Beat: News

UN representative calls on the Netherlands to end "racist" Sinterklaas

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USPA News - Verene Shepherd, the chairperson of a United Nations (UN) working group on issues surrounding people of African descent, on Tuesday condemned the annual `Sinterklaas` tradition in the Netherlands as "racist" and "a throwback to slavery." Sinterklaas is a traditional winter holiday figure in mainly the Netherlands and Belgium, but his black helpers Zwarte Piet - or Black Pete in English - are a recurring subject of debate.

The tradition, which is one of the sources of Santa Claus, involves annual welcoming events in which Sinterklaas arrives on a boat and rides a horse through the streets while being accompanied by his black-colored helpers. Nearly two dozen people have complained against Zwarte Piet being used in the upcoming welcoming ceremony in Amsterdam, leading to a hearing attended by dozens of people and further igniting the discussion as to whether the helpers are being depicted as slaves. Those in favor of the black helpers argue that Zwarte Piet is "black as soot," as the traditional story involves the helpers climbing down dirty chimneys to deliver gifts to children. "The working group cannot understand why it is that people in the Netherlands cannot see that this is a throwback to slavery and that in the 21st century this practice should stop," Shepherd said on Tuesday in an interview with Dutch current affairs TV program EenVandaag. "I feel that I, if I were living in the Netherlands, as a black person, I would object to it." Shepherd leads the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent which is investigating the issue and expects to present a report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights by September next year. "We hope it will be discussed in the United Nations General Assembly," she told the program. "The UN can request the Netherlands to take action." Her comments on Tuesday made headlines in the Netherlands, where a newly-released poll suggests that 95 percent of Dutch people do not associate Zwarte Piet with slavery. It also showed 91 percent of Dutch people do not believe Zwarte Piet`s black color should be changed on the basis of a small number of complaints, and 81 percent of respondents would consider such a change unacceptable. The chairperson said she was "obliged" to do further research as a member of the working group, and said the members could be proven wrong if they receive new information. Shepherd also called on Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who has said Zwarte Piet is not a government issue, to take action and influence cultural groups who organize and promote the event. Attempts in previous years to introduce rainbow-colored helpers in some Dutch cities have been met with resistance and a large number of complaints. Still, a municipality in the country`s northeast announced on Tuesday that it had decided to use rainbow-colored helpers this year to show "it does not matter whether you are a black pete or a green, yellow or blue pete." "It`s offensive," Shepherd added in Tuesday`s interview, during which she suggested there is no need for Sinterklaas. "We don`t go around saying all white people look like this or white people look like that. We don`t do that. And what is wrong with one Santa Claus? Why do you have to have two Santa Clauses?" In the Netherlands, however, even though Christmas is celebrated, Santa Claus is not as popular as Sinterklaas.

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