

Bernama Journalists Accounts Of July 9 Illegal Assembly
Bernama
Julai 31, 2011

KUALA LUMPUR, July 31 (Bernama) -- The illegal assembly held in the federal capital on July 9 was an attempt to challenge the country's institutions especially the police for the political interests of certain quarters.

Organised by an illegal organisation known as Bersih 2.0 purportedly to call for electoral reform, the rally was held in total disregard to calls by the authorities not to hold street demonstrations and objections from the public.

A team of Bernama journalists was on duty at several locations around Kuala Lumpur to record the event that took place on that day.

The following accounts were recorded by journalists who witnessed first hand what happened on July 9:

MOHD NOOR FIRDAUS MOHD AZIL (Location: Stadium Merdeka and Menara Maybank)

I was assigned to cover the illegal assembly at Stadium Merdeka with three other journalists.

Travelling in a Bernama official car, we could go through several roads blocked by traffic police with the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) and members of the Malaysian Civil Defence Department also present.

As we arrived at Jalan Stadium, we saw the road had been fortified with rolls of barbed wire. The police told us to register before being allowed to enter the area.

After waiting for two hours, an Utusan journalist and I took the decision to check out the surrounding areas. As we descended to Bulatan Merdeka, we saw a group of Bersih supporters walking briskly into a backlane parallel to Petaling Street.

We followed them and came upon a bigger group at Petaling Street. Then we heard a person shouting "We are changing the plan. Directive from higher ups wants us to gather at Menara Maybank and disperse."

When the crowd entered Jalan Tan Cheng Lock in front of the Kota Raya Shopping Complex, the situation became chaotic and the air smelt acrid, piercing the nose.

(It was believed tear gas had been released in the area earlier) As we approached Menara Maybank, we could see commotions all over the place when a group of demonstrators was being pursued by a team of policemen on the fringe of Menara Maybank.

At that moment, the FRU got ready at the junction with Jalan Tun Perak while the crowd which kept swelling in numbers was led by Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) leader Badrul Hisham Shaharin, better known as Chegu Bard, in front of the Pudu Raya Bus Terminal.

As it began to rain, the protesters started crying "Allahu Akbar", "Reformasi", "Tumbang BN" and "BN Zalim". There were however no cries relating to fight for transparency of the Election Commission as they had promoted earlier.

With the standoff converging in front of Pudu Raya, the FRU gave the crowd three warnings to disperse but the demonstrators refused to budge. On the final count, the FRU had no

choice but to activate crowd dispersal, firing tear gas canisters flying and spraying water canons.

The Utusan Malaysia journalist and I were caught in the middle between the demonstrators and FRU and we tried to seek shelter in a car park but the thick gas enveloping the area, caused us to feel breathless.

Before we knew it, the impact of the tear gas hit us right in our face and in that instance, we felt nausea and our eyes stinging.

We were almost on the verge of fainting. I immediately grabbed a bottle of mineral water from my bag to wet my shirt and wash my face. More mineral water bottles were given by a policeman in civilian clothes who saw us get caught in the commotion.

As I could not see where my colleague was, I decided to get out of the area to a lane where several people were handing out salt and water to rub on the face to relieve the effects of tear gas.

When the situation subsided, the rain stopped and I came out to check on the latest situation. At that time, I saw members of the police starting to arrest demonstrators who tried provoke them. Later, the member of Parliament for Bruas, Datuk Ngeh Koo Ham from DAP and MP for Subang from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) R. Sivarasa with a PAS member (later I found out he was the person who feigned dead - Suhardi Mohd) were discussing with the police to allow the procession towards Stadium Merdeka. With the greenlight from the police, the group led by Chegu Bard member ascended the hill to Stadium Merdeka while the crowd swelled into a huge column.

At Stadium Merdeka, the procession met and merged with another swarm led by former PAS vice-president Datuk Husam Musa.

Negotiations were held with the police but this time, they were not allowed to enter the stadium compound.

MOHD FAIZAL HASSAN (Location: Puduraya Bus Station)

A media colleague and I were located somewhere between shops near the Puduraya bus station when I felt my eyes and nose burning, making it difficult to breathe.

That was my first encounter with tear gas which was fired by police to disperse the July 9 illegal rally.

After washing up with salt water, 10 minutes later I rushed to find a higher location where I could get a clearer picture of what was going on.

I could see that despite having been directed by the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) to leave, the rally's participants, mostly men, refused to do so. They stood about 50 metres from policemen, but I saw no police brutality in the incident.

Tear gas was released into a clear area and it was the wind that carried the fumes. No water cannons hit rally participants.

The 1pm incident caused the group to move towards Bukit Bintang, but they stopped near the Tung Shin Hospital for shelter from the pouring rain.

I took that time to clean myself up in the hospital parking lot and perform my prayers.

While at the parking lot, I saw a woman and her two young sons who seemed lost and unaware of what was happening.

I quickly told them to leave the area and go towards the FRU who were waiting near Jalan Bukit Bintang in case of untoward incidents.

As expected, protestors walked to Jalan Bukit Bintang from the hospital minutes later but were blocked by the FRU.

The FRU acted wisely by practising their standard operating procedure (SOP) such as giving out warnings before using tear gas and water cannons on the crowd in the streets.

Because of the rain, tear gas was carried through the wind towards the hospital parking lot and groups of rioters were seen leaving the area using other routes to Jalan Bukit Bintang.

They arrived near the Istana Hotel then moved on to KLCC and Pudu Raya.

Police arrived at the scene 20 minutes after rioters assembled and shouted anti-government slogans.

The FRU arrived later and used their SOPs again, this time successfully arresting rioters while others fled into KLCC, Jalan Yap Kwan Seng and surrounding areas.

That was when I saw an ambulance, probably tending to an injured participant, which left Jalan Ampang for the Kuala Lumpur Hospital.

I then returned to the office and several hours later received news that a participant had died in the KLCC area due to breathing difficulties.

ZULHILMI SUPAAT (Location: Kuala Lumpur Police Headquarters)

Several organisers of the illegal rally who were taken to the Kuala Lumpur Police Headquarters for questioning admitted they were treated well by the police.

Datuk S. Ambiga who was detained at 2.30 pm at KL Sentral and released at 6.30pm the same evening, conceded that the police took good care of her throughout the time.

She looked cheerful while leaving the station and told reporters she was also satisfied with the facilities provided to those detained at the Police Training Centre, Pulapol, which included food, water and prayer rooms.

In fact, she was shocked to find out Pulapol had served them 'nasi beriani' and said, "We had no 'nasi beriani' here but I was treated well during the 45 minutes questioning, I have no complaints against the police."

PAS president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang who was also detained at the headquarters was given a ride home by the police at 7.30pm that night.

Almost 100 PAS supporters who had waited outside to meet their leader were dissatisfied and a handful of them turned abusive towards the police guarding the entrance.

They only calmed down after PAS assistant secretary-general Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi who happened to be there made a few phone calls and confirmed Abdul Hadi had been sent home.

SITI ZUBAIDAH ABDULLAH (Location: Bukit Bintang)

While at certain locations in the city street demonstrations were brewing and police were apprehending protesters, Bukit Bintang Walk was calm. A media group from Bernama TV, TV Al-Hijrah, Astro Awani, Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian had gathered there since 9am.

At around 1pm, UMNO Youth's Patriot members group appeared and started distributing red T-shirts before the arrival 30 minutes later of their leaders, BN Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin, and Datuk Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim.

Khairy in a brief address said the group's action was not to participate in the street demonstration but to protest against those who were trying to cause antagonism in the country.

"We are in the front line as a peaceful group to defend our leaders and the country's harmony...the illegal assembly today is an opposition agenda hiding behind Bersih, not for a 'clean (election)' but to bring down the government," said Khairy.

Patriot members numbering more than 500 appeared determined as they marched towards Stadium Merdeka while singing the patriotic song, "Inilah Barisan Kita" while police looked set to halt them.

Earlier before the Patriot group appeared, another group with about 500 members believed to be from Bersih were on the march from Jalan Imbi towards Stadium Merdeka. It was confusing to the media assigned in the area, who nevertheless trailed after them up to Jalan Pudu.

At Jalan Pudu in front of a hotel, a Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) team had already been mobilised, complete with shields and an anti-riot water-cannon vehicle.

Meanwhile, police gave a warning to the rallying Patriot members to disperse peacefully. But the call went unheeded, while they roared "Hapus Bersih" (Destroy Bersih), "Hidup Rakyat" (Long live the people) and "Hidup Malaysia" (Long live Malaysia).

As the warnings were ignored, the security forces were left with little choice but to shoot tear gas in the direction of the group.

Police then detained Khairy, Abdul Azeez together with UMNO Youth assistant secretary Datuk Megat Firdaus Megat Junid and UMNO Youth executive committee member Lokman Adam.

The situation returned to normal around 3.30pm when the group began dispersing.

Police also ordered other parties around to leave the area while the media stayed on until 4pm.

ZURIATI ZULMI (location: Sogo Complex, KLCC, KTMB Station, Menara Maybank)

I was assigned to cover the illegal assembly at Kampung Baru, Maju Junction and also along Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman (TAR).

This was the first time I ever covered an illegal assembly. I was so nervous and kept thinking that things could go out of control, just like most demonstrations I saw on television.

From Jalan Tun Razak to Jalan Ampang, policemen were taking control of traffic flow in several locations to help reduce traffic congestion.

While going along Jalan Bonus at about 10am, I saw a small group of demonstrators gathered there as if they were waiting for their next instruction.

Upon arriving at the Sogo shopping complex, the environment was quite calm and at 10.30am, I was ordered to go to KLCC as it was speculated that tear gas had been fired there. When I arrived at the KLCC, it turned out to be just a rumour.

At around noon, through a walkie-talkie, I heard a colleague say that the situation at the KTMB station had become heated when police tried to disperse a group of people planning to hold a gathering there.

When I arrived at the station, I saw police had already made some arrests and despite being highly provoked and bad-mouthed by aggressive demonstrators, the police appeared calm in handling the situation.

I did not see the police using brutality against the detainees.

The way the police asked their names and checked their identity cards, although firm, was still in a courteous manner.

For female detainees, there were policewomen assigned to them.

When the situation in KTMB Station returned to normal, areas in Central Market started to be flocked by Bersih supporters. From the Dayabumi building, I could see them marching to Dataran Merdeka.

There, police were heard to have warned them repeatedly to disperse, but not only the warnings were ignored, the demonstrators even shouted the words "Allahuakbar" and "Reformasi".

The demonstrators were also daring enough to provoke the police and caused the law enforcers to resort to firing tear gas.

At about 1.30pm, the weather got hotter and I realised that my water bottle was empty.

Then, I saw a 7-Eleven store and as I tried to rush in, I found the door was blocked from inside by a stack of boxes. I tried to ask for a bottle of mineral water, but the store operator refused to open the door.

So, I moved on to try my luck at a restaurant inside the Dayabumi building, but the front door of the restaurant was also closed and locked from inside.

Through the glass window, I could see there were several customers in the restaurant, so I knocked on the door and begged the restaurant owner to sell me some water.

Thank God they listened and let me in to buy some food and water.

At 2pm, based on the information I received, I walked to the Menara Maybank, accompanied by a photographer.

The FRU had already fired tear gas canisters and water cannons when we arrived there.

However, it shocked me to see so many Bersih supporters there and that they were obviously aggressive in ignoring police orders to back off and disperse.

I saw police run after some demonstrators who tried to challenge their authority. Several detainees were also seen trying to use violence against the police.

At that point, I was trying to call the headquarters to inform them about the situation when police fired another tear gas canister, causing me and other members of the press to run helter-skelter with teary eyes.

Soon after that, there was a heavy downpour and I joined other reporters to take shelter in a restaurant near the Kotaraya complex.

When the rain stopped at about 3pm, the demonstrators who also ran helter-skelter earlier came out from their hiding places and among them, there was an instigator who was shouting and urging those present to march to the Merdeka Stadium.

Along the way, they were chanting "Allahuakbar" and "Reformasi".

We (members of the press) also followed the group, but upon reaching a bend at the Central Market LRT Station, we were welcomed by another tear gas canister fired by the police. My friend and I, however, managed to escaped from the area and the gas.

Police then fired three more tear gas canisters towards the demonstrators as they still refused to disperse.

In my opinion, the canisters were fired randomly because I personally saw the police pointing the tear gas guns up in the air to enable the canisters to be fired further away.

The situation subsided at 4.15pm.

I would like to say that despite their firm action, the law enforcers had also displayed humanity because they did not use the tear gas at their whims and fancies.

Several ambulances were also seen nearby to offer help to those suffering from the tear gas.

-- BERNAMA

Copyright © 2011 BERNAMA

Source: <http://bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsgeneral.php?id=605134>