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Two Democratic Senators Hit Obama on Human Trafficking



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WASHINGTON — Two Democratic senators raised fresh doubts about the Obama administration's efforts to halt human trafficking in Cuba and Malaysia, whose governments are listed on a [recent State Department report](#) as among the 23 most negligent in the world.

Senators Robert Menendez of New Jersey and Ben Cardin of Maryland aired their grievances with the White House at a [hearing of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Wednesday](#). They said the administration's policies on liberalizing trade relations and combating human trafficking were inconsistent. While the State Department lists Cuba and Malaysia as high-level or "tier three" violators of a decade-old anti-trafficking law, Obama has urged Congress to lift a trade embargo on Cuba and to approve the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), whose signatories include Malaysia.

"The fact of the matter is we're undermining our moral authority if we're willing to deal , but we're saying, 'You're on this list,'" Menendez said

"You lose that leverage," Cardin told Sarah Sewall, under secretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights at the State Department.

"I would have, it would give me a little more comfort if I knew that you, your views concerning why Malaysia is a tier-three country and a candidate for TPP what changes we expect to see implemented in Malaysia *before* a trade agreement is signed, or that there is sufficient enforcement in the trade agreement being negotiated and Malaysia won't be a tier-three country during a trade agreement

with the United States. Can you give us that assurance?" Cardin said.

Sewall vowed to get an answer to the senator. "What I can do, um, Senator Cardin, and you will appreciate, I don't speak for this, but what I can do is get back to you and answer all of your questions."

Cardin replied that he wishes to hear from Sewall soon, because he expects the Senate will vote on the trade deals in the next few weeks.

Menendez is an outspoken foe of normalizing relations with Cuba. Cardin represents a liberal state where unions and progressives have vowed to sink the pan-Asian trade pact.

The senators' statements throw light on the resistance the Obama administration will face on Capitol Hill as it seeks to normalize trade relations with Cuba and the 12 nations that signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Yet also the remarks served to highlight the administration's struggles to implement the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#), which was renewed in 2013.

On its most recent report, the State Department describes trafficking as "recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for completed labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion." The 66-page report lists the United States, France, and England as "tier one" countries which comply with Trafficking Victims Protection Act. In addition to Cuba and Malaysia, the governments of Russia, Iran, and North Korea made the list of the most indifferent to the "modern form of slavery." The report said 20 million people are trafficked, including five million children.

The countries are rated based on their adherence to the anti-trafficking law, which Republican Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey sponsored. The first provision in the law requires governments to enact laws that ban "severe forms of trafficking in persons."

Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire offered less critical words of the Obama administration, saying that Sewall and her team had done a "great job" by compiling the report. Sewall noted the administration has worked with Ghana to implement a more robust anti-trafficking law in that country.