

UN Finds Austerity Violates Rights

Feb. 21—The horrifying cost of the imposition of austerity on Greece by the Troika’s Memorandum is the subject of a 25-page report by Cephias Lumina, an Independent Expert from the UN Human Rights Council, issued in March 2014. The report details many of the “effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of states on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social, and cultural rights.”

Lumina’s conclusions were based on evidence gathered during an April 22-27, 2013 trip to Greece, where he interviewed government officials, opposition members, and private groups. His “framework of analysis” is stated as follows:

“Austerity and other economic adjustment policies raise important concerns regarding the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights, because they are often incompatible with the obligation of States to take steps for their progressive realization and to avoid deliberate retrogressive measures, in particular those that are incompatible with the core obligations of each right and the duty of States to use all available resources in an effort to satisfy, as a matter of priority, these minimum obligations.”

These human rights obligations, he states, apply not only to governments but to “non-State actors, including international financial institutions.”

The areas of obligation that Lumina studied, and in which he found shocking deterioration in conditions for the population, due to the government’s attempt to implement the economic adjustment programs and stipulations of the Memorandum, included: employment, social security, health, education, housing, and social exclusion.

Summary Findings

Work: The study finds “one of the most profound consequences of the adjustment programme has been the exponential rise in unemployment.” The program mandated a cut of 150,000 public sector jobs, 22% of public employment, by 2015. In addition, wages have

been cut and taxes have been raised, resulting in mass unemployment and conditions which violate the Greek Constitution’s explicit commitment “to protect the right to work and to create conditions of employment for all citizens.”

Social Security: Social protection programs, from unemployment insurance to pensions, have been slashed. The Expert agreed with the European Committee of Social Rights that the cumulative effect of pension cuts “constituted a violation of the right to social security enshrined in article 12(3) of the European Social Charter.”

Health: Cuts in spending, job cuts in public health, closure/merger of hospitals, reduction in the number of hospital beds, and an increasing number of people losing public health insurance, have cut access to quality care, and resulted in a re-emergence of diseases long thought to have been eradicated. “Overall, the health budget has been cut by about 40 percent.”

Education: Funding has been cut by 30%.

Housing: There has been an increase in homelessness since 2009 by about 25%. The only major institution providing housing benefits has been abolished.

Poverty: Before the adjustment program, Greece already had the highest poverty rate in the Eurozone. This has greatly increased. “Experts conclude that the 63.3% of the population that found itself below the fixed poverty line in 2010 and 2011 did so as a consequence of austerity policies alone—meaning they can be directly attributed to the changes imposed by taxation, and wage and social benefit cuts.”

Lumina concluded:

“The adjustment programme and, in particular, the excessively rigid austerity measures implemented since May 2010, have exacted substantial economic and social costs for the Greek population. The programme has pushed the economy into recession, compromised the standard of living of the majority of the population and generally undermined the enjoyment of human rights in Greece. A large proportion of bailout loans has been used to pay off the banks that lent money recklessly to Greece, while increasing the country’s debt. Regrettably, the role of the State as provider of accessible public services has been subordinated to the increasingly elusive goal of restoring a sustainable public budget.”