Conservatives, UN food envoy embroiled in fresh war of words over poverty report

Mike Blanchfield, THE CANADIAN PRESS Monday, March 04, 2013 5:15 PM

OTTAWA - The Harper government is once again engaged in a war of words with a United Nations agency.

Canada can't credibly preach human rights on the international stage when too many of its own citizens are going hungry, the UN's right-to-food envoy, Olivier De Schutter, told The Canadian Press in an interview.

His comments come on the heels of a report De Schutter released Monday in Geneva at the UN Human Rights Council that cited several Canadian government policies as impediments to fighting poverty.

They include the cancellation of the long-form census in 2009, the ongoing Canada-EU free trade negotiations and the way Ottawa oversees the money it transfers to the provinces for social services.

"That is worrying because Canada, like any other country, is only credible when it preaches human rights to others if it is irrefutable itself," De Schutter said.

"I think it is in the interest of Canada itself to have an absolutely stainless reputation."

Elissa Golberg, Canada's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, fired back Monday, accusing De Schutter of unfounded criticism of Canada's Constitution and its federalist system of government.

"Canada has a number of concerns with the approach that was adopted, as well as with some of the conclusions drawn in the report," Golberg said.

"The special rapporteur has focused on some issues that exceed his mandate."

The spat renewed what has become a long-running war of words between the Harper government and the UN. The conflict has seen the government criticized by a handful of UN committees for its rights record, while Canada has staged high-profile walkouts of other UN bodies for allowing despotic countries to speak or participate.

But De Schutter said in an interview that Canada would face a further reckoning at the UN because findings of his report would be "one major piece of evidence" in front of future UN bodies assessing the country's rights record.

Canada, he said, is a well-respected international leader in civil and political rights, and that includes its international development aid and food aid policies.

"In order to maintain its high reputation in this area, it should do more in the area of economic and social rights," De Schutter explained.

"It is also striking that on quite a few occasions, various human rights bodies have addressed recommendations to Canada concerning social and economic rights that essentially Canada has not been following up on."

Last spring, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights criticized Quebec's Bill 78, which puts limits on the size of demonstrations and sparked major protests last year.

Ottawa fired back quickly, defending Quebec's right to pass its own laws in a democratic environment.

A few weeks later, the UN Committee Against Torture accused Ottawa of being "complicit" to human rights violations committed against three Arab-Canadian men held in Syria after 9-11.

The committee said Canadian officials played a role in the poor treatment of Omar Khadr at Guantanamo Bay, and criticized government delays in approving the child soldier's request to serve out his sentence in Canada.

Their report called on the federal government to issue an official apology to Canadians tortured by foreign jailers, including Abdullah Almalki, Ahmad El Maati and Muayyed Nureddin.

De Schutter's report said that policy decisions by the Harper government — including the cancellation of the long-form census — are undermining the fight against hunger in Canada.

"In order to maintain its high reputation in this area, it should do more in the area of economic and social rights," De Schutter said in an interview that Canada would face a further reckoning at the UN because they called a crisis in the ambulance system.

"That is worrying because Canada, like any other country, is only credible when it preaches human rights on the international stage when too many of its own citizens are going hungry, the UN's right-to-food envoy, Olivier De Schutter, told The Canadian Press in an interview."

"The special rapporteur has focused on some issues that exceed his mandate."
De Schutter said the government needs to get a better handle on how many people are using food banks.

"They were, in principle, meant to be a very temporary fix, a temporary stop gap in the system and now they're becoming a permanent feature of the Canadian landscape," he said.

"The reality is that the responsibility of government begins by accepting to look at the reality."

His report also criticized the federal government for dismantling mechanisms that would have allowed it to ensure that the provinces spend transfers on food and housing for the disadvantaged.

"At the moment what we see is a real ping-pong game going on between different levels of government, and an ability of the local initiatives to be supported," he said.

Goerg told the committee Monday that De Schutter's report was an affront to Canadian federalism, and "demonstrated a regrettable lack of understanding with respect to Canada's constitutional framework and the size and diversity of our nation."

"Canada is disappointed that UN mechanisms have often failed to appreciate the co-operative nature of our multi-faceted and complex system of government," she added.

"Canada does not see federalism as a problem or an excuse."

De Schutter's report urged Ottawa to create a national food strategy to fight hunger among some of Canada's most vulnerable, particularly aboriginals and people on social assistance. It calls on Ottawa to spell out the levels of responsibility between federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq said Monday that De Schutter was responsible for a "one-sided biased report, written by someone who chose to ignore facts."

"Implementing the recommendations in this report would have a devastating impact on Canadians, including a $48 billion tax hike," she said.

After his visit to Canada last year, Aglukkaq called De Schutter "ill-informed" and "patronizing." Immigration Minister Jason Kenney called him "completely ridiculous."

When asked about those attacks, De Schutter said the cabinet ministers were simply playing to domestic political considerations.

"I present a mirror to the government. I look at the evidence. I go through the numbers. I listen to people. And I report to the government about what I've been seeing," he said.

"The mirror is one some people may not like to look at. But shooting the person holding the mirror is not the right answer."

Alex Neve, the head of Amnesty International Canada, said the report raises "a very real human rights issue" that the government needs to take seriously.

"That's all the more reason why it's been particularly disappointing to see how both last year, when the special rapporteur carried out his mission in Canada, and this year, we are not at all seeing a serious response from the government," Neve said from Geneva.

© The Canadian Press, 2013