NEWS RELEASE

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“From food security to the right to food” – UN expert highlights China’s next steps

BEIJING (23 December 2010) – “China has made remarkable economic and social progress over the past three decades, lifting several hundred millions out of poverty, and food security benefited significantly from this overall progress. However, the shrinking of arable land and the massive land degradation threatens the ability of the country to maintain current levels of agricultural production, while the widening gap between rural and urban is an important challenge to the right to food of the Chinese population”, said the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Mr. Olivier De Schutter, who ends his mission to the People’s Republic of China today (*)

“Within a few decades, China has been able to feed itself and to feed one fifth of the entire world population. That is really impressive. Yet, considering a country’s global agricultural output and the progressive realization of the right to food are two different things”, said De Schutter. “The right to food depends on people having incomes that allow them to purchase food. It also requires that food systems are sustainable so that satisfying current needs are not at the expense of the country’s ability to meet future needs. It is obvious that these two conditions are facing important challenges today”.

Since 1997, China has lost 8.2 million hectares (20.2 million acres) of arable land due to urbanization or industrialization, forest replanting programmes, and damage caused by natural disasters. “Today, 37 per cent of China’s total territory suffers from land degradation, and the country’s per capita available land is now 40 per cent of the world average. This shrinking of arable land represents a major threat to the ability of China to maintain its current self-sufficiency in grain, and it fuels competition over land and land evictions”, the Special Rapporteur noted.

“The recent food price hikes in China are a harbinger of what may be lying ahead, and the food reserves maintained by China may therefore prove of strategic importance in the future. This situation should encourage China to move towards more sustainable types of farming, as experimented successfully in the Yunnan province, if current levels of production are to be sustained. Climate change will cause agricultural productivity to drop by 5 to 10 per cent by 2030 in the absence of mitigation actions, and a transition to low carbon agriculture is key in this context”.

De Schutter also expressed concern at the widening urban-rural income gap, which reaches almost 6 to 1 if distribution of spending on public services is taken into account. “Education, healthcare, old-age pensions, and the basic income guarantee are provided at the local level, but local governments have insufficient revenues to fulfill all the tasks assigned to them”, he noted. The result is that they impose user fees for essential services or limit the levels of individual entitlements. The income gap partly explains why 144 million people have migrated from rural areas to work in urban areas these last decades. The central Government should take responsibility for this situation”.

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“The situation of these rural migrant workers is a source of concern. They are often employed in the informal sector, and the current household registration system (*hukou*) deprives them from access to certain basic services in the cities”, said De Schutter, who expressed the hope that the system would be gradually phased out.

Other topics covered by the Special Rapporteur during his mission included the question of land grabbing, the situation of nomadic herders in Western Provinces and Autonomous Regions, the nutrition dimension of the right to food, and the transparent management of food safety issues by the authorities. Based on his mission to China, the Special Rapporteur will present a report to the Human Rights Council in 2011.

(*) See the Special Rapporteur’s full end-of-mission statement: [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/docs/CHINA_food_preliminary_conclusions.doc](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/docs/CHINA_food_preliminary_conclusions.doc)

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*Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization.*

*Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur:* [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm) and [http://www.srfood.org](http://www.srfood.org)

*OHCHR Country Page – China:* [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/CNIndex.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/CNIndex.aspx)

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