

US summons Malaysian envoy
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The United States summoned Friday Malaysia's top envoy in Washington to protest its crackdown on dissent at a time when the opposition was attempting to take over power in Kuala Lumpur.

Ilango Karuppanan, the charge d'affaires of the Malaysian embassy, was summoned to the State Department after an opposition politician, a prominent blogger and a journalist were held under a law allowing indefinite detention without trial, a diplomatic source said.

The move came amid fears in Kuala Lumpur that Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's government was planning a larger crackdown as Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim scrambled to oust the government with parliamentary defections.

"Peaceful expression of political opinions is a fundamental right and critical to a democracy," a State Department official told AFP.

"The United States believes that the Malaysian government should provide due process and treatment consistent with Malaysian law and international standards," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"We expect that democratic countries that purport to advocate free expression of political views will not curtail such freedom," the official said following the trio's arrest.

This is the second time Ilango was summoned to the State Department in a month.

The last time he was hauled up when Anwar was charged with sodomy, an accusation the opposition leader said was concocted by the government after it was humiliated in March elections,

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Rais Yatim had slammed Washington previously for interfering in the country's "domestic" affairs.

But US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Washington would continue to speak out on cases involving human rights and politics although it did so "in a spirit of respect for Malaysia".

Raise at UN Assembly

Those arrested under Malaysia's Internal Security Act (ISA) Friday were top blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin, opposition MP Teresa Kok and Sin Chew Daily journalist Tan Hoon Cheng.

Three Malaysian newspapers - the Sin Chew Daily, The Sun which is a free English-language daily, and Suara Keadilan which is published by the opposition - were also Friday reportedly threatened with suspension.

"The United States firmly believes that freedom of the press and freedom of speech are fundamental to a vibrant democracy," the State Department official said.

Rights groups condemned the arrests, saying it was an abuse of power by Abdullah's government.

Amnesty International wants the United States to consider raising the case at the current UN General Assembly, where a special forum was to scrutinize human rights situation of member nations, said the group's Washington-based Asia Pacific advocacy director T Kumar.

"It appears that the Malaysian government is engaging in a witch hunt against peaceful dissent," he said. "The government should release all ISA detainees and not use the law as a tool to maintain political power."

Human Rights Watch, an independent US group, said Malaysia risked "irreparable harm" to its "already fragile reputation" if those arrested were not freed.

"The Malaysian government apparently thinks it can only maintain power by jailing journalists and opposition politicians," said Elaine Pearson, the group's deputy Asia director. "Such tactics have no place in a modern democracy."

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