

August 26th 2015

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In all of the discussion over what the right balance in trade policy is for this country, one very important issue has been missing in the current debate: whether countries will face real penalties for the worst kinds of violations with respect to human trafficking and slavery, the banning of labor unions, and the horrible mistreatment of women and members of the LGBT community.

The modern-day slavery issue came up in regards to the Menendez Anti-Trafficking Amendment included in the Fast Track trade authority legislation passed in June. That provision would mean that either Malaysia would be banned from the TPP unless and until it took real measures to combat trafficking, or if Malaysia were allowed to remain in the pact; the TPP would not be subject to Fast Track treatment. Even in the face of recent revelations about mass graves of trafficking victims in Malaysia and widespread consensus that the situation in Malaysia has not improved, your administration's political appointees overruled the State Department's policy staff and upgraded Malaysia – removing the country from the Tier 3 Trafficking list relevant to the Menendez amendment.

Beyond the TPP debate, there are a number of other countries across the world where trafficking and labor rights violations, as well as other massive violations of other human rights, are major issues. We are concerned that our government does not give these issues enough attention in general and in the context of our trade policies in specific. We won't list all such countries today, but highlight two countries with some of the worst abuses in all of these areas, and with whom the United States has a great deal of economic interaction: Qatar and United Arab Emirates.

Both countries have severe problems with human trafficking and slavery. Both have extremely discriminatory laws against both women and LGBT people -- as a matter of fact, UAE makes the "crime" of homosexuality punishable by death. According to the U.S. State Department, Qatar is one of the worst countries in the world in terms of human trafficking and slavery abuses, including well-documented reports of enslaved migrant workers dying at the rate of one every other day in 2014 during the construction of the World Cup infrastructure. UAE withholds the passports of migrant workers, so they can't escape the dreadful conditions in which they are forced to live -- including living 15 to a small room and being forced to work over 80 hours a week.

Both countries discriminate in the extreme against women, in the workforce and in their personal lives. There have been women jailed for "illicit sex" after being gang raped, and other women arrested for drinking before being raped. These countries' state-owned airlines fire women for being pregnant or getting married, and force them to live in company housing.

The list of human rights and labor rights abuses that have been described by journalists and documented by the U.S. State Department goes on and on. And yet, the U.S. government supports both of these countries' admission to the World Trade Organization, the body that enforces a global commerce policy that is supposed to create a level playing field for trade, but has neither labor nor human rights requirements. Indeed, if the U.S. Congress enacted legislation prohibiting imports from these countries based on their treatment of women, their trafficking practices, or their attacks on LGBT people, it would be the United States that would likely face trade sanctions – not these countries.

Both of these nations enjoy Most Favored Nation trading status with the United States and trade freely with us. They also are involved in a special trade agreement with us and some other countries that are supposed to guarantee an equal playing field for airlines around the world called the Open Skies Agreements (agreements, by the way, that Qatar and UAE both blatantly violate with massive subsidies of their state-owned airlines). These countries' economic ties to the U.S.A. are deep and substantial.

Mr. President, we call on your administration to fully engage on human rights issues with countries that have these kinds of deep and substantial ties to the United States and yet still egregiously abuse their own people and migrant workers. That would involve countries like Qatar and UAE, cutting off other economic subsidies this country may be giving them, and condemning those abuses in public statements and international bodies.

Having countries such as Qatar and UAE be major trading partners with America, while doing nothing about their human rights abuses, is exactly the kind of thing that undermines faith in new international agreements like the TPP and our government's credibility when we speak of human rights, women's rights, LGBT rights, and labor standards around the world. It is time to do something on this important issue.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned

Organizations

American Family Voices
Campaign for America's Future
CREDO
DailyKos
Democracy for America
National Organization for Women

Progressive leaders

John Amato
Beth Becker
Heather Booth
Chris Bowers
Natasha Chart
Ken Grossinger
Dave Johnson
Jackie Kendall
Howie Klein
Mike Lux
Heather Parton
Joel Silberman
Susan Smith
Billy Wimsatt