
Philip Alston: Malaysia backtracking on poverty commitment

New York (6 July 2020) – “Malaysia’s new Government has performed a backflip on its predecessors’ commitment to take poverty seriously,” said Philip Alston, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, whose [report](#) from an official visit last year was released today.

Following the [visit](#) to Malaysia in August 2019, Alston found that the national poverty rate of just 0.4 per cent, the lowest in the world, was based on a statistical sleight of hand. Government officials, including the then-Prime Minister, committed to revising the national poverty line. However, the new Government’s response to Alston’s final report throws that commitment into doubt, stating that it “stands by [the] absolute poverty rate.”

“The Government’s reversal is deeply concerning because the current line is inadequate and almost universally considered to be misleadingly low,” Alston said. “The insistence that the line is ‘derived from internationally accepted standards’ is a smokescreen and ignores the blatant mismatch between reality and statistics. Pretending that almost no-one in the entire country lives in poverty doesn’t change the reality that millions are poor. Saving face is one thing, but distorting the facts is quite another.”

“Malaysia has made impressive progress against poverty in the past forty years, but its continued use of an outdated and unrealistic poverty line obscures the troubling reality that millions scrape by on very low incomes, a situation only made worse by COVID-19.” The national poverty line of RM 980 (US\$235) per household per month would see an urban family of four surviving on RM 8 (less than US\$2), per person per day.

“If the Government wants to eradicate poverty, revising the poverty line is just step one,” Alston said. “Progress will require a better understanding of the nature of poverty, especially in urban areas, improved social policies, and a new approach towards long-neglected populations that face higher rates of poverty.”

“Millions of non-citizens are disproportionately affected by poverty, including migrants, refugees, stateless people and unregistered Malaysians, who are systematically excluded from official poverty figures, neglected by policymakers and often effectively barred from basic services. Migrant workers make up a sizeable part of the overall population and have been central to the country’s economic success. Yet they have deliberately been left in a regulatory grey zone that facilitates sometimes scandalous abuses and generally poor conditions.”

“Indigenous peoples continue to face discrimination despite laudable commitments to promote their rights. Government officials misunderstand or dismiss their goals and ways of life with alarming regularity.” Indigenous peoples have far higher rates of poverty than the general

population and experience widespread violations of their rights, appropriation of their land, and exclusion from social support.

Women in Malaysia shoulder a disproportionate share of housework, have an exceptionally low rate of workforce participation, are disproportionately stuck in lower-level jobs and are paid less than men. And people with disabilities face widespread discrimination and obstacles that prevent them from participating in society on an equal basis with others.

“The Government should institute far-reaching reforms of the fractured and patchy social protection system to ensure that the needs of people living in poverty are comprehensively addressed, with a social protection floor for all,” Alston said. “COVID-19 has demonstrated that anyone can lose a job through no fault of their own, and reinforced the absolute necessity of strong support programs.”

“Key poverty-related data is often inaccessible or even non-existent, which is counterproductive and leaves policymakers and researchers essentially working in the dark. Unlike many comparable countries, Malaysia does not provide full access to household survey microdata, and does not collect information on the size of certain vulnerable populations.”

The former Rapporteur visited Malaysia from 13 to 23 August 2019. He travelled to Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Sarawak, Sabah, and Kelantan, 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.

“Overall, while Malaysia has achieved progress against poverty, unless the new Government takes a different approach, the job will remain painfully incomplete,” Alston said. “The Government has a real opportunity to become a true champion of poverty reduction by improving the lives of many facing hardship, providing those in poverty with the support they need and ensuring that the country’s economic growth is truly inclusive and benefits the entire population.”

Alston’s successor, Olivier De Schutter, is scheduled to [present](#) the report to the UN Human Rights Council on 7 July.

ENDS

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

For media requests, contact Rebecca Riddell (rebecca.riddell@nyu.edu) and Bassam Khawaja (bassam.khawaja@nyu.edu).

The report’s presentation will be live-streamed at <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/human-rights-council/>.

Philip Alston is the John Norton Pomeroy Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, where he chairs the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice. He was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights between 2014-2020. As Special Rapporteur, he was 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. The [current](#) Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights is Olivier De Schutter.

Follow Philip Alston on Twitter at [@PhilipGAlston](#) and Facebook at www.facebook.com/AlstonUNSR