

Cops caused violence at Bersih rally, Suhakam inquiry told
Malaysian Insider
July 5, 2012
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KUALA LUMPUR, July 5 — Riot police fired tear gas and water cannons during the April 28 Bersih rally, leading to violent clashes with protesters, and the situation was made worse by the use of barbed wire around Dataran Merdeka as it led to injuries to scores of demonstrators, a Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) inquiry was told today.

One witness told the inquiry that the barbed wire used by the authorities at Dataran Merdeka was usually used in war zones.

"According to my experience, it is the most dangerous barbed wire. This is from my experience as a former army officer," retired soldier Khairul Anuar Pawanchik told the inquiry.

He told the Suhakam panel that he saw a man with his ear cut and left dangling from his head, and that he was sure it had been caused by the barbed wire used to seal off Dataran Merdeka.

"He was severely bleeding from his left ear after the wire cut his ear. It was dangling," said Khairul who told the panel he was a Red Crescent volunteer on standby for medical emergencies at Masjid Jamek that day.

"The police should not use violence to handle a rough crowd. That kind of force was unnecessary," he said.

But Khairul also said he heard a group of 20 to 30 uniformed policemen taunting a crowd of people dressed in the yellow Bersih 3.0 T-shirts, estimated at about 200, "Why are you running away? If you have guts come and face us. Stand and fight."

The 60-year-old added that just before the incident, he also heard and saw heard the same group of demonstrators chasing down a lone uniformed policeman on Jalan Raja Laut, who was bleeding from injuries, yelling, "Kita bunuh polis yang jahat (We kill bad policemen)".

Another witness, Kunabalan Rahagopal, told the inquiry that the police did not give any warning before firing tear gas into the crowd of thousands of protesters.

"I am certain that there were no warnings given before the policemen moved in," the freelance social service consultant said.

The self-confessed Bersih supporter who was affected by the tear gas said the situation was peaceful initially, until an anti-riot police squad arrive on the scene in a Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) truck on Jalan Loke Yew, after 2.40pm.

He told the inquiry that he had seen five to six teenagers dressed in black breaking through the barbed wire barricades there, without incident.

"A Chinese individual jumped over the barricade and spoke to the policemen and gave them a bouquet of flowers and was interviewed by the media," Kunabalan said, in his account of events at about 2.40pm last April 28, before the chaos began.

"The FRU truck moved in and started shooting the water cannon. Within minutes, they started firing tear gas," he said.

A third witness who testified today, retiree Baharudin Hisham, 53 from Puchong told the inquiry he was an innocent bystander who was window-shopping in the Sogo area downtown before a group of uniformed police caught hold of him and started beating him up, along with other a large crowd of people wearing the yellow Bersih T-shirt.

"I was dragged on the road and beaten all over my body and head," he said.

"The policemen then detained me without reason," he added.

Baharuddin said the incident occurred at about 4pm that day, just after Asar prayers.

Suhakam kickstarted today a public inquiry into the violence in the national capital that erupted last April 28 over Bersih's third demonstration for clean elections since 2007.

The inquiry panel led by Suhakam vice-chairman Datuk Dr Khaw Lake Tee and aided by commissioners Professor Datuk Dr Mahmood Zuhdi Abdul Majid and Detta Samen will be interviewing some 22 witnesses over a period of 22 days.

Today's three witnesses testified before observers from the Malaysian Bar, the police and several other independent monitors.

The next hearing will be on July 11 at 9am.

The April 28 rally that saw tens of thousands gather at six different locations before heading to Dataran Merdeka was peaceful until about 2.30pm when Bersih chief Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan asked the crowd to disperse.

But her announcement was not heard by most of the crowd who persisted to linger around the historic square which the courts had already barred to the public over the weekend.

Just before 3pm, some protestors breached the barricade surrounding the landmark, leading police to disperse the crowd with tear gas and water cannons.

Police then continued to pursue rally-goers down several streets amid chaotic scenes which saw violence from both sides over the next four hours.

Several dozen demonstrators have claimed that they were assaulted by groups of over 10 policemen at a time and visual evidence appears to back their claim but police also point to violence from rally-goers who attacked a police car.

The police car then crashed into a building before some protestors flipped it on its side.

The federal government has also formed its own panel to investigate the April 28 violence, but the choice of former police chief Tun Hanif Omar as chairman has been widely criticised after he compared the movement to communism and accused the organisers of an attempted coup.

The Hanif panel had today revisited the site of the April 28 rally, while the Suhakam inquiry was underway.

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