CHRONICLE OF FORCED LABOUR IN UZBEKISTAN: Issue 4, September 17, 2015

Posted on the 17th of September, 2015

The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights presents the latest reports from the 2015 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan in this fourth issue of the Chronicle of Forced Labour in Uzbekistan 2015, detailing instances of forced labour by the government of Uzbekistan, in violation of international law and national law and its commitments to implement these laws.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Forced Labour Convention defines forced labour as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself [or herself] voluntarily,” and the ILO explains that “menace of penalty” includes various forms of coercion, such as physical violence, psychological coercion, and the loss of rights or privileges. The ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention explicitly prohibits forced labour for the purpose of economic development.

As a member state of the ILO, the Uzbek government has ratified the forced labour conventions and committed to prohibit forced labour. Article 37 of the Uzbek constitution prohibits forced labour and guarantees the right to work in fair labour conditions. In 2014, the Uzbek government issued a decree committing to the “Creation of institutional base for ensuring of free employment of the cotton pickers by farmers through labour market institutes.” In August 2015, the Uzbek government signed loan agreements with the World Bank agreeing to the suspension of finance if there is child or...
forced labour in the project areas.\textsuperscript{vii}

In this fourth issue of the 2015 Chronicle, UGF reports violations of each of the commitments by the government of Uzbekistan (GOU). The violations are listed in the following chart, referencing the articles that follow and provide additional details.

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**Reports by the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF)**
**Report 1:** The administrator (hokim) of the Uchtepa district of Tashkent city, A. Dosmukhamedov, issued an order to organizations of all types to contribute labour to the cotton harvest. The order applies to both public institutions and private companies, to submit a list of employees who will pick cotton to the district administration (hokimiyat). Copies of the order and its annexed form to assemble the list follow. Translated into English, the order states:

“In keeping with the order issued by the Cabinet of Ministers during its meeting on 28 August 2015, as well as taking advantage of favorable weather conditions in order to collect the cotton crop without any loss, all organizations, enterprises and business entities of Uchtepa district (Tashkent city), regardless of the form of management, are informed to participate in the cotton harvest.”

“Based on the above, please select 18 employees for the cotton harvest. Submit a list of these employees (with copies of passports) using the attached form to the headquarters of the Uchtepa district hokimiyat (5th floor), by _______ hour _______ (date) 2015.”

“District Khokim signature A. Dosmukhamedov”

**The order and annexed form**

**Independent Media Reports**

**Report 2:** “Business owners in the largest markets in Tashkent complain about ‘cotton fees’”
The owner of a business in the “Karvon” market in Tashkent reported in an interview with Radio Ozodlik that each business owner was ordered to provide a cotton picker for ten days and, in some cases, up to a month. “When we said that we do not have extra people, the city hall and tax officials told us: ‘Then pay for ten days, 400,000 soums (approximately $84).’ In fact, we don’t have much staff; where could we get the money to pay another salary? We have to pay the compensation; there is no other way for us,” said the businessman.

Shoira Sodikbekova, a resident of Tashkent, reported that the other major market in Tashkent, “Abu Sahiy,” had started raising money for the cotton harvest.

“My sons rent space for a trading shop at this market. They were told, ‘Give heartily, as much as you can afford, and we will hire workers and take them to the fields. Help with the cotton harvest.’ They collect from the shop owners. This can be observed every year,” said Ms. Sodikbekova.


**Report 3: “Mosques are calling on parishioners to help with the cotton harvest”**

During recent Friday prayers at many mosques in Uzbekistan, the imams urged parishioners to participate in the cotton harvest and to pray to Allah for an abundant harvest.

“Today at the Friday prayer, the Imam asked us to support the cotton growers, both financially and spiritually. It seems the cotton harvest has nearly the status of a Sunna, approved by the Prophet Muhammad. Next it might be considered a farz, an action required of every Muslim following sharia instructions,” reported a Radio Ozodlik listener.

A staff person at the cathedral mosque of Khoja Alambardor in Tashkent confirmed that the imams are now delivering sermons that urge people to pick cotton, on orders of the “Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan.” “There is an order from the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan to read these sermons. All communities pray to God for a good cotton harvest. They also research the value of cotton to the country,” said the mosque representative.

This year the imams themselves will also go pick cotton, according to the regional offices of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan.

Under the influence of international pressure in recent years, the Uzbek government has stopped forcing children to work in the fields, particularly school children. However, now, rather than students, millions of adults are forcibly mobilized to the cotton fields.


**Report 4: “In Uzbekistan state employees, pensioners and women with young children asked to participate in the cotton harvest”**

**Fergana**

The higher education institutions in Fergana region began sending students and teachers to pick cotton, in fields in the Yazavansky district, according to regional residents. A pensioner from Fergana city told Radio Ozodlik that all the neighborhood committees (mahallas) compiled lists of people who receive pensions and childcare allowances from the government, and everyone listed was ordered to go to the cotton harvest. A human rights activist from Fergana, Abdusalom Ergashevm, confirmed the reports, adding that 18 buses took people to the cotton fields in the region on September 7.

**Kokand**

Each neighborhood committee (mahalla) was instructed to organize groups of 10-15 people to send to pick cotton, reported an employee of one of the committees.

“We were told to provide 10-15 cotton pickers from each mahalla. These are people who either receive state pensions or are public-sector workers. We drew up a list of them and gave it to the administration [mayor’s office]. So far they have been told they will pick cotton starting September 10,” said the committee employee.

**Jizzak**
The belongings of staff of hospitals and medical clinics were brought to facilities near the cotton fields in the Dustlik area of Jizzak region, reported the human rights activist Uktam Pardaev.

“Their belongings were sent on September 3 and 4. The employees were told that they should be ready to go to the cotton harvest at any moment. This year they do not know in advance the day they will have to leave for the fields. Earlier they said September 5, but now they say within 2-3 days. All the neighborhood committees also have to be ready to go at any time,” said Mr. Pardaev.

In Gallyaral district, neighborhood committees have visited homes and warned women that receive state childcare benefits that it is mandatory to pick cotton, according to Mr. Pardaev. If the mothers do not comply with the orders, the committees threaten to suspend the childcare payments.


Report 5: “Students of the Irrigation Institute wrote a ‘commitment letter’ to harvest cotton”

Students at the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Melioration wrote to Radio Ozodlik to report that they signed agreements to be suspended from school if they do not pick cotton. The document, called an “obligation,” refers to the students’ participation in the cotton harvest as “educational practice.”

The students provided a copy of the obligation letter to Ozodlik. The document states:

“I, ______________, a student in the ______ course of the Faculty of Land Use and Land Registry, have been notified about participation in the cotton harvest of 2015, in order to implement the protocol ‘On Assembly on the preparation
to cotton harvest in Syrdarya region in 2015,’ of the Cabinet of Ministers from 15th August 2015.”

“I will fully participate in practical work during the internship, and will follow the rules of study, discipline, and safety.”

“If I violate academic rules, internal regulations of the higher education institution and practical procedures, I agree to be expelled from the ranks of students.”

The Irrigation Institute closed on September 8, and the administration of the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Land Reclamation did not comment on the “letter of commitment.” An Institute staff member answered the phone and said that the institute would be closed from September 8 until the end of the cotton harvest and added that the documents shared by the students cannot confirm anything.

“I cannot say anything about this. Everyone went to Sayhunabad. The institute is closed today. On all matters, please contact the headquarters in the Sayhunabadskom area,” he said.

The collection of cotton is considered an educational practice in the document sent to Ozodlik. Therefore, if a student does not participate in the educational practice of harvesting cotton, he or she is considered to be in breach of internal institute regulations. Therefore, the student may be suspended from school.


Report 6: “Pensioners forced to pick cotton or submit 50% of their pension”

Pensioners are becoming the next victims of the cotton harvest, Radio Ozodlik is informed. In some areas, the chairmen of neighborhood committees (mahallas) have threatened pensioners with a 50% cut in their pension payments if they do not either pick cotton or hire someone to participate instead of them.

“In our area, there are no state workers or people receiving benefits for childcare. There is only one elderly man who receives a pension from the state. The chairman of the neighborhood committee said, ‘Well, you have a pensioner. Let him either pick cotton or find someone. Otherwise, we will cut 50% of his pension,’” reported a Radio Ozodlik listener from Chimbay district, Karakalpakstan.

In the neighboring district of Beruni, many elderly people are picking cotton and are afraid of losing their pensions, reported a local resident.

“I have not seen very old people, but those picking cotton are around 60 and have retired. What else can they do if they (the mahallas) tell them ‘Go, or you will not get your pension,’” reported the resident, who added that his own family faced this situation.

An official from the Beruni local administration (hokimiyat) told Ozodlik that all public-sector workers are to pick cotton, and mahallas are going to pensioners’ homes and recruiting them to help in the fields.

“If the young people see the old people picking cotton, they will have no reason to refuse. They will be ashamed of themselves and therefore go to the fields,” said the official.

In Jizzak region, neighborhood committees also visited pensioners and urged them to participate in the cotton harvest, reported Ziydulla Razzokov, a human rights activist in the region. Mr. Razzokov said he witnessed one pensioner refuse the mahalla representative’s demand to work in the fields.

Ozodlik is receiving numerous reports from different areas of the country that public-sector institutions, especially hospitals and educational institutes, are sending staff to the cotton harvest. Currently, the third-year college and lyceum students and all students of university and other higher-education institutes are out in the fields.


Report 7: “In Samarkand, weddings are banned during the cotton harvest”

The Samarkand regional government banned wedding celebrations at restaurants and other common venues prior to the start of the cotton harvest. On September 6, the local heads of government (hokims) ordered wedding and other large event venues to close for one month.

“We wanted to celebrate my sister’s wedding on the 10th [of September]. But no one would take our request for a
reservation. The owners of these facilities said that they were ordered not to host any weddings until October 10, due to the mobilization of people to the harvest. With that, we immediately rescheduled my sister’s wedding to another date, September 5,” wrote a resident of Ishtihan district, Samarkand region to Radio Ozodlik.

Residents of the Kattakurgan district of Samarkand reported to Ozodlik that they had to host wedding celebrations at home, due to the ban on facilities hosting weddings. An owner of one of the wedding venues in Kattakurgan reported that the district administration ordered them to not host weddings during the month.

“Every year during the cotton season we are left without work for a month. This was also the case last year. The [district] administration summoned us to a meeting on September 2 and asked us not to host gatherings of people in one location, because it would impede the cotton harvest,” said the wedding venue owner.


Report 8: “The mobilization has started- ‘Everyone to the cotton fields’”

A massive mobilization of people to pick cotton is underway in Uzbekistan since September 10. The Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Melioration and the Abdulla Kodiriy State Pedagogical Institute of Jizzak sent all of their students to the cotton fields on September 10, on trains and buses. All of the public-sector institutions sent part of their staff to pick cotton and stay overnight near the fields. The Jizzak State Pedagogical Institute sent 1st-4th-year students to the cotton fields in Dustlik district, Jizzak region, the morning of September 10. The officials are expected to send the students to the fields in two stages, according to the Jizzak resident and human rights activist Uktam Pardaev, who has been observing the mobilization.

“The mobilization of students from the Pedagogical Institute to pick cotton began this morning. I am standing here watching their departure, on vehicles loaded with food and bedding. Approximately 50-60 busses are filled with students. They say that the students will be sent to the farms in Dustlik district,” said Mr. Pardaev.
Also on September 10, the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Melioration sent its students to pick cotton. According to an official from the Institute, the students were sent to the Sayhunabad district in Syrdarya region.

“Today, the students’ train will arrive in Gulistan. From there, they go by bus. A place to stay and other amenities were prepared for them,” said the official.

In Karshi city, all university students were sent to pick cotton between September 9 and 10, according to residents. In other regions, the higher-education institutions are preparing to send students to the cotton fields. In Termez and Samarkand, the higher-education and college students will be sent to pick cotton in the next two days.

“Tax Collectors asking for Beds”

The employees of the tax office of Jizzak were sent to pick cotton on September 8 and complained about poor working conditions, reported Mr. Pardaev.

“The Jizzak district tax officers were sent to the Amasay district to pick cotton and stay overnight. A day later, they began to call their homes and ask for beds to be sent, because there were no such thing; the rooms were damp and cold,” Mr. Pardaev said.

“If you are approached by UN representatives, tell them you are here on your own accord”

Medical institutions in Tashkent instructed staff to begin picking cotton this upcoming Sunday in various parts of Jizzak region. One of the doctors ordered to go reported that he and his colleagues were instructed what to say if the inspectors showed up: ‘we came to pick cotton on our own free will.’

“We’re going to the cotton fields on Sunday morning and will stay there for one month. The chief doctor told us that if we meet UN experts, we should say that we came on our own will,” said the doctor.


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\(^1\) ILO Convention No. 29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (Forced Labour Convention), adopted June 28, 1930, 39 U.N.T.S. 55, entered into force May 1, 1932.


\(^5\) Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoev, “Decree of Cabinet of Ministers of Republic of Uzbekistan ‘On additional measures on implementation of conventions of International Labour Organization (ILO) ratified by Republic of Uzbekistan in 2014-2016,’” Tashkent, 27 May 2014, No. 132, at point No. 25.


\(^7\) World Bank project areas include the regions of Andijan (Ulugnor district), Bukhara (Alat district), Fergana (Yazyavan district), Karakalpakstan (Beruni, Elikkala, Turtkul districts), Kashkadarya (Mirishkor district), Namangan, Samarkand, Syrdarya (Bayavut district), Tashkent. See the following documents for the Uzbek government commitments to the World Bank: [i] Inspection Panel, Report and Recommendations on Request for Inspection, Republic of Uzbekistan: Second Rural Enterprise Support Project and Additional Financing for Second Rural Enterprise Support Project (P126962), Report No. 83254-UZ, (December 9, 2013), at ¶ 25 “all of the following documents have been revised to include provisions that require the beneficiary/beneficiaries to comply with national and international laws and regulations on forced labour, alongside those for child labour: (i) the Rural Enterprise Investment Guidelines; (ii) the Subsidiary Loan Agreement among the Ministry of Finance, the Rural Restructuring Agency (RRA) and the Participating Financial Institutions (PFIs); (iii) the Project Implementation Plan; and (iv) the

Editor’s note: A Sunna or Sunnah is an Islamic custom or practice based on Muhammad’s words and deeds.