UN raps Malaysia on palm oil abuses, risks
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Malaysia’s push to join the ranks of rich countries shouldn’t come at the expense of the environment or the vulnerable groups, warned a U.N. expert after a visit to the Southeast Asian nation.

Speaking at the end of the official mission, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier De Schutter cited concerns over the country's palm oil industry, which has emerged over the past 30 years as key driver of economic growth, but at the same time has been linked to labor abuse and destruction of tropical rainforests.

“As it moves towards becoming a high-income country, Malaysia must 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,” De Schutter said, according to a release from the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“Ending poverty means effectively safeguarding against exploitation,” he said, referring to the million-plus migrant workers estimated to be working on Malaysian oil palm plantations.
De Schutter added that Malaysia’s dependence on palm oil has put its food security at risk, according to the statement released by the U.N.

Palm oil dominates the agricultural landscape in Malaysia, occupying 5 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.

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 30% of rice, Malaysia’s main staple crop, 66% of fruits, and 41% of vegetables.

De Schutter said Malaysia needs to do more to protect indigenous communities in the face of rapid plantation expansion.

“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 said. “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.”

Malaysia is the world’s second largest producer of palm oil. It also experienced the world’s highest rate of forest loss between 2000 and 2012, according to a recent study.

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