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Malaysia: Police use brutal tactics against peaceful protesters

The UK government must press Malaysia's Prime Minister on freedom of assembly in his visit this week, Amnesty International said today, after peaceful protesters in Kuala Lumpur were met with police violence and 1,667 arrests at the weekend.

Police arrested peaceful demonstrators, fired tear gas canisters directly at protesters, and tear gassed a hospital compound on 9 July, in attempts to stop the electoral reform rally known as Bersih 2.0 from gathering in a stadium.

One protester, 56-year-old Baharuddin Ahmad, collapsed near the landmark Petronas Towers while fleeing teargas and was pronounced dead later in hospital.

"Prime Minister Najib's government rode roughshod over thousands of Malaysians exercising their right to peaceful protest," said Donna Guest, Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific at Amnesty International.

"This violent repression by the Royal Malaysian Police flies in the face of international human rights standards, and cannot be allowed to continue. Any future peaceful demonstrations should be permitted and respected by the authorities."

Amnesty International is calling on the Malaysian authorities to investigate claims that police failed to provide prompt assistance to Baharuddin Ahmad before his death, including reports that an ambulance arrived only an hour and a half after he collapsed.

Many protesters were beaten by police and officers of the Federal Reserve Unit, a special force used to suppress mass public assembly. One of the numerous Youtube videos of police violence shows plainclothes officers kicking a protester lying on the ground, while uniformed police stand by.

Police also fired tear gas canisters directly at protesters, including members of the parliamentary opposition. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was injured after a canister was fired in his direction, and Khalid Samad, a Pan-Islamic Islamic Party (PAS) member of parliament, was injured after being hit in the neck by a canister.

Tear gas was also fired at a hospital where protesters had retreated, putting the health of patients at risk, although this was denied by the Malaysian police.

"The British government shouldn't reward this brutality by rolling out a red carpet for Malaysia's prime minister," said Donna Guest. "David Cameron should tell Prime Minister Najib that these human rights violations against peaceful reform protesters are unacceptable."

Amnesty International is also calling on the Vatican to press Najib to respect human rights when the Malaysian leader visits Rome later this week.

All protesters arrested during the rally have now been released without charge. According to local sources, many of those released bore injuries sustained during arrest. “The use of force by police at this rally was excessive, unnecessary and designed to instil fear,” said Donna Guest.

Around 40 people arrested in the run-up to the rally still face prosecution. Most have been charged under Section 49 of the Societies Act for possession of illegal materials, including Bersih T-shirts.

Six members of the Socialist Party (PSM) have been indefinitely detained without charge under an Emergency Ordinance since 2 July. One of them, member of parliament Dr Jeyakumar Kumar, was hospitalized 10 July for a heart condition following days of prolonged interrogations.