

## **Malaysia vastly undercounting poverty, says UN rights expert**

KUALA LUMPUR (23 August 2019) – Malaysia lays claim to the world’s lowest national poverty rate by using an unduly low poverty line that does not reflect the cost of living and by excluding vulnerable populations from its official figures, [said](#) UN human rights expert Philip Alston at the end of a mission to the country.

“While Malaysia has achieved undeniably impressive growth in reducing poverty in the last 50 years, the official claim that poverty has been eradicated, or exists merely in small pockets in rural areas, is incorrect and has crippled policymaking,” Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, said as his 11-day visit ended.

Malaysia’s official poverty rate dropped from 49 per cent in 1970 to just 0.4 per cent in 2016. However, the national poverty line of RM 980 (US\$235) per household per month would see an urban family of four surviving on RM 8, or less than US\$2, per person per day.

“This is a tragically low line for a country on the cusp of attaining high income status, especially since a range of rigorous independent analyses have suggested a more realistic poverty rate of 16-20 per cent, and about nine per cent of households survive on less than RM 2,000 (US\$479) per month,” Alston said.

“Actual poverty rates are much higher than official figures suggest, and the Government needs to reassess how it measures poverty so that the hardship many Malaysians experience is not conjured out of existence by a statistical sleight of hand.”

“Malaysia’s new Government should urgently reconsider its approach if the country is to make any real progress on this issue.”

“Despite near-universal healthcare and high school enrolment rates for citizens, and a growing economy, large parts of the population are being left behind and many people living above the official poverty line are in fact in poverty,” Alston said. “I spoke with families who have struggled to pay their rent, whose children could not afford to go to school, and who went without healthcare because of the cost of transportation.”

“Undercounting has also led to underinvestment in poverty reduction and an inadequate social safety net that does not meet people’s needs. A fragmented social protection system is putting many people’s rights to food, housing, and education at risk.”

Alston also highlighted that poor people in Malaysia suffered disproportionate violations of their civil and political rights, including in prisons and in the legal system.

“Indigenous peoples suffer much higher rates of poverty, and despite laudable commitments by the Government to ensure their rights, the customary land of indigenous communities remains under siege, jeopardising their livelihoods, food security, and access to traditional medicines. I was troubled to hear state officials speak of the need for indigenous communities to ‘adapt’ and relocate to urban areas in order to secure their rights,” Alston said.

“Millions of non-citizens including migrants, refugees and stateless people are barred from the public school system, face severe barriers to accessing healthcare, and are often unable to work legally, yet are systematically excluded from official poverty statistics.”

“Migrant workers, who are ubiquitous in the Malaysian labour force, are driven into poverty and set up for exploitation by a combination of unscrupulous recruitment agents and employers, harsh immigration policy, lax enforcement of labour protections, and the risk of deportation for pursuing their rights.”

“The Government should urgently revise the way it measures poverty to bring it into line with the country’s cost of living, and it should include vulnerable non-citizen groups in the new measure. It should also stop arbitrarily withholding information that is crucial to understanding poverty and inequality, such as household survey microdata.”

The Special Rapporteur travelled to Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Sarawak, Sabah, and Kelantan during his visit to Malaysia, and met state and federal Government officials, international agencies, civil society, academics, and people affected by poverty in urban and rural areas. He visited a soup kitchen, a women’s shelter, a children’s crisis centre, low-cost housing flats, a disability centre, indigenous communities, and informal settlements and schools.

“The Malaysians I met who were struggling to get by or to provide support to those in need deserve better than to be told by policymakers that poverty does not exist, in direct contradiction of their own experiences,” Alston said. “Malaysia has made real progress on a range of progressive commitments, but the new government should not deny the existence of the poor and marginalised. Instead, it should step up efforts to fulfil their rights.”

The Special Rapporteur will present a comprehensive report with his conclusions and recommendations to the Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2020.

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***Photos from the Special Rapporteur’s visit to Malaysia are available for journalists’ use at <https://srpoverty.org/country-visits/malaysia/>.***

**Mr. Philip Alston** (Australia) took up his functions as the [Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights](#) in June 2014. As a Special Rapporteur, he is 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 Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms 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.

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