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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 19 (IPS) - The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, complimented Malaysia for its efforts to becoming a high-income country. But Malaysia should also “ensure that growth is not achieved at the expense of the environment and the rights of vulnerable groups in society, such as the indigenous communities and migrant workers,” he cautioned.

In a statement released Wednesday, De Schutter said: “Malaysia has made impressive progress towards the reduction of poverty and has improved on all socio-economic indicators. As it moves towards becoming a high-income country, it must address what may be called ‘second-generation’ development issues,” the expert stressed.

He praised the country’s significant achievements towards the full realisation of the right to food, including the adoption in 2013 of minimum wage legislation for the country, which he said ”will make great strides in ensuring that access to food is a reality for the working poor in the country.”

Despite this progress, he singed our some of the remaining challenges. “Ending poverty means effectively safeguarding against exploitation,” he said, referring to the precarious situation of up to four million migrant workers currently working in Malaysia, primarily on palm oil plantations.

Palm oil dominates the agricultural landscape in Malaysia, occupying five million hectares - more than 70% of the country’s arable land. Malaysia produces 39% of global palm oil and accounts for 44% of global exports. However, the growing sector has generated environmental concern due to deforestation, biodiversity loss and soil nutrient depletion, according to the statement.

The Special Rapporteur warned that the focus on export-led commodity production makes the country highly vulnerable to price shocks on international markets, as the country depends on imports for basic foodstuffs, including 35% of rice, Malaysia’s main staple crop, 66% of fruits, and 41% of vegetables.

De Schutter also identified human rights challenges in regards to Malaysia’s indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia and in Malaysian Borneo, urging that the rights of these communities, as recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, be fully respected.

“When development projects affect the land on which they rely for their food and livelihood, they must be given a real say in the matter,” he stressed. “They must provide free, prior and informed consent, on the basis of well-tested human rights principles, and be enabled to participate in and shape the development of their communities.”

In this regard, the expert welcomed the national inquiry into the land rights of indigenous peoples conducted by the Malaysian Human Rights Commission. “I trust its recommendations will lead to a reorientation of policies to better protect the rights of indigenous communities,” he said, calling for the creation of a national commission for indigenous peoples.

Building on the findings from his study of other fast-growing countries experiencing a nutrition transition – combining a rapid shift to urbanized and sedentary lifestyles and to diets containing more processed foods – he welcomed the Malaysian authorities’ efforts to ensure healthier diets, including initiatives to improve the dietary quality of school meals.

During his nine-day visit (9-18 December) to assess the realization of the right to food in Malaysia, De Schutter held consultations with a range of ministries at federal level and with the states of Sarawak and Sabah, and consulted broadly across civil society. He also met with communities in Petaling Jaya, Selangor and in the Penampang region of Sabah.

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