

Turkmenistan Forces State Workers into New Cotton-picking Campaign

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Authorities in Turkmenistan ordered on August 15 a new wave of cotton harvest in several regions, according to ATN sources. Public sector technical workers, such as cleaners and guards, were the first to be sent to the fields from schools and kindergartens, hospitals, sewing factories, housing management, post offices, banks and other institutions.



All technical employees of the Turkmenabat school system are sent to pick cotton on a daily basis. In the fields, however, cotton is scarce, due to a drought and the early start of the cotton campaign this year. Yet, public sector workers are sent to Farap, Sayat and Khalach districts to work all day, before being trucked back to the city.

On August 22, 23, and 24, workers were forced to go to the cotton fields despite a presidential order that had announced those days as holidays for the celebration of the Muslim festival of Kurban Bairam.

“Today I could only collect five kilograms of cotton,” an ATN source in Lebap said on August 28. “Yesterday, I picked even less, just above three kilograms.”

In Mary province, employees of the local state sewing factory each had to pay 25 manats (around \$1.5) on August 27 to lease city buses in order to send workers to the cotton fields. The sum would cover a 10-day lease of the public buses, after which another local government institution will cover the transport costs, and the factory staff will go to pick cotton. At a staff meeting, the manager of the factory told employees that they would take turns to pay for the transport lease until the end of the cotton picking campaign.

Sources said that in September the teachers will be forced to go to the fields, although most of them would prefer to pay and buy out this responsibility. This year, however, teachers were warned that the [informal] cost to get out of the cotton-picking campaign would be between 15 and 25 manats, more than during the previous season, when it had cost around 10 manats.

The Turkmen authorities deny that the cotton picking campaign is carried out through forced labor. At the latest round of human rights negotiations between the European Union and Turkmenistan held in Brussels on June 21, the Turkmen delegation rebuffed EU accusations regarding the use of forced labor in the cotton campaign. Diplomats told ATN that deputy foreign minister **Vepa Khajiyev** denied any use of forced labor. He categorically stated that no-one in Turkmenistan forces anyone to pick cotton, suggesting the European side study the International Labor Organization (ILO) report, which did not highlight forced labor violations in the country. The 2016 report, however, contains a clear message by the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations that cotton harvesting in Turkmenistan is indeed carried out through state-organized forced labor and that this practice is systematic and widespread.

In recent years, several global brands have announced publicly that they will refuse to purchase textiles and cotton from Turkmenistan as long as forced labor continues. In May 2018, the U.S. authorities imposed a ban on raw cotton and cotton byproduct imports from Turkmenistan.

ОБСУДИТЬ (0)