

COTTON CAMPAIGN

END FORCED LABOR IN CENTRAL ASIA

November 25, 2016

His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon
United Nations Secretary-General
United Nations Headquarters
New York, NY 10117

Dear Secretary-General Ban:

We are writing on the occasion of your forthcoming trip to Turkmenistan to convene the first global conference on sustainable transport on 26 and 27 November 2016 in Ashgabat. We believe it is important that you privately and publicly express concerns about forced and child labor in Turkmenistan.

It has been widely reported that every year the Government of Turkmenistan forcibly mobilizes tens of thousands of public-sector workers and farmers to cultivate and harvest cotton.¹ The use of forced labor violates international laws ratified by the government of Turkmenistan, including International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions No. 29 on Forced Labour and No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour. In its 2016 annual report, the ILO Committee of Experts made a specific observation on Turkmenistan, expressing the ILO “*deep concern* the widespread use of forced labour in cotton production which affects farmers, businesses and private and public sector workers, including teachers, doctors and nurses, under threat of losing their jobs, salary cuts, loss of land and extraordinary investigations” [emphasis in original].²

Furthermore, we are deeply disturbed by reports of government reprisals against journalists and other members of civil society who attempt to document and report on human rights issues. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN WGAD) recently expressed concern over the widespread use of incommunicado detention, closed trials, lack of legal defense, torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities.³ On October 25, 2016, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Turkmenistan correspondent Soltan Achilova, 67, was questioned by police, then assaulted and robbed by unknown assailants.⁴

We urge that on this trip you demonstrate a strong commitment to stopping forced labor in the cotton sector of Turkmenistan, including the following steps:

1. Privately and publicly calling on Turkmenistan to enforce national laws that prohibit forced labor, including by instructing officials at all levels of government to refrain from using coercion to mobilize citizens to work in the cotton fields and prosecuting any officials that do;
2. Publicly expressing concern about the retaliation against citizens and journalists who report human rights concerns, including the use of forced labor;

¹ International Labour Organization, CEACR, “Direct Request (CEACR) - adopted 2011, published 103rd ILC session (2012) Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) - Turkmenistan (Ratification: 1997) available at http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID:2699323; International Labour Organization, CEACR, “Direct Request (CEACR) - adopted 2013, published 103rd ILC session (2014) Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) - Turkmenistan (Ratification: 1997) available at http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID:3146802; Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN), “Monitoring of Forced Labor during Cotton Harvest Campaign in Turkmenistan,” 2013; ATN, “Spotlight on Turkmenistan: Widespread State-Orchestrated Forced Labor in Turkmenistan’s 2014 Cotton Harvest, June 2015; ATN, State-Led Forced Labor during the Long 2015 Cotton Harvest, January 2016; ATN, “They bring people to cotton fields in the back of a truck, like sheep for sale”, October 2016: <https://habartm.org/archives/5844>

² International Labour Organization Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Individual Observation concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No.105), Turkmenistan, published in 2016:

http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID:3253697

³ United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, “Opinion No. 40/2015 concerning Saparmamed Nepeskuliev (Turkmenistan),” A/HRC/WGAD/2015, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Detention/Pages/Opinionsadoptedin2015.aspx>

⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Journalist Suffers Repeat Attack In Turkmenistan”, November 14, 2016: <http://www.rferl.org/a/28116700.html>

3. Urging the Turkmen government to allow the Cotton Campaign through its designated representatives to monitor forced labor during the 2017 cotton harvest with unfettered access;
4. Calling publically on the government of Turkmenistan to reform its cotton sector, including by ending mandatory cotton production and harvest quotas, ensuring financial transparency of cotton expenditures and revenues, and raising and eventually freeing cotton procurement prices.

The credibility of the United Nations depends in part on its willingness to challenge human rights violations committed by its members. We urge you to deliver a strong message to the Government of Turkmenistan that it must take immediate steps to end endemic forced labor in its cotton sector.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and welcome the opportunity to engage in further dialogue.

Sincerely,

The Cotton Campaign – a global coalition of human rights, labor, investor and business organizations dedicated to eradicating child labor and forced labor in cotton production