Beat: News

Hundreds protest as Dutch begin "racist" Sinterklaas tradition

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USPA News - Hundreds of people gathered in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam on Saturday to protest against the annual Sinterklaas tradition in the Netherlands, which has been condemned as "racist" by some as the white winter holiday figure has black helpers. 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 children`s festival, which is one of the sources of Santa Claus, involves nationwide welcoming events in which Sinterklaas arrives on a steamboat and rides a horse through the streets while being accompanied by his helpers with blackface make-up. The annual tradition, which ends with a night of gift-giving on December 5, began on Saturday with a national welcoming event that took place in the northern city of Groningen this year. It was attended by approximately 45,000 people and took place without protest or incident, although a 45-year-old man carrying a knife was arrested after becoming disruptive. But in the capital Amsterdam, where the local welcoming event takes place on Sunday, hundreds of people gathered at a square outside the Euronext stock exchange to protest against Zwarte Piet. They held signs reading phrases such as "Free Piet" and "More Color, Less Racism." Quinsy Gario, who is one of the leaders of the protests against Zwarte Piet, addressed the crowd and called on them to boycott several media organizations that have portrayed them in an unfavorable light. "I would like to ask all of you to not talk with [those media organizations] and make sure we show that in a righteous country it is through dialogue, rational arguments and determination," he said. In October, nearly two dozen people complained against Zwarte Piet being used during the 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. A commission that investigated the complaints advised Amsterdam Mayor Eberhard van der Laan to allow the welcoming ceremony to continue as planned. The protesters then went to court in an attempt to have the event`s permit retracted, but a judge quickly ruled the event does not pose a threat to public order and could therefore not be banned. Yet in a meeting earlier this month with some of those who complained, the committee which organizes the event in Amsterdam agreed to make some changes. Those changes mean Zwarte Piet in Amsterdam will no longer have large gold earrings and the figures can choose from more colors of lipstick, but protesters said the changes were not enough. A recent poll suggests 95 percent of Dutch people do not associate Zwarte Piet with slavery, and 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. Approximately 81 percent of respondents would consider such a change unacceptable. The support for the black-faced helpers was highlighted through a Facebook petition called "Pietitie" that has gathered more than 2.1 million likes in less than a month, making it by far the country`s largest page. 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 13,300 likes since October 2011. Last month, the issue surrounding Zwarte Piet became a much-discussed subject across the country and made international headlines after the chairperson of a United Nations (UN) working group on issues surrounding people of African descent called for an end to the popular children`s festival. "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," Verene Shepherd said last month 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." "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?" Shepherd said in the interview. In the Netherlands, however, even though Christmas is celebrated, Santa Claus is not as popular as Sinterklaas. Her comments came days after it emerged that her working group is investigating the Sinterklaas tradition and expects to present a report to the UN Commission on Human Rights by September 2014. She promised to do further research first, but declined an invitation to attend the welcoming ceremony in Groningen or to meet with representatives from the Netherlands. 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, some cities decided to use rainbow-colored helpers this year, while other places such as the southern city of Tilburg have rejected the criticism and said they see no reason to make changes. Both black and rainbow-colored helpers participated in Saturday`s welcoming ceremony on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao, where political parties have complained about Zwarte Piet in the past. Contrary to the Netherlands, Sinterklaas is made more white during the welcoming ceremony on the island.

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483 Green Lanes
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