

# 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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#### INTRODUCTION



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In 2015 the government of Uzbekistan carried out joint monitoring of forced labor with the ILO. It also used unprecedented deception and repression, including arrests and persecution of independent monitors to cover up the use of forced labor of more than a million of its citizens to harvest of cotton, the country's "white gold", while at the same time ostensibly cooperating with ILO monitors and attempting to show nominal compliance with World Bank agreements requiring remedial measures against labor violations. The government ordered posters and banners warning citizens about forced labor at the same time as it loaded students on to buses, pulling them out of classes for two months to pick cotton, and hung those banners – after many of the buses had departed – far from the fields where teachers, doctors, nurses, students and others, labored to fulfill daily picking quotas.

The government warned people to lie to international monitors, to tell them they were picking cotton voluntarily, even though they risked losing their jobs and other penalties if they refused. At the same time it made "policy commitments" lauded by the ILO not to recruit medical workers and teachers to pick cotton, it forced many of those workers to sign statements that they picked cotton of their own will, although they were forced to agree to be fired or face other punishment if they refused. While the ILO asserted that many workers view the harvest as an economic "opportunity," teachers, nurses, and other public sector employees were pulled from their jobs, worked grueling hours in the heat, suffered abysmal living conditions, including overcrowding, lack of access to safe water and hygiene facilities, often far from their families, to fulfill daily picking quotas under threats, harassment, and humiliation, all for wages that amounted to the equivalent of \$1.50 per day. In fact, the harvest imposed an economic burden on many, including those who hired day laborers to pick cotton for them, and those who had to pay expenses, including for food and transportation, that exceeded what they earned. While the government ran a hotline for people to register complaints about forced labor, it arrested, threatened, intimidated, and ill-treated independent monitors seeking to document labor rights conditions.

This stakes of this cynical enterprise are high: cotton, a strategic resource in Uzbekistan, nets the government some \$1 billion per year in revenue from sales.<sup>1</sup> While proclaimed "the people's riches," the cotton industry is a corrupt enterprise directly subsidized by the people of Uzbekistan through their labor and forced payments extorted by government officials. The forced labor system, which exploits the vulnerability of more than a million people, contributing to their impoverishment, generates revenues for a tiny elite.

Given these stakes, cotton production is highly centralized and tightly controlled by top-level government officials



On the cotton fields (October 2015).

<sup>1</sup> For detailed information on the cotton production system and its financial system, see: "Uzbekistan's Cotton Sector: Financial Flows and Distribution of Resources," Alisher Ilkhamov and Bakhodiy Muradov, Open Society Institute, October 2014, available at: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/uzbekistan-s-cotton-sector-financial-flows-and-distribution-resources>. For information on revenue, see p. 18.



starting with the president. The government commands every aspect of the production, processing, sale, and export of raw cotton and cotton fiber. The president and Cabinet of Ministers set national policy for cotton production, including the varieties grown and production quotas for farmers, and oversee its implementation. The prime minister directs the regional and local hokims (heads of regional and district administrations), who bear personal responsibility for fulfilling cotton production quotas in their areas.<sup>2</sup> The prime minister conducts regular meetings and conference calls with local authorities and farmers across the country to ensure implementation of the cotton plan during all phases of production, including compliance with daily harvesting quotas.<sup>3</sup> Cotton profits are shielded from public accountability in the Selkhozfond, an extra-budgetary account of the Ministry of Finance, accessible only to top officials.<sup>4</sup>

Although the harvest exacts an economic toll on many workers, a portion of people who pick cotton do work willingly for the economic opportunity it provides. However, the workers willing to pick cotton generally appear to be replacement workers or other laborers who were able to command a wage paid by individuals or institutions ordered to deliver a harvest quota. These workers participated primarily in the “first harvest” in early September, when cotton was abundant and easy to pick. Thus, it is crucial to assess “willingness” at all stages of the season and to examine more closely the circumstances of those workers, who wanted to be free to work for the highest pay available.

Farmers are forced to plant state-ordered acreage of cotton and wheat or face the loss of their land. The fact that they sign leases stipulating these requirements does not make them voluntary.<sup>5</sup> The Uzbek government regularly coercively mobilizes citizens to perform unpaid labor or low-paying agricultural work that is in addition to their regular employment. In the agricultural sector, this includes preparing fields for planting, planting cotton, weeding, and harvesting. Officials impose



Evening submission of cotton  
(September 2015).

2 Despite the government’s tight orchestration of the cotton production system, one analysis concludes, “These draconian methods do not result in increased efficiency of cotton production...” Ibid, Executive Summary. See The Uzbek Government’s Forced Labor System Chain of Command in the Appendix. Presidential Resolution No. PP2830, “On Organizational Measures to Ensure the Timely and Quality Harvest of the 2014 Cotton Crop,” September 4, 2014. The resolution orders regional and district hokims, among other officials, to bear “personal responsibility” for the cotton harvest. This resolution is from 2014, but this aspect of the system remained unchanged in 2015.

3 Ibid and Hornidge, Anna-Katharina and Shtaltovna, Anastasiya, “A Comparative Study on Cotton Production in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan,” Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn, 2014, [http://www.zef.de/uploads/tx\\_zefportal/Publications/ZEF-Cotton\\_Kasachstan-web.pdf](http://www.zef.de/uploads/tx_zefportal/Publications/ZEF-Cotton_Kasachstan-web.pdf), page 13-14.

4 Ilhamov and Murodov, p. 18.

5 The ILO observed the existence of a contract does not negate the possibility of forced labor, and that transfers of workers to tasks unrelated to their ordinary occupations raise a concern of contracts being used as a tool for compulsory labor. See ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Individual observation concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), Uzbekistan, 2015.

production quotas on farmers for both wheat and silk cocoons, and enforce the quotas with threats of penalties. Citizens, particularly public sector employees, are regularly required to clean streets, paint fences, and plant flowers, especially along major roadways used by high-level officials. The government requires people to make other forced contributions for public or quasi-public purposes, such as collecting scrap paper and metal, for road repairs, and city “beautification.” In interviews with us, numerous teachers and students described making forced contributions to subscribe to newspapers and magazines and to bring in scrap metal or make payments to help schools meet quotas for these items.<sup>6</sup>

While many people may accept these intrusions as a fact of life or the “cost” of employment in Uzbekistan, resignation should not be mistaken for voluntariness. In the vast majority of cases we documented in 2015 and over the last seven years, state-led coercion, not patriotism or desire to earn supplemental income, led people to work in the cotton sector. This feature of the forced labor system has remained unchanged.

Despite the Uzbek government’s attempted cover up, the ILO’s monitoring report reaffirmed the existence of forced labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton sector, concluding “the risk of forced labor under conditions of organized recruitment is real, and not merely theoretical.”<sup>7</sup> The report findings include: (1) the practices of officials responsible for meeting cotton quotas did not change; (2) there were indicators of forced labor related to widespread organized recruitment of adults to pick cotton; and (3) public-sector workers in the education and health-care sectors were compelled to contribute labor or payments. In its review, the ILO Committee of Experts<sup>8</sup> strongly urged the Uzbek government to continue work with the ILO to ensure compliance with the ILO conventions against forced labor.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Regional and local officials tasked with collecting scrap metal and paper impose collection quotas on schools. Children are required to bring in a certain amount of scrap metal or pay a fee for every kilo not collected. See for example, “Школьников в Узбекистане продержали взаперти из-за несдачи металлолома [Schoolchildren in Uzbekistan Kept Locked Up for Not Bringing In Scrap Metal],” Radio Ozodlik, February 25, 2015, available at: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26867626.html>. Students and teachers also mentioned these forced contributions in their interviews, for example, Uzbek-German Forum interview with student in Kashkadarya region, November 5, 2015, in which the student notes that the 20,000 soum (approximately \$3.33 USD) he earned from picking cotton for 40 days was confiscated for mandatory subscriptions. A college instructor told us, “One problem we have is subscriptions to magazines and newspapers. Every year the college is sent a list of newspapers and magazines. The list is divided among the groups. The prices are not cheap. We struggle to collect the required amount from the students because many have parents without a stable income... And the newspapers and magazines don’t come regularly. Every teacher is forced to subscribe but the newspapers don’t reach us.” Uzbek-German Forum interview with a college instructor, Syrdarya region, November 3, 2015. See also, “Первоклашек в Узбекистане заставляют подписываться на общественно-политический журнал и покупать камеры видеонаблюдения, [First Graders in Uzbekistan Forced to Subscribe to Social-Political Magazine and Buy Cameras for Video Surveillance], Radio Ozodlik, December 21, 2015, available at: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/27439604.html>.

7 International Labour Organization, “Third Party Monitoring of the use of child and forced labor during the Uzbekistan 2015 Cotton Harvest – An assessment submitted to the World Bank by the International Labor Office,” November 20, 2015.

8 The Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) is an independent body composed of legal experts charged with examining the application of ILO Conventions and Recommendations by ILO member States. The annual report of the Committee of Experts covers numerous matters related to the application of ILO standards.

9 ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Individual observation concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), Uzbekistan, 2016.