June 27, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We write to express our disappointment that the State Department upgraded Uzbekistan to the Tier 2 Watch List in the 2015 Trafficking in Persons Report. We believe the decision to upgrade Uzbekistan decreases pressure on the authorities in Tashkent to address the problem.

We agree that limited changes have taken place in Uzbekistan, but we do not see how the State Department could conclude that Uzbekistan has made significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with the minimum standards of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act while the country’s government mobilized more than a million of its own citizens to harvest cotton in 2014¹ and began this year by mobilizing thousands more to prepare the fields for the upcoming harvest.²

The 2015 TIP Report states that the government issued a decree reiterating its pre-existing law prohibiting child labor, fined college directors and farms for use of child labor, and signed an agreement with the ILO. However, the report also states college directors and other government officials mobilized child labor “under pressure to fulfill government-decreed cotton quotas.” As the report notes, forced labor in Uzbekistan is different from forced labor in most countries in that it is “government-compelled.” While a highly-ramified system of state-organized forced labor remains in place, we do not believe that Uzbek government’s commitments and selective actions on child labor can be said to represent substantial efforts to comply with the TVPA minimum standards.

Having made the unfortunate decision to upgrade Uzbekistan to Tier 2 Watch List, we believe it is more incumbent than ever on the U.S. government to increase pressure on Tashkent to eliminate forced labor from the cotton sector. In particular, the United States should immediately insist that Tashkent, at a minimum, instruct officials at all levels of government to refrain from using coercion to mobilize citizens to work in the cotton fields and prosecute all officials who do; commit to an action plan to eradicate forced labor with the International Labour Organization; and permit citizens to report human rights violations in the cotton sector without fear of retaliation.

We urge the U.S. to use its voice and vote at the World Bank to block any new loans in the agricultural or education sectors of Uzbekistan until the Uzbek government demonstrates meaningful progress to end forced labor. The U.S. should also press the World Bank to conduct credible, open and inclusive monitoring for labor rights violations in its project areas, using input from Uzbek civil society, and provide effective remedies to any person who is subjected to forced labor in its project areas.

In light of increased participation of the private sector in the state-sponsored forced labor system in recent years, we also urge U.S. officials to stress to American companies operating in Uzbekistan the importance of fulfilling their human rights due diligence responsibilities, including by declining to contribute to the cotton harvest.

For our part, the unions, industry associations, investors, trade unions and NGOs that form the Cotton Campaign will continue efforts to raise corporate, public, governmental and international awareness of the problem and press the Uzbek authorities to move beyond their current phase of public denial and end their annual mass mobilization of forced labor for the cotton harvest.

Sincerely,

The Cotton Campaign

Advocates for Public Interest Law

American Apparel & Footwear Association

AFL-CIO

American Federation of Teachers

Anti-Slavery International

Association for Human Rights in Central Asia

Australian Council of Trade Unions
Bennett Freeman, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

Boston Common Asset Management

Calvert Investments

CEE Bankwatch Network

Child Labor Coalition

Daughters of Charity, Province of St Louise

Dignity Health

The Eurasian Transition Group, e.V.

Gonggam Human Rights Law Foundation

International Labor Rights Forum

International Partnership for Human Rights

Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union

Mercy Health
Mercy Investment Services

National Consumers League

Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment

No Slavery Australia

Open Society Foundations

Portfolio Advisory Board, Adrian Dominican Sisters

Responsible Sourcing Network

Retail Industry Leaders Association

St. Joseph Health

Solidarity Center

Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia

Stop the Traffik

The Sunshine Coalition
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia

Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia

U.S. Fashion Industry Association

Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights

Walden Asset Management

Walk Free

c: Pamela Spratlen, United States Ambassador to Uzbekistan
   Thomas E. Perez, Secretary of Labor
   Nisha Desai Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State, South and Central Asian Affairs Bureau
   Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary of State, Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau
   Patricia A. Butenis, Acting Director, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons
   Sara Aviel, United States Executive Director, World Bank