

Minister shows disdain for students, deputy says attacks 'matter of concern'
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, April 19 — Malaysia's two top higher education officials today issued vastly contradictory remarks on the alleged assault on the student activists at Dataran Merdeka, with minister Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin refusing to sympathise with the group while his deputy Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah expressing concern.

In a Twitter posting this morning, Khaled (picture), responding to reports of the attack, pointed out that no one had told the group to camp out at the iconic square in the first place.

"Takde siapa pun suruh berkhemah di Dataran, bila berlaku apa2 perkara, jgn tagih simpati," he wrote. [Translation: No one asked them to camp out at Dataran, when anything happens, do not be so addicted to sympathy.]

But when approached in Parliament here, Saifuddin said he was relieved that no serious injuries were recorded in the early-morning fracas, adding that it was a "matter of concern".

The deputy minister also repeated his view that the students "have a right to be there" although not everyone agreed with their views.

"To me, only DBKL (KL City Hall) and the police would have the right to take action against the students... not anyone else," he said.

The group of student activists has been camping out in tents, in shifts, since last Saturday after hundreds of them marched across the city's capital to lobby for free tertiary education, after being disenchanted by pay-back terms and conditions over the government's higher education loan scheme.

But this morning, the group claimed they were attacked by a mob of about 60 to 70 thugs garbed in black who demanded that they return home.

Saifuddin had earlier said he understood the students' sentiments against the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) and said that such assemblies and demonstrations were part of a functioning democracy.

He, however, disagreed with the group's demand to abolish the loan scheme and said that the demonstration should end quickly, particularly out of respect for the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as a royal concert has been scheduled at Dataran Merdeka in the monarch's honour this Saturday.

A nearly five-minute long video of this morning's assault has been uploaded on YouTube showing a group of young men dressed in printed black T-shirts rushing towards another group of men, including those dressed in the striking yellow Bersih T-shirts, attempting to kick at them.

The video did not record anyone actually being beaten up as alleged, but does contain sounds of people shouting in the background. Most of the words are undecipherable, but some are clearly enunciated, such as some men's voices yelling "Bodoh!" (Stupid) and "Assalamualaikum" repeatedly.

Several figures, including those dressed in police uniform, were seen trying to break up the melee and telling onlookers to disperse.

The video, titled "Mob of 40 attacking students at Dataran Merdeka" uploaded on Youtube carried a description lifted from a Facebook message stated "the Government might take action against them tonight. My assistance managed to capture some video although he himself was attacked by 4 to 5 of them [sic]."

The attack drew an immediate condemnation by human rights group Suaram, who noted that the incident was not the first time violence was used to disrupt peaceful demonstrations.

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