

# 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*

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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The evidence from the 2015 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan indicates that the government has not undertaken reforms to end its systematic use of forced labor. Yet the 2015 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan differed from previous years in a significant way: While the government continued to force more than a million people to pick cotton and farmers to grow cotton under threat of penalty, it did so while making significant efforts to project the appearance of cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and to claim compliance with its commitments to the World Bank to apply labor laws.

The Uzbek government had a lot at stake. The World Bank has invested more than \$500 million USD in Uzbekistan's agricultural sector. Following a complaint from Uzbek civil society, the Bank attached loan covenants stipulating that the loans could be stopped and subject to repayment if forced or child labor was detected in project areas by monitors from the International Labor Organization, contracted by the World Bank to carry out labor monitoring during the harvest.

Instead of good faith efforts to reform, the government appeared to double down on coercion. The government's 2015 "re-optimization" plan for agriculture punished farmers in debt or who failed to meet production quotas by taking back their land. Under another plan known as "Clever," the prime minister ordered bailiffs and police to repossess the farmers' property for debts or unfulfilled production quotas. They confiscated livestock, tractors, even televisions without court orders or valuation processes. As in previous years, the government imposed cotton production quotas on farmers and exerted control over every aspect of production. The government's procurement price for cotton, set at less than production costs, and system of government-controlled monopolies for agricultural inputs and purchasing, conspired to keep farmers in a cycle of crippling debt.



Almost all of the cotton crop in Uzbekistan is being harvested by hand. (September 2015)

To harvest cotton, officials once again forced more than a million people, including students, teachers, doctors, nurses, and employees of government agencies and private businesses to the cotton fields, against their will and under threat of penalty, especially losing their jobs. The government forcibly mobilized teachers and medical workers to the fields en masse, despite stated policy commitments not to recruit from these sectors. People picked cotton for shifts of 15 – 40 days, working long hours and enduring abysmal living conditions, including overcrowding and insufficient access to safe drinking water and hygiene facilities. People with the means could avoid fieldwork by hiring replacement workers to pick cotton in their name or by paying off their supervisors. Officials and business owners, themselves under pressure to support the national plan, ordered 40% or more of their employees to pick cotton, often in written directives. The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights obtained several examples, included in an online table of documents<sup>1</sup>, that illustrate the state organization of forced labor on a massive scale.

Uzbek citizens subsidized the government’s cotton industry with their labor and incomes. Through extensive field research throughout 2015, we found that cotton work is not viewed by the vast majority of people as an opportunity to supplement incomes. Instead, the forced labor system of cotton production exacted a significant economic toll on many workers, who earned little or failed to earn enough to cover their costs and justify the associated risks and personal and professional disruptions.

The government also undermined education and health care by mobilizing teachers and healthcare workers en masse across the country for long shifts as well as daily cotton work, leaving schools and medical facilities understaffed. Employees who remained at work while their colleagues picked cotton had to work extra for no overtime pay to cover their colleagues’ absences, especially as some institutions such as schools and hospitals experienced tremendous pressure to appear to be functioning normally. Many colleges (the equivalent of high school) and universities suspended classes entirely for students at the harvest, or, in the case of some colleges, nominally held classes only for first- and second-year students while third-year students picked.

A powerful climate of fear pervaded the harvest season and facilitated the government’s forced mobilization of workers. Nearly everyone we spoke with during the season indicated that they were directly threatened or understood implicit threats if they refused to pick cotton, most crucially that they would lose their jobs. The climate of fear prevented people from using a complaint hotline run by the Labor Ministry and state-controlled trade union federation, and from speaking openly to the ILO’s monitoring teams, which were comprised of one international member and five officials from government or government-controlled organizations.

The government unleashed an unprecedented campaign of harassment and persecution against independent monitors to attempt to cover up its use of forced labor while taking pains to make widespread, massive forced mobilization appear voluntary. In some cases it forced teachers, students,



A bus is delivering public sector employees to the cotton fields (in the bus window, there’s a sign saying “Cotton 2015”).

1 See Documentary Evidence, available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

and medical workers to sign statements attesting that they picked cotton of their own will and agreeing to disciplinary measures, including being fired or expelled, if they failed to pick cotton. It instructed people to lie to monitors saying they came to pick cotton of their own volition. Officials also repeatedly arrested, assaulted, and fabricated charges against citizens documenting forced labor, including Uzbek-German Forum's monitors.

Despite the government's efforts to cover up forced labor and impede effective monitoring, the ILO concluded that forced labor remains a problem and significant reform efforts are needed. Despite these findings, the Uzbek government continued to receive World Bank funds. As detailed in the final chapter of this report, the Uzbek-German Forum urges the Uzbek government to end the coercion and corruption that pervade its cotton sector and violate the rights of its citizens, and calls on the World Bank, United States, European Union and ILO to hold Tashkent accountable for its international commitments.



Evening delivery of cotton. Usually, employees from the public sector sign on to collect a daily quota of cotton (the average amounts to 50 kg per day).

## Key Recommendations

### To the Government of Uzbekistan

- Enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor in alignment with ratified ILO conventions;
- Make public, high-level policy statements condemning forced labor, specifically including forced labor in the cotton sector, and making clear that all work should be voluntary and fairly compensated;
- Instruct government officials at all levels and citizens that act on behalf of the government to not use coercion to mobilize anyone to work, including farmers, children, students, public-sector workers, private-sector workers, pensioners, mothers and others receiving public welfare support, and the unemployed;
- Allow independent journalists, human rights defenders, and other individuals and organizations to document and report concerns about the use of forced labor without fear of reprisals;
- Ensure an immediate, prompt, independent and effective investigation into reprisals against independent monitors;
- Ratify and implement ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize; and
- Initiate a time-bound plan to reform root causes of forced labor in the agriculture sector.

### To the International Labor Organization

- Establish, monitor and report on clear benchmarks for the government of Uzbekistan to fulfill its commitments to implement the fundamental labor conventions of the ILO, including the elimination of state-orchestrated forced labor of children and adults in the cotton sector;
- Ensure the participation of the IOE, ITUC, and International Union of Food Workers (IUF) as well as regular consultation with independent Uzbek civil society groups in the development and implementation of all monitoring and technical assistance activities in Uzbekistan;
- Raise concerns about the safety and access of independent monitors publicly and at the highest levels and make clear that their ability to work unimpeded is a vital sign of the government's good faith and requirement for ILO assistance;

### To the World Bank and Asian Development Bank

- Suspend disbursements until the Uzbek government demonstrates meaningful progress reforming the root causes of forced labour, its financial system that incentivizes officials to use coercion and repression of citizens who report violations;
- Engage and work with the Uzbek government to develop and implement a time-bound plan to reform root causes of forced labor in the agriculture sector;
- Ensure robust and fully independent third-party monitoring of compliance with core labor conventions in the project areas;

- Establish a confidential and accessible grievance mechanism and provide effective remedies, including legal and financial, to any person who is subjected to forced labor in the project areas;
- Take all necessary measures to prevent reprisals against community members, journalists, and independent organizations for monitoring or reporting on human rights violations in these areas, for engaging with the Bank's project monitors, or for filing complaints, including by seeking an enforceable commitment from the government that it will not interfere with independent reporting and engagement.

## **To the United States and European Union**

- Urge the government of Uzbekistan to end its use of forced labor including by implementing the specific recommendations above.
- In the U.S., place Uzbekistan in Tier 3 in the 2016 Global Trafficking in Persons Report and until the state-orchestrated forced-labor system for cotton production is ended.
- Exclude cotton from Uzbekistan from benefitting from trade preferences under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) until the government of Uzbekistan ends its forced-labor system of cotton production.
- Investigate and prosecute companies that are benefitting from or contributing to the forced labor system of cotton production that are in violation of international and national laws.

## **To Companies That Use Cotton**

- Sign the Cotton Pledge "to not knowingly source Uzbek cotton for the manufacturing of any of our products until the Government of Uzbekistan ends the practice of forced child and adult labor in its cotton sector."