High Food Prices, Hunger and Poverty Up in the North

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Dismissing the Findings

In the frigid North of this beautiful country, residents are paying ludicrous prices for food and other basic provisions. We're talking about $20 for a head of cabbage, $40 for 40 oysters, $62 for a case of ginger ale and $104 for a case of bottled water! What they spend on a few basic needs is equivalent to what people in southern Canada spend in a week.

On May 16, United Nations Special Rapporteur-on-the-Right-to-Food, Olivier De Schutter, wrapped up his 11-day fact-finding mission through poor, inner-city neighbourhoods in central Canada and other remote aboriginal communities. His findings sparked controversy in political circles, exciting indignation and resentment from the Conservative government, to which the opposition parties have responded with harsh criticisms. Admittedly, this is an open letter signed by more than 100 organizations and individuals asking the government to apologize for what they consider an attack on the UN.

All a press conference in Ottawa shortly before the end of the mission, De Schutter announced that three million out of a population of 34 million people (600,000 households) in central Canada would be "food-insecure." One in ten children with children under six years old cannot meet their food needs; and two-thirds of the population suffers from obesity due to junk food being much cheaper than healthy food.

He stated that it is "time for Canada to adopt a National Right to Food Strategy," which would include reforms to current subsidies and ensure living wages. He went on to advise the government for not ensuring proper transfers payments on social services.

De Schutter also expressed disappointment in not being invited to meet with any cabinet ministers, which he says is traditionally what happens during these types of expeditions. He "cautions against understanding what hunger is about," he told As existe. He also noted that there are severe "nudges" in some policies that the government cannot continue to ignore.

Unfortunately, his findings—which have been echoed by previous parliamentary committees and other independent research—fell upon deaf ears.

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq dismissed the apparent gravity of the situation by telling De Schutter “polishing” and “ill-informed,” adding that he had not actually been to northern Canada. She suggested that the real threat is environmental and animal rights groups that have disturbed aboriginal communities’ feeding patterns by blocking game hunting in general. Immigration Minister Jason Kenney was jumped on the wagon saying that the mission was "frivolous."

He added, "it would be our hope that the contributions we make to the United Nations are used to help starving people in developing countries, not to give lectures to wealthy and developed countries like Canada."

The spokesperson for John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs, shared similar sentiments when he suggested that, because the world has such dire hunger problems, the UN should make better use of its time rather than going after a country like Canada.