



THE COVER-UP

WHITEWASHING UZBEKISTAN'S WHITE GOLD

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

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FORCED LABOR SYSTEM OF

COTTON PRODUCTION IN 2015



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National Plan and Coercion of Farmers

The government's direct and total control of the cotton sector sustains a system of patronage, is the root cause of forced labor, and remained unaltered in 2015. The system is organized from the top down and its implementation involves officials at every level.¹ In the first quarter of the year, the president, prime minister, ministers of the Agriculture and Water Resources, the Economy, Finance, Foreign Economic Relations, and Investments and Trade ministries, and representatives from the state-controlled cotton association set the national production target.² The prime minister issued quotas to the regional hokims, who, with the cotton association, imposed production quotas on farmers through their land lease agreements and procurement contracts. Farmers, who do not own their land but lease it from the government, were, as in previous years, obligated to sell their cotton to one of the state-controlled gins at the state price. The Finance Ministry set the procurement price for cotton – the price paid to farmers – below the government's own estimate of production costs.³ The government also establishes the rates paid to workers for harvesting, which are substantially lower than market wages, perpetuating the need for forced labor.



On the cotton fields (September 2015).

The forced labor system of cotton production in Uzbekistan begins with farmers, affecting millions.⁴ Many farmers, who must use inputs and agricultural services sold by government-controlled monopolies, believe that production plans are punitive and arbitrary. The plans and consequences for failure to fulfill them contribute to farmers' vulnerability and leave many farmers at economic disadvantage. The most profitable crops for farmers are horticultural products, such as fruits and vegetables.⁵ Yet the government requires many farmers to dedicate significant land to cotton and

1 See: The Uzbek Government's Forced Labour System Chain of Command, available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/>.

2 This association, known as Khlopkoprom in Russian and Uzpakhtasanoat in Uzbek, is the state-controlled association responsible for procurement and sales of raw cotton and ginning.

3 Ilkhamov and Muradov, pp. 20 – 23.

4 According to a World Bank estimate, there are some 4.7 million small farms in Uzbekistan most of which are operated by poor households, and 21,000 larger farms. Uzbekistan: Strengthening the Horticulture Value Chain, World Bank Policy Note, Khidirov, Dilshod; Larson, Donald F.; Schuman, Irina; Abstract, January 1, 2015, available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2015/01/24003407/uzbekistan-strengthening-horticulture-value-chain>.

5 A World Bank analysis concludes: "Evidence in this note suggests that growing fruit and vegetables is among the most profitable activities on both dehqan [small peasant farms] and private farms and, over the last ten years, the incomes those activities generate comprised a growing share of national GDP. Horticultural export earnings have also surged in recent years, growing from USD 373 million in 2006 to USD 1.16 billion in 2010. Uzbekistan has special agro-ecological conditions that set it apart from most countries and provides the basis for its horticulture subsector. Like agriculture as a whole, the subsector benefits greatly from policies that support basic

wheat production and to fulfill annual production quotas of both crops, limiting their ability to make a profit. Farmers often enter into informal agreements with the local hokim in order to grow more profitable crops and compensate for the debts they often incur to fulfill their cotton quotas. A farmer from Syrdarya told us

The district hokim sets the [cotton] plan. The hokim meets with all the foremen of the territory to determine the fertility of the land. After he gathers all the information, he imposes the state production plan on the farmers. Although he knows how much the harvest depends on the strength of the land, he always makes the quota higher. And so some farmers can't even meet half of the production targets. Farmers that have a good relationship with the hokim and his team of advisors use any means to try to get lower quotas. They will even pay bribes to lower their production quotas and then secretly plant different crops.⁶

Punitive Measures Against Farmers

In 2015 the government relied on law enforcement structures to monitor and control various aspects of agriculture and instill fear in farmers. Police regularly patrolled cotton fields, inspected farms, and monitored both workers and the progress of the harvest. The legal basis for this presence is unclear, although the message to farmers was unmistakable: they face serious consequences for failure or error.⁷ The farmer from Syrdarya said, "When workers arrive at your fields, you become the center of attention to the district officials. They come to inspect – the foreman, prosecutors, police. You need to provide information about how the harvest is going today, who is picking, how many pickers, and tell the cotton collection headquarters how much cotton I will deliver today..."⁸

In 2015 the government launched an agricultural "re-optimization" plan to reduce the size of most agricultural land allotments.⁹ It also implemented a plan known as "Cleaver" (Oibolta in Uzbek), under which farmers in debt were required to give up their land local officials repossessed the land and possessions of farmers who had



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research in agronomy and post-harvest technologies, from policies that support private investment and efficient markets, and from policies that promote the good stewardship of natural resources." World Bank Policy Note, "Uzbekistan: Strengthening the Horticulture Value Chain," Khidirov, Dilshod; Larson, Donald F.; Schuman, Irina; abstract, January 1, 2015, available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2015/01/24003407/uzbekistan-strengthening-horticulture-value-chain>.

6 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a farmer, Syrdarya region, November 10, 2015.

7 Radio Ozodlik reported on the suicides of two farmers, one in June and one in July, who failed to meet the wheat production quota and faced other problems with their farms and were subjected to severe humiliation, and threatening and degrading treatment by the hokim and local officials. See "В Узбекистане оскорбления властей вынудили фермера покончить с собой [In Uzbekistan insults by officials forced farmer to kill himself]," Radio Ozodlik, July 4, 2015, available at: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/27109836.html>.

8 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a farmer, Syrdarya region, November 10, 2015.

9 Over the last 13 years, Uzbekistan has undertaken a series of agricultural reforms designed to "optimize" production by increasing or decreasing the amount of land allocated to farmers and redistributing land assignments. Uzbek-German Forum interview with a farmer, Jizzakh region, October 2015.

failed to meet production quotas for cotton or wheat or incurred debts.¹⁰ In a conference call with local authorities and farmers on October 12, 2015, Shavkat Mirziyayev, Uzbekistan's prime minister, ordered local officials to use court bailiffs and police to take property from indebted farmers. A farmer from Namangan who was on the call told Radio Ozodlik that the prime minister said, "Go to farmers' fields and tell them to fulfill the [production] plan. Go to the homes of farmers in debt, who can't repay their credit, take their cars, livestock, and if there are none, take the slate from their roofs!"¹¹ A farmer from Syrdarya described the Cleaver plan:

They have found a good way to deal [with people who fail to produce the quota]. The police and prosecutors come and seize your other crops. The farmer can never make a profit then. It's a big deal if he can even cover his expenses for cotton. As far as I know, there are no farmers who are not in debt to the banks. Everyone is in debt millions [of soum]. To cover them, they seize our vegetable crops, wheat, rice, and confiscate our belongings to pay the state banks.¹²

A farmer from Kashkadarya said:

I didn't fulfill the cotton production plan this year, but I don't have any debt. But because I didn't meet the quota the police came and took my brother's car. We have a family farm. They haven't given it back. The [police] go to the houses of people with a lot of debt and take everything, anything they can find, without any documents. If [the farmer] has cattle, they sell the cattle...¹³

A farmer from Jizzakh who did not meet his cotton production quota described in detail his debts to various government-controlled suppliers, including for diesel fuel, fertilizer, and the use of a combine for harvesting his wheat crop. He said:

I finished the year in debt 60 million soum (approximately \$10,000 USD) from my bank credit. [Prime Minister] Mirziyayev's Cleaver group took 10 sheep, three cows, as well as my tractor and cultivator from my home. They closed my farm. Now I don't know what will happen...¹⁴

Fear and Control through Cotton Meetings

Throughout 2015, regional hokims were again held responsible for ensuring farmers grew enough and others picked enough cotton to complete their portion of the national cotton production plan. Hokims directed district and local officials in their regions to implement labor recruitment plans. Daily "cotton meetings" played a key role in overseeing and enforcing cotton harvest policy. The prime minister organized regular meetings by conference call with local officials and farmers across the country before and throughout the cotton season. Regional and district hokims also convened cotton meetings throughout the harvest season, and presided over them accompanied by local police, prosecutors, tax inspectors, and other officials. Farmers, administrators of education,

10 «Убийственная кампания» Мирзияева заработала полным ходом – десятки фермеров лишились имущества [Mirziyayev's 'Murderous Campaign' Has Had Complete Success – Tens of Farmers have Lost Their Property"], Radio Liberty, October 23, 2015, available at: <http://rus.ozodlik.org/content/article/27321803.html>. Uzbek-German Forum interview with farmer, Kashkadarya region, December 11, 2015.

11 "Премьер-министр Узбекистана начал «убийственную» кампанию против фермеров [The Prime Minister of Uzbekistan has Begun a 'Murderous' Campaign Against Farmers,]", Radio Ozodlik, October 14, 2015, available at: <http://rus.ozodlik.org/content/article/27305585.html>.

12 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a farmer, Syrdarya region, November 10, 2015.

13 Uzbek-German Forum interview with farmer, Kashkadarya region, December 11, 2015.

14 Uzbek-German Forum interview with farmer, Jizzakh region, December 10, 2014.

healthcare and other public institutions, mahalla committee members, and others were required to attend. The meetings often occurred late in the evening and lasted for hours. A farmer from Kashkadarya said, “During the harvest I spent every night at the cotton headquarters. The hokim convenes meetings until midnight. He tells us ‘you’d better find cotton from somewhere, even from under the dirt, and fulfill the quota.’ Next to him sit the prosecutor and police officers.”¹⁵

Although the ostensible purpose of the meetings is to monitor progress on daily harvesting, their main objective appeared to be to instill fear into those responsible for carrying out cotton policy and humiliate those who do not meet the plan. The officials called on farmers, directors of institutions and enterprises to report how many people they sent to the fields and their progress in meeting harvesting quotas. Those who did not meet targets were excoriated, threatened, and sometimes beaten. The hokim of the Nizhnechirchik district of the Tashkent region beat a farmer at a cotton meeting on September 9, causing the farmer to be hospitalized for two days for his injuries.¹⁶

At a cotton meeting in the Khazarasp district of Khorezm, the hokim ordered full participation in the harvest, threatening to shut down organizations that did not send their employees. The hokim said:

*Cotton! You have to go and pick cotton and fulfill the quota. Is it clear!? ...[All] must go and pick cotton. This policy applies to everyone! If even one person does not go out, it will be bad for you! I’ll shut down your organizations! Everyone, without exception, whether from the hokimiyat, tax officials, the bank or other organizations, all will be shut down!*¹⁷

15 Uzbek-German Forum interview with farmer, Kashkadarya region, November 9, 2014.

16 “Хоким Джохонгир Абдуразаков Нижнечирчикского района принуждает медиков и учителей собирать хлопок, а также является взяточником и хулиганом. Узбекистан. [Hokim Jahongir Abdurazakov of the Nizhnechirchik district is forcing medical workers and teachers to pick cotton, is taking bribes, and a scoundrel. Uzbekistan.], Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan press release, September 12, 2015.

17 Transcript of audio recording of Uktam Kurbanov, hokim of the Khazarasp district of Khorezm region, cotton meeting, September 29, 2015.