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Gaspar Matalaev: serving time for reporting on forced labour in Turkmenistan's cotton fields

Joanna Ewart-James | Monday 5 February 2018 11:38 GMT | [0](#) comments



Turkmen reporter Gaspar Matalaev is suffering with ill-health from the poor conditions inside the labour camp where he is imprisoned serving a three-year sentence. Mr Matalaev was arrested immediately following the publication of his report on forced labour in the cotton sector.

Turkmenistan is a large producer of cotton. On assignment from Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN) Mr Matalaev gathered interviews, photographs and evidence that students, public sector workers and others, are working in cotton fields coerced by district authorities to meet government quotas.

Plain clothes police officers arrested Mr Matalaev at home during the night, just two days after ATN published Mr Matalaev's forced labour report and the day the Minister of National Security was severely reprimanded by the Turkmen President at a State Security Council meeting for weak control over subordinates in the country.

The police said the arrest, on 4 October 2016, was related to pictures on the internet. An arrest warrant was not presented and the subsequent trial did not meet international standards. Additional charges have since been added to his sentence, whilst substantive evidence of the basis of his sentencing is absent.

The state owns most of the land, leases it to the farmers and then every citizen is given a daily government-imposed quota during the harvest. Failure to meet the targets, results in risk of termination of employment, loss of land and harassment from employers or the government. Freedom United which campaigns for an end to modern slavery, calls on President Berdymuhamedov to free Mr Matalaev, gathering over 60,000 signatures on an [online petition](#).

The harassment of Mr Matalaev and researchers and reporters like him has attracted the concern of the United Nations. Mandate holders under the auspices of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have expressed their grave concern at allegations that Mr Matalaev may have been subjected to torture or ill-treatment while in police custody to force a confession, and that his case is an attempt to silence those documenting forced labor practices.

Recent announcements of a ban on black cars and women driving give a glimpse into one of the most oppressive and authoritarian-governed countries in the world. Turkmenistan remains completely closed to international scrutiny and subsequently the country's government has never engaged with the international community or civil society over concerns about forced labour.

Freedom of expression is denied with activists facing government reprisal and international human rights groups are banned from entering the country. Mr Matalaev is a relative of the editor and founder of ATN, one of the few independent monitors documenting this forced labour, further supporting the conclusion that his persecution is politically motivated.

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