UN official lauds Food Bill, but stresses need for monitoring

Our Bureau

New Delhi, July 4:
The ruling United Progressive Alliance may have drawn flak for bringing in an ordinance on the Food Security Bill to guarantee subsidised foodgrain to those living below the poverty line, but the Bill received support from an unusual quarter on Thursday.

Olivier De Schutter, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, who will submit a report to the international body on the legislative experiences of various countries on the right to food, termed the Bill a “promising development.”

However, he highlighted the need for a strong monitoring mechanism, social audits and effective vigilance.

“It (the Bill) has global significance. I believe it is an important movement for the right to food in India. It can inspire many countries to do the same thing,” De Schutter said at a press conference here on Thursday.

The Union Cabinet gave its nod for promulgating an ordinance on the food security law on Wednesday. This would give 67 per cent of India’s population the right to subsidised foodgrains. The ordinance will now go to President Pranab Mukherjee for his approval.

However, the Government has been at the receiving end from many political parties, which termed the UPA’s move as “politically motivated” with an eye on the general elections due next year.

De Schutter said the fact that India was bringing out a law was of special significance because this would be a legally binding provision from which the Government would not be able to back off at a later stage.

It is estimated that the Government will spend Rs 1,25,000 crore a year to supply about 67 million tonnes of rice, wheat and coarse cereals for effective implementation of the law.

Even as he accepted that there was a fiscal cost attached to providing food to a large chunk of the population at subsidised rates, especially since the cost is borne by the taxpayers, De Schutter added that the indirect cost of not addressing hunger – in terms of healthcare needs, learning disability and mortality rate – could not be ignored.

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