

Banned Hindu outfit chief wants talks with Malaysian PM

The banned Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) has proposed a dialogue with the Malaysian government to discuss the future of the estimated 1.8 million ethnic Indians in the country.

It wants to talk to Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak who, since taking office in April, has released five top leaders from jail 'in a spirit of reconciliation'.

Hindraf leader P. Uthayakumar, one of the five, said on Wednesday that the group had sent an 18-point memorandum to the government on the issue several times.

'I feel that the government is not forthcoming in wanting to have a discussion with us. What we want from the government is to hear the voices of the Indian community and meet our needs, as raised in the memorandum.'

He said this after cheering 18 Hindraf activists who had been on an 18-hour hunger strike at Kuala Lumpur City Centre since Tuesday evening.

Later, a group of 50-odd Hindraf members and supporters, led by Uthayakumar, went to the Prime Minister's Office to hand over a copy of the memorandum.

'A tense moment occurred when they were told only five could enter the Prime Minister's Office,' New Straits Times said Thursday.

Uthayakumar then placed the memorandum on the foot of the steps leading to the guard post and the group left.

Rallies and public demonstrations require police permission in Malaysia.

Hindraf courted controversy in November 2007 when it organised a 10,000 people rally to highlight the perceived grievances of the Indian community. Police had to disperse the rally using water cannons.

Uthayakumar and four other Hindraf leaders -- M. Manoharan, S. Kengadharan, Vasanth Kumar and Ganabati Rau -- were detained in December that year under the stringent Internal Security Act (ISA). Courts refused them bail.

The arrest caused concerns in India, the US and several countries where Tamil diaspora are in large numbers.

Hindraf alleges that some 30,000 Hindu shrines have been demolished or dislocated by the government in the last five decades. It also alleges discrimination in education and jobs.

The government took a dim view of one of the leaders posting a letter on a website addressed to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown seeking compensation for the plight of the ethnic Indian community, since it settled there during the British colonial era.

The five were charged with sedition and 'terror links' with the Sri Lankan organisation, Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Hindraf leaders deny this charge.

Since the five leaders were released, a group from Hindraf has come out to form another party that wants to forge closer understanding with the government.

Ethnic Indians constitute about eight percent of Malaysia's multi-racial population that has majority Malays and about 30 percent Chinese.

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