

Press Releases: Briefing on the 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report

Special Briefing
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Press Briefing Room
Washington, DC
June 27, 2017

MS NAUERT: Hi, everyone. Welcome to the State Department. Do you see those two junior reporters in the back? Those are my kids. Hi, boys. Welcome to mommy's new job. (Laughter.) So that means you all have to try to be a little bit nice today, or at least keep it clean.

All right. Good afternoon, everybody. I know we've got a lot to get to today.

QUESTION: A blatant play for sympathy. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: No, I wish. This morning, Secretary Tillerson released the 17th installment of the Trafficking in Persons Report, also known as the TIP Report. To go into greater detail about that report today, we have with us Susan Coppedge, who is the ambassador-at-large to monitor and combat trafficking in persons. She'll join us in just a second.

Ambassador Coppedge will deliver remarks and then take a few of your questions. If you'd like to ask a question, just raise your hand, let her know which outlet you're with since she isn't here for you every day, and she can take your questions. So if you do have any questions about the TIP Report, please do ask those questions of her now so that she can best address them. When she's finished, then I'll take over and answer your questions about other matters at that time.

So with that, I'll hand it over to Ambassador Coppedge. Thank you so much for joining us.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Let me move this for you so you don't have to –

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Thank you. Good afternoon, although I've lost all track of time today. It's been quite busy. Thank you, Heather. Thank you very much.

This morning, Secretary Tillerson released the 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report, a reflection of global leadership on this key human rights issue and our principal diagnostic tool to assess government efforts across the three Ps of prosecution, protection, and prevention.

The TIP Report is also a symbol of our moral and legal obligation to combat human trafficking and is in keeping with our country's historical commitment to advancing human dignity and freedom around the world.

This year's TIP Report – I brought a copy; I'm sure you'll all want one – emphasizes that governments must do everything in their power to hold traffickers accountable, from passing and enforcing tough anti-trafficking laws to prosecuting complicit officials who betray the public trust and profit from the suffering of others.

As the Secretary said this morning, the complicity and corruption that facilitates human trafficking must end. Justice must be served both to deter potential traffickers but also to restore the dignity of survivors.

To accomplish this, governments need to speed up the delivery of justice while respecting due process, impose adequate terms of imprisonment commensurate with the heinous nature of the crime, and prosecute all criminally culpable parties and intermediaries.

Trafficking in persons is a hidden crime rooted in deception. Victims are coerced or intimidated into silence, and they often fear that if they do come forward they will be punished. When governments enact and enforce strong, comprehensive anti-trafficking laws, they send an unmistakable message to criminals: We will not tolerate this. Traffickers, not their victims, should and will face punishment.

This morning, the Secretary highlighted some positive examples of government action to hold human traffickers accountable, and we commend these and other governments that take up difficult cases and prosecute them to the end. But with more than 20 million estimated trafficking victims globally, prosecutions are still inadequate given the scale of the problem, and we all have more work to do.

Here are a few quick statistics from this year's report. Of the 187 countries assessed under the minimum standards, 36 countries were placed on Tier One, 80 on Tier Two, 45 were placed on the Tier Two Watch List, and 23 countries were on Tier Three. In all, there were 21 downgrades, meaning a country moved down a level, and 27 upgrades.

But no matter the tier, every country, even those on Tier One, should do more to combat trafficking. Tier One countries only meet the minimum standards to address trafficking, which is why the TIP Report offers recommendations for Tier One countries as well as others.

A key concern for many countries is a failure to impose sentences for traffickers that are sufficient to deter the criminal activity or reflect the nature of the crime. We still see instances of government officials

protecting brothels, taking bribes from traffickers, and obstructing investigations for profit, and while we still see governments criminalize and penalize victims for crimes their traffickers force them to commit.

This is why we continue to use the Trafficking in Persons Report as an instrument in diplomacy, a means to effect global change and motivate tangible progress around the world. We hope it will continue to prompt foreign governments to enact legislation, establish national action plans, and implement meaningful anti-trafficking policies and programs.

I am very proud of this report, and I am happy to take any questions you might have. Yes.

QUESTION: Hi, yes, I'm with Reuters. I wanted to ask about the Child Soldiers Prevention Act list. So Iraq and Burma were taken off the list this year, and Human Rights Watch put out a statement about an hour ago saying that as of – even as of last week there were children that were part of Burma's armed forces, and in Iraq children have died fighting the Islamic State along with Iraqi Government units, meaning that both of those governments are still complicit in the use of child soldiers. I'm just wondering, what is the reasoning for taking those countries off the list?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So the State Department will continue to monitor and report on the recruitment and use of child soldiers and will continue to engage the governments of Iraq and Burma on this issue. And in the report narrative, for example, for Iraq, we recognize that children remain highly vulnerable to forcible recruitment and use by armed groups, including ISIS, the Popular Mobilization Forces or PMF, tribal forces, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party. We are also concerned as well in the trafficking report about what happens to those children when they are recovered and make sure that governments continue to provide services for those individuals when they are released from military forces.

Similarly, with respect to Burma, we continue to remain concerned that that government's response to past instances of child soldiering – the government has punished some military officers who engaged in the unlawful recruitment of child soldiers, but these punishments were not sufficiently stringent. They were more administrative than they were criminal sanctions. And I was able to directly raise this point with the government officials while traveling to Burma in December.

The 2017 report urges the Burmese Government to cease official involvement in compelling civilians to perform any type of forced labor, to reform the military's self-reliance policy and others that drive the demand for forced labor, and to look at child soldier conscription, and then again, when children are removed from the military to work on reintegrating them into society. So the narratives for those countries accurately and factually report what happened in those countries during the reporting period which ended March 30th of 2017.

QUESTION: But do you see any improvement? I mean, is there – what's the justification for then removing – if there are all these continued concerns,

what's the justification for removing them from that list?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So we look at various factors under the minimum standards when determining a tier ranking for those countries, and that analysis is reflected in the report. So certainly for these countries, we talk about areas where improvements need to be made, but Burma has made significant strides in removing children from military service.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Thanks. China obviously responded with some displeasure, calling it irresponsible. So what effect do you expect this to have on working with China on North Korea, and is it possible that it might actually have the opposite effect?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Well, we have to continue working with all governments that are ranked in the report, and sometimes there is initial displeasure with that ranking. However, the report is seen worldwide as a real factual and accurate analysis of what's going on in countries such as China, and there are recommendations for China as there are for other ranked countries – Tier Two and Tier Two Watch List as well. And so all countries have recommendations, including the United States. We certainly look at ourselves as well and talk about areas where progress can be made and hope to continue those good working relationships diplomatically.

QUESTION: So what expectation do you have that this will be a positive pleasure – pressure that will spur them to act in the way that the U.S. wants them to do towards North Korea?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So the Trafficking Victim Protection Act sets out these minimum standards and the analysis that officials in the State Department are to use, and this is done by people in the field at our embassies as well as here. So we don't consider whether it's going to be positive or negative. We want to be truthful and accurate, and we certainly hope to continue our diplomatic engagement.

Historically, we have heard that this report does make a difference. When I travel, I meet with senior government officials who want to do more to address this issue and want to do more to improve their ranking. And so I hope that internal pressure on a country as well as diplomatic pressure from other nations will continue to be an impetus for change.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question on (inaudible)?

QUESTION: What was it that – what was it that tipped the edge – tipped the edge for China? Because it's been on the Two Watch List for a while, and according to reports there was some pressure other years to put it down to three. Was it the North Korean forced labor? Because that's what Secretary Tillerson decided to emphasize in his remarks.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Secretary Tillerson did highlight the concerns with forced labor with respect to North Korea, but there are other forced labor concerns in China as well. There have been NGO reports that indicate there is

still government complicity with respect to drug rehabilitation facilities where individuals continue to be detained without judicial process. Human rights organizations and media continue to report that local officials in western China coerced Uighur men and women to participate in forced labor outside that province there. And then despite the local government issuing a decree in early 2017, that practice has not ceased. Last, international media and the ILO report that children in some work-study programs supported by local governments and schools are forced to work in factories. So forced labor in China is not one-dimensional.

QUESTION: One more on China. I'm Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Thank you.

QUESTION: So in terms of just to follow up on Barbara's question, in terms of one thing tipping the scale, I guess. You listed several things that are of concern, but did one of them tip the scale? And then in general, was downgrading China part of a broader strategy on China or is this just happening in the context of this relationship without a connection?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So it's hard to say that any one thing for any one country will tip the scale, because there are so many minimum standards we look at. We look at whether the law is comprehensive. In China, for children under 18, it appears that Chinese law does not require – or does require force, fraud, and coercion, which is an international standard for those over 18. Children under 18 who are placed in sex trafficking should automatically be viewed as victims, because they are not consenting based on their age. So there's a concern about the law there.

There's a concern about victim services in China as well, that once individuals are identified they're not screened for trafficking indicators, they aren't provided the services they need, and they aren't assisted with reintegration into society. So there are many factors that go into any country's ultimate tier ranking.

QUESTION: Question on child brides?

QUESTION: And then anything about the broader relationship, about downgrading China this year to pressure them in any way?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So the minimum standards that are in the law don't really allow for consideration of strategic relationships or other factors.

Yes.

QUESTION: Can I – question on child brides. My name's Said Arikat from *Al Quds* daily newspaper. About child brides, especially Syrian refugees on the side of the Jordan border in the Zaatari camp in particular and in Lebanon as well, where girls as young as 13 and 14 are married off to wealthy, middle-aged men from the Gulf region and so on. And it seems to be sanctioned by both the Jordanian Government or the Lebanese Government and the clerics. I wonder what you're doing about that.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Certainly if there's –

QUESTION: And the UN.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Certainly if there are instances of sex trafficking with respect to forced marriage, that is recounted in the report. Forced marriage is one of those truly horrible issues that may not, however, always be trafficking. It can be that you're forced into marriage without the continued exploitation via force, fraud, and coercion. But we do look at forced marriage as a component of sex trafficking in cases where it's indicated.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Patty Culhane, Al Jazeera English. What will be the real-world impact of China being put in this tier? Will the – sanctions, cultural programs – how will we see an impact?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So there are restrictions that can come with a Tier Three ranking. We have a 90-day process to put that into place and the White House makes the final determination on those restrictions, so we don't yet know.

QUESTION: Are you aware of any time that sanctions have been imposed, that a president since – has imposed sanctions on a country for being in Tier Three?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: I've been in the office for two years, and last year there were partial restrictions that were imposed is my understanding.

QUESTION: On which countries?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: I can't recall right now. We can get back to you on that.

QUESTION: I'm with *The Washington Post*. Some of the human rights groups have said that some of the current policies, such as putting an end to sanctuary cities, might make it more difficult for the U.S. to remain on Tier One next year. Is – I'm just pulling that one out, just to be straightforward about it. Is that a realistic possibility, that something like ending sanctuary cities could cause the U.S. ranking to take a hit?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: So one of the vulnerabilities that the report addresses worldwide is individuals who are in a country unlawfully and may not have access to documentation or lawful work. That then makes them more vulnerable to traffickers, who can then impose upon them work requirements that could lead to forced labor and labor trafficking. And so it certainly is a concern globally how to address and how to screen for indicators among those who might not be in a country lawfully to see if they are, in fact, victims of trafficking.

And here in the U.S., if that is found to be the case, that someone is here unlawfully but is a victim of trafficking, they are allowed to apply for a T visa, and that T visa allows them to stay and work with the prosecution in their case and to move forward. And one of the messages while I have been in

this office is – has been that we really need to focus on not criminalizing victims who are committing crimes due to the situation of being trafficked – for example, the trafficker brings them across the border or the trafficker puts them into employment or the trafficker puts them into prostitution. These are crimes in this country, but the victim is not the one perpetrating the crime, it's the trafficker.

MS NAUERT: Last question.

QUESTION: This may be a question for DHS, but how – if you've been deported, how do you apply for a T visa?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: You can still apply for a T visa with the Department of Homeland Security. In fact, I had a victim in a trafficking case who was back in Central America, and we needed to bring her here to testify, and she received a T visa for that.

QUESTION: Who had been deported for being here illegally?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: She had been deported. Yes.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: And she has come back and testified?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: She did. She was able to obtain a T visa from abroad.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: So last year, China actually was given a waiver to stay on the Tier Two Watch List. Can you speak a little bit to whether that was considered in this particular year or kind of generally speaking how the department considers whether or not to issue a waiver?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Sure. So for two years, a country can be on the Watch List without a waiver. And then for two years a waiver is required to remain on the Watch List. And to be eligible for that waiver, a country must submit a national action plan that if it were fully funded would lead toward significant efforts to eliminate trafficking. So that decision is made every year that a country needs that waiver.

So it didn't impact this year's decision. We analyzed the minimum standards and made a determination that China was not making significant efforts and therefore belonged on Tier Three.

QUESTION: Did they issue an action plan or send you an action plan, China specifically?

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: I don't recall.

MS NAUERT: Thanks, everybody.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: That's all the ambassador has time for.

QUESTION: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR COPPEDGE: Thank you all.

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