



DHS Chief Faces Senate Questions Over Trump Comments, Immigration Policy

Aline Barros and Jeff Seldin

January 16, 2018

WASHINGTON —

In a wide-ranging hearing Tuesday on Capitol Hill, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen told a Senate committee she did not remember hearing President Donald Trump use vulgar language to describe Haiti and African countries during a meeting last week with lawmakers at the White House.

The U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearing follows a busy, often contentious week in immigration politics for the United States, with Republican and Democratic lawmakers sparring with each other and the president over potential reforms to the country's immigration system.

Notably, Democratic Senator Dick Durbin, a committee member, attended an immigration meeting at the White House last week, during which he alleges Trump used the word “s---hole” to describe African countries.

Trump has said Durbin misrepresented his comments; Nielsen, in turn, has repeatedly said she does not remember hearing the slur from the president.

“I did not hear that word used, no sir,” the secretary said in response to questions from Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), adding that the conversation during the White House meeting “was very impassioned.”

“I don't dispute that the president was using tough language. Others in the room were also using tough language,” Nielsen told the committee.

In a speech that criticized Nielsen and the administration as a whole for their decisions on immigration and their handling of allegations of racial and religious discrimination, Democratic Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey allowed the secretary little opportunity to interject.

“Your silence and your amnesia is complicity,” Booker told her.

Questions throughout the four-hour hearing otherwise focused on the Department of Homeland Security’s plans on immigration and border security.

The Trump administration continues to roll out a plan to curb immigration and increase deportation on multiple fronts, including by ending several programs, significantly cutting others and advocating for an agenda that increases what it calls “merit-based” immigration, over family or diversity applicants.

Administration opponents and activists say that Trump’s government is discriminating against some immigrants, largely those of color, in favor of promoting more immigration from predominantly white countries.

Several federal agencies have published reports requested by Trump in early 2017 that, on the surface, seem to provide data that supports the government's curbs to immigration.

To that end, the DHS and the Department of Justice released a report Tuesday morning that shows “three out of every four, or 402, individuals convicted of international terrorism-related charges in U.S. federal courts between Sept. 11, 2001, and Dec. 31, 2016 were foreign born. The report was mandated in an executive order on immigration issued last March.

A senior administration official who briefed reporters on the report accompanied it with a plea to Congress to work with the administration to end “chain migration” and the diversity visa.

“We are committed to protecting the American People and reforming the immigration system along the lines the president has outlined,” the official said.

“Our current immigration system jeopardizes American security,” the White House said in a release announcing the report.

Alex Nowrasteh, a researcher with the libertarian Cato Institute who has written about the lack of correlation between immigration and terrorism, was immediately critical of the latest government figures.

“This DHS/DOJ report says nothing about terrorism that we didn't know before,” Nowrasteh told VOA.

Moreover, he added, the data in “the report does not report the statistic that matters: From 9/11 through the end of 2017, native-born Americans are responsible for 78 percent of all deaths in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Foreign-born terrorists are responsible for 22 percent.”

A request by VOA for additional data and explanation of the numbers was not immediately answered by DHS on Tuesday.