

Letters

What every Uzbek knows about forced labour

From Elaine Fultz, Philadelphia, PA, US



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25 MINUTES AGO

Sir, Your report “[World Bank accused over child labour in Uzbekistan](#)” (June 27) on Uzbekistan’s cotton sector presents a clash of views on forced labour in the country. Two noted human rights organisations contend that forced labour was pervasive in the 2015-16 cotton harvests, including in World Bank project areas. The bank counters that the International Labour Organization, which monitored its projects, found no such evidence. How can Financial Times readers sort out these claims?

As a former ILO director of the region that includes Uzbekistan, I place high confidence in the human rights organisations. Each year, both then and now, Uzbek human rights advocates provide the world with on-site interviews and government documents revealing massive mobilisation of forced labour. Their findings correspond with my own experience in the country and my continuing contacts there. Virtually every Uzbek knew, and knows, that the regime harvests cotton with

forced labour, including teachers, nurses, students, civil servants, school children, and others. This entrenched system makes it virtually impossible for World Bank areas to be insulated from forced labour's taint.

How, then, do we explain the ILO's failure to detect what human rights advocates have documented? Two factors are important. First, the ILO is a standard-setting organisation that provides valuable technical assistance, but its officials have neither the mandate nor the expertise to police governments' compliance with its standards. Second, the Uzbek government denies its labour abuses and attempts to conceal them from the international community.

The ILO's approach to monitoring reflects both these constraints. Without a team to call on, in 2016 the ILO recruited a tiny group of international observers, just seven people. In a jaw-dropping violation of its independence, the ILO allowed this group to be accompanied by the government-controlled trade union. Under these conditions, the ILO's failure to detect forced labour in World Bank project areas is hardly surprising. What could one expect from a handful of monitors accompanied by minders in a vast and difficult-to-assess terrain?

So why did the World Bank commission the ILO to report on the state of forced labour in Uzbekistan? We must conclude that it did so because it knew precisely what sort of report it would get.

Elaine Fultz

Philadelphia, PA, US

Former Director, ILO Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

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