitled to. You go out to the street peacefully and gather.

"Furthermore, Umno had also done this in the past in the street demonstration (with the Malayan Union)," she pointed out

She said the Bersih rally had raised public awareness as people are tuned into electoral reform, not just locally but also Malaysians abroad.

For her, she said there has been a real shift of the middle ground, as people leading comfortable lives in the comfort of their houses took a stand,

"These people took a stand as they want to see free and fair elections. All of society, they were there that day.

"Everyone, knows someone who went to Bersih. It wasn't just KL as there were numbers in Penang, Johor, Kuantan, Kuching and also worldwide," she said.

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