

COTTON CAMPAIGN

END FORCED LABOR IN CENTRAL ASIA

Mobilization of forced laborers continues in Uzbekistan

Overview:

On September 21, 2017, the prime minister of Uzbekistan ordered local officials to recall students, medical and education workers from the fields, following President Mirziyoyev's statement on the eradication of forced labor in his address to the United Nations General Assembly. University students and some education and health care workers were returned from the fields on September 22, 2017, a significant development. However, education and medical workers in some districts continue to pick cotton. In other districts, officials ordered pupils' parents to work in the place of teachers or required teachers and medical workers to pay hire workers to pick cotton in their place. Teachers and doctors from Angren city were mobilized to pick cotton alongside coal miners and factories' workers. As in the previous harvests, local administrations and law enforcement were involved in forcible mobilization of citizens.ⁱ

Despite an important commitment from the President and prime minister, the government of Uzbekistan has not yet taken steps to dismantle the production quota system of centralized control, which creates pressure on local officials to resort to forced labor to meet otherwise hard-to-reach objectives. Continued scrutiny is needed to ensure that the promises made by the authorities are translated into practice and to prevent a shift of coercion to other groups or other forms of coercion such as increased extortion to pay for replacement workers.

Extortion is rapidly becoming a distinct feature of the 2017 cotton harvest. Officials extract money from the citizens to pay for replacement workers to line their pockets and essentially subsidize cotton sector at people's expense. According to Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF), teachers who were returned from the fields at the prime minister's order on September 22, 2017, were told to pay about US\$40, half of their monthly wage, to hire a replacement worker.ⁱⁱ In Uzbekistan's "pick or pay" state-run forced labor system, officials prefer the "pay" piece, which allows them to skim corrupt profits and avoid the need to force people into the fields.

Employees of numerous other organizations are still forced to harvest cotton or pay for their freedom. On September 26, 2017, the Central Bank of Uzbekistan released an "internal use" document ordering the chairmen of commercial banks boards and the heads of the regional branches of the Central Bank to request every member of staff in regional branches to hire five people each to pick cottonⁱⁱⁱ.

According to UGF, private businesses in various retail markets of Uzbekistan are also required to pay so-called "cotton money" to a representative of the tax office or the market administration. Taxi drivers also are being forced to transport workers to and from the cotton fields. They have been told that this is their contribution to the collection of cotton and that there would be no payment for the service.^{iv}

In an attempt to disguise coercion, many citizens report being forced to sign (e.g. in early September, the Union of Youth of Uzbekistan forced students to sign) declarations that they are "voluntary" cotton pickers.

Despite commitments by the Uzbek government to prohibit forced labor and its increased engagement with the International Labour Organization (ILO) via the Decent Work Country Programme, preliminary interviews gathered by UGF in 2017 indicate that a number of steps have been taken to mobilize public sector workers and private sector workers to harvest cotton under threat of penalty. Documents collected to date indicate that directors of schools and colleges and heads of markets continue to be required to send people to harvest cotton.

Forced labor and child labor in the spring 2017 cotton planting and weeding season – UGF found that the government required public sector employees, including education and medical workers, people receiving public benefits, and some university students in at least one region, to work in the cotton fields in spring 2017 for no pay. It also required some private sector businesses, including commercial banks, to send employees or hire laborers to perform spring fieldwork.

- Everyone interviewed told UGF that spring fieldwork was arduous, and that they worked with no shade in temperatures that reached up to 40 degrees C (104 F). The length of the workday varied. Some people worked just a few hours a day while others worked up to 12 hours with a midday break. Nearly all workers had to provide their own food and water. Some also paid for transportation.
- UGF documented several instances of child labor in spring 2017, including children working alongside or instead of adults, and children working for pay as replacement workers hired by businesses or organizations required to send their employees.

- UGF documented several instances of child labor in Karakalpakstan in spring 2017, all in Turtkul. In these cases, the use of adult forced labor appeared to contribute to the use of child labor as children were working as replacement workers for or alongside adults required to work. UGF interviewed two schoolboys, ages 14 and 16, hired to work as replacement workers for a grocery store in Turtkul. The boys were not in school on the date of the interview, a Monday, even though they said they had end of year exams in a few days. In June, when school had finished, UGF also observed approximately 10 children, each holding a ketmen, a traditional Uzbek weeding tool similar to a hoe, at a place where people required to work by their *mahalla* (local administration) and replacement workers were gathered to wait for transportation to cotton fields in Qumbosgan. A man hired as a replacement worker said that the children were working for the *mahalla*.

Forced labor in the beginning of the 2017 cotton harvest – The harvesting of cotton began on September 10 in several regions of Uzbekistan. According to preliminary data, the forced mobilization of public sector employees to the cotton fields took place all over the country. UGF monitors conducted interviews with workers in schools and hospitals. According to them, the management of state institutions requires workers to sign statements “of voluntary participation in the collection of cotton.” In some cases, “decisions of helping the motherland to harvest cotton” are adopted at collective meetings of public organizations. Information about such confirmative letters of “voluntary participation” was received from the Syrdarya, Jizzak, Andijan regions and the Republic of Karakalpakstan.^v

- In the Republic of Karakalpakstan, doctors from central hospitals in the Turtkul and Ellikala districts told UGF that the hospital management recommended employees hire replacement pickers and thereby stay at their workplaces.
- Lists of traveling “volunteers” are prepared by the management of institutions and handed over to the *khokimiyats* (local administrations), which traditionally control the whole process of cotton harvesting.
- To date, students have returned and resumed their studies, and this is certainly a positive step. It is not clear whether this change will continue beyond the first month of the harvest season.

Known deaths during the first month of the 2017 cotton harvest:

- On September 16, a 58-year-old man from the city of Andijan died on the cotton field, when he went to collect cotton in place of his wife.
- On September 16, a 39-year-old woman was hit by a bus when she was returning from a cotton field.
- On September 19, a 2-year-old boy, normally looked after by his grandmother, was scalded by a bowl of hot soup at his mother’s workplace. His grandmother had bowed to the pressure of *mahalla* because she feared that if she refused, they would delay payment of her pension.
- On September 28, a 28-year-old woman died from internal bleeding three days after reporting she was felt unwell and unable to pick cotton in place of her mother – one of 150 medical workers of the same local hospital who were mobilized to pick cotton. The woman tragically died, was not allowed to leave the fields, received no medical help, and left behind her elderly mother and two children.^{vi}

The government is persecuting activists and journalists who document the harvest – The government suppresses independent scrutiny of its labor practices by preventing human rights activists, independent monitors, and journalists from documenting the cotton harvest.

- On October 4, human rights activist Elena Urlaeva, photo correspondent Timur Karpov, accompanied by journalists from Germany, were detained by Buka district law enforcement officers for speaking to cotton pickers – mobilized teachers, doctors and other public sector employees from the city of Angren. Timur Karpov reported that he was beaten by the local police officer during detention.

Corruption – Cotton revenues continue to make up a large portion of Uzbekistan’s economy. Cotton production is a vertically integrated state-run industry, the profits of which go into an off-budget account called the *Selkhozfund*, only accessible to the highest levels of government elite. This information is important to explain the motivation of ongoing state-sponsored forced labor, and should be included in any reporting on the Uzbek cotton harvest. Additional research to bring transparency into the flows of Uzbek cotton revenues is sorely needed.

Conclusions:

State-sponsored forced labor in the cotton harvest remains a serious, systematic, and continuous problem in Uzbekistan. There is a vast disparity between legal commitments made to eradicate forced labor and their practical implementation. The forced labor during the cotton harvest represents a grave violation of Uzbekistan’s obligations under international law and requires immediate action.

International pressure was critical in the Uzbek government ending large-scale mass mobilization of children to harvest cotton, and it will be critical to ending the large-scale mass mobilization of adults that continues unabated.

As long as the state has the monopoly on the cotton sector and refuses to pay market rates to cotton pickers, regional authorities will continue to use administrative pressure to send people to collect cotton. The return of students from the cotton fields, and the attempt to return teachers and doctors is a positive sign. But the system of forced cotton quotas means these positive changes are at great risk. It means that if one part of the population is freed from collecting cotton, then the burden will fall on another.

Recommendations:

In view of the above, the government of Uzbekistan is urged to:

- Enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor in alignment with ratified ILO conventions.
- Fully implement ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, which the government ratified in October 2016.
- Instruct government officials at all levels and citizens acting on behalf of the government not to use coercion to mobilize anyone to work.
- Allow independent journalists, human rights defenders, and other individuals and organizations to document and report concerns about the use of forced or child labor without fear of reprisals.
- Take immediate steps to provide, in practice, effective protection of independent journalists, human rights defenders, and other activists against any actions that may constitute harassment, persecution, or undue interference in the exercise of their professional activities or of their right to freedom of opinion, expression, and association. Ensure that all such acts are thoroughly and independently investigated, prosecuted and sanctioned, and that victims are provided with effective remedies.
- Initiate a time-bound plan to reform root causes of forced labor in the agriculture sector, including:
 - Cease punitive measures against farmers for debts and not meeting state-mandated production quotas for cotton and other agricultural products;
 - Ensure the state-established procurement prices for cotton and other agricultural products reflect the costs of production, including the cost of voluntary labor at market rates, and, over time abolish the state monopsony on cotton purchasing; and
 - Increase financial transparency in the agriculture sector, including by ensuring national budgets reviewed by the Oliy Majlis include expenditures and income in the agriculture sector and ensuring taxes paid in the sector go to the national budget.

The World Bank Group Board of Executive Directors is urged to:

- Direct World Bank and IFC management to report to the Board quarterly on the progress of the above recommendations.
- For any project in Uzbekistan, ensure that an assessment of forced and child labor risk is presented to the Board. Do not approve projects in areas in which forced or child labor are systemic to the very industry the Bank is investing in or investments in companies that have and continue to use products made with forced or child labor.
- Refrain from complying with the government's alleged recent request for a loan of up to \$1 billion, negotiations of which will be set to begin on November 1.
 - Make clear to the new government that it is too early to provide increased support, and that compliance with this request would widely be seen as encouragement for a regime whose human rights record is not yet clear and that has continued to return to familiar methods of repression despite positive rhetoric.
 - Demand transparency over public finance in Uzbekistan, including the *Selkhozfond*, and make clear that without such accountability effective oversight of this loan would be impossible, making the risks for the Bank too high.

ⁱ Center-1, "Uzbekistan. Elena Urlaeva: "The Ban on the Displacement of People to Pick Cotton was a Hoax"", 29 September 2017. Access: <https://centre1.com/uzbekistan/elena-urlaeva-zapret-na-vyvoz-na-hlopok-byl-rozygryshem/>

ⁱⁱ Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, "The European Parliament hosts an exchange of views with experts to review the developments in Uzbekistan", September 28, 2017. Access: <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/the-european-parliament-hosts-an-exchange-of-views-with-experts-to-review-the-developments-in-uzbekistan/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, "Uzbekistan: Central Bank Orders Bank Employees to Recruit Workers to Collect Cotton", September 30, 2017. Access: <http://harvestreport.uzbekgermanforum.org/uzbekistan-central-bank-orders-bank-employees-to-recruit-workers-to-collect-cotton/>

^{iv} Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, “The European Parliament hosts an exchange of views with experts to review the developments in Uzbekistan”, September 28, 2017. Access: <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/the-european-parliament-hosts-an-exchange-of-views-with-experts-to-review-the-developments-in-uzbekistan/>

^v Uzbek-German Forum, “Chronicle of forced labor 2017. Issue 3: June – September”, September 12, 2017. Access: http://uzbekgermanforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Chronicle-2017_Issue-3_Cotton-Harvest-and-Weeding.pdf

^{vi} Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, “Cotton-picker left in the field camp for three days died from internal bleeding”, September 28, 2017. Access: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28761817.html>