

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.

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