

UN human rights expert criticises 'heavy-handed' police methods in Malaysia
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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's "heavy-handed" control of the Bersih rally last weekend has come under criticism from a United Nations human rights expert, who also expressed concern over reports of detention of political leaders.

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression Frank La Rue said the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including in the form of peaceful protests, was essential for democracy

"By declaring the demonstration illegal, sealing off parts of the capital in advance and responding in such a heavy-handed manner against peaceful demonstrators, the Government of Malaysia risks undermining democratic progress in the country," he said in statement on the UN website late July 11.

"Actions taken by the authorities prior to and during the rally unduly restricted the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association," he said.

More than 1,400 people were arrested by the police on Saturday, July 9 for their involvement in the illegal protests which brought Kuala Lumpur to a standstill.

Among those were arrested was Bersih 2.0 steering committee chairman Datuk Sreenevasan Ambiga, who was among the activists and politicians detained for their involvement in the illegal rally

La Rue said that declaring the assembly illegal based on claims that it was trying to topple the government or was a risk to national security and public order – in the absence of any credible evidence to substantiate such claims – was also an unnecessary restriction of civil and political rights.

Meanwhile, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention El Hadji Malick Sow said the Working Group remains deeply concerned about the detention of six individuals since June 25 under the Emergency Ordinance, which allows for detention without trial for up to 60 days.

He also reiterated the Working Group's recommendation to the government to repeal the Emergency Ordinance and other preventive laws, on the grounds that they significantly hinder fundamental human rights, such as the right to fair trial.

La Rue and Sow also reminded the government of its obligation to fully respect the rights to peaceful assembly, association, and expression, as guaranteed under the Federal Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

They said that as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Malaysia had pledged to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights.

La Rue and Sow are independent, non-paid experts reporting to the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

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