

## **MALAYSIA: Amnesty International reiterates need for freedom of expression as protests turn violent**

Amnesty International today warned that the Malaysian authorities looked set to intensify their crackdown on peaceful assembly and protest in the wake of disturbances in Kuala Lumpur at the weekend.

“Freedom of peaceful assembly, protest and expression are fundamental human rights that serve as an essential outlet for political and economic tensions within any society” Amnesty International said. “Unless discontent is allowed free expression, there is a risk that public anger will turn to violence”.

On Saturday 24 October police used excessive force to break up a peaceful demonstration in central Kuala Lumpur, including water cannon spray containing chemical irritant. As with the dispersal of previous peaceful demonstrations, protestors and bystanders were reportedly beaten, kicked and slapped by police. At least 50 people were reported arrested for illegal assembly.

On the same day the police also ordered the dispersal of an indoor forum being held at the Malaysian Trades Union Congress headquarters in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA). Participants were given ten minutes to leave or else face arrest.

Later on Saturday night violent clashes between police and protestors broke out in the central city district of Kampong Bahru. Two policemen and 12 demonstrators were injured as, for the first time, protestors responded to police street clearance operations by throwing stones.

At least 232 protestors were reportedly arrested for illegal assembly and rioting during 24 October. On 26 October the release of 50 detainees was ordered by a magistrate while 180 other people were remanded in custody. Some of the detainees appeared to have suffered beatings and had been denied access to legal teams until shortly before their remand hearings.

As political tensions continue in Malaysia it is feared that the authorities will increasingly cite public order concerns to further restrict the right of assembly, and to justify the use of force against peaceful demonstrators. Amnesty International believes that such restrictions will be ineffective and will increase the risk of future peaceful demonstrations degenerating into more serious violent unrest.

Amnesty International believes that the Royal Malaysia Police faces a critical period during which its professionalism will be judged by its ability to respond to protests, both peaceful and potentially violent, without deviating from its role of serving and protecting the community.

Amnesty International calls on the police to act at all times in accordance with international standards on the use of force. These standards, which apply to law enforcement officials around the world, state that force should only be used when strictly necessary, and only to the minimum extent required under the circumstances.

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