

# 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*

#### METHODOLOGY



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A team of 22 experienced monitors working with the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) carried out research in six regions in Uzbekistan: the Tashkent, Syrdarya, Jizzakh, Kashkadarya, Andijan, and Bukhara regions and in three districts in Karakalpakstan.<sup>1</sup> Jizzakh, Syrdarya, and Kashkadarya are the three regions in Uzbekistan that produce the most cotton. Residents of Tashkent mobilized to pick cotton are generally sent to one of these three regions. In most cases monitors are fluent in both Uzbek and Russian. In 2015 our monitors carried out research throughout the cotton production cycle, starting in the springtime period of field preparation and through the harvest, which started in early September concluded in early November.

Our monitors have received extensive training on research methodology by an expert in labor law with more than 20 years' experience working with the International Labor Organization (ILO). Monitors have a thorough knowledge of Uzbek labor law as well as international laws and regulations concerning forced labor. Researchers have, on average, five years' experience monitoring labor and human rights issues related to the cotton harvest. They live in the regions that they monitor and have a deep understanding of the local context including the prevalence of fear in the population. They have established networks of relatives, neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances who provide information and are experienced in identifying the places and institutions that send workers to pick cotton, and in conducting interviews in dangerous conditions without putting respondents at risk. Several of the Uzbek-German Forum's monitors themselves participated in the cotton harvest. Monitors include farmers, teachers, and journalists from local agricultural publications. Their own information, supported by photographs and video, provided an additional key source of information.

Our monitors experienced significant harassment and interference by the Uzbek government in 2015 as it made efforts to appear cooperative with ILO monitoring and compliant with World Bank agreements while continuing to use forced labor. Government officials attempted to prevent monitors from observing mass mobilization of people to harvest, speaking with people being sent to pick cotton, visiting cotton fields, attending meetings, or gathering documents. Several monitors faced severe reprisals for conducting this work, as explained in further detail later in this report. Some had to curtail their monitoring due to harassment and interference. In 2015, monitors carried out research using a variety of methods, including the following six main methods:



Our monitors went to the cotton fields informing the pickers about their rights and handing over information flyers. (September 2015, Khorezm Region)

<sup>1</sup> See monitoring map. Karakalpakstan is an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan that covers 160,000 square kilometers (62,000 square miles) in Northwestern Uzbekistan. It is the site of a \$260 million World Bank funded project to support the modernization of irrigation and agriculture. We conducted monitoring in three districts: Beruni, Ellikkala, Turtkul, the sites of World Bank-funded projects.

## Method 1: Observation and documentation of mobilization of workers and brief interviews

The largest organized mass mobilization of workers to live near the fields and pick cotton for extended shifts (as opposed to daily shifts) took place from September 6 – 15. During this time monitors visited hokimiyats (regional and district administrations) and other locations where workers were gathered and sent to the fields, usually on buses. Where possible, monitors conducted brief interviews with workers about the circumstances of their mobilization, including voluntariness of mobilization and length of shift. These interviews were generally anonymous given the risks to workers.

In addition, over the course of the research period, monitors conducted short interviews with 400 people who took direct part in the cotton harvest or paid to avoid picking cotton. Throughout September and October the Uzbek-German Forum sent 42 notifications of concrete cases of forced labor to labor unions in Uzbekistan, which were operating a hotline to report forced labor in conjunction with the governed, and copied the ILO. None of these notifications received a reply. In three separate cases, however, we learned that local officials harassed the victims of forced labor because of our intervention, including by warning them not to talk to international monitors.

## Method 2: Visits to institutions

Monitors visited institutions such as hospitals, schools, universities, and businesses throughout the cotton harvest to conduct short interviews. In each region monitors visited at least five schools, three hospitals or clinics, five colleges<sup>2</sup>, a university, a large market, and five government institutions. Monitors documented the number of people sent to pick cotton from each of these institutions and corroborated the findings in later interviews. Monitors found, on average, that between 25 – 50% of employees of each institution as well as most students over 18, were at the fields throughout the harvest.

## Method 3: Document collection

Monitors collected documents indicating the forced nature of the mobilization of cotton pickers. The evidence gathered includes orders signed by directors of private enterprises to send workers to the harvest, decrees by hokims (district and regional governors) ordering employees of public institutions to participate in the harvest, notes signed by students declaring their “voluntary participation in the cotton harvest,” and social media posts, primarily by students, discussing the conditions of mobilization, extortion, and the difficult living and working conditions in the cotton fields.<sup>3</sup>



Human Rights activist Uktam Pardaev.

<sup>2</sup> In Uzbekistan, a college is the equivalent of high school or upper secondary school. First-year students are usually 16 years old; second-year students are usually 17; third-year students are usually 18.

<sup>3</sup> See Documentary Evidence, available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

#### **Method 4: Local media monitoring**

The monitors tracked local newspapers that published articles propagandizing the cotton harvest as well as other local and international reporting on the cotton harvest. Some of these articles feature employees of various institutions, including medical workers, teachers, university students and third-year college students, working in the cotton fields. The articles indicate that mobilization of workers was organized by the local authorities, which also bestowed prizes, such as teakettles or cottonseed oil, on the best cotton pickers.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Method 5: Visits to cotton fields**

Monitors visited at least six housing facilities for pickers and five cotton fields in various regions to observe workers, document labor conditions, and interview cotton pickers. Due to strict controls, it was only safe for monitors to undertake visits to worker housing in the Khorezm and Syrdarya regions. Monitors conducted brief interviews with cotton pickers, primarily college and university students, and took photos, audio and video recordings of interviews and working conditions.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Method 6: Detailed interviews**

Following the harvest, monitors conducted detailed interviews with people who picked cotton or made a payment, using questionnaires developed in consultation with specialists, including legal experts and sociologists. Monitors conducted 97 detailed interviews, including with 25 schoolteachers, 25 students, 10 farmers, 15 employees of government institutions, 15 medical workers, and 7 entrepreneurs.

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4 See Cotton Chronicles 2015, Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, available at: <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/category/cotton-chronicle/>.

5 Some of these photos and recordings are available on the independent news and analysis website El Tuz, <http://www.eltuz.com/?p=557>.



Distribution of booklets carrying information about the Uzbek legislation on the prohibition of Forced Labour (October 2015).

The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights has conducted in-depth monitoring of labor and human rights issues related to the cotton harvest since 2009, and some of our monitors have worked on these issues for many years before that. In this time, we have conducted more than detailed 1,000 interviews with people affected by the cotton harvest, visited numerous medical and educational facilities, cotton fields, businesses, and local government offices, collected dozens of documents indicating the mass use of forced labor in the cotton harvest, and monitored local media reports about the harvest. Read together, each interview adds to a fuller and more detailed picture of the system. This body of research gives us a deep understanding of the labor dynamics of the harvest and how the forced labor system affects individuals and public services. It also allows us to identify trends, developments, and changes from year to year. This report draws on that accumulated knowledge and experience as well as specific research from 2015 that shows the labor and human rights issues from this year.