

1.2 million Dutch reject criticism of "racist" Sinterklaas tradition

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USPA News - More than 1.2 million people have joined a petition on the social networking website Facebook to reject criticism of the annual Sinterklaas tradition in the Netherlands which a United Nations (UN) representative has condemned as "racist" and "a throwback to slavery." The "Pietitie" page was created by two Dutch men on Tuesday afternoon after Verene Shepherd, the chairperson of the UN's Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, called for an end to the popular children's festival.

Her comments made headlines and became a much-discussed subject across the country. 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 annual tradition, which is one of the sources of Santa Claus, involves nationwide 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. "Don't let the Netherlands' most beautiful tradition disappear," the Pietitie page said, along with other slogans calling for Zwarte Piet to stay black. The page surpassed 1 million likes within 24 hours and increased to 1.2 million likes by early Wednesday evening, making it the most-liked Dutch-language page ever. "I never felt that it was a racist thing at all," wrote supporter Cheryl Ann LaValais, who identified herself as a foreigner living in the Netherlands. "How could a little child even think that way, so that is why this tradition should stay, kids are not born to be racist, it is taught to them. Let them enjoy their holiday." Another person criticized calls to exclude Black Pete, saying it would be racist to exclude the black-colored helpers because of their skin color. Another Facebook page, which is titled "Black Pete is Racist" and calls for a children's festival without "racist overtones and without exclusion," has gathered only 7,400 likes since October 2011. The Facebook petition comes soon after a newly-released poll suggested 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 comments by Shepherd came days after it emerged that her working group is investigating the issue and expects to present a report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights by September next year. She said the group hopes the report will be discussed in the United Nations General Assembly, after which the UN can request the Netherlands to take action. "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." 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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