

# Malaysia must do more in anti-smuggling fight for Tier 2

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has received lukewarm response here.

The US State Department had, last year, downgraded Malaysia to Tier 3 in its annual 'Trafficking in Persons' report, joining the likes of North Korea and Syria.

The report cited "limited efforts to improve its flawed victim protection regime", among others. It remains unclear what efforts Malaysia have taken to improve the situation.

The authorities acknowledge scores of undocumented Myanmar nationals, Indonesians and Bangladeshis have made their way into the country with the help of human smugglers.

This is a major security threat, leaving our citizens vulnerable to diseases and acts of terrorism. The huge volume of illegal immigrants, who have since settled down, would also change the demographics of this country.

Several US lawmakers and human rights activists expressed shock over the decision to give Malaysia an upgrade. US senator Robert Menendez said he will call for an investigation if Malaysia is pushed to Tier 2.

"They appear to be giving Malaysia a sweetheart deal," Menendez was quoted by the *New York Times* on July 10.

Others who were appalled by the decision were Human Rights Watch Asia advocacy director John Sifton and Network executive director Simone Campbell.

Politics aside, one wonders if Malaysia

This newspaper has highlighted how easy it is for one to enter and exit the country. Rat holes are aplenty along the border.

This was also revealed by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission during an exercise last year. Corrective measures would include placing more manpower to patrol the Malaysia-Thailand border and repairing or upgrading fences along the border.

But locals will say it is business as usual in Wan Kelian (Perlis), Bukit Kayu Hitam (Kedah) and even Sungai Golok in Kelantan. The authorities too seem to have forgotten about our porous borders, stressing work cannot be carried out due to "insufficient funds".

Others seem to be engrossed with the RM2.6 billion fiasco as the country continues to be at a risk of foreign threats. Economically, these foreigners send money back home and as such, the outflow of ringgit is unimaginable.

But no one seems to care.

The Hari Raya *balik kampung* exodus will further uncover the large number of foreigners heading home in boats. They are expected to return to Malaysia, with the help of syndicates through illegal means, after enjoying the festivity with their families.

There are also exploited women, who were promised jobs in saloons or as maids by their 'agents', only to end up in the flesh trade. Visas are misused and abused. This dark and wicked industry is just too luca-

They said: "Thailand, for example, prosecuted fewer human traffickers in 2014 than it did in 2013. Malaysia remains a major hub for trafficking and abuse of asylum seekers, including by government officials. Bangladesh continues to deny basic protections for Rohingya fleeing persecution in Burma."

They added that Asean countries must be further engaged, encouraged and supported in their efforts and not be rewarded for half measures or complicity.

"Rewarding Bangladesh, Burma, Malaysia and Thailand with an upgrade in tier ranking would serve only as a devaluation of internationally recognised human rights and would send a dangerous signal to the world about the United States' commitment to ending modern day slavery," the letter read.

For the record, Santiago is Asean Parliamentarians for Human Rights chairman, while Pitts is Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission co-chairman.

So Malaysia, what have you done to deserve a Tier 2 upgrade? Merely calling for regional action is not enough. More has to be done to cripple human smugglers.

We must address our border issues for the sake of national security. It is ridiculous to put our citizens at risk due to a lack of concerted effort by the powers-that-be or by claiming we do not have enough money.

The US must allow us to show the world why we should be in Tier 2. Credit should only be given when due.

THE shocking revelation of mass graves hidden in the thick jungle bordering Malaysia and Thailand earlier this year seems to mean nothing.

Bodies of human trafficking victims, believed to be from Myanmar who tried to enter Malaysia by land hoping for a brighter future, were uncovered.

They were finally given a proper burial in recent weeks as the nation ponders the extent of the human trafficking syndicates whose tentacles appear to cross many borders.

Our politicians and enforcement agencies, typically, gave assurances of changes in policies. They promised stricter scrutiny in border patrol. Heads will roll, they promised.

Non-governmental organisations and observers are tired of singing the same tune. They continue to declare war against human traffickers and uphold the protection of human rights.

But for several arrests in Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia, it has been mere words.

What came as a shocker to many was Reu-

ters had, last Wednesday, quoted US sources as saying Malaysia will be upgraded from the lowest tier on its list of worst human trafficking centres.

The upgrade is believed to be linked to Malaysia accepting the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement which

has forgotten its fight against foreigners entering into the country without valid documents.

Illegal immigrants continue to make their way into the country in huge numbers as they flee their homeland – mainly due to religious persecution and economic woes.

tive.

Klang MP Charles Santiago and US Congressman Joseph K. Pitts, in their letter to US President Barack Obama, applauded recent regional efforts to combat human trafficking but stressed more can be done to stop the trafficking networks.

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**A police officer inspects the remnants of a human trafficking camp in Bukit Wang Burma, near the Malaysia-Thailand border. The writer says the US must allow Malaysia to show why it should be in Tier 2 of the list of worst human trafficking centres. — Picture by Azinuddin Ghazali**