Malaysia should move from cash handout to rights-based programmes, says rights council

BY TRINNA LEONG
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The United Nations Human Rights Council today urged Putrajaya to move away from charity-based schemes to rights-based programmes to avoid exclusion of groups, graft and leakages.

Olivier De Schutter, who is the UN Human Rights Council special rapporteur to Malaysia on the right to food, said while cash aid programmes such as Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) and Kebajikan Rakyat 1Malaysia (Karisma) can offer assistance to the needy, it is unsustainable for Malaysia to continue with such schemes.

"The government has put in place some social programmes that are one off programmes that provide cash transfers to poor families but these programmes are not permanent.

"These are not standing social protection schemes and are not based on protecting people by giving them rights that they can claim before independent bodies. As a result people do not know what they have a right to, they cannot complain if they are excluded," said De Schutter, who is on a 10-day mission to the country.

Critics have questioned the BR1M, a government initiative to help lower income families, saying it was used for election purposes by the ruling Barisan Nasional.

In the recent Budget 2014 announcement, Putrajaya increased the aid from RM500 to RM650 for households earning RM3,000 and below, while single individuals aged 21 and above who earn less than RM2,000 would receive RM300.

De Schutter said the aid does not "provide the kind of security the poor should expect from standing social protection schemes such as those recommended by the International Labour Organisation (ILO)".

"So I very much hope the programmes that are in place would be transformed into social protection schemes that would be rights based and I believe Malaysia is now at a stage of development where it can make this shift," he added.

He said rights-based social programmes are those that "benefits so people know exactly what they can expect from the government and can complain if they did not receive what is stipulated for them".

"In the absence of rights-based social programmes, these programmes are just public charities and therefore subject to leakage, to corruption, to discrimination and they do not provide people with the kind of security they have a right to expect. This is why rights-based social programmes are much more effective and a better use of resources to the government."

While De Schutter commended initiatives such as Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia, he said they were not necessarily reaching the poorest segments of the population.

Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia, a government-subsidised retail franchise, was launched in 2011 to offer cheaper groceries. However, criticisms surfaced later over the quality of the products being sold. - December 18, 2013.