

Poverty alleviation needs to be accompanied by accountability: UN expert on extreme poverty and human rights

BEIJING / GENEVA (23 August 2016) – China has made huge progress in poverty alleviation, but it also needs to put in place meaningful accountability mechanisms that citizens can use when their rights are violated in the context of development-related activities, according to a United Nations expert.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, said today that “China’s achievements in alleviating extreme poverty in recent years, and in meeting highly ambitious targets for improving social well-being, have been extraordinary.” He noted that the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party is confronted with enormous challenges in the form of slower growth rates, dramatic inequality, deep-rooted environmental degradation, and a struggle to define the rule of law. But he added that its determination to build a ‘moderately prosperous society’ free of extreme poverty cannot be doubted. “This political will is impressive and all too uncommon in today’s world,” Mr. Alston said at the end of his official visit* to the country.

President Xi Jinping has promised to eliminate extreme poverty by 2020, so that no-one shall be left behind. In practice, this means lifting 55.75 million rural people out of extreme poverty defined by reference to an income-based standard of \$2.30 per day or 2,800 yuan per year. However, an important part of the human rights dimension of the challenge has so far been neglected according to Alston.

“China has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and has consistently emphasized its commitment to guaranteeing those rights. But for these rights to be treated like human rights rather than broad development goals three essential steps need to be taken: first, the recognition of the rights in legislative or other form, second, the creation of institutions to promote their realization, and third the provision of accountability mechanisms to ensure redress for violations,” Mr. Alston noted.

Most of the rights are not specifically recognized in legislation, and no institutions exist that promote these rights as human rights. But the biggest challenge relates to mechanisms for redress and accountability, which are an indispensable component of a human rights approach.

The Special Rapporteur noted that there have been some promising developments in recent years, including the reform of the Administrative Litigation Law and changes to

the court system. Mr. Alston warned that other developments look like a Pincer Movement designed to systematically narrow and control the space for citizens to express discontent over matters such as land rights, workers' rights and environmental threats.

“The crackdown on human rights lawyers that began in July 2015 and gathered pace with recent convictions, the persistent ineffectiveness of the system for petitioning officials, punitive responses to protests, new laws designed to limit the roles played by NGOs and to limit dramatically the role of foreign foundations, all seem to be heading in the direction of shrinking the space available to citizens to influence policy-making through public debate or to contest alleged violations of their rights.”

“China has much to be proud of in the field of poverty alleviation. However, if it is to effectively ensure the implementation of its economic and social rights obligations, it needs to adopt more robust mechanisms for citizen involvement and for governmental accountability.”

During his nine-day visit to China, the human rights expert met and engaged with the central government and with local governments, non-governmental organizations, representatives of international organizations, and academic experts in Beijing and in Yunnan province. The Special Rapporteur will present a comprehensive report with his full findings and recommendations to the Human Rights Council in June 2017.

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(*) Read the full end-of-mission statement by the Special Rapporteur:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20402&LangID=E>

Mr. **Philip Alston** took up his functions as the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in June 2014. The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms of the Human Rights Council that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity. Learn more, log on to: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/SRExtremePovertyIndex.aspx>

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