



THE COVER-UP

WHITEWASHING UZBEKISTAN'S WHITE GOLD

Persecution of Independent Monitors to Cover Up Mass Forced Labor in the Cotton Sector

Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights e.V., March 2016

CLIMATE OF FEAR



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The unwilling participation of millions of people in a system that strips them of basic labor protections is made possible by fear. Forced labor in Uzbekistan occurs in a context of entrenched repression and widespread human rights violations.¹ Uzbekistan consistently ranks among the worst human rights abusers in the world.² Courts are neither independent nor trusted by the population as impartial, and serious due process and other rights violations are rife in the criminal justice system. The use of torture against detainees and convicted prisoners is systematic and routine.³ The government imposes severe and undue restrictions on the freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, association, and other fundamental freedoms.⁴ The government subjects journalists, civic activists, independent political and religious figures, and human rights defenders to harassment, surveillance, and interference in their work, and in some cases imprisonment, ill-treatment, and torture.⁵ Local neighborhood councils, known as mahalla committees, cooperate closely with the police to monitor and report on residents. Mahalla committees have authority over welfare payments, such as invalid and child benefits, as well as utilities, and withhold these punitively against residents.⁶ Citizens who complain about the government



A relative of a dead forced labor victim.
(Tashkent region)

- 1 World Report 2016: Uzbekistan, Human Rights Watch, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/uzbekistan>.
- 2 See for example the International Human Rights Rank Indicator (<http://www.ihrii.com/>) and the Freedom in the World Index (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>). In 2015, Freedom House rated freedom in Uzbekistan 3 out of 100, only three other countries in the world received a worse ranking.
- 3 The United Nations special rapporteur on torture made the finding that the use of torture in Uzbekistan is “systematic,” following his 2002 visit to the country. See: United Nations Economic and Social Council, Civil and Political Rights, Including the Questions of Torture and Detention, Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. UN Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the question of torture, Theo van Boven, Visit to Uzbekistan, E/CN.4/2003/68/Add.2. February 3, 2003, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4090ffc80.pdf>. In the Concluding Observations of its 2013 periodic review of Uzbekistan, the Committee Against Torture reiterated its concerns about the persistent use of torture in Uzbekistan, CAT/C/UZB/CO/4, available at http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2fC%2fUZB%2fCO%2f4&Lang=en. In the Concluding Observations of its 2015 fourth periodic review of Uzbekistan, the Human Rights Committee said “The Committee remains concerned about reports that torture continues to be routinely used throughout the criminal justice system; that, despite the existing legal prohibition, forced confessions are in practice used as evidence in court, and that judges fail to order investigations into allegations of forced confessions even when signs of torture are visible; that persons complaining of torture are subjected to reprisals and family members are often intimidated and threatened to ensure that complaints are retracted; and that the rate of prosecution is very low and impunity is prevalent (arts. 2, 7 and 14),” CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4.
- 4 See for example, UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Uzbekistan, August 17, 2015, CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4.
- 5 “US: Press Uzbekistan on Political Prisoners, Prison Death,” Human Rights Watch, January 15, 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/15/us-press-uzbekistan-political-prisoners-prison-death>.
- 6 Uzbek-German Forum interview with mahalla resident of the Yakkabog district of the Kashkadarya region, November 10, 2015. The resident said, “You could say that those who pick cotton for the mahalla are required to do so. Because they get money, welfare payments and so the mahalla can demand it. If you don’t go, the mahalla won’t

or are perceived as critics often face severe reprisals. For example, Radio Ozodlik reported that local police arbitrarily detained a young man for five days and accused him of being homosexual for complaining about electricity shortages⁷ and a store in Gulistan in the Syrdarya region refused to sell flour to an ill elderly woman because her local mahalla committee had reported that she didn't pick cotton.⁸

In 2015 the use of fear was especially pronounced as the government made significant efforts to cover up its use of forced labor through intimidation, threats, and persecution of independent monitors who sought to document and expose labor practices. A worrisome feature of forced mobilization in 2015 was the supervisory role played by local law enforcement officials. Police and prosecutors supervised mobilization; for example, a local newspaper reported "The transport of people to the fields will take place over several days according to procedure, under the careful scrutiny of the hokimiat authorities and law enforcement agencies."⁹ The hokim of Angren assigned supervisory role in recruitment to the head of the Angren police department and the Angren prosecutor, although it is unclear why these officials would have legal jurisdiction to supervise a voluntary activity.¹⁰ To a population with a deep and well-founded fear of law enforcement, law enforcement presence reinforces the message that cotton picking is mandatory and that people could face reprisals for refusing.

In addition to this overt pressure, an onslaught of intense propaganda accompanied the 2015 mobilization. Everywhere people confronted messages from authorities at every level that picking cotton amounts to the patriotic duty of every Uzbek citizen and refusal amounts to opposing the government, the state, and even God. In one example, Imam Khasanboi Asanov wrote in a local newspaper that "picking cotton is God's work and every person must fulfill his obligation to help pick cotton to the very last cotton ball."¹¹

Due to intense propaganda linking cotton to the Uzbek identity and duty, there is the pervasive sense that those who refuse to pick cotton could be viewed as anti-state or opposing the government.¹² In the atmosphere of intense political repression and intolerance of any opposition that prevails in Uzbekistan, many viewed this as dangerous. The parent of a 17-year old student who was forced to pick cotton said he was threatened to be exposed as anti-government by school officials sent to recruit his daughter if he refused to send her to pick. They told him "if you don't send your daughter to pick cotton then write a note that you oppose the policies of Uzbekistan. You are welcome to keep your daughter out of the fields but then we will make copies of this note and send one to the director of your bank [where you work] and others to the Central Bank and the regional hokim and we will

give you your money."

7 "Пожаловавшегося на отсутствие света молодого учителя обвинили в гомосексуализме [A Young Teacher Who Complained about the Lack of Electricity was Accused of Homosexuality]," Radio Ozodlik, November 23, 2015, available at: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/27381102.html>. Consensual sex between adult males is a criminal offense punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. In a recent speech, President Karimov called homosexuals "psychologically sick people," "Ислам Каримов назвал геев «психически нездоровыми людьми» [President Karimov Called Gays 'Psychologically Sick People']," Radio Ozodlik, February 6, 2016, available at: <http://rus.ozodlik.org/content/article/27536052.html>.

8 "Больной старушке отказались продавать муку за невыход на сбор хлопка, [Sick Old Woman refused Flour for Not Picking Cotton]," Radio Ozodlik, November 23, 2015, available at: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/27381096.html>.

9 ПАХТАКОРЛАРГА КЎМАҚДОШМИЗ В помощь хлопкоробам, October 3, 2015, available at: <http://amunews.uz/news/show/1217>.

10 Tashkent region monitor's report, September 15, 2015.

11 Ohangaron Hayoti (Akhanganar Life) newspaper, September 25, 2015.

12 Picking cotton in Uzbekistan is often referred to as khashar, an Uzbek word meaning collective work undertaken for the good of the community.

see if you will have a job after that.”¹³
A businessman from the Syrdarya region told us that people are afraid to complain about forced labor, fearing severe consequences. He said he heard that someone who refused to pick cotton disappeared during the night together with his entire family. While there is no evidence to support the truth of the rumor, the fact that some Uzbek citizens believe such rumors underscores the depth of fear pervading the harvest.¹⁴



Coercion and Vulnerability

While in some cases the government uses heavy-handed tactics to coerce people to pick cotton, in many other cases the pressure exerted may be harder to see. Almost universally, respondents told us they could not refuse to pick cotton. For many, the very notion was unthinkable. In many cases people simply understand that cotton harvesting is a requirement to keeping their jobs, and if they refuse they will suffer catastrophic economic consequences such as loss of employment or welfare benefit. Our respondents told us they picked cotton because their employment, education, or benefits were threatened. Teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals all told us that they would lose their jobs if they refused to pick cotton or pay for a replacement worker. In some cases their supervisors directly threatened that they would lose their jobs if they refuse. Teachers, medical workers, and other public employees and those receiving social welfare benefits are particularly vulnerable to coercion because they depend on the government for their income. One college instructor called public employees “the most obedient people on earth.”¹⁵ A teacher from the Andijan region said “It’s impossible [to refuse]. [Teachers] won’t argue about this. If not now then at some time in the future, their bosses will dismiss them from their jobs. When teachers are hired, they make an oral promise that they won’t refuse to do public work. That’s enough.”¹⁶ Radio Ozodlik reported that officials threatened pensioners with loss of 50% of their pension if they do not pick cotton.¹⁷

A teacher from the district of the Syrdarya region said,

I have observed lots of changes [during the harvest]. To send people to the fields they cut off electricity during the day. In the morning they yell through a microphone, calling everyone to the fields. You need to buy food to take to the fields but the markets are closed. You come home from hard work [in the fields] and there is no hot food or groceries at home. Don’t even speak of a rural medical clinic. They paste a sign on its doors saying ‘everyone is at the harvest’ and they go to the fields. If you go to the mahalla committee to get some kind of document, there won’t be anyone there.¹⁸

13 Uzbek-German Forum interview with parent of a 17-year old lyceum student who was forced to pick cotton, Andijan region, November 15, 2015.

14 Uzbek-German Forum interview with businessman, Syrdarya region, November 12, 2015.

15 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a college instructor, Jizzakh region, November 9, 2015.

16 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a schoolteacher, Andijan region, November 8, 2015.

17 “В Узбекистане пенсионеров заставляют выйти на сбор хлопка или отказаться от половины своих пенсий [In Uzbekistan pensioners are forced to pick cotton or give up half their pensions],” Radio Ozodlik, September 9, 2015, available at: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/27244283.html>.

18 Uzbek-German Forum interview with schoolteacher, Syrdarya region, November 6, 2015.

A teacher, who was pregnant, recounted to us a conversation she had with a school official in September, when the official told her she had to pick cotton.

I heard that forcing people to go to the cotton harvest is against the law. But you won't leave me alone. Even seeing my condition, you are forcing me and other pregnant women to go pick cotton. You are a woman, you understand that it's dangerous to be bending down all the time while pregnant. Why can't you tell your bosses that we have a certain number of pregnant women and they can't pick cotton so we can't fulfill the quota?

The official responded:

Who told you that picking cotton is forced labor? You are a teacher with higher education, how dare you talk like that? Do you really not understand the policy around cotton? It's not news to you. If you won't pick and the students won't pick, then who will pick? I understand that you're pregnant. But we aren't forcing you to pick cotton yourself. You can hire someone in your place. Or your husband can go instead of you. Today you tell me you're pregnant. Tomorrow, someone else will say 'I'm ill.' A third will say 'I'm old,' Our [school] director is also a woman but she sits every night at the [cotton] meetings at the hokimiat with hundreds of men. I have been to those meetings several times myself. Ekh. If you only knew what kind of cursing we have to listen to at those meetings. Our director sits there for hours shaking with fear. She is ready to buy the cotton to fulfill the quota assigned to us. Do you think she takes the money for herself? All the money goes to cotton.

Our monitor suggested that the pregnant teacher call the Feedback Mechanism hotline, but the woman refused. She said that the complaint would only cause bigger problems for her.¹⁹

A former mahalla official from Andijan said

Oy! How could you refuse [to pick cotton]?! It's government business. The government pays your salary so you will pick or you could be asked to give up your post. Now, there is no work...so you can't refuse [to pick cotton], you are obligated...Yes, obligated. What kind of fool would go to work in the dirt in the cotton fields on a cold day of his own accord instead of sitting inside in a nice warm office? Even a fool can understand it. To understand that [picking cotton] is mandatory, you don't have to be a genius and solve puzzles. But we pretend we don't understand. We say, 'cotton is the people's khashar [communal work].' But for real khashar you only participate if you really want to, right? If, for example, your neighbor, calls you for khashar, you go if you want but if you don't your neighbor doesn't threaten 'you'll come or else I will do something against you.'²⁰

19 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a schoolteacher, region withheld, September 29, 2015.

20 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a retired mahalla employee, Andijan region, November 20, 2015.